**They Say His Eyes Are Black As Void And Her Hands Glow Like Moonlight**

by **StarlightLion**

**Summary**

Corvo wants to go home and see his daughter again. His Messengers want to complete the mission and get the hell out. Harlan wants Garrett to suffer, and Basso wants to help Garrett recover. Emily wants The City to finally surrender. Garrett just wants it all to stop.

And the gods?
It's never safe to question what they want.

**Notes**

Hello peeps!
This fic is honestly going to be a clusterfuck, full disclosure. I have no plan for the plot here, I mostly just have nebulous ideas of how the world works and the City's relationship with the Kaldwin's Empire and how all the mystical forces across these universes intertwine.
But hey, Garrett's original voice actor is Corvo's voice actor, and Primal powers under control (see: not Erin) seem close enough to some of the crazy Outsider gifts so fuck it, let's just consider them the same universe. It's funner that way. Besides, I am going to kill to see...
Corvo and Garrett interact. Let's go.

Crossovers are admittedly a new territory for me, and I normally avoid them because it's not my main interest but... well, exceptions always exist I suppose! This story is mostly going to be stress relief for me, and the bulk of my focus will be going towards A Druid's Curse. (as of publishing this prologue, that particular fic hasn't actually been put up yet, but it's much more planned out and I actually know what I'm doing there haha). That said... well who knows. I'm finding myself enthralled by Garrett's lore. For all the failings Thief has, I do love it. Maybe I'll just end up writing this in a frenzy.

I make no promises regarding this fic. I don't know how long it'll take, how many chapters it'll be, or when and how it'll end. I'm as much in the dark as you are. It's exciting.

Also, I've... ah hah, taken some liberties with the geography of The City. It's not exactly the easiest video game map to plot out to begin with (WHY ISN'T THE IN-GAME MAP LABELLED PROPERLY AAAAAAAA) but I've placed it on an existent part of the Dishonored map sooo..... yeah, liberties. All is fine.

Without further ado, the never-awaited prologue to an absurd plotbunny!

To Emma, I dedicate Leon Diamandis. - I couldn't save you, but I can honour you.
Prologue - Focus

The flames inside the Clocktower had burned down to nothing. Usually, Garrett made certain that at least the embers remained - it got cold easily in the unfinished structure, and while his leathers offered some protection from it, and he had warm blankets should the need truly arise, fire was his preferred method of warmth. The flickering light that sometimes seeped out only helped fuel the fear of ghosts that helped protect him.

Tonight, he let them die. A dull ache nested in his skull, coiled behind his right eye. He’d gotten used to the constant pain, gotten used to accommodating for the lapses it caused in judgement, gotten used to slowing down to ensure he wasn’t missing things. Or seeing things.

Even so, it was particularly bad tonight. It had been a year since he’d sunk the Dawn’s Light, a year over which he’d continued to hope that it would ease, that with Erin gone and the Primal… wherever it had ended up, he could move away from the visions and the headaches and the bullshit.

It was, as he should have known, a vain thing to hope.

The City had slowly started to recover from the attempted coup, as the Gloom ended seemingly overnight and its citizens stopped dying. Well, died less, anyway. It would have recovered much faster if not for the martial noose that still choked it.

With the Baron dead, Thief-Taker General Harlan had seen fit to take control via what remained of the Watch and set himself as a martial ruler. Conscript notices had gone out to bolster the ranks of what was now little more than a personal army. Those conscripts that had gone unfilled had been slashed off the General’s roster with blood instead. Garrett had stayed in his tower, taken a good long break to let himself heal, and watched the City surrender to Harlan’s boot on its throat.

In the cold, Garrett flexed his left hand. It ached too - less noticeable than his eye, and thus the ache wasn’t exactly pain - but he stretched and flexed all the same, working out the stiffness. His gloves sat on the bed beside him, unclipped. Even now, studying the thick, white scar left behind, Garrett felt relief boil in his chest. He’d been lucky - he’d been so lucky. If the General had shot him with any of his explosive bolts - well, he’d probably just be dead in that case, so maybe that wasn’t worth worrying about. But if the General had used a normal crossbow instead of his wrist-mounted one, then the bolt would have been twice the size; even with the miniaturised bolt, Garrett had been lucky to escape fractures. It had hurt enough that he suspected the bone had been scraped, but his metacarpals had held, the bolt slipping between his index and middle.

And even so, after the agony had subsided, Garrett had lost feeling in his fingers for a while. It had been hard to worry about, at the time, in the middle of disaster and hunting for Erin and figuring out what the hell the Primal was supposed to be. Afterwards, he’d worried sick.

He was lucky.

Two seasons he’d spent defaulting to easy jobs, choosing quantity over quality, just so he could focus on healing properly. Boring, dredged seasons - but Garrett knew he couldn’t risk worsening the injury. It had to heal right, which meant it had to heal slow. A thief’s hands were his life.

He flexed the hand. The stiffness was starting to ease, movement and heat loosening the tendons and giving him back full motility. He’d come to accept it; as long as he kept care of it, his hand had healed good as new. It was another thing he had to keep track of, another thing to worry about in
the grand scheme, but it could have been much worse. He was lucky.

Sighing softly, Garrett looked up and studied the inside of the Clocktower. The walls stared back, a dull off-grey. It was unnatural, in the darkness, both shadow and light lost to him. Everything had a strange, flat quality to it, as if it wasn’t quite real. It almost looked like he was living inside one of Erin’s drawings.

And the flames were dead. Even Garrett’s night vision wasn’t that good - he should have been navigating by memory, by the faint blurred edges of solid mass and the echo of empty space. In the dark, he saw more by the shadows things made than the things themselves. But this--

It was time to admit it. There was something wrong with him.

Closing his eyes, Garrett focused on the ache in his temple, trying to feel out the tendrils of Primal energy. It had always felt alien, in the past - Erin’s attacks and visions, the energy that had erupted around them at the Baron’s Manor, on Dawn’s Light. Even holding the fragments of the Stone had caused the same feeling. A creeping sensation, slow and wet, like whale oil oozing under his skin. The faint clicking in his ears.

When he felt it this time, he did his best not to recoil. It pulsed softly, the pain and the Primal, and he felt the liquid feeling seep out. It was like bleeding from his eye, but when he automatically touched his face, his fingers came off dry. Unease bubbled in his gut, anxiety and fear mixed with the strange hollow sensation that always came with using the Primal’s power. It tasted of poppies, in the back of his throat.

Garrett pushed it away, tried to unfocus, tried to lock the energy back up in his eye where it-- didn’t belong, but had come to stay. He knew better than to think he could be rid of it entirely. If it had remained despite the ritual to draw the Primal out of Erin, then it would remain forever. But still, Garrett ignored the pain as it crept down his neck and bloomed across his shoulders, flowing down his left arm to his hand. He might not like it overly much, but the abilities that came with his little sliver of Primal were - while limited - incredibly useful tools. If only he could keep control of it.

He didn’t like to be so reliant on anything. Tools could be lost. Even his eye could be taken. If he relied on them too heavily, then he’d be defenceless without them. His hands, his wit, and a shadow were all he should ever truly need.

When he finally opened his eyes again, whole body aching with the tension and oily slick feeling of the Primal, the Clocktower’s greyscale wall stared back. It didn’t quite look real, picked out without shadow or light, like one of Erin’s drawings.

Garrett lay back on his bed and stared up at the clock mechanisms, steadily ticking away. It was time to admit it.

There was something wrong with him.
Teeth Are Worthless If They Don't Bite

Chapter Summary

In which Garrett knows that he needs to stop.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Mismatched eyes scanned the small leaf of paper, getting narrower and narrower the longer they read. After pausing at the end for a second that went on too long, they lifted to meet Basso’s.

“Don’t gimme that look. What? Ya don't gotta take the job, it's just something someone wanted done.” Basso’s hands danced through the air as he spoke, emphasising.

Well. Danced was perhaps too gracious a word. Paddled, maybe.

Garrett set down the paper and folded his arms. “I steal objects, Basso, not people.”

Basso blinked. “Eh? Oh, ya mean- Fuck, Garrett, I wouldn’t ask ya to kidnap nobody. Jessamine is the name of the dagger.”

One eyebrow quirked. “A dagger with a name? Bit strange for something that pretentious to be in the Old Quarter.” Strange was an understatement - suspicious was more like it. Few people named weapons that weren’t ceremonial or otherwise somehow remarkable; even fewer let them get lost in the dregs of poverty. Despite that, his fingers itched - Garrett wanted to take the job despite his misgivings. It was too suspicious, too likely to be a trap - a named weapon! And with a highborn sounding name like that - but he could already see where he’d put it amongst his collections.

A quick shake of the head. If he took the job, he’d not be keeping it anyway. That in mind, it wasn’t worth the very likely trap.

“I dunno, Garrett, the guy who wanted it said it was an heirloom or something. Fuck if I care - he offered more coin than you're worth to go’n get it. Weird though, he did look like he coulda gone and got it himself.” Basso turned and gave Gwendolyn a pet. The rook warbled softly, but didn’t bite. Kinder than her predecessor. Garrett followed the movement, eyes narrow. Basso rarely got spooked, but Garrett had known him for long enough to recognise an anxiety tick when he saw it. “Shoulda seen his mask.”

Garrett took note of that, already bidding farewell to the job. “More coin than I’m worth, Basso? Are you putting a price on my life?” Almost teasing, though; Basso wouldn’t sell him out for any amount of money. It was an odd feeling, knowing that he trusted Basso to that degree, but - in this case at least - Garrett had gotten used to it long ago.

“Rork’s teeth, Garrett.” Flustered, aware it was joke but unaccustomed (no matter how many times), waving his hands again. Gwendolyn cawed and flapped her wings in response. “Ya seen the Thief-Taker’s new wanted posters for you, right? Offering fifty thousand gold for your corpse?”

A soft, affirmative hum. “And double that if I’m taken alive. Flattering, really.” Even if it made his skin crawl. Harlan wanted him alive far more than he wanted him dead. Given he’d not only stolen
the Serendi ring attached to his belt but slipped out of the ancient Rotunda, all without getting caught and right under Harlan’s nose; that he’d since continued to evade capture, and continued to steal anything that caught his fancy; that he’d not only been responsible for ending the Graven Dawn when the General himself had failed, but that despite his claims to the contrary that truth was still whispered through the alleys of The City - well, all that considered… Garrett preferred not to think about all the reasons the Thief-Taker wanted him delivered alive.

He had a feeling that he’d prefer the corpse method.

Basso rolled his eyes. “Yeah, well - look, I looked into this guy first, yeah? Obviously. I wouldn’t trust my best lifter to some bullshit. Called himself Raven.” Basso put his hands on his desk, leant forward slightly. Head tilted ever so slightly to the side - Gwendolyn warbled quietly again.

“You couldn’t find anything on him, could you?”

A helpless shrug. “Not a damn thing. Guy doesn’t fuckin’ exist. Not a surprise really, but I got nothing. He can’t have been in The City that long to not leave a trace anywhere.” Frustrated, but Basso simply sighed and straightened up, gestured to the brief letter Garrett had set back down on the desk. “Wanted me to give that to you. Don’t got a clue why he’s so fucking cryptic with it - gave me all the information about the job anyway. Point is… normally I’d tell him to fuck off and be done with it.”

“Oh good; you can still see a trap past that belly of yours.”

Basso offered an indignant sound, swatting the air in Garrett’s direction. “Yeah, yeah, fuck you too. The point is, mystery dick offered half a million coin for the dagger’s safe return.” An edge in his voice, there - and Garrett paused, going still in response. More coin than my life is worth… might not be an exaggeration. “And that’s… a shitload of coin. So I figured that I’d offer you the job and let you decide.”

Garrett shifted his weight from one foot to the other, tilting his head while he considered it. Obvious trap was obvious, but the bait… Garrett didn’t even have anything he could really do with so much gold. He had no plans to leave The City - it was his home - and he couldn’t rightly purchase an estate in Auldale.

Although, the idea was tempting. To live in luxury was appealing, but Garrett liked the Clocktower good and well as it was. No, it wasn’t the space or the reputation that made the thought a temptation - it was just how funny it would be to see the Thief-Taker General’s face the day he realised Garrett was living in Auldale. It was some glorious sort of middle finger to the man; almost as much as stealing his prized ring and sneaking out in silence and shadows.

It must have shown on his face, because Basso let out a sound of exasperation. “Jacknall’s balls, you’re really thinking about doing this, ain’t you?” For a moment, Garrett was confused - Auldale? No, he really wasn’t seriously considering living in Auldale - and then he remembered that Basso wasn’t privy to his thoughts.

“You said it yourself, Basso. That’s a lot of gold.”

“Yeah, and you and I both know it’s a trap.”

Garrett shrugged. It would hardly be the first trap he’d knowingly walked into, and besides - he had his wits, his wirecutters, his focus. The dull ache flared up briefly at even the thought, but Garrett forced it down. Basso flickered with a blue shimmer for a second. Strong, bright. Fingers dug into Garrett’s upper arms. It took a moment of silence and stress to realise they were his own.
“... I think I can handle a trap.” Now that was a matter of pride. Stupid, stupid pride - he didn’t need to have an ego, he knew he was the best. Garrett hadn’t live this long by being stupid, he’d lived this long because he knew when to bail. He knew when to give up. He’d always known that fear was his friend. Healthy fear kept him alive, kept him from making stupid mistakes because of pride or greed.

Garrett thought of the Great Safe, and the Stone fragment that was all it had held. All I had to do was get you in the building. He’d known that had been stupid when he’d done it too. Live or die, flee or steal. It had been pride, and ego, and the overwhelming desire to stick it to the General as much as he possibly could. Stupid. He’d risked his life for nothing - for bragging rights. Who was he going to brag to?

True, he’d needed the fragment in the end, but he’d had no way of knowing that at the time. At the time, it had just been…. And the Keep had been in flames, crumbling around him - he’d risked Basso’s life, sending him out into the riot and the panic alone and injured, all because he hadn’t been able to resist the prize.

Pain flashed behind his right eye again. How had he known? Garrett pushed it all aside.

“You’re right.” And for once, Basso was silent, mouth open where he’d been about to speak, stunned. “What else you got, Basso? I’d rather avoid a blade in my neck. Or a rope around it.”

Basso nodded, said something in agreement, ruffled through a series of papers. Garrett had to make himself listen; it dug into his chest like a Watchman’s sword. It was a stupid job, an obvious trap. Too much money (nobody could actually pay that much), too far fetched a target (nobody left a prized dagger in the Old Quarter who couldn’t retrieve it), too suspicious a client. Basso had no taste for violence, was heavier on his feet than a pregnant ox, couldn’t have picked a pocket if his target was already dead and took more time to pick a lock than it took Garrett to pick a house clean - but where he failed at gathering loot, he excelled at gathering information. Garrett had never quite gotten the hang of that particular skill; yes, he could sniff out an expensive trinket a mile away, but Basso moved through information like Garrett moved through a shadow.

If Basso couldn’t find anything about the strange Raven, then there was nothing to be found.

“... Captain’s wife over in Auldale. Ask me those jewels are probably fake, but the damn comb’s made of whalebone, so it’s probably worth more with the damn things ripped off anyway. Garrett?” Lifted into a slightly higher pitch, stepped a little closer, concern alight in his eyes. The scars on his temple and jaw flickered in the candlelight, remnants of the ordeal Garrett had cost him.

Garrett unfolded his arms, let the carefully torn cloak fall about him more fully, obscuring his form as he eased back half a step more into the shadow. There was an odd look on Basso’s face as he stopped, eyeing him. It wasn’t confusion, and he didn’t seem angry. Garrett wasn’t very good at reading people’s faces beyond that. Nevertheless, he felt the tiny nibble of guilt in his chest; it wasn’t often he retreated from Basso. He wasn’t even sure why he had - reflex, maybe. His thoughts had been leagues away.

“Hey, forget about that Raven cunt. How you doing, Garrett?” Low now, instead of lifted, but with the same edge of concern; almost soft. It wasn’t unusual, exactly, not from Basso, but it still sat funny in Garrett’s stomach.

Instead, he shrugged. “You’re like a mother hen, Basso. Are you like this with all your blackhands?”
Basso scowled at him, and although Garrett could read the anger it didn’t quite seem… right. Not directed at him, maybe. Blackhands. Garrett had a funny relationship with the word himself - most thieves did - but Basso reviled it. Everybody had their quirks.

“Nah, Garrett. You’re stupider than most of ‘em, so you get special treatment.” A different edge this time, turning away to pick out a small scroll of paper from the many on his desk and holding it out. That’s fair. It was hardly his problem that he was better than all the others too. “Client got a drawing of the comb. Burn that, this time, yeah? Don’t forget.” A faint tremble, in his hand, as he let Garrett take the rolled up drawing - Garrett chose to ignore it. Easier that way, for everybody. “Owned by the new Lady Auberdine, in case you didn’t hear me the first time.” Garrett hadn’t. Was it that obvious? Garrett could only hope Basso simply knew him that well. “Client wants you to meet them at that new Skinmarket inn, whassit called– the Wasted Stallion.” And then, muttered under his breath, quiet enough Garrett only barely caught it: “Pretentious shitheads.”

“You didn’t tell them I’d meet there.” Flat. Garrett wouldn’t be caught in a place like that; rob it blind from the rafters, maybe, but never caught. Even somewhere dark and unpopulated, Garrett almost never interacted with their clients personally. Basso handled the people side of their arrangement; he took the jobs, gave back the goods, split the money with Garrett.

Basso offered him another scowl. “Course not. I ain’t got sloop between my ears, Garrett. Tell you though, she seemed mighty disappointed she wouldn’t get to meet you. I think you’ve got yourself a following of some sort. That stuff you got around your eyes? That the ladies use on their lashes or whatever? Some of them have started wearing it like you do.” Shaking his head.

A moment of silence. That was an entirely different kind of not okay. “Forget the jobs, Basso. Time to skip town.” Muttered, lacking bite because Garrett still had no intention of actually going anywhere - The City was his home - but the thought of not only being well-known enough for people to start imitating him but that people might actually imitate him-- Garrett shook his head.

“Don’t worry about it. Same deal as always, Garrett. You steal the comb, I’ll handle the rest.”

A half shrug. It was better than doing nothing, although even in Auldale under Harlan’s nose, he didn’t expect it to be much of a challenge. “See you later, Basso.” Grabbing the letter he’d discarded, Garrett turned and left. He used the door.

In the lamplight before he was lost to shadow, he reread the letter.

The Old Quarter. Her name is Jessamine. I was told you are the best. Casualties are unacceptable.

Handwritten, a tight even scrawl. The endless string of capitals made Garrett’s headache even worse. Scrunched up in hand, and then shoved into a spare pocket - too cryptic, too demanding. Her name is Jessamine. A goddamn dagger. He didn’t even realise he was gritting his teeth until he’d scaled the side of the building and settled in a comfortable crouch on the slatted roof. The ache in his jaw only made the rest of him hurt worse.

Casualties are unacceptable.

What in the name of every old god and new did that fucking mean? Obviously, Garrett wasn’t there to kill anyone. He wasn’t an assassin, and he never would be. Taking someone’s valuables and taking someone’s life were opposite ends of a very large, very imbalanced scale. It wasn’t that
he’d never killed anyone before - but he’d never set out to do so, and even in his long career it had only happened four times. Each time had come down a choice between their life, and his.

Garrett put it out of his head. He had other things to think about - right now, and pretty much for the rest of his life. Those other things decidedly did not include the last couple of years. Right now, they included the whalebone comb.

Now, that really was a rare thing. Whalebone wasn’t common pretty much anywhere outside of the Empire of the Isles, but it was an even scarcer resource within The Eternal City. Trade with outside nations was fairly limited here; the citystate had always made do mostly on its own. It was one of the reasons (although Garrett didn’t know or care to know the others) that whatever its original name, it had just become The City. Granted they were somewhat secluded on a large island off the west coast of Gristol, but they were pretty much the last place within the Isles themselves that hadn’t ceded to the Empire.

A chill went through him at the thought. Their government had just been decimated. They were under martial law, had been for the last year, and the Thief-Taker was still having trouble keeping The City in line within the urban areas, nevermind the farms that were all stretched out across the remaining island above Cinderfall.

They were vulnerable.

The ache pulsed in Garrett’s head, spiking across to settle behind both eyes and spiralling down his neck. Swallowed the groan, but he dropped his head into his hands all the same, and then pulled down the scarf to squeeze the bridge of his nose. Fingertips dug into the corners of his eyes, pressing down. Normally, it might have hurt in its own right - now, it somewhat eased the ache a tiny bit. Or at least, it redistributed sensation until he fooled himself into thinking it hurt less.

“Well… Guess I know how we kept the Empire at bay all this time.” The Northcrest family had been safeguarding and using the Primal for generations. It would, at least, have been an effective shield against their assault, and an effective weapon against their insurgence.

A sigh, fingers lowering back to the slats for balance. But the Primal was gone. Or at least, it was utterly uncontrolled. The Northcrests were all dead, their secrets dead with them. Most of the old noble families had been killed, driven out, or otherwise dismantled during the coup and over the following year. Power had shifted. Political clout meant almost nothing these days - military clout was where the power (and the gold) was at. Most of the new ‘noble’ families were those who had fathers in high places within the Watch. Harlan had taken the Baron’s manor as a mixture of his own personal home and the new Watch headquarters.

Garrett didn’t want to think about that.

But a pseudo-militia led by an obsessive monster like the Thief-Taker wouldn’t protect them. When the Empire learned of the absolute clusterfuck their leadership had become, it wouldn’t take long to strike. Thinking about it now, Garrett was honestly surprised that they hadn’t already been subjugated.

No. He didn’t want to think about that either. He wasn’t sure what he’d do. Survive, steal - obviously - but if the endgoal was establishing a new rhythm and stealing from another new set of upperclassmen, that meant getting through the overhaul in one piece. Garrett wasn’t much for politics or even national loyalty. As long as there was something to steal and he could continue living in The City, he would be happy. But he wasn’t a fool - and the Empire was ruthless to those who opposed it. The Isles had once been four different kingdoms, and the citystates had littered all of them. The Eternal City was the last one left, and had been for so long Garrett barely knew the
names of what had once been their kin.

The problem wasn’t maintaining targets, should the Empire come to claim them. It was surviving the process in the first place.

Well. At least they’d take care of the General for him.

Once again, Garrett shook his head, trying to clear those thoughts. The ache burst outwards at the movement, and regret bloomed in his gut alongside nausea. “Fuck me,” he muttered, pinching the bridge of his nose again. He was starting to consider raiding an apothecary. He didn’t like most of their medicines at the best of times - poppy milk might be the worse offender, but he loathed the way they all dulled his senses and fogged his mind - but some days he couldn’t even sleep for the pain. It was starting to be the worse evil.

Taking a deep breath, Garrett balanced on the roof, hands flat against the leaning slats between his feet, and tried to box everything up. His thoughts went away; the pain resisted but eventually settled back behind his eyes. He opened them, winced in the lamplight, and focused on the dark of his leather. It still hurt like hell, and it made thinking a little harder, the pain flaring outward again every time he caught light in his eyes, but it was better than nothing.

Please don’t focus flare me right now. It had been bad enough yesterday; he hadn’t gone out all night, trying to fletch some new arrows through the pain and over the strange greyscale flatness that the world took on when he looked through the Primal, and come daybreak he’d been so exhausted he’d passed out over the top of his blankets without even undressing. By the time he’d woken up (several hours past dusk), it had stopped.

He boxed the fragments of weird dreams - drifting fog that glowed like moonlight and coiled like shadows, luminous flowers that refused to bloom, the constant permeating clicking and claws and screaming and hollow eye sockets filled with hatred and light, the coldness of it, the distant voice that cooed and laughed - alongside everything else, took another deep breath, and stood up.

The pain got worse, but his vision and balance held, so he slowly pulled his scarf back up, wrapped securely over his nose, and looked around. There was only one bridge across the river to Auldale (at least, only one within the city limits), and myriad ways to sneak across it. Garrett really didn’t feel like stowing away somewhere to do it tonight; it was too unpredictable, too unreliable. He very well might have to cling to the underside of a wagon or a carriage, and he wasn’t sure how long he’d be able to sustain such a hold anymore. Not with the constant pain in his head, or how much it had cut down his appetite, or the shuddering of wheels across cobblestone.

But all the same, he didn’t want to risk getting caught in an open spotlight, did not want to swim, and definitely wasn’t going to steal a boat to do it. “Guess I’ll climb the underside.”

Sighed. It wasn’t a particularly enjoyable climb - not like scaling the Clocktower - and while it wasn’t particularly dangerous either (even if he did fall, and he wouldn’t, it was a short drop into water, and Garrett at least knew how to swim to shore), the underside of the bridge was one of the last places in The City that one could find the scorpions.

Tiny things, sunset orange in daylight and pale grey in darkness, and their venom wasn’t enough to kill a grown man but it hurt like an absolute motherfucker. Last time Garrett had gotten stung, he’d been totally out of commission for a week.

He’d just have to be careful not to disturb any of their nests. They were territorial little things, living in clusters, but they weren’t overly aggressive. It wasn’t a huge problem if he got stung, but he’d have barely enough time to make it back to the Clocktower at top speed before the venom
fully kicked in if he did.

Right now… he wasn’t sure he would make that. The thought made him want to hit something. Someone. He hated having to plan around this weakness. He hated not being able to rely on his skills, his body, the way he always had. He hated the Primal. It had taken so fucking much from him already. It had taken an entire year of his life. It had taken all chance of reconciliation with Erin. And that hadn’t been enough, the fucking thing-- energy, life, being, whatever it was, it hadn’t been satisfied with all that, with nesting in his eye like some kind of parasitic worm and changing its colour, changing his senses. Now it was slowly crippling him too.

_Not tonight. Later. Deal with it later._

Deal with it later and hope it goes away. Not exactly a good solution, but it was all Garrett could do about the Primal. What little he truly knew of it he’d picked up during his hunt for Erin; from her whispers and taunting in the visions, from Elias Northcrest and the few notes and murmurs he’d picked up around the Manor and his minions, from Orion and his whole bowl of crazy. He hadn’t exactly gone out his way to study up on the subject, and he didn’t have much interest in doing so. There was no one he could really ask about it, besides perhaps the Queen of Beggars, and she was reticent at best and downright fallacious at worst. In all the years Garrett had known her, he wasn’t certain he’d ever gotten a straight answer out of her.

Anything else that might have offered some insight meant either breaking into Northcrest Manor or going back to the forgotten library below the House of Blossoms. He wasn’t particularly keen on doing either of those things. Being in the House of Blossoms at all was risky, a little frightening (he knew Madame Xiao Xiao was good to her girls, but she was ambitious and duplicitous and would skewer him in a heartbeat if he was caught there). Besides which, even with his scarf securely in place, moving fast and breathing as little as possible, the opium smoking the air was enough to dull his reflexes a little. He would rather avoid the whole place.

So Garrett put the Primal and its problems out of his mind, as much as he could. He didn’t know enough about it, didn’t fully understand what it was or how it worked or _why_ it had stuck to him like this. He didn’t really know why it gave him all these… abilities, or what it had truly done to Erin - and frankly, he just wanted it to stop. They were useful, to a degree, but he didn’t need or want the extra abilities.

And it had driven Erin mad. He didn’t know what happened to her after trying to pull it out of her; if she was still alive all this time later, if she was sane, or back to her old self, or still out of her mind.

He didn’t want it in his head, but given he wanted to gouge out his own eye even less, he tried to make do.

His musings had brought him to the Auldale bridge. For several minutes, dropping down from the buildings and settling into a comfortable shadow, he just observed. He could pick out the Watch patrols by their bobbing torches; there were, no doubt, half a dozen more Watchmen wandering the bridge in darkness. The General was quite aware of Garrett’s penchant for slipping past fire-blind men when their backs were turned.

Of course, that applied to other thieves as well, but neither they nor the torchless Watchmen had Garrett’s night vision. Even without focusing.

The thought pulsed pain across his face, and for a second everything stopped. There was white in his vision, and Garrett closed his eyes. When he opened them again, seconds later, the torches had rotated almost half their circuit. _Longer than a few seconds. Fuck._
It didn’t matter. He pushed it aside, waited for the torches to be as far away from the closest corner of the bridge as they were all going to get, and sidled closer. A late carriage was waiting at the mouth of the bridge, a pair of horses stomping impatiently and chewing their bits. The faint *clang* as their metal-clad hooves impacted the stone set Garrett’s nerves on edge, like a faint ache in his teeth. Or maybe that was the Primal. *Keep looking at them.*

He had to duck behind it all the same, right as he slipped out of a shadow to jump over the edge, because a Watchman without a torch stepped out opposite him. Low to the ground, half hidden behind one of the carriage wheels, Garrett peered out again. The man had stopped, squinting in the soft light from the Watchmen talking to the carriage driver, and was staring at where Garrett had been. Curses flooded to the tip of his tongue, but he swallowed them and simply waited. *Come on, come on. It was just a shadow. Move on before--*

“Well, you’re clear to go. Safe ride.” There was a faint response from the driver, and Garrett heard the crack of the reins. *Shit, shit.* The Watchman who’d seen him was still there, taking a few steps closer now, clearly suspicious - although confused, or he would have already raised an alarm.

No choice.

Garrett twisted as the horses whinnied and started to move again, hooked his fingers through the framework on the underside of the vehicle, and reverse bunny-hopped his feet against the far corners of the structure. Already, a dull ache started up in his shoulders, weaving down between his shoulder blades to the small of his back; he twisted his hands until he was hooked by his palms, closer to the wrists than the knuckles, and well and truly locked in. His thighs took up the ache a few moments later, exerting a constant, tiring pressure against the corner beams of the undercarriage.

It was every bit the hells that he’d expected it would be. By the time he got to the other side of the bridge, Garrett had decided the comb wasn’t worth this much trouble and more than not, he was likely to stab the client with it than actually see it returned.

The carriage stopped again. The jerking rumbling stopped, and he felt his jaw relax - when had he clenched it? - and he took as slow a breath as he could manage. Voices and firelight drifted down to him, but he stayed where he was; he couldn’t drop here. He didn’t have enough information, there was too much light. It was ten times harder to slip *out* from under a carriage than it was to get there in the first place. Everything ached. The pain behind his eyes was so sharp he was beginning to wonder if gouging out the Primal eye might hurt less after all.

*Old gods, don’t look down.* His cloak was hanging from his shoulders, dragging on the ground. He hated that too, but he hadn’t the time to tuck it over his waist and he didn’t dare hang from one hand. Not right now, not with the pressure he had to hold with his feet to stay in this position; too little and he fell, too much and he risked damaging the wood, or at least distorting it enough to cause noticeable change. With one hand, it was hard to hold the right pressure at the best of times - he could barely concentrate enough on where all the Watchmen were around the carriage, let alone juggle that kind of change in leverage.

The reins cracked, the horses snorted low, and the cracking shudder of the carriage over cobblestone started up again.

Garrett’s eyes closed.

He was pushing too hard. He was pushing too hard, and he knew it. Normally, unless he was forced to, Garrett did his best not to overwork himself. There was no weakness in stopping when he hit his limits - there was incredible stupidity in pushing beyond and harming himself, just for the
sake of pride. He didn’t need to go beyond his limits, most of the time. If he was tired, he would rest; hungry, and he would eat. He wanted for very little, materialistically. What he did, he could simply take. Garrett’s best, and most indispensable tool, was his body. He tried to take as careful care of it as he did all his others.

But this…

*There’s something wrong with me.*

There was darkness around them now, the road smoothing out from cobble to worked stone. The rattling dulled; not gone, but close enough. Garrett slowly worked his hands back out to just the fingers, clinging with all his strength, and glanced sideways. Again. He saw nothing in the dark, no feet or other horses. It would have to do.

He waited for a pause in movement, a natural slow as the horses adjusted their strides, and let go. The fall, as short as it was, knocked the breath out of him.

A gasp, but he didn’t have time to be winded. Garrett waited the second it took for the carriage to drive on and expose him, scrambled to his feet, staying low, and swooped towards the nearest building. A moment later, he squeezed into the narrow alley between it and its neighbour, lost himself in shadow, and slid down the wall. Out of sight, now. Safe.

Okay, time to be winded.

He took his time, getting his breath back. It took longer than he liked; dropping from a carriage in motion often winded him. It was all about the landing. He knew how to catch himself safely in a fall, how to roll out momentum, but a drop like that - even short, it was blind and it was from an awkward, rigid position. Most of the time, he landed badly. Still, it was something he was used to, something he knew how to work through. Garrett knew how long it should have taken him to recover.

The ache slowly eased in his muscles, but the pain behind his eyes only grew sharper. Almost twice as long as he’d hoped- as he’d expected, Garrett unfolded his arms from his diaphragm and took a deep breath.

He was pushing himself too hard. Why? Why couldn’t he just ease off until he figured this whole Primal thing out? (Or it killed him. Yeah… that was a distinct possibility). Even knowing he was being stupid, the idea of giving up - of letting the Primal defeat him, *again* - kicked up something violent in his chest.

It wasn’t a feeling he liked. Garrett wasn’t prone to emotional outbursts; he’d never been particularly driven by emotion. Sure, he enjoyed stealing and he basked in the precision and skill of it, but he wasn’t ruled by his enjoyment. Logic was a much better motivator - reason, deduction, rationality. Garrett did what he wanted, when he wanted, so long as it was safe and he was in control. In control of himself, as much in control of the situation and the consequences as he could be.

Emotion made you stupid. It made you fragile. If Erin had ever taught him anything, it was that. She’d always been wild - out of control. Garrett had made an emotional decision to steal the Claw from her, and she’d made an emotional decision to fight him for it. She’d chosen pride and ego over safety and logic when he’d called off the mission. Garrett had stayed to save her instead of saving his own hide.

In the end, if they’d both just been *reasonable* - rational - they would have been fine. Emotion was
dangerous. Garrett knew he couldn’t get rid of it entirely, and he wasn’t self-destructive enough to try, but he wouldn’t be ruled by it.

But this… Even the thought of turning back now, of giving up this job and heading back to the Clocktower to rest and work on the Primal burning him out, made his chest tighten again. He should, he should - he needed to slow down again. He needed to stop for a while. It was the same thing he’d done after Erin had run off, to let his hand heal, to ensure he didn’t ruin his future by being reckless and greedy now.

There was something wrong with him. He should go home.

When Garrett slid back up the wall and got to his feet, glancing up to search for the moon through the clouds, he chided himself. You’re being stupid. You didn’t chase the dagger job because it was a stupid risk. Why is this any different? But the headache dulled back to just his right eye, a deep coil of pain that made him feel heavy, and Garrett turned towards what had once been the Argent estate. It now belonged to Watch Captain Auberdine and his family. The comb belonged to his wife.

He made it into the house without much trouble. The family had three or four dedicated guards (made exempt from the Watch conscription by virtue of practically belonging to a Captain already), but Garrett barely had to try to slip past them. Like most, they fell into the folly of never looking up.

Finding the comb itself wouldn't be quite as easy, but he still didn't expect trouble. It was always possible he'd get lucky and overhear the guards talking about it, but once he'd gotten into the house he put the distant hope aside. He expected a housemaid or two, maybe a butler if Harlan liked this Captain particularly, but the guards were likely to remain outside. His first guess would be the master bedroom, then.

There were no convenient hidden passages that led down to the floors below - at least, not that Garrett found during his sweep of the top floor. A nice pair of earrings, left tucked away so far back in an otherwise empty room Garrett rather suspected they’d belonged to the previous tenant, and a small stack of coins later, and he was slipping down the stairwell as fast as possible, sticking to the walls. The carpet muffled his footsteps, letting him stay quiet even as he rushed, but he was still relieved when he came to the next hallway and ducked into the shadow of a large cupboard.

He’d seen nobody around upon descent, but he pressed deeper into the wall and closed his eyes, willing the ache therein to fade and straining his hearing for any scrape of sound.

His heart thudded in his ears, heavier and faster than he was used to. He hadn’t exerted himself all that much, had he? The movement over the rooftops hadn’t been particularly difficult, not before or after the bridge, and while clinging to an undercarriage was never fun, it shouldn’t have worn him out this much. Especially not after giving himself time to recover and merely sneaking through a house.

This time, he crept onto the top of the cupboard and buried his face in his hands. After a moment, he pulled his scarf free from his face to let himself breathe easier. It was the pain; he couldn’t get his heart to drop into a more normal pace no matter how much slow breathing he did.

“Fuck.” As soft as possible, under his breath, and then opening his eyes, pulling his scarf back up, scanning the hall. A flicker of blue washed across his vision, the shadows fading to white - voices reached his ears, suddenly clear despite the strange hollow reverberation that clung to them, and then agony filled his head. One hand went straight to the top of the cupboard, hard, too loud, but holding his balance where he crouched on his toes. His heels dropped under him, flatfooted now. The other hand went over his face, fingertips digging into his temples. His thumb pressed the
fabric of the scarf into his mouth, tugging it out of place. It tasted like dust as he bit down on it, but it kept his teeth from grinding and offered some tiny, paltry resistance.

Now was not the time for this.

Even as he slowly opened his eyes, the pain vibrated through his whole body and slipped under his skin. The oily feeling filled him, and the sensation of ignition wasn’t far behind. Garrett held his teeth tight, jaw aching with the pressure, but he stayed still and listened to the voices.

In hindsight, ‘voices’ may have been too tame a description. Gasps and moans caught in his ears, shivering against the thunder of his heartbeat. A faint sense of coldness trickled out from his chest. It didn’t mix well with the burning oil pain emanating out from his eye. Reflexively, he wiped at the curve of his nose and under his eye. His fingertips came away smudged with kohl, but dry.

Clenching his hand, Garrett tried to unfocus, tried to think. The pale glow dimmed, but didn’t fade completely; focus flared. A useful term that meant nothing to anyone else, but it was what Garrett had taken to calling the bouts of uncontrollable focus.

They’d been happening more and more.

That’ll be the master bedroom, then. Just his luck they’d be having sex in it right when he showed up. On the other hand, most people in the middle of sex didn’t notice an extra shadow.

He didn’t have to show off right now. He just had to get the comb, and get the hell out before this focus flare really knocked him on his ass. Garrett could feel it coming, the oozing pain creeping deeper into him as the seconds passed, slowly surrounding muscle and organs and bone until there was nothing left that didn’t feel like it was on fire.

Curse whichever pit the Primal crawled out of.

Garrett dropped down from the shadow, watching the air shudder with little white ribbons as he neared the door from which behind the moans came. He glanced around, moving his head slowly to ensure he didn’t give himself whiplash, and made sure there were no other little shimmers. Nothing approaching.

The ache in his eyes should have made him blind, if not for the flatroom lightlessness that saturated everything. Garrett hadn’t felt this nausea for a long time. He didn’t think he could manage another trip across the bridge under a carriage, if there were still any crossing (and there always was, if he just waited long enough). This unsteady, there was no way he could safely make the climb under the bridge, and if he got caught in a spotlight then the Watch would take him straight to Harlan.

To make it back over, he’d have to swim. The thought made the nausea worse, but it was better to be swimming across the surface the whole way than to get stung by a scorpion and fall beneath it. He wasn’t sure he’d be able to find it again.

He finally unfocused as he eased the door open to the bedroom, the shimmer and disorienting shadowlessness fading back into darkness and candlelight. Even just a tiny bit, the pain inside his skull dimmed. The moans were much louder in here, even as he closed the door most of the way again and slunk around the wall, keeping his body low to the floor and holding his steps as he moved, keeping silent. Fragments of each other’s names filled the air like opium, the heady gasps shuddering after them. If Garrett had been in less pain, he’d have been uncomfortable. It wasn’t as if he hadn’t snuck past people having sex before - in fact, it was more common than he really appreciated, and the entire House of Blossoms was nothing but. Even so, he would much prefer the
Was it so much to ask that all the normal daylight people be asleep by now?

He couldn’t help the way his hair went on end as he crept past them to the big dresser drawers; he was only human, after all. By the time he’d opened the fourth drawer, spotted the false bottom, frozen at the pause in sound and then carefully slid it to the side just enough to tug the comb out from under it, Garrett’s skin prickled uncomfortably, an altogether different and equally unwelcome heat mixing with the Primal’s oily burning feeling. It was too hot in this room; he could feel the slick stickiness of sweat under his leathers.

The comb went point up into one of the leather pouches tied to his harness, trying to keep the teeth from doing any damage, and Garrett put the drawer back in order. As fast as he could, he moved back around the walls of the room, opened the door the crack he needed to slip out, and shut it behind him.

Moans of crescendo followed him out, and he shuddered. It wasn’t his heartbeat thundering in his skull, he’d realised, it was just the pain.

Really, seriously, time to go.

The trip back to the bridge was a little bit of a blur. For as far as he could, he stuck to the rooftops and atop the estate walls, but eventually he had to drop down to street level. It had never really been a comfortable altitude for him. It took him several minutes, and Garrett chewed the inside of the scarf in frustration, struggling to shove away the pain, but he counted four bobbing torches. One less than before. What had happened to it? Maybe the patrol had broken up, joined their fellows - maybe they’d gotten tired and bailed. Maybe they’d fallen over the side and into the river. The thought brought a modicum of amusement to him, although he couldn’t bring himself to laugh through the agony flooding his body.

There really is seriously something wrong with me.

He knew, because the thought that maybe the missing patrol had expanded their routes didn’t even occur to him. He slunk out of the shadows, heading towards the side of the bridge, intending to drop down and swim, and it wasn’t until the shout went up behind him that he realised he too was casting a shadow.

The firelight bobbed behind him, closer. Shouting - “The thief! Catch him! Shoot to maim, you dogs - don’t kill him!” - and the whole bridge erupted into chaos. The ground by Garrett’s feet blew, stone fragments pinging off the sides of his legs. The leather protected him from cuts, but at least one of those was going to bruise. Winking innocently, the bolt buried itself in the cobble. It hurt, but Garrett broke into a dead sprint. It hurt so much he could barely see - couldn’t keep track of where the Watch was, who was shooting, what direction they were coming from. He bolted for the Auldale bridge, blackjacked the only Watchman who was quick enough to meet him head on directly in the face, and raced from shadow to shadow. His muscles burned, his chest tight and the thundering in his skull thudding in time with his footsteps, but he couldn’t stop. The sound of shouting was everywhere, firelight was starting to converge. There was the sound of exploding stone, too close, with too much regularity.

Instinct took over.

He darted back and forth as he ran across the bridge, dodging as many men as he could, and those unlucky few that he couldn’t avoid caught a blackjack to the head - or whatever part of them
Garrett could reach. A sword missed him by an inch, swung over his head with enough force to send the Watchman to the ground as he met no resistance. Garrett’s hood was ripped back, and without missing a beat he tore down the scarf to make breathing as easy as possible; kept running. They already knew his face, what did it matter? He wasn’t exactly hiding now.

Past the bridge, into Stonemarket, keep going, gasping for breath, like his whole body might combust at any second, every movement slippery, keep going, careening into walls as he went around corners, not daring to lose speed, unable to hear if they were still on his tail over the ragged heaving breath in his throat and the crashing beat of his heart in his ears.

Blue.

There was so much blue, the whiteness and the winding ribbons of light as the clamour of his feet filled the air, and the shouts followed him, and insults flashed by from citizens awoken from sleep. Garrett had lost track of where he was going, trying desperately to think while he fled. All he had to do was get somewhere safe, he just had to lose the Watch and hide. They weren’t that clever, and there were millions of shadows available.

Lose their trail. Get to safety.

Can’t think. Move. Why is everything so fucking blue?

The Primal was scorching in his right eye, an excruciating wet pressure like his eyeball had ruptured. No time to check, just running. Would probably accidentally poke it out if he tried. Might not be a terrible idea.

Eventually, he had to slow down or be sick. He was only human, he had human limits. He’d never pushed so far past them unless he had to. Why had he…? The whalebone comb pricked his fingers as he dug it out roughly, staggering against the wall and into a shadow. Fuck you. But he couldn’t let it go.

Where was he?

Tried to look around, frantically, looking for something familiar, a landmark to orient himself. Everything looked… wrong. Even with the glowing blue and the shining whiteness that made the whole world look flat, it was almost like the perspective was wrong.

I’m on the ground.

Garrett was so used to seeing The City from the rooftops. Maybe he should climb the building he was leant against, get a better handle on his surr--

Twisting and looking up nearly made him vomit. His whole body was agony, the pain in his head so acute he could almost hear it, borderline blind in his right eye. Safe. He just had to get somewhere safe.

The comb teeth hurt like hell, but it was a different kind of pain. Sharp and immediate, something tangible to concentrate on over the howling voices of a thousand nebulous pains. The beads of blood looked almost black viewed through the lens of the Primal, flecked with a million glittering blue dots.

Safe. All he had to do was get somewhere safe.

Comb teeth biting into his fingertips, his other hand pressed against his right eye as if the heel of his palm could stop the Primal leaking out, Garrett took off running. He didn’t even try to stick to
the shadows.

He couldn’t even see them.

It was the footsteps that first alerted him. Rushing, the panicked sound of someone fleeing without regard to the noise they made. Caught his attention, lifted his head, and then Basso scowled as he realised they were getting rapidly closer.

“Oi, listen ‘ere you half-arsed lifter, I ain't gonna hide you from the W-” and the man careened into the basement, stumbling- all but falling down the stairs, and it wasn't Nikol like he'd thought it was. The hood was ripped back, the face exposed for all the world to see, black hair (black? Had he ever even seen that before?) wild.

Blue-green light coiled up between his fingers like smoke, bleeding past the hand that covered the right half of his face.

“Garrett…”

Stunned. Basso had seen Garrett hurt before, and once or twice he’d even spent the day curled up under the Burrick, too sore or tired to make the climb back up the Clocktower - or the stones too iced over to risk it.

In all that time, he’d never seen Garrett panic. Never seen the naked fear that filled the eye Garrett hadn’t covered. It gleamed back in the candlelight, the soft brown wide, pupil narrow. He was panting, breath jagged in the cool night air, and for a long moment everything seemed to stretch. Basso felt his heart stutter over the shock.

Then, all at once, that eye rolled and Garrett collapsed. The blue smoke spiralled to nothing and something clattered to the ground from his other hand, his whole body crumpling, and as Basso shot forward to catch him (“Shit! Garrett!”), he saw that it was the comb, speckled with blood. Shock was an open wound in Basso’s chest, hollow and cold. For a long moment, all he could do was stand there and hold Garrett’s limp form.

He was… light. Basso hadn’t ever carried his weight before, but he had seen the lithe way Garrett moved when he’d been drenched in light - or at least not completely hidden in shadow. He’d gotten a fairly good feel for it rowing them over to Moira, because he knew the difference in stroke effort between them both in the boat, and Basso alone. Even accounting for how Garrett had been noticeably narrower and lighter after his missing year, Basso was good at mental math.

Too much of the weight in Basso’s arms was from the leather and Garrett’s other gear.

“Fuck, Garrett. What did you do?” Dragging him up a little more, Basso carried the unconscious thief back to the nook where his bed was tucked away. Even though Basso was a public face in his enterprise, it didn’t mean he liked being in the open while he slept. He had one foot in the shadows, after all. “... I shouldn’t have let ya take this job.” Muttered, hot with guilt even as he set Garrett down on the bed and started stripping off weapons and tools. The bow came off first, and the quiver right behind it - Basso handled that as carefully as he could manage, not just because he knew Garrett had created the bow himself, but because he also knew Garrett crafted his own arrows, and he had absolutely no desire to find out what happened should one of them blow up in his face. He set them on the bookcase beside the bed, a couple of shelves down. An easy reach when Garrett awoke and found himself weaponless.

The cloak came off easily, and the scarf with it. Basso took a moment to study Garrett’s face; he
knew he shouldn’t, but he couldn’t help it. Garrett always had the scarf pulled down when they spoke - a display of respect, at first, and later one of trust and (dare Basso believe it) affection - but this was the clearest he’d ever seen him.

The glow that sometimes came on in his murky blue eye wasn’t there, or at least wasn’t visible through his eyelid, but the jagged, pitted scar that ran from his hairline down to his jaw had the faintest milky sheen in the dim candlelight. It didn’t sit very deep in his face, but the edges broke and danced like a canyon seam; it was (with his eye closed) his most distinguishable feature. Again, as always, the low burn of hatred settled in Basso’s gut. The Northcrest Manor should have been reduced to nothing but cinders.

Black hair fell around his head in a wild halo; there were obvious twists where it normally sat under the leather hood, totally flattened, but it wasn’t as short as Basso might have expected. It had a strange matte look, lacking glossiness - it almost looked as if Garrett had rubbed kohl through it. Basso resisted the urge to touch and find out.

The climbing harness that locked around his torso proved harder to get off. Basso kept working at it, until practically every buckle he could find was undone, and eventually he managed to twist it off one arm at a time, wincing as the movement pulled Garrett into an unnatural position. He didn’t resist the whole time, limp and pliant under Basso’s hands - like a fresh corpse.

_Hell’s cunt, Basso._ After the thought had surfaced though, he couldn’t help it. He kept checking that Garrett was still breathing. An almost silent endeavour, slow, but his chest rose and fell with comfortable regularity. He didn’t make a sound as Basso manipulated him - didn’t even twitch.

Well and truly down for the count.

Basso was starting to worry about poisons, as he unclipped and tugged off Garrett’s gloves, followed that up with his boots, removed all the remaining pouches that were attached to his outfit, and then moved him to the far side of the bed. More shadows there, and once Garrett was tucked under the blankets and his head settled on a pillow, Basso extinguished the candle closest to him, quietly moved his chair near the base of the stairs that led down here, and resigned himself to a long night. It wasn’t as if he’d been going to get much sleep tonight anyway.

What in the fuck had put Garrett down like this? He knew Garrett wasn’t in good shape, but he also knew that the thief had always taken good care of himself and didn’t consider weakness in the same stupid way a lot of other thieves did. The way Erin had. If he’d gone too far, he’d have stopped.

Right?

So what had happened, in the mere six hours since he’d been here last, to cause this? And he’d been running, _fleeing_ - he’d been caught. Not counting some of the absolute shit that the Thief-Taker had pulled, Garrett almost never got caught. He wasn’t infallible, of course, but even when he did get spotted, Garrett didn’t run like that. Shadows hid the man like physical shrouds. It was honestly a marvel that Basso knew he’d never understand, let alone replicate; it was a hallmark of the best thieves in The City which ones could melt into darkness like that. Garrett was a master of it - Erin wasn’t too far behind. _Hadn’t been._ There were a few others in The City who could do it (Ardan, Linnea), but none like Garrett.

And he was a clever man. If he’d been spotted, he would have dodged and climbed a building and hidden. He had never had a problem losing the Watch’s trail before.

So what had happened? Why was he here? Why had he come sprinting in like a terrified rabbit only
to pass out?

Gods’ bells, this was a situation.

Garrett wasn’t going to be happy when he woke up.

“Yeah. That’s an understatement.” Basso sighed, rubbing his face. Honestly, he wasn’t even sure how Garrett would react to discovering Basso had pseudo-stripped him; but there was no way that Basso was going to let the man sleep it off wrapped up in weapons and cloak and whatever trinkets were in his pouches.

From what Basso had felt while he’d manhandled Garrett, it hadn’t been all that much. That a compulsive pickpocket like Garrett had come back with nothing but the actual target item would have been enough to make Basso worry, if he hadn’t been able to feel the reason for it through all Garrett’s leathers. His harness had been cinched up to its tightest, and while it wasn’t yet loose with the buckles so close together, it was a near thing. The last time Basso had cared to take note of every detail he could garner just by looking (when Garrett first returned after the accident), they’d been three or four notches down. Before that, another notch again - on the comfortable side of bigger.

Basso paused.

Actually, on second thought, he was quite sure Garrett had altered the climbing harness since he’d last seen it. There were more notches now - it went tighter than it had ever been intended to go. The chill that flew under Basso’s skin had nothing to do with the warm summer breeze that drifted down his steps; Garrett had made the harness adjustable to allow for ups and downs in his own weight and size. It was intentional - it had to be. His leathers held a mild elasticity in their own right, and could be comfortable and form-fitting while maintaining a bit of give. The harness had to spread Garrett’s entire weight and safely dangle it from a rope, had to suspend him perhaps indefinitely without cutting into his body or risking injury or damage despite extreme strain. Basso had seen Garrett leap from buildings with nothing but a thin braided rope and his climbing harness to keep him out of Red Jenny’s claws. The harness had to fit correctly.

But Garrett had allowed for healthy changes. That he’d had to add more notches just to ensure it kept doing its job meant he knew he was too thin. Too light. What the hell was going on that Basso hadn’t noticed? Guilt gnawed uncomfortably in his chest. He’d not seen Garrett eat often, it was true - and he never drank anything someone else gave him - but the few times it had happened hadn’t left Basso with the impression Garrett had any trouble with it. Daresay, when he was given the opportunity for a nice meal, Garrett even savoured it the same as any man.

That he hadn’t been eating lately was obvious, but… Ya old guttershite. Basso was an idiot. He should have picked up those subtle signs before it had ended up this cascade of fuckery. How? How had he missed something so obvious?

Well… that Garrett rarely let anyone touch him might have hindered it. It was only putting him to bed that Basso had seen the reality of how thin he’d gotten.

That’s where his shit-lordly smirk went. Fuck me.

The flutter of anxiety and guilt didn’t ease as the night wore on. Basso kept one eye on the stairs, ears open, waiting for the self-righteous clomp of Watch boots or the whisper of one of this thieves. As dawn began to break, Basso finally got up, stretched his stiff legs, and set his chair back behind his desk. The light was starting to filter in through the window, weak and grey right now but promising a clear day. While the back corner of bed Garrett was tucked into would be free
of the sunlight, Basso still pinned the small blanket across the window to keep it dark, and then hesitated; studying the sleeping thief. Still breathing. Basso had watched long enough that he could even hear it, now, ever so faintly.

On her perch, Gwendolyn warbled a morning greeting. Quieter than usual, keeping her wings folded in when normally the sleek black rook flapped them until Basso gave her a morning treat. She yawned as Basso approached her, beak clicking shut. The sound was quiet (Basso knew for certain), but it seemed to echo in the cellar, louder than Garrett’s ghostly breaths.

“Stay here, feathers,” Basso murmured to her, scratching just behind her beak for a moment and then picking up a scrap of bread leftover from (very) late dinner. It was tough and stale now, but she took it from his fingers - without biting! - and crunched it up all the same. A soft warble. “Screech if anyone but me comes down here, right?”

Another scratch, letting Gwendolyn rub the side of her beak against Basso’s fingers briefly, and then he was locking the cellar door behind him and making his way up into the Burrick proper. Drathen was already in for the day, setting up glasses and making sure the kitchen was ready. The pub was, admittedly, technically a front for Basso’s fencing and criminal dealings, and didn’t turn nearly a big enough profit to warrant staying in business in its own right, but it made a nice side gig. Honestly though, Drathen was probably the biggest profit it had ever made. He was the Burrick’s chef and barman, and had been since her grand debut.

When Basso came in, Drathen set down the glass he was cleaning, and walked around to him. “Basso. You slept yet?” Basso just shrugged back. It wasn’t like he couldn’t get by on no sleep if he had to, but it took its toll on him, and fast. Always had. Fuckin’ night owls. Drathen jerked his chin back towards the door. “Get some kip, Basso. I can take care of the old girl.”

Waving a hand dismissively, Basso leaned against the counter. “Yeah, gotcha. First though, I gotta place ya first order of the day. Jug of water, two glasses, and breakfast that’ll keep.” Drathen raised an eyebrow at him, and didn’t move. For a long moment, they just stared at each other - a war of attrition. Anger coiled in Basso’s chest, wet and hot, but he did his best to swallow it. He wouldn’t win this battle. He never did. A moment later, he sighed and rolled his eyes. “Got a guest.”

Drathen offered Basso a lewd grin. “Oh? And here I thought the only tail you could get was Gwendolyn.”

Offering a snarl, but Basso wasn’t really offended. The snarl was pretty much ruined by a snort of laughter all the same. One foot in the shadows and all, but Basso weren’t no thief. He couldn’t survive in his business without having friends - in high places, literally and figuratively - in low places, where they had their ears (and everything else) to the ground. And nearby, whom he could trust. Drathen fell into that last category. He’d been in on the gig for years, didn’t care. Probably thought it was funny when someone stuck it to the Watch, the blighter. The fact Basso cut him an extremely generous paycheck probably helped.

All the same, he knew Drathen wouldn’t snitch him.

“Don’t be stupid. Why settle for women when you can get coin? Besides, you know I look after my lifters. Family and all that shit.” A joke, to be certain - he’d protect his thieves sure, as long as it was safe and they weren’t inordinately stupid (Nikol) but there was only a few he’d go that far for.

Drathen laughed; a rich, content sound. T’was a rare man who was truly happy in The City, but Drathen had never been anything but. Sometimes Basso swore he was simply high at all times. It was the only reasonable explanation. “Sure, sure, Basso. Must be one mighty fine lifter you got down there in your bed.” The grin still there, grey eyes gleaming. Another snarl, this one lacking
the snort, but Drathen just waved both his hands and laughed again. “Give me ten minutes, Basso.
You can take down breakfast, get some shuteye you tottering bastard, and maybe I’ll even set Graves to keep watch on your door.”

At the sound of his name, the dog perked his head up from where he lounged behind the counter, hidden from view of patrons and Watchmen alike. A low whuff drifted into the air. A dopier hound Basso had never seen; his skin folded in too many places and his ears flopped either side of his head. Not to underestimate the creature - Basso had seen him give a wicked bite to those who threatened his master - but Drathen always trained his hounds well and this one was stupider than most.

“Keep that fleabag outta sight,” Basso called after Drathen as the man vanished into the Burrick’s little kitchen. “He’d soon as invite the damned Watch in than bite their feet off.”

Laughter floated back out. “Graves! Black Tax!” The dog sat up sharply and growled. Not at anything in particular, it seemed, but his hackles were up even as he remained sitting, teeth gleaming in the early light and lingering candlelight from Drathen’s arrival shortly before dawn. Even knowing Graves wouldn’t bite him, Basso felt the unease that a snarling dog always brought. “Good boy. Lie down.” And a piece of chicken sailed unerringly through the kitchen door towards the dog as he obeyed. It was snatched out of the air and all but inhaled.

Basso shook his head. “Yeah, yeah. I already got a guard, Drathen. Keep him around to intimidate the dregs.”

Soon enough, Basso was heading back down, juggling the tray and the key to the cellar door, and then he was taking his plate (Drathen had given him two) and stretching out on the battered couch that helped shape the alcove his bed was in. Separation screens lined the back of the couch, the bookshelf delineating the rest of it. Basso couldn’t see Garrett in the dimness, even if he twisted around to look, and that would be enough - he hoped - to keep Garrett from freaking out when he did wake.

The plate was still half full, balanced on the far edge of the couch, when Basso knocked off.

Chapter End Notes

HahahahahahahahAHAHahahaAHaAHAHAAHAHAaAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA
This is my life now
OH WELL
This is either longer than I intended, or shorter, depending on how you look at it.
Lorebuilding I suppose? Stuff and things. Basso is a Good.
Bad Decisions Taste Strangely Like Cinnamon

Chapter Summary

In which Basso will take whatever victory he can get.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

It was too warm, wherever he was. Warmer than… ticking. Clock. …tower? Home. He was hot and sticky against his skin, and the second skin, and something tight and confining again over that. It didn’t smell like home either, a heady scent of oil and paper and flame and… musk.

Okay, too far. Garrett opened his eyes, pushing himself up on elbow to take in his surroundings. The lack of ticking had him on edge already; the ticking was the sound of safety, but sometimes the cockwork still stopped working during the days. The altogether different smell of this place meant he was detangling the arm not bearing his weight, even as he blinked his eyes open and took in the room, searching for a threat or something he recognised.

A bookshelf loomed to the left of the bed, separation screens fanning outwards from it to seclude it; a candle was lit on the other side of the bookshelf, showing off intricate stonework and ragged couches. On the shelf was a scattering of papers and boxes and unlit candles, and-- two shelves down, almost within reach, Garrett’s bow and quiver. His climbing harness sat next to them, the buckles glinting faintly in what light carried through.

Further out, through the artificially narrow passage that connected the bed to the rest of the room, there was a desk. It was equally as messy as the shelf, but laden with many more loose sheafs of paper, a pair of leather-bound books, and two shining candles.

A soft *caw* caught his attention. There, next to the desk - a tall perch, and a dark black shape settled upon it. Faintly silvery whiskers - no, feathers - bloomed around the base of its beak. A bird-- a *rook*---

Gwendolyn.

“What?”

He was in Basso’s cellar. The anxiety eased with the realisation, although it didn’t help the weirdly prickling feeling of realising he’d woken up in Basso’s bed and couldn’t remember how he’d gotten there. At least it was still dark outside. The blanket had been pinned across the little window, but sunlight looked different behind it. He can’t have been here too long.

Gwendolyn warbled and there was the sharp rustle of wings as she took off from her perch. Automatically, Garrett held out his hand, fingers slightly curled, thumb tucked against his palm, index finger up; a makeshift perch. Like she did at the Clocktower, she landed on his hand, rubbed the side of her beak against his finger, and then she settled; shuffled her wings once, let all her feathers puff out. They slowly flattened back down again as she cocked her head and eyed him.

The ache made itself known as Garrett untangled himself from the blankets, relieved at the touch
of cooler air against his throat and hands and feet. *He stripped me.* Yeah, that was weird. It wasn’t as if he didn’t trust Basso not to hurt him, he just liked to keep his distance from other people. That they might harm him if they got too close wasn’t even necessarily the reason, but Garrett always felt better with a certain radius of empty around him. Some nameless birds not included.

It wasn’t exactly a single ache, but it permeated his whole body until he felt like one big bruise. Even just the movement required to sit up, stretch out (Gwendolyn’s claws dug into his fingers even though he tried not to move her too much) made his heart rate pick up, and he closed his eyes to steady his breathing. Nothing like the awful sharp pain of last night, or the metallic fear that coated his tongue as the spotlights found him, but--

Garrett jerked, half trying to stand. It didn’t really work on the bed, the surface uneven and giving way under even his scant weight, but Gwendolyn dug her talons in, wings flaring open, and then let go of her now unsteady perch. She did a quick circle and landed on the second top shelf of the bookcase, but she *screeched* as she did.

Not daring to grab anything, Garrett melted back into the corner of the bed, pressing against the stone wall. Only now that they paused did he realise the floor above him was bustling with footsteps and the low constant chatter of voices. One rang a little louder than the others - still indistinct, but Garrett recognised the tone. When he heard the loud clink before Basso opened the door, and then again before Basso even turned towards him, Garrett realised the cellar had been locked.

Pocketing the key, Basso turned towards his bed. His gaze went to the bookshelf before he squinted into the shadowy corner Garrett had retreated to.

“Garrett? You’re awake, yeah?” And for a long moment, Garrett couldn’t make himself respond. It felt like a hand around his throat, keeping him silent. The ache in his body was constant, but it was quiet. He would be slow and tender until it healed, but it wouldn’t prevent him from movement. The sharp searing wetness behind his Primal eye was a different matter. It bubbled as Garrett fought for his voice.

Gwendolyn cawed, an indignant noise, and swooped down to perch on Basso’s head. Basso let out a resigned sigh.

“Yeah. I’m up.” It was forced, and even to Garrett it sounded cold, but it had taken enough effort just to get the words out in the first place that he didn’t bother justifying his tone. Equally as forced, he leaned forward out of the deepest shadow, and then he picked his way across the bed - half crawling and half butt shuffling and why in blazes did Basso even have his bed pushed up against the wall anyway, getting across a mattress this big was always a pain in the ass and not even Garrett, not even Erin, could make it look graceful - and got to his feet.

The stone was a welcome chill against his bare feet.

Scowling, Basso took half a step closer, studying Garrett intently. The urge to back away reared its head in full force, and Garrett was suddenly hyper aware of the bed against his calves. The little scratch of guilt was back. He knew Basso wouldn’t hurt him. He was still a little more than arm’s reach away, and Garrett was ten times quicker, even in pain. Basso not only wouldn’t, he couldn’t. Physically. Garrett shoved that thought away.

A huff, and Basso folded his arms. “Ya look terrible, Garrett.” It almost stung. It was probably true, though, considering how he felt, how off-kilter and fractious. “When did you last eat?”

“... When I got up this evening.” It was easier to speak, the phantom hand around his throat starting
to loosen, but everything still felt…. Garrett kept an eye on Basso, but he picked his way closer to the bookshelf and started redressing. Harness first - cinched up to the new, narrow eyelets he’d put in, ignoring the ripples of frustration and fear and self-loathing that flooded out at the reminder. He was trying to manage the consequences of the Primal worsening, and it was the best he could do. At least the harness could still be fitted to him properly. If he’d just left it, refused to acknowledge the deterioration, then he would be in far more danger.

Basso reached up and Gwendolyn hopped from his head to his hand, watching as Garrett gave a light tug on the harness to ensure it was sitting right, repeated the action at different points, in different directions, and then wrapped the scarf around his neck, secured his cloak around his shoulders. He eyed his bow for a moment, and then left it. He knew he wasn’t going anywhere soon - Basso would demand answers. Basso deserved answers. Instead, he sat on the bed, tugged on his boots and laced them up, and then made sure his gloves were clipped back into place. Even unarmed, he felt better.

All the same, he left his hood down. It was too warm in here.

Basso didn’t come any closer, but he was squinting down at Garrett once more. “... Garrett, that wasn’t this evening. It’s tomorrow. Ya slept through the day.” Even, flat tone. Unusually inexpressive, even if Garrett didn’t always pick up the expression. Controlled - too controlled. Almost hollow.

It spread from Basso to Garrett, opening in his chest. Tomorrow. It wasn’t that it was still dark, it had gotten dark again. His hands closed in his lap, fingernails digging into the leather. There were little pricks of blood that had dried on his finger pads, and fresher dots on the inner edges of his index and middle fingers where Gwendolyn had dug her talons in.

Where had those other injuries come from?

“... What the hell happened out there, Garrett?” Strained, now, after the stretch of silence when Garrett didn’t respond. Basso dropped into the chair behind his desk, running a hand through his hair. He looked… tired. His face was drawn, dark little smudges visible under his eyes. Had he slept at all while Garrett had been passed out in his bed? Another scratch of guilt to add to the collection.

After a moment, Garrett went back to staring at his hands. “... I don’t know.” It grated to admit it, his chest tightening painfully, but he didn’t even remember coming here. He’d stolen the comb, and gotten dark again. His hands closed in his lap, fingernails digging into the leather. There were little pricks of blood that had dried on his finger pads, and fresher dots on the inner edges of his index and middle fingers where Gwendolyn had dug her talons in.

Safety. He’d been looking for safety.

“You don’t know.”

Garrett sighed, rubbed his face. The black smudges that stuck to his fingers as he pulled away reminded him he’d been geared for thievery, and he grimaced - the kohl would be smeared all over his face by now. “I…” Glanced sideways at his bow, itching for the weapon, but all too aware that there was nothing to defend himself from. “I slipped up. Had to run.” And sudden cold filled his chest, like he’d been dunked in ice water. His eyes shot up to Basso’s. “I didn’t lead the Watch here, did I?” He was going to kick himself if he hadn’t even lost them before coming here. Basso was his friend, and he was a good fence, but even he couldn’t get away with housing the Master Thief. Harlan already knew that they were connected - he’d taken Basso in order to get information
out of him regarding their relationship. If he knew just how far that friendship went… Well, nobody deserved the kinds of things the General would do to them.

There was something strange in Basso’s gaze. A sharp, glinting thing that didn’t seem angry at all. Pain. The coldness seeped out into Garrett’s limbs. “Nah. Lost ‘em good before ya got anywhere near here. I figured that was deliberate.”

This time, Garrett looked away.

“... I ain’t never seen ya like that, Garrett. You got here looking like Red Jenny herself was after you, ‘cept I know you’d have just laughed in her face. You were terrified. And then ya just…” A vague, sweeping gesture, blowing out the rest of his breath. Gwendolyn cawed quietly, flapping her wings. “What happened.”

Not a question. Garrett felt his shoulders tense at the command, and for a split second he wanted to flee, but he forced it down, took a deep breath, made his hands uncurl. He still couldn’t look up. “… I don’t know, Basso.”

The strange sound finally dragged Garrett’s gaze upwards, concern spreading out over the cold feeling like a thin skein over too much liquid. Basso was on his feet again, hands clenched at his sides. “It ain’t the fucking Primal again, is it?” But there was no uncertainty in his tone. Why would there be? It was the same answer Garrett had given him every time he asked about his missing year.

“It’s been getting worse.” It was time to admit it. Admit it. There’s something wrong with me. He’d known for a while. He had to stop trying to push through it like nothing had changed. He was going to get himself killed. The hand closed around his throat again. The hand closed around his throat again. Garrett swallowed and hissed softly, trying to shake the feeling. He hadn’t felt fear like this in a long time. It took him back to being young and helpless; it bubbled in his gut like boiling sewage. Toxic. “There’s…” Caught, stopped. Garrett gritted his teeth and tried again. “I can’t control it anymore.”

That counts.

Not exactly what he needed to say, but it was close enough. Basso knew him better than anyone. He’d understand what it meant. He had to.

Whatever interpretation he’d expected Basso to have, he wasn’t ready for the snarl. Gwendolyn screeched indignantly and took off again before landing on her perch. Basso paced for a few steps, stopped, shook himself, paced back again. It was only when he glanced towards Garrett and grimaced that Garrett realised he was watching, stock still where he sat on the edge of Basso’s bed.

Carefully, the movement more controlled than Garrett had believed the man capable of, Basso strode back to his chair and sat in it. His hands stayed on his thighs, fingers dug in, shoulders quivering with tension. Had Garrett misread him entirely? Had he said entirely the wrong thing?

Ever so slowly, he started inching closer to his bow.

“... Fuckin’ Primal,” Basso muttered venomously. “What do you mean, you can’t control it anymore?” Controlled again, less hollow and more furious, but held tight.

Garrett continued the slow quest to be armed again without alarming Basso further. “I’ve told you about the Primal energy in my eye. I can use it to… augment my skills.” Basso nodded, gaze locked on Garrett’s. It was hindering how much movement Garrett could make. Deep down, he still didn’t believe Basso would actually do anything to him, but it didn’t stop the sickening anxiety
from the violent response. He’d been unprepared. Complacent. The fact remained that if Basso had wanted to hurt him, he’d have been utterly at Basso’s mercy. “... I can’t fully control it anymore.”

It came out easier, the second time. Maybe he’d understand now.

Basso took a sharp breath in through his nose, held it, let it blow out. Closed his eyes. Garrett darted at the chance, slipped his quiver and bow in swift, practiced movements. By the time Basso looked at him again, he was seated on the bed - not quite in the same place - and fully armed. The wrinkle that creased Basso’s brow did not go unmissed.

“…” This time, Basso looked away instead. “How long?” Garrett tilted his head slightly, not understanding the specifics of what Basso wanted. “How long has it been outta control?”

Now, Garrett shrugged. “It’s the Primal, Basso, it’s always been out of control.” The glare that met his snide comment was not pleased. The tension slithered down Garrett’s spine. “Look, it was always painful if I overused it. It’s just been… getting worse. There’s no need to look like that.”

A mistake. He’d made a mistake. The rage that lit in Basso’s eyes was undeniable; recognition fluttered through Garrett’s chest. He’d seen that anger before - when he’d told Basso to cut Erin. That he already had. It caused a tremor in Garrett’s chest, his heart skipping a beat; that had been the only time Garrett had ever been truly afraid Basso would never speak to him again. It had taken almost a season for Jenivere’s next visit. But even as he remembered that, the tension eased a little and Garrett no longer held his hands ready to grab his bow. Basso had been so angry back then too, and he’d never done anything remotely violent towards Garrett. A chair or two had suffered his wrath in Garrett’s place.

“You never fucking told me it was hurting you.”

Voice low. He hardly sounded like himself. Taking a deep breath, Garrett reminded himself again: Basso was trustworthy. He was safe here - as safe as he was anywhere.

“I try not to use it. It wasn’t an issue.” Maybe he was pushing his luck. Maybe he should just let Basso have at it.

Another low little snarl, and Gwendolyn cawed in response. She was upset. Probably hadn’t felt this kind of tension in the air before. “So it’s an issue now? If ya can’t control it, why use it?”

“It… doesn’t work like that.” Oh crap. He was really going to have to actually explain it, wasn’t he? He’d never actually given details on how the Primal worked, on how he focused. It would sound batshit, and Basso wasn’t exactly keyed up on the Primal knowledge. He knew that it existed, that it was some form of energy, and that it had all but killed Erin. He knew it had been the reason for Garrett’s disappearance for a year. He knew--

It struck Garrett all at once. Basso knew that the Primal had been the reason for such a big chunk of his segment of the hellscape The City had become. That he’d lost Erin (they were friends too, right? Garrett wasn’t sure Erin had friends, and he was fully aware of the irony in that thought); that he’d thought he’d lost Garrett. This anger wasn’t directed at Garrett - it was the Primal.

Garrett sighed, but at least the fluttery tension in his chest eased off. He rubbed his face again, and then ran a hand back through his hair. Grimaced. Needed to wash it. “… I can… see certain things, when I look through the Primal. I can’t see certain… other things. Like light.” Or shadow. Basso’s eyes narrowed, and then widened in understanding. “When it first started, I had to concentrate on it. Now… sometimes I can’t turn it off. It’s getting worse.”
And he hated that it almost sounded plaintive, but he couldn’t bring himself to admit it in the right words. There was something wrong with him. Garrett gritted his teeth, jaw clenching, and then immediately regretting it. The pain sparked up behind his right eye, smouldering like the last embers of a fire even while the rest of him still ached. He flexed his left hand, trying to distract himself, to do something constructive. After a few moments, the stiffness was already noticeably less.

“... You said it hurts ya.” Garrett just nodded. If it was anyone else he’d never admit that, but at this point refusing to do so was just lying, and Basso deserved better than bald-faced lies. “Is that why you ain’t been eating? I know you added more notches to that harness.”

“Eyelets.” Automatic. Something nitpicky to zero in on, something he could fall back into sass with. Garrett knew himself well enough to know what he was doing. Defuse and escape. If he derailed the situation, then it was easier to climb out of.

“What?”

“Well, technically only the metal rings are the eyelets, so I suppose you’re not entirely wrong, but-”

“Trickster’s tears, Garrett. I don’t care about the metal eyes-its.” That was an old curse. Where had Basso picked that one up? ...Which was definitely the pertinent question. “Is that why?”

Sighed, a breath that Garrett couldn’t be sure hadn’t been stolen, because for half a second the room swam with blue light. He pressed the heel of his palm into his eye. “... Yeah. Constant migraine does wonders for your appetite. You should try it sometime, Basso, maybe you’ll get back in shape.”

“Har de ha ha.” Sarcastic, but Basso definitely wasn't focusing on the snippy reply. It was too much to hope for, Garrett supposed, that he might distract the man. “You thought maybe to pay the apothecary a visit?” A little indignant, maybe even waspish, but Basso already knew the answer.

Garrett scowled at him, but he was fully aware he didn't cut a very intimidating figure - not when Basso had put hands to him and felt how delicate he was getting, not when he still had one hand dug into his eye because it hurt. “What do you think, Basso?”

“I think that worrying about that shit screwing with ya senses doesn't fucking mean much when you can't even handle a simple job right now.”

Flat. Probably not meant as an insult, but Basso had never pulled his punches before. Garrett lowered his hand, wincing as his eyes caught the candlelight, and looked away. Basso sighed softly - the anger drained out of his voice.

“Garrett… So we should deal with this Primal shit, but first we gotta get you back on your feet. There ain't no point going after it if ya just gonna hurt yourself. So, start with an apothecary, get you eating again. We can work on the other shit afterwards.”

It sounded so reasonable when he said it like that. It didn't stop the creeping feeling of nausea as he considered willingly drugging himself. “I know a good chemist. I can get you something in the next hour, and she won't ask questions. Won't answer them neither.”

Garrett’s stomach dropped. Basso wanted him to- now? He accepted that Basso was going to needle him about it, and if Garrett was honest then he was probably right - dealing with the symptoms and consequences first before going after the cause - but it didn't make the thought of
impairing himself any more appealing. He couldn't make the climb up the Clocktower in that state, it would be suicide. In all likelihood, that meant staying here. A thousand reasons that was a bad idea sprung up, and the burning sensation slid out from behind his eye, moving across his face, following the scar. Quietly, he hissed.

A warble from Gwendolyn. “... Garrett, if I thought I could leave ya to just eat more, I would. You ain't ever been stupid enough to neglect yourself,” unlike some other thieves, Erin's face flashing in his mind, “so clearly this thing is hurting you enough to stop you.” Teeth gritted, but Basso was still right. It had taken a season before Garrett had given into his decreased appetite and actually cut down on his meals. A season, and a few too many times vomiting.

It had been years since Garrett had pushed himself hard enough to vomit, but the exertion required to do his work in combination with the pain spikes had become overwhelming. So Garrett had stopped eating in the evenings, and only nibbled during dawn, before going to sleep. He hadn't always remembered.

“I have no intention of drugging myself, Basso.” Dark, almost growled - he cursed internally. Basso was right, he needed to do something.

The tension was back in his chest all the same, making it hard to breathe. He trusted Basso, but… This was an open cellar, locked or not. Hidden in the corner or not, Garrett disliked being somewhere so accessible in the first place. Being here and being high, unable to defend himself, made the tension turn to panic. Garrett swallowed it, clenching his hands against the tremor that threatened.

“Piss off, you don't.” Snapped. “That Primal shit isn't gonna fix itself. It nearly killed Erin already, and I ain't gonna let it kill you.” An altogether different anger, now, vicious and dark. “First thing is putting some meat back on ya. And clearly you need something to take the edge off.”

Or he wouldn't have gotten to this point in the first place. Part of Garrett desperately wanted to give in - let Basso look after him. *I'm not okay. I can't control it and I'm not okay.* But it made the knot of panic in his chest balloon, suffocating from the inside out. If he wasn't self-reliant then he wasn't worth a damn. Why the hell would Basso look after him if he wasn't worth his weight (*more than, I weigh nothing*) in gold?

*Because Basso cares about me personally. It was an uneasy thought, squirming in under the growing breathlessness. Because Basso isn't just here for the loot I bring in.* Not much better, flexing his hands, gaze turned away from him.

“I…”

This time, it sounded like pity in Basso’s voice. Garrett’s hands tightened in his lap. “Stay here. You'll be safe here. Gwen’ll give a yell if anyone but me is coming anyway. Door’ll be locked. I'll be back in the hour.”

Basso got to his feet, stretched a little, gave Gwendolyn a scratch, and left without another word. The door was clicked locked behind him.

For a long few minutes, Garrett just sat in silence.

He had options. The first - and he was doing his best to resist it, hands laced together in his lap - was to just leave. The door was locked but he fit through the window (there were so many advantages to being small, even without the weight loss), and they both knew the lock didn't even qualify as a minor obstacle. Not that Garrett particularly wanted to pick the lock to Basso’s cellar;
he was very good, but locks were finicky and picking them often left damage even when done right. Garrett just didn't care that everybody else might have to get theirs repaired or replaced.

Or he could stay. There were a dozen other options in between, fluttering through Garrett’s mind like jagged-winged butterflies, but in the end they all condensed into staying, or going. Running. Garrett stared into nothing, thoughts swirling. If he stayed then Basso was going to make him take whatever illicit substance his chemist whipped up for him, but if he left then not only would the problem continue, but Basso would be angry.

Worse, Basso would probably be hurt.

Garrett sighed and dropped his head into his hands; he was alone. Only Gwendolyn was here to see his indecision. Stay or go, be drugged or stay sick, be made vulnerable or… stay vulnerable.

Sighing again, Garrett took off his bow and quiver, set them beside him, and threw himself back onto the bed. He could go and avoid the drugs - and the way his senses would blur until he couldn’t tell them apart - and the dimming of the headache that he’d had so long he couldn’t even remember what it was like without it. He could flee the fear and tight panic at the idea of being here, and being so vulnerable and losing all judgement and coordination, and being completely at Basso’s mercy.

Or he could stay. Basso wouldn’t hurt him - he could finally relax (once he was drugged it wouldn’t matter that he was vulnerable anymore, because he wouldn’t care), he could live a while without the constant headache.

It was as appealing as it was terrifying.

Only after a few more minutes considering it, and Gwendolyn warbling softly (to herself? Did birds get bored?) did Garrett realise the other problem. Stupid. It took you that long. I can’t keep this up. If he stayed, then Basso would expect him to keep taking whatever drug he came back with. The whole point was to get him back up to a healthy weight, to the point where he could work and exist without being so dangerously weak that even a basic theft left him exhausted and - in this case - sloppy enough to get caught, weak enough to pass out after a simple run.

But… Stupid, stupid. He should have done it differently. He should have stopped working instead of stopped eating. He should have-- Should have, should have. It didn’t matter now. I can’t keep this up.

That thought circled around, louder than the others - devouring them.

Eventually - how long had it been? Garrett shivered realising he couldn’t tell, that his internal clock wasn’t working - he was shaken from his brooding by Gwendolyn shrieking. Her wings flapped, though her talons gripped her perch tightly and she didn’t catch any air, and the gravelly call rang in the small, stone room. Snatching up his quiver and bow, Garrett crept back across the bed as quickly as he dared, trying to be silent. Groans he knew were hidden in the mattress but couldn’t remember the locations of - Stupid, you’re losing your edge- Fuck that, you’ve lost it - went up around him, and he was suddenly grateful that Gwendolyn’s caws covered them up.

The rook went quiet as the key turned in the lock with a click. Garrett held his breath, pressing himself further back into the shadows. Basso hadn’t lit the candles by the bed, giving Garrett as much darkness as possible; gratitude welled in his chest at the unexpected thoughtfulness. It was a bubble under the rising panic and whirling confusion. Who had a key to the cellar that wasn’t Basso? Gwendolyn wouldn’t have alerted him if it was Basso (he did, admittedly, have a very distinctive tread), but nobody else should have the key to that door.
It came open silently, and a man with soft brown hair and loose, warm linen clothing came in. One hand balancing a tray that held both a jug and a plate and somehow didn’t tip, the man shut the door behind him - left it unlocked - and then set the tray down on Basso’s desk. He squinted towards the bed, but Garrett watched his eyes skate over him without pause. *Can’t see me.* The panic swelled into relief.

“... Hey, you up? Basso told me his thief wanted some food. About time, too - I was about to clock out for the day. Night. Eh, whatever. You didn’t eat breakfast, so I assume you were asleep all day. Wild shit, sleeping during the day.” He shook his head, the candlelight dancing on his copper skin. “Ignore that. Anyway, I brought dinner for you. Are you seriously not going to come out?” And he waited a full minute, squinting into the shadows, but otherwise quite patiently.

Garrett stayed right where he was, motionless. His heart was slowing down a little, as much as the pain behind his eye allowed, finally recognising the man. Drathen had been at the Burrick for as long as Garrett could remember. He was, by all accounts, a good man - he knew Basso trusted him. All the same, Garrett didn’t know him. He felt less threatened by the man’s presence, knowing that he had been with Basso for so long, but it wasn’t enough to make him reveal himself.

*Don’t show yourself. Stay out of the light.* He’d learned oh so very fast that failure was akin to suicide.

Eventually, Drathen shrugged. “Eh, whatever. Tell Basso he’s got bad taste in women, thief.” And he walked away, paused with his hand on the door handle. “...Oh-- Eat that this time. I’m not wasting good ingredients on you if you’re just going to send them back up.”

Shut the door behind him, locked it, walked away. Garrett followed the sound of Drathen’s footsteps all the way back up the stairs and then back behind the Crippled Burrick until they faded completely. Gwendolyn warbled at him softly. Her head tilted, eyeing the tray of food that Drathen had left on the desk; her beak clacked. With a sigh, Garrett pulled himself out of the shadows, making his way back across the bed into the half-light, and then off completely and fully into view. “Oh, you want some?” Amused; the thought of having the rook eat his food and trying to convince Basso that it had been him was a good one. Much better than the others circling him like carrion crows. “Here.” Eyeing the plate a moment, Garrett picked out some of the rice and offered it to her. She plucked it from his palm delicately, squishing the pieces to paste in her beak before swallowing, carefully avoiding nipping him.

When she figured there was none left, she gave his fingers an affectionate nibble, warbled, and set about grooming her feathers. Garrett scratched her head gently. It was easier, looking at her - hurt less than looking in the direction of the candles. “Basso’s going to be beside himself when you die.” Sighed. Jenivere had been bad enough, and Basso had been at odds with the magpie. He made no secret of his love for Gwendolyn. “Working with him is going to be a nightmare.”

Which was true, but the idea upset Garrett a little as well. He’d been attached to Jenivere too, even if he tried to deny it. When Gwendolyn went, the world was going to lose a damn good bird.

All of which was depressing as hell, but ultimately a distraction that he was happy to keep thinking about. Gwendolyn cawed at him quietly.

“Alright, alright.”

Garrett turned back to the tray, half-closing his right eye as the light struck it; sharp, pulsing pain shot back through his head, bounced in his skull, and made its way down his neck. Even the thought of actually chewing and swallowing the food - simple rice and some kind of poultry, with a sauce that Garrett supposed would smell pleasant if it didn’t make his stomach turn - was utterly
nauseating. Instead, he picked up the glass, poured half a measure of water into it from the jug, and studied it with a frown. Carefully, he lifted it to his face and gave it a sniff. No untoward odours came off it, no signs of the myriad poisons he could detect that way. A quick glance at the candle through the glass yielded no sign of discoloration or particulates and a spike of pain that settled into throbbing behind both eyes and all the way around his skull. Eyes narrow in response, Garrett considered Gwendolyn.

“You know, Basso will kill me if you die.” But he said it conversationally and offered the glass to her all the same. She warbled, scraped one set of talons against the glass like she might hop to the rim and perch, and then took a beakful of water.

Garrett slunk back to the bed to sit in less light. He left his bow and quiver in the far corner where he’d taken them and sat cross legged, cloak pulled around his side and into his lap. For a few minutes, he just watched the rook for any sign of pain or paralysis, or anything else that poison might do. She eyed him back, flipped her tail, started grooming her feathers. Eyed his plate and hopped a little closer to it, looked back at him. He scowled at her. Eventually, he had to accept the obvious; there was nothing wrong with the water.

He sipped as Gwendolyn warbled again, and it seemed to satisfy her. “You’re just fletching waiting to happen, you know that?” he asked her mildly; she cawed, flapped her wings, and watched him with one eye as he sipped again. The water was pleasantly cool, and while the actual action of swallowing was uncomfortable it soothed the nausea a little. He took another. “Happy?”

She warbled. Sometimes Garrett wondered if she actually understood him, or if it was just a happy accident. Maybe she was playing them all for fools. Being a pet was certainly a comfortable life. Gwendolyn didn’t even have a cage.

Garrett filled the glass full again when he was done, and returned to his position cross legged on the bed. At some point Gwendolyn flew over, perched on his knee - her weight wasn’t inconsiderable, and he felt a little unbalanced by it but it was an almost comforting feeling, the bird providing companionship without offering threat - and she dipped her beak into the glass when he lowered it.

So long he spent sitting, thoughts chasing themselves in circles as he debating staying or going, that eventually Gwendolyn gave another soft caw, fluffing her feathers out and shaking herself, snatching Garrett’s attention. She gave a self-satisfied warble, dipped her beak for some water, and then Garrett heard the footsteps. A tread he recognised - heavy and slow. Comfortable. He was still on the bed in the half-light when the lock clicked and the door silently opened. Basso took a glance around as he came in, and visibly relaxed at the sight, although the lines around his eyes tightened a little when he spotted the untouched food.

Garrett tried to push away the stab of guilt and irritation. It was a miracle the smell alone hadn’t done more than cause a dull ache in his gut. That’s probably not better. A little sigh at the realisation; Basso was right. He had slept all day, and had barely gotten out of bed tonight, and he still couldn’t stomach food - not even simple food.

“... You know why I don’t want to take whatever you’ve got,” he forced out. Get ahead of the game here - if he beat Basso to it, then he could still feel like he had some control over the situation. Hopefully… it would make it easier.

Basso blinked, taken aback, and then sighed. “Yeah, cause you’re a paranoid bastard. No, I get it,” at the scowl Garrett shot at him, “but you couldn’t fight off a one-legged pigeon, Garrett. You’re in no state. So shut up and let me stop you from getting yourself fucking killed.”
Hackles up at that, hands tightening on the glass, but he fought down the response because Basso was right. He’s right. Telling himself that didn’t make much of a difference, but Garrett tried to pretend that it did - he was dangerously weak, dangerously sloppy, dangerously slow. Forgetful. He hadn’t even considered that the Watch patrols might have changed in the time it had taken him to steal the comb. Once he’d seen their routes, he’d just assumed they’d remain and put the thought out of his head.

He sipped the water for something to do, distracting himself long enough to put down the anger and fear bubbling up in his throat. Basso glanced between him and the jug at the movement, seeming surprised; he’d probably never seen Garrett drink anything before. It was a rare occasion indeed that he drank anything someone else offered him. For the most part, Garrett collected rainwater and drank that - it was one of the only things he could guarantee hadn’t been tampered with.

“Okay.”

Voice low, forced out between his teeth, a little afraid that the glass might shatter in his hands as he gripped it even tighter. Gwendolyn rubbed her beak against the leather of his leg. It was almost worth it to see how Basso’s entire body relaxed, almost slumped. Garrett couldn’t quite tell if it was relief or shock. Might have been both.

Stepping over to the tray, Basso produced a thick package from somewhere on him - I have got to ask him about his pockets - and set it beside the jug of water. He didn’t question Garrett, something the thief was immensely grateful for. Probably didn’t want to risk Garrett’s nerve. It was a good call; Garrett was quite sure that he’d back out if given half a chance. His skin itched as Basso unwrapped the package and revealed a gleaming glass bottle. It was clear and unmarked, corked and sealed with wax like expensive wine, and filled with a clear liquid that sparkled the faintest red in the light.

It suddenly struck Garrett that such a concoction at this time on such short notice must have cost a small fortune.

“Oh figured you didn’t want to have to inject the damn stuff.” Garrett suppressed a shudder; Basso had guessed correctly. Memories not his own flashed through his mind, sending icy skitters under his skin, and pain flickered in his right eye for a completely different reason than the Primal, needle-sharp. Pulling away the last of the wrapping, Garrett saw him set down a much smaller glass, almost like an open vial. “She said one of these in a glass of water was enough. No more’n twice a day.”

Garrett did some quick mental math. Tried. His thoughts kept spinning away, peeled back by agony, but eventually he settled on the roughest estimate he could. The whole bottle would last easily a season at that rate of consumption, maybe two, assuming Garrett needed and used it twice a day. This stuff was that potent? Garrett re-estimated the cost of it; make that a large fortune.

Part of him wondered if he should pay Basso back for that. It was an odd, alien sensation - parting with coin was a completely unfamiliar action. He stopped for a few seconds, feeling out the idea before rejecting it. The faint associated queasiness at the idea Basso would willingly waste so much money on him was far outweighed by the reflexive revulsion at the idea of paying that much himself. He was the Master Thief. He didn’t buy things.

For a long moment, they just looked at each other. Gwendolyn cawed unhappily, took some more water from Garrett’s glass, and then took off and landed on Basso’s shoulder. He reached up absently to pet her, seemed to relax a little more as she nibbled his ear.
“... Do ya want me to-?”

“No.” Sharp, almost defensive.

Unfair, but it was bad enough that he was considering-- agreeing to this folly. Garrett didn’t think he’d be able to handle watching Basso drug him, voluntary or not. At this point, he wasn’t even certain how voluntary it was. Would Basso even let him leave if he tried?

Even more unfair. Of course he would. Basso had never been shy about calling Garrett (and everyone else) out on what he saw as stupidity, but he never forced anyone to do what he wanted. All the same, Garrett didn’t want to have to remember Basso drugging him. For another few seconds, they just stared, and then slowly - reluctantly - Garrett got to his feet. He set the glass down on the tray, turning away from the direct light, and refilled it. Tried not to let his hands shake. Wasn’t sure if he succeeded. Basso was watching, the gaze like a razor at Garrett’s neck, hair on end, but he didn’t dare comment on it. Couldn’t trust that his voice would come out okay if he tried. Filling the little measuring vial was a lot harder than he’d hoped, even if the wax broke and peeled off easily enough and the cork came free with a satisfying pop. His hands were definitely shaking as he did, and a few drops spilled over the edge before Garrett tilted the bottle back up.

For a moment he froze, aware that Basso was still watching, and then he just sighed, set the bottle down, corked it. The liquid had a faintly sharp scent, almost like cinnamon. It made the pain in his eyes sharper; the whole of his nose ached ferociously, as if the bone was melting under his skin. Nausea roiled in his stomach, closing his throat.

Once again, for a few moments, Garrett just stared at the little vial. A thousand curses sang in his mind as he realised he was really doing this - he was actually going to tip this unknown drug into his glass and consume it, willingly. Of course he was. Basso was still watching.

“... Fuck this.” Muttered, but he picked up the vial and emptied it into the water, setting it back down half a second later. As fast as he could. No second-guessing himself - except, of course, he could always just tip the water out. “Fuck you in particular.” Aimed at Basso, although Garrett didn’t take his eyes off the glass.

It wasn’t so big of a glass. The shaking was blatant now, but Garrett picked it up and sculled the whole thing in a few gulps. Bitterness chased the drink down, the sharp cinnamon-y smell eclipsing his senses, and even as he set the glass back down he gagged on it. Reflexive - poison - but Garrett gripped the edge of the desk and closed his eyes, trying to keep his breathing even. He was breathing through his mouth. His heart raced in his chest, a caged bird. Best not name it Gwendolyn then. The thought was hysterical.

Basso’s voice was distant. “Hey, easy. It’ll take a few minutes to kick in since you aren’t injecting it, but maybe you oughta sit down. She said it shouldn’t fuck with your mind too much, but it’ll screw up your balance. Garrett? Hey, can you hear me?”

An edge in there, but Garrett couldn’t concentrate on it. His breathing rang in his own ears. He could feel his heart, beating frantically, like pressure on his ribcage. It ached.

However long he stood there, eventually he felt his heart start to slow down. Under control. And then slower, his breathing easing into something more leisurely than it had been in a long time. Not my control, though. The low chuckle broke through. He liked things to be under control, but had he ever actually specified his own? He couldn’t remember. Funny. All fine. Fucked to all hells but it’s under control. Not mine. Not Basso’s either. Some chemist. Don’t know her name - call her Gwendolyn.
“Garrett?” An new edge there, to Basso’s voice. Maybe he should try some of whatever this shit was. Maybe he’d chill out. “Hey, come on. Sit down.”

Garrett opened his eyes, still gripping the desk. It was a good thing he was, because when he looked up and turned his head to Basso, the whole room spun around him and he tilted. Arms closed around him, panic spiked for a split second and he twitched, and then it settled back into something dull and pleasantly heavy in his chest. “You’re upside down.”

A sigh. Anxious? Couldn’t tell. Might not matter. “Over here, Garrett.” And then muttering that he couldn’t quite make out; his ears buzzed quietly. It was… not unpleasant, actually. He was set on the bed, and then gently lowered as he leaned. Sprawled now, head propped up on one hand, laid out on his side watching Basso move back towards the desk,

“I don’t buy things.”

“What?” Baffled, stopping what he was doing to look over.

“I don’t buy things. I’m not paying you for that.” He pointed with his free hand at the bottle, and then studied it more intently. Why was that? He hadn’t noticed the faint patterning on the glass before.

The light. He was studying it in the light. There was a faint pressure in his right eye, a reminder of the power that lay coiled there, but it didn’t hurt. Nothing hurt.

Nothing hurt.

Unbidden, laughter burst from his throat, and Basso took a step back. Nothing hurt. Garrett knew his thoughts were muddled, spinning and darting, glittering dragonflies he couldn’t quite catch hold of, but it didn’t feel so different to how he’d been feeling these past seasons. His thoughts were muddled and there was this constant nagging sensation in the back of his mind, like he was missing something, forgetting something - but lying on his side like this, comfortable on the bed, the room stayed steady and he could still see and hear clearly, and the pain was but a memory and distant not-entirely-unpleasant pressure in his Primal eye.

Maybe he still couldn’t - shouldn’t but totally could - work in this state, but it was no worse than the pain. It was much better. It didn’t hurt and-- the smell of the food hit him suddenly and his stomach growled. Starving. When was the last time he’d eaten a full meal?

No. Scratch. When was the last time he’d eaten?

“Basso. Pass m--” The bowl was held in front of him, a spoon offered right after. Garrett sat up, blinked dazedly as the room did a dance, and then took them as it settled. “Thanks.” Without hesitation, he dug in.

From his peripheral vision, he watched Basso sit down slowly in his chair, and then stretch out and relax. The sigh was audible over the faint buzz. Was that a real sound? Garrett wasn’t sure. It didn’t matter much - if Basso could hear it or not, who cared? Gwendolyn fluttered over, hopped closer, and warbled quietly. Garrett offered her a half-hearted glare. Then, despite himself, he scooped a little rice and offered her that instead.

“Hey, hey, don’t spoil my bird,” Basso scolded him, but for the first time tonight he was smiling. “She’ll get fat.”
Garrett shrugged, watched Gwendolyn knock the rest of the rice off the spoon and onto the blanket, and then scooped another mouthful for himself. “Like owner like pet.”

“Yeah, yeah. Fuck you too.”

He was careful to step in time with the ticking of the massive gears. His boots were thick leather and fitted, and while they were quieter than the stiff noble shoes he wore around the court, they couldn’t hide his tread completely. He would have killed for some soft leather or fabric, but he was meant to be here on Official Royal Business; besides which, Corvo didn’t hold with the illegal dealings that lent themselves to such things.

Leon would die before he let Corvo down.

So, he made sure to step in time with the immense ticking. It made for slow exploration, but at least it was quite dim in here. There was evidence of a fire once burned in the large brazier on the upper floor, and unlit candles littered the tables. A workbench and bookshelves dominated the rest of the floor, picked out in the faint yellow-grey of Dark Vision. Little shimmers, holding the barest hint of green, picked out what looked to be an impressive set of leatherworking tools, and next to them fletching equipment.

Leon’s fingers twitched, tempted to steal the bundles of feathers, but he let them be. He wasn’t even supposed to be out exploring like this, so he couldn’t risk taking anything. Further down, kept quite orderly in a series of low drawers, was a collection of other tools and crafting gear. Leon wasn’t sure what had been made with them, but he hoped it was also impressive.

Slowly, he made his way down the stairs; one at a time, steps and heartbeat settling into rhythm with the ticking of the great clock.

The floor below shone. Trinkets littered every available surface, organised into groups. Only half of them made any sense to Leon, but his breath caught all the same. Faintly blue light made the whole lower floor glow, a thousand things he could line his pockets with. A quick glance around, and he caught no echo of yellow in his Vision. No shudders in the air that indicated sound or movement. Abandoning his stealth, Leon dashed down the stairs and examined the collections.

Several sets of rings, and Leon started seeing why they were grouped such as he studied them. One set all adorned with various skulls; another with pretty clusters of gems and gold filigree. A set of bracelets that reared into snake heads made his skin crawl, but they shone prettily in the faint blue. Two more sets of brooches - a series of lovely butterflies and one more of elongated flowers—no, three sets of brooches, the third a collection of carved faces. Maybe they were pendants? Leon would need light to be certain.

And fully… eighteen shining city plaques in neat rows. Despite himself, Leon whistled. A truly impressive haul. Absolutely wondrous. Many dozens of other things winked faint blue around him. He hadn’t seen a stash of treasures this impressive since--

Leon’s heart stopped. His Dark Vision flickered out, the faint warmth in the rune on his back flickering out with it. Pitch blackness met him without it; he wouldn’t have the faintest clue there was several fortunes sitting innocently in front of him if he hadn’t come across the lair with Vision active.

“Outsider’s tits.” Whispered, mixed awe and panic. “This must be- Oh, shit, oh shit.”
Frantically, Leon reactivated his Dark Vision, feeling the warmth sear across his rune, and spun around. Blue glitters flashed by, the treasures winking their temptations. He caught sight of another bookshelf in the alcove under the top floor, another table, a bed in the far corner. They didn’t matter. No gleam of yellow, no sound, no movement. Leon sprinted up the stairs, clambered onto the wide open sill, and reached out his hand to aim. Thumb and forefinger extended in an L-shape, he closed one eye to get a better defined point, aimed at the next roof. For a moment, his rune burned white hot and then he blinked to the next rooftop over. It dulled back down to a dim warmth, and then nothing as he deactivated Dark Vision again.

Light enough out here to see without it. Nowhere near as dark as inside the clock tower. Couldn’t risk Corvo picking up on his sudden flush of emotion with their Arcane Bond active, couldn’t risk--

He darted from one rooftop to the next, moving mundanely now to avoid giving Corvo his exact location, only to pull up short. The twisted mask met him, protective wires covering the mouth like stitches in a wound, the lenses glinting menacingly in the hollow eye sockets. Normally, it was a face of comfort - now, Leon gulped.


Corvo folded his arms in silence.

For a few moments, Leon just looked back up at him, forced smile painful, and then he slumped and groaned. “Look, I haven’t taken anything! I was just exploring! The buildings here are-- It’s like they were *designed* to be travelled by rooftop! So much better than Dunwall-- No, I mean-- Fuck. Just- fuck.”

Finally, Corvo let out a soft sound. It couldn’t be called laughter, but Leon all but collapsed in relief. It was about as close as Corvo had gotten since they’d been given this assignment. “Come, Leon. We must return. You should not have wandered.”

“I know. I’m sorry, I’m just…” Not capable of coming up with a good enough excuse. Boredom was a terrible reason to endanger the mission Empress Kaldwin had bestowed upon them.

Corvo shook his head and started to lead the way back to Auldale across the roofs. It wouldn’t do to be seen wandering outside of the area - or indeed, outside the grounds of the manor General Harlan had assigned them. The dim gold glow of Corvo’s marked hand was hidden behind his gloves; the rune burned every time Leon blinked after him, but he was used to the flashes of pain by now. They didn’t slow.

“I understand. Everyone is restless; this isn’t a pleasant assignment. Political messes never are - and this Harlan… is quite unreasonable.”

“We’re not here to catch his criminals, and we *especially* aren’t here to facilitate their torture!” Leon exclaimed, the words bursting out of him. A moment later, he shied away. He didn’t expect Corvo to be upset with the sentiment, but it was a dangerous opinion to voice - here, in hostile territory, with a hostile host, and only the other Messengers for safety. “… Sorry, Corvo. I just don’t see why we should do this. I don’t want to do this.”

Corvo was silent. In his silence, they made their way to the street level, to the river, took a running jump and blinked the rest of the way across, and then ran back to the manor where the Messengers were housed. Only when they came in the back door did Corvo finally speak.

“I agree. I won’t assist the General in torturing a man I know nothing about.” A strange edge to his
voice there, and Leon’s heart sank.

“... So…?”

“So I will learn about him.”

Chapter End Notes

Ah hahahahahahahaha I'm insatiable. I can't help it - I love this fucking universe. Anyway. Warning for change in tags (I'm constantly fiddling with them though). Finally some Corvo! I'm approaching this fic from the perspective of being a hardcore Thief fan (admittedly only of the 2014 version) and a mediumcore fan of Dishonored, so I'm curious as to how this plays to those of you who are coming mainly from the Dishonored fandom? Or those of you who are only in one of these two? Not to worry either way, all will be explained eventually. I am taking a lot of liberties with the lore of both games, so there's that.

Anyway! I've been doing placement hours this week and passed out yesterday for 13 hours, so time to get some kip myself - and then start writing the next chapter because I just can't help myself. Ciao!
Six days had gone by in relative peace and routine. It was strange, confined to the cellar instead of the Clocktower. Strange, but strangely… pleasant. The faint sound of Basso snoring at nights while Garrett curled up on the couches and alternated between sketching, doing Basso’s oft-neglected paperwork, and eating more than he really should had quickly become comforting - not quite like the great ticking of the clock, but similar. He had yet to come down from the Burrick tonight, but it was early still. The last puddles of dusk light hadn't faded, and happy bustle and chatter drifted down from above.

After the fourth day, Garrett had begun experimenting with the cinnamon-y drug. With a full stomach, the drug didn't scatter his thoughts quite so much as it had the first time, but although it largely left him with his faculties it lowered his inhibitions to almost nothing and killed the helpful paranoia that kept him safe. Sometimes it was a little hard to remember why he needed to hide if Gwendolyn screeched; thankfully, even intoxicated on the stuff, Garrett was a creature of habit. Despite leaving him with his senses and most of his mind intact though, a full dose reduced his ability to balance to naught. Basso (or Drathen, and Garrett tried hard not to think about how willingly he'd shown himself to the man the second time he'd come down with food) needed to be there to hold him steady if he even wanted to think about moving around. On the other hand, the dizziness didn't cause any nausea, and the full dose completely negated the pain that had dogged him since the Primal had festered in his eye. It was a good feeling to be able to eat properly again without making himself sick. Already, the harness sat two notches looser against his body. It was as good a measure of progress as any.

A double dose of the drug, taken on a full stomach (Garrett had no desire to actually harm himself), had turned out to be an exercise in shame. While it hadn't seemed to have any long-term effect on him, Garrett’s memory of that particular morning was a blur. He’d taken it as his second dose of the day, when Basso was waking up and would be able to assist Garrett in recording the results. He remembered snatches of what had happened afterwards, Gwendolyn cawing and Basso cursing and laughing in equal measure - flashes of blue and then feeling sick and then waking up that night feeling tacky and damp and disoriented. Basso’s notes detailed a series of behaviours that Garrett was not keen to ever repeat (he absolutely did not fight a rook for a bookcase, that had to be fabricated) and then an hour spent in misery vomiting, and then passing out. In the margins of those recordings, Garrett had scribbled a new note: DO NOT REPEAT.

A half dose of the drug, taken a day later on a full stomach, had produced a much more desirable outcome. While it hadn’t completely erased the pain the Primal caused, it had dulled it down into a distant, manageable ache and only made Garrett a little wobbly on his feet rather than stopping him from staying upright at all. Walking in straight lines might be an issue, but he could navigate on his own and think clearly enough to work. Basso wasn’t convinced, but Garrett felt quite confident that he could operate on half doses fairly safely, so long as he didn’t try anything too drastic or
complicated. Against strict orders, he’d snuck out and come back an hour later with a nice little haul of Watchmen’s picked pockets. He’d split it fifty-fifty with Basso to try and placate him. The fence had been beside himself when Garrett had slipped back in the window, coins and trinkets stashed in every pocket. All the same, the results showed good promise; he’d been able to stick to the street level shadows, stay quiet and unseen, and not get caught pickpocketing despite the copious attempts at it. He’d been in pain, but it was dull and quiet; only when he focused did it exacerbate into something problematic.

Mentioning that hadn’t gone over very well. Basso was right - he shouldn’t be using it voluntarily when he still couldn’t control it (and as they’d found out during the first couple of days, even a full dose didn’t ease the pulsing agony when Garrett was focus flared) - but he was testing the parameters. If Basso was going to insist he take the drug - and that… was getting easier and easier - then Garrett wanted to know everything he could. If only Basso would give him the name of the damn chemist.

Another half dose that morning, taken on an empty stomach, hadn’t offered any additional analgesia than before, but Garrett had spent half an hour curled up on the bed feeling woozy and disoriented and distinctly unhappy. The dizziness was a little worse, and even thinking about focusing caused little ripples of pain the fluctuate out from his eye. He’d been grateful when Basso had insisted they had enough data and made him eat. Once the food had settled, he’d felt better.

This morning, as Basso started waking up nearby, Garrett set down the sketchbook and contemplated the bottle where it sat innocently on the shelf. They’d used fully a finger’s width of it so far; barely any of it. One dose didn’t last quite twelve hours. Perhaps ten. Garrett sometimes took his second dose slightly early in the mornings, if the pain was coming back especially bad, or if he intended to go to sleep sooner than usual. The two tended to coincide. Today, it had returned as a wet throb behind his right eye, and faintly painful pressure inside his skull. Unpleasant, and he wasn’t especially hungry, but it was tolerable. He’d told Drathen to just bring him something light, and he quietly nibbled away on a hunk of bread. It had been warm when he’d first picked it up. Cool now, still soft and vaguely pleasant on the tongue, but he ate slowly all the same. No nausea, not yet, but it wouldn’t hurt to be cautious about it.

Having been nigh on constantly medicated for a week, Garrett wanted to take a break. Not that being pain-free wasn’t nice, but it was starting to feel like reliance. The idea crept from thought to thought, quietly unsettling. Garrett wouldn’t be dependant on anything except himself; he refused. Just a short break. Basso couldn’t be upset about it. After all, he was still here. He’d been eating and recovering well. Loathe as he was to admit it, Garrett felt good. Better than he had in a long time. The harness was still a couple notches too tight for his liking, but it was nearing the low end of his original safety net. Soon enough, he’d be out of the eyelets he’d had to add.

Besides, he was still experimenting with it. Given continuous dosing for six days, he needed to know how he would fare if he missed one. He wasn’t going to take it for the rest of his life; the thought made his heart skip a beat, a soft shudder going through him. Once he was recovered enough, he was going to find out more about the Primal. In all likelihood, it meant heading back down to the ancient library under the House of Blossoms.

Well… maybe he could use Basso as a distraction. He had a feeling the man wouldn’t object so much to the idea in that case, and it wasn’t as if he didn’t have the money to fund it.

It was still a strange, prickling feeling, the thought of spending some of his amassed fortune, but… it would only be the coins. In terms of material wealth, Garrett was pretty sure he might be the richest man in the city. Anything he wanted for, he simply stole anyway, so he’d never had cause to spend the money he was paid for his work. He just liked being paid. Greed. The General’s voice
echoed in his head, but Garrett shrugged it off. What was so wrong with a little bit of greed? So he liked shiny things, so what? And the rest of his collection - he wouldn’t even need to touch the special sets of jewellery or the City Plaques or any of the other innumerable items that had caught his eye. Garrett had enough coin stored away in the Clocktower to fund any trips Basso might want to make to the Blossoms for the rest of his life.

And besides… it wasn’t as if he couldn’t simply steal it back later. Spending it to ease his way into the underground library was worth every coin.

A snort drew his attention; Gwendolyn warbled, yawned as she woke with her master, flapped her wings, rubbed her beak through her feathers. With a creak of the mattress, Basso sat up, rubbing his eyes. Gwendolyn warbled again, drawing Basso’s attention - he shambled out of bed, mumbling incoherently, and padded heavily over to the bird. A scratch, and Basso offered her a scrap leftover from his dinner. Once she was satisfied, Basso yawned again, stretched, and turned.

“Hey, Garrett. How you feeling?” Still a bit mumbled, not fully awake yet. Sorry, Basso. Garrett knew only too well how fast Basso would wake up when he heard something he didn’t like.

And he wasn’t going to like this.

“I’m fine. I’m going to skip this morning’s dose.” Matter of fact. Say it like it is, don’t ask permission. I don’t ask permission for anything. He was prepared for the splutter, and even the glare, but not for the sudden bloom of concern in Basso’s eyes. He was getting good at reading that; it had happened far too often for his tastes.

Basso came and sat on the other couch, cast a cursory glance over the paperwork and sketchbook and little series of records from Garrett’s experiments. “Is this just another fucking experiment, or is it… going bad?”

An interesting way to phrase it. Garrett shook his head. “Relax, Basso. I just want to get an idea of any withdrawal symptoms before I have to stop.” For any reason. He wasn’t going to rely on it forever, but even in the meantime things could go wrong. The bottle could be lost or broken or stolen - Garrett could end up having to skip doses because he was elsewhere, or not safe enough to risk it. He wasn’t going to stay cooped up in Basso’s cellar for much longer, and they both knew it.

A sigh, but Basso didn’t protest. Probably knew it was futile. He’d had enough protesting the earlier experiments. “A’ight. I’ll come down and check on ya while you’re sleeping, take some notes if you like.”

“Thanks, Basso,” Garrett smirked, sitting back and crossing his legs. “It’s almost like you care.” Teasing. He knew Basso did, even if he couldn’t fathom it. Then again, he had broken into the City Keep while it was burning down just to rescue Basso from the Thief-Taker General. Maybe he could fathom, just a little.

Basso snorted and got back up to grab a change of clothes and head up to the Burrick attic to bathe. “Yeah, yeah. Can’t imagine why.”

She kept tripping on the dress. It wasn’t that she was particularly unused to wearing a ballgown, but it had been sewn long enough that the skirts kept falling where she wasn’t expecting them. What in Void was this latest fashion anyway? Nobody needed so many layers, especially not in the middle of summer, and especially not if they didn’t intend to steal everything in sight. Or maybe smuggle out a body. Annabel was fairly certain she could fit another human body inside her skirts.
“Stop fidgeting,” Keldin hissed to her, standing with her on the balcony. They overlooked the ballroom dance floor, although there was a distinct lack of dancing going on. Despite the title of Ball and the fancy clothing decorating every body in the room, Annabel was starting to think these ‘Lords’ had no idea what a proper ball was supposed to entail. In all honesty, that didn’t surprise her. There wasn’t a drop of noble blood to be found in these new leading houses - that, and their master was a fucking madman. She hadn’t heard anyone sound that obsessed since Nathaniel had found out about sex.

A snicker. More’s the pity that he hadn’t been sent on this particular mission. Still, one look at Thadeus Harlan had proven that Nathaniel’s brand of diplomacy would have sent the whole thing awry. “You stop fidgeting,” she hissed back to Keldin. “Your clothes are just as uncomfortable as mine. And half as heavy.”

A little twitch told Annabel that Keldin was a hair’s breadth away from facepalming, but he resisted the urge and kept his eyes on the crowds. “I’d kill any number of these idiots to be in uniform.” Muttered, just for Annabel’s ears. She laughed. “But it doesn’t matter. Lord Corvo said we had to play nice.”

“You mean the Empress said we had to play nice. I’m pretty sure Corvo would sooner depose this whole shitwalk and let her take control. It’d be about time. This ‘Eternal City’ has escaped the Empire for too long.” Sighed, leaning casually against the balistrode and trying to convey mere boredom instead of simmering murderous intent. “Besides. You know Corvo says we shouldn’t kill if we don’t have to. There’s bound to be non-lethal ways of dealing with this pathetic excuse of a government.”

Keldin mirrored her snort. “Yeah, I wouldn’t call this a government. Glorified personal army. Frankly, I’m astonished that the general populace haven’t rebelled yet. If this was Dabokva-- Heck, if this was anywhere in Tyvia, they’d have all been dragged to the public square-”

“Stonemarket, I think,” she interjected softly.

“-and executed by now.” A pause. “Yeah, that sounds right. That’s where Leon was exploring, right?”

“Lucky bastard.” Muttered bitterly, shifting her weight against the balistrode, watching what looked to be a Watch Captain if she remembered how the pips worked here as he strode across the ballroom. The woman he approached looked like she wanted to die, but she curtseyed and offered a forced smile as he engaged her. “I can’t believe the Lord Protector had to go out and get him. And he wasn’t even punished!”

For a long moment, Keldin was quiet. She kept an eye on the Watch Captain in her periphery, but glanced at him questioningly. He met her gaze, looked back out over the ballroom, and sighed. “He’s the newest Messenger here. And besides - can you really blame him? We’re all losing our minds here.”

Annabel hummed quietly. “Yeah, you got that right. That Harlan guy is a fucking psychopath. And he thinks he has enough control of The City to use it as a bargaining chip. As if we’re just some especially well equipped thugs he hired to fuel his personal vendetta. Against some little thief! Who cares about one thief? This place is a ruin waiting to happen. There’s gotta be a million people who’ve resorted to lifting. Or, you know, taken it up while there’s no stable law enforcement.”
“I think we all know that it’s going to come down to a military invasion. This mission is mostly reconnaissance, in the end. And trying get as much of the power that remains in The City on our side, so when we do invade there’s not so much death.” Quietly, frowning as he studied the crowd. He’d seen something that caught his attention. Trying to find it, Annabel followed his gaze.

“... I might be pissed at him, but Leon’s right. This whole thing is a waste of time. We should get rid of Harlan and let Empress Kaldwin know this place just needs to be razed to the ground. Or- at least given some proper, solid rulership,” she quickly corrected as Keldin shot her a quick glare. “I don’t care why we’re here, Kel. I’m not gonna help that psychopath hunt down some guy and torture him to death.”

Now, Keldin’s bright grey eyes fixed on her fully, something untoward shining in their depths. “Not even if Lord Corvo orders you to?”

Chills fluttered under her skin, and her heart jumped painfully in her chest, but Annabel held Keldin’s gaze, trying to keep her own equally as hard. “Even if Lord Corvo orders me to. I’ll kill any of these fools, but I refuse to torture anyone. I won’t help someone do it. And especially not the General.”

Sighed, looking back across the ballroom, eyes narrowing. Keldin ran a hand through his hair, the light blond locks coming out of place as he did. “… I feel you, Annabel, I do, but… this is a diplomatic mission. We have to try and stay in the General’s good graces.”

“Or we could kill him.”

Muttered, pouted, but Annabel knew better than to expect anything to come of it. Corvo wouldn’t kill unless he absolutely had to - not even a shithead like Harlan. Sometimes it made her want to scream.

Keldin sighed. “See that?” he gestured vaguely, but she saw the swift extension of his index finger and looked towards where he was pointing. Letting out a delighted coo and straightening up as if in excitement, Annabel forced the smile across her face. Hopefully it didn’t look as fake as the woman cornered by Watch Captain Dick.

“I see. Want me to handle it?”

A quick shake of the head, and finally a wicked little grin. “Nah. Let Leon handle it himself. See what he does.” They glanced quickly to the far end of the room, where Corvo and the General (Thief-Taker. What a hideous title) were quietly conversing and occasionally entertaining guests. Corvo wore his formalwear better than any of them, the gleaming peacock blue dinner jacket picked out with gold thread and the stars that denoted his status pinned to the shoulder. Matching pants and a slightly paler waistcoat were pretty, but outshone by the jacket. He didn’t wear coattails, unlike many of the men assembled. They must still be in style in The City.

Well, it made sense that Corvo wore his clothes better. They were probably more expensive than anyone else’s. Emily-- Empress Kaldwin had ensured they all had serviceable formalwear for this trip. Many of the attendees had noticed - after all, Corvo cut rather a handsome figure - but he had steadfastly ignored it. Any attempts at flirting had been met with blank stares. Annabel shook her head as the woman currently with them tipped her head coyly. It must be nice, to have people throwing themselves at you. Even if Corvo rebutted them every time.

Across the room, Leon was talking to several Watchmen, gesticulating excitedly. The men nodded along, inserting gestures and comments of their own. It seemed quite lively a conversation. He too was easily visible amongst the native citizens; no coattails fluttering from his jacket, drawn up in a
deep crimson, picked out with silver stitching, and sable skin that was stark against the pale tones surrounding him. The design was identical to Corvo’s aside from boasting only a single star on his shoulder, as was Keldin’s (flamboyant) mint green and silver. She envied them their suits. Back home, in Dunwall, she and Phoebe - and all the other Messenger women - were free to wear their formal suits as well, instead of these dresses. Whilst her violet and Phoebe’s yellow were certainly beautiful, they were heavy. If it came down to a fight, Annabel was going to have to rely on Keldin to keep her safe until she could rip off most of the outer layers. At least they were allowed their matching single stars, albeit settled at their throats as if they were jewellery and not a sign of military rank.

“I can’t believe Corvo only let us bring one weapon to this thing.” Hissed, running her finger along the inside of her silken violet gloves to check on the tiny lines of darts she’d hidden therein.

Next to her, Keldin shifted uncomfortably. “Yes, well. This is supposed to be diplomacy, not an invasion. Nothing should happen today.” Low, held too even. Keldin didn’t believe it any more than Annabel did. She caught him shift his weight from one leg to the other - checking the dagger strapped to the inside of his thigh.

“Sure. Tell that to Leon when he whips out his throwing knives. Do you know how many he managed to sneak past Corvo?”

Keldin snorted. “Zero. Lord Corvo allowed him three. I can’t believe three throwing knives counts as ‘one weapon’ but I had to pick between my daggers.” Finally, the bitterness shining through. Annabel smiled to herself, then shrugged.

“Don’t worry about it. Diplomacy, remember? Anyway, are you supposed to be up here? I thought I was on lookout until twelve. You’ve left Phoebe and Leon high- eh, low and dry.”

A grimace, and grey eyes flashed to her pleadingly. “I couldn’t take it down there anymore. These Watchmen are all idiots. Their wives aren’t any better. This is the most scintillating conversation I’ve had all morning.” Annabel sighed and shook her head.

“So you want me to trade with you already? Weak, Kel.” But she pushed off the balistrode, subtly stretched, and gave her skirts a light tug. “Fine. Spot me, will you?”

A call of thanks followed her as she picked her way across the balcony delicately, and then down the curving stairs of the General’s mansion. The balcony was just for show, but coming down the stairs in this ridiculous dress, already a touch unsteady on elevated heels - a new fashion that she hated, but Empress Kaldwin had insisted - was actually a mission in its own right.

Once she’d made it to the floor, she paused and swept her gaze around, trying to decide on a suitable group to approach. None jumped out at her particularly, and she wasn’t allowed to hover around Corvo (or, more accurately, he didn’t want them spending more time than necessary around the General), so eventually she approached a servant, picked a flute of wine off his tray with a murmured thank-you, and selected a spot near the far wall to observe. It wasn’t mingling, and it was essentially a worse version of the task she’d just let Keldin take over, but fuck it. If any of these people wanted to talk to her, let them approach her. She could play enigmatic just fine, thank you very much.

Pretending to sip her wine, she looked back to Leon. The servant Keldin had spotted had already reached his group, offered refreshments, and left them. Her eyes narrowed. The servant had been moving with far too much purpose - she’d picked Leon’s group to approach specifically. It was unlikely the others had noticed it; Leon probably hadn’t even realised, too engaged in his conversation. Damn it, Leon. Pay attention to your surroundings. Why had Lord Corvo chosen him
for this mission? He’d had free reign to pick any four of the Messengers. Leon was an excellent combatant, good at stealth, had a scheming mind and had shown proficiency in many of Corvo’s gifts, but he was too new. He hadn’t been seasoned yet - and here he was, in the middle of possibly the most hostile environment in the Isles, paying nary a glance to the people around him.

She pretended to take another sip, eyed Leon’s half-empty glass, and felt her stomach sink. *Damn it, Leon.* Not only that, but he’d either forgotten they were under orders to remain lucid, or he hadn’t been able to think of a way to fake it under such direct scrutiny. She hoped to the Void it was the second one. That was a panic reaction - definitely bad, and it made him a liability, but it was at least understandable. Anything else was sheer bollocks-for-brains stupidity.

A quick glance up at Keldin confirmed he’d noticed; his gaze kept flickering to Leon, mouth drawn into a tight line. Annabel had to stifle the urge to make sure Corvo knew - he would have noticed. Probably before they did. Even so, it never hurt to be sure. Her heel tapped against the polished marble floor, too loud, too obviously anxious, but she couldn’t help it.

This ball sucked.

She looked for Phoebe, trying to still her thoughts. Her bright yellow was harder to find than it had any right to be, but eventually she spotted the small Messenger tucked away in an alcove lined with plush couches, surrounded by fawning wives. Doing a perfect job, then. Phoebe was an adult, but she was unusually small - tiny enough that most mistook her for a child. It made for a mess at home most of the time, where the Messengers were well-known and recognised by their stars and, often, by face. Here, though, on mission… Phoebe let them assume it. Nobody had dared asked Corvo to his face yet why he’d brought a ‘child’ on a diplomatic mission, and they all preferred it that way. Sparring with Phoebe was fine normally - she was as skilled as any of them - but it was a nightmare when she used them as rage relief.

All the same, she let people assume her height dictated her age and right now, that meant the Watchmen’s wives were clustered around her, cooing over her star and her accent and her dress, and all the while spilling citystate secrets.

At least *someone* was doing their job right.

The day wore on, and Annabel found herself engaged with several Watchmen and their wives. More Watchmen than wives. Not all of them were married, of course, the The City still held the archaic practice of barring women from military work. (Or political work. Or any employment directly from the state, really). Even so, a large chunk of the wives still remained with Phoebe; she was settled on the laps of two of them now, stealing treats from their plates as they gossipped. Honestly, it was a wonder how blind people were. She was short, sure, but Phoebe didn’t even go out of her way to act like a child. She just stayed a bit quiet, and they dismissed her intelligent comments as just being a well-learned girl.

Honestly. Disgraceful.

To be fair, Annabel had to navigate her own stickiness. The darts were a tempting weight in her gloves as a couple of the Watchmen flirted, and a couple more kept asking why she was on this mission. Was she Phoebe’s warden? (Too young to be mother to that old a girl, obviously). The smile was painful as she brushed it off, shaking her head and stuttering like she was embarrassed instead of furious. Corvo’s lover? *No.* She had to swallow any other response to that one. Ugh. Such a mess was that.

It wasn’t until one of them implied that she should have stayed behind in Dunwall where it was safe that she really had to take a deep breath. *Don’t snap the glass, don’t snap their necks, don’t*
use your darts. Don’t cause a scene. The mission. Let Corvo handle it. Focus, Anna. She offered them a polite smile and indicated the star at her neck.

“Actually, sir, I’m part of the Empire’s military and serve under Lord Royal Protector Attano as one of the Royal Messengers.” She even managed a curtsy there, and prayed that her voice came out amused or coy or anything other than cutting. Lord Royal Protector. Well, it wasn’t exactly untrue - she did serve Corvo, and he was the Royal Protector. It was just... more the Royal Spymaster bit that she served.

The looks she received made her tremble, suppressing the anger. These snivelling idiots thought she couldn’t serve in a military capacity because she didn’t have their wilting cocks to prove it? Maybe she’d cut them all off. Then nobody could serve.

One of them offered her a tentative smile. “My apologies, Lady Whitefield, but you cannot be serious.”

They saw the twitch in her eye. She knew, because the one who’d spoken took a step back and glanced at his fellows. Taking a deep breath - and letting them see it, because if they knew she was angry then she’d make damn sure they knew she was better behaved than them too - Annabel set her wine glass down on one of the small tables dotting the edges of the room and forced out as nice a smile as she could.

“I am very serious, Captain Rhodes. This star is not simply for show. I would direct you to the same badges worn by my colleagues. In future, Captain, I would appreciate it if you refrained from slandering my rank, even if it is not from your own nation. If you will excuse me.” A bow, this time, fuck the curtsy, and she pushed past them and made her way across the ballroom. Thumbs ran over her concealed darts, temptation pounding in her wrists with her pulse, but she resisted. Don’t cause a scene. Diplomacy. Fuck I hate this city. Fuck this city, and fuck its batshit leadership.

Annabel wasn’t sure how long she stayed hidden away in the corner of the room, avoiding her duty to mingle and just observing. She was allowed to disobey certain orders if it meant following others. Mingling meant talking - it meant likely hearing the same comments over and over again. If she had to choose which orders to follow, she chose the diplomacy ones. She would stay quietly in her corner and not kill anyone.

It wasn’t until she caught sight of Keldin’s mint green coming closer that she realised she’d been glaring vacantly. Oh god. I’m as bad as Leon. But still, she drew herself up and met Keldin halfway, tilting her head. If he was down here, then either it was her turn back up on the balcony, or something had changed.

Judging by the stern expression and the quick pace, she guessed it was the latter.

“What happened?” she whispered as they got close. “We aren’t scheduled for dinner for... what, three more hours?”

“Two,” Keldin murmured back, and Annabel shoved away the way her heart sank. She’d slipped up so badly. Stupid prehistoric Watchmen secluded citystate fucking attitudes.

Even so, her fingers curled. “Shit.”

Keldin shook his head. “Don’t worry about it. Look, I don’t know what’s up, but something’s... odd. The Captains have been moving in these weird patterns. I almost didn’t notice. And the General’s two Commanders? They’re up to something. I don’t know. Lord Corvo’s summoned us.”
Annabel resisted the urge to look around and instead offered Keldin a smile. “That’s not great. I hope you brought your good dagger. Go rescue Phoebe, I’ll get Leon. How drunk is he?”

Tentative; not sure she wanted to know. She hadn’t been paying attention. *Outsider’s eyes. I might as well be drunk myself for all the use I’ve been.* Keldin’s grimaced answer was not encouraging. “Maybe it’s best to leave him where he is.”

“That bad?”

Annabel looked around now, searching for the other Messenger. She found him standing in a group of four Watchmen - not Captains, but some of the small group of favoured men who’d been invited. They were distinctive, in their simple red suits. Barely formal enough for a dinner party, let alone this event. Laughing and joking, but even as she watched one of them took Leon’s mostly empty glass and replaced it with a full one.

“Worse. They’ve been with him for two hours.”

Offering a grunt of confirmation, Annabel turned back to Keldin. “Leave him. We can’t have that hot mess anywhere near Harlan. We can figure out what they’re doing with him afterwards. And that idiot better pray he hasn’t let anything slip, because I will scalp him.” Keldin winced, and followed Annabel towards Phoebe. She watched them approach, dark blue eyes stormy and grateful all at once.

“My deepest apologies, lovely Ladies,” Keldin began as they got close enough, executing a walking bow with apparent ease. “It is with the most sincere regret that I must whisk our darling Phoebe away.” Even as he did nothing of the sort, flashing a charming grin - might Annabel daresay even roguish? - as she beckoned Phoebe over. Yellow skirts swirling, Phoebe hopped down and darted over, grimacing the moment her back was to the Watch wives and they wouldn’t see. They tittered in disappointment, but seemed suitably distracted by Keldin. Most of them, at any rate. Annabel didn’t worry about the ones who didn’t.

Watching Keldin charm for a few moments longer, she lowered her voice so it wouldn’t carry. “You’ll have to tell me if you heard anything interesting, but Corvo wants us right now. Kel noticed something odd about the Captains. It’s probably related. Also, we’re abandoning Leon to his drunken fate.”

Phoebe glanced past them, tilting her head as she watched Leon be held on his feet by two Watchmen. “Mmm. Might be better to rescue him. I don’t trust these people. He can’t defend himself.”

Not bothering to look again, Annabel shook her head. “I know, but do you really want that hot mess anywhere near Harlan?” Phoebe’s face twisted into absolute disgust for a moment.

“Good point. Harlan flirted with me.”

“Phoebe, Anna flirts with you all the time,” Keldin interjected as he returned to them, touching two fingers to Annabel’s elbow for half a second. She nodded slightly, acknowledging it, and they followed Phoebe as she led the way up to Corvo and the General.

“Yeah, but I know she’s an adult. She’s older than me! If anything, the scandal is that Phoebe flirts back.”

They shared a vaguely disgusted look, shadowed in their eyes and kept off their faces, and then presented themselves to Lord Corvo and the General. Two flawless curtsies and a bow. Something
dark hung in Corvo’s eyes when they straightened and he surveyed them. He didn’t need to say anything - they all knew what it was. Phoebe gave the slightest touch to the back of Keldin’s leg, pushing seniority on him, and he cleared his throat.

None of the charming smile now. It wouldn’t work on Corvo, and they rather suspected Harlan would find a way to be offended. “I sincerely apologise, Thief-Taker General. Our colleague seems to have forgotten himself in the festivities. We thought it best he be allowed to make a fool of himself with men more… of his calibre.” Annabel held her smile through gritted teeth as Keldin spoke. Leon was a bit of a brat, but he was still far superior to any of these City dregs. It grated to have to pretend she agreed with such degradation.

A hearty laugh from Harlan. The grin was unsettling. “There’s always one, isn’t that right, Corvo?” The Lord Protector nodded, an irritated expression flashing across his face. For show. He was upset with the situation, Annabel could read it in the clasp of his hands behind his back and the way he stood at full height, despite the fact they all knew Harlan disliked how much he towered over them all, but he wouldn’t show it like that unless he wanted to. Harlan shook his head. “Not to worry, my boys will take good care of him.”

Was there something especially sinister in that statement, or was it just the normal level of menace Harlan spoke with? Annabel wasn’t feeling particularly menaced, but her pulse jumped in her throat again and she had to focus on breathing steady. Phoebe took her hand, a picture of innocence, and squeezed. Swallowed the gasp of pain and squeezed back, forcing the smile to remain over her teeth, shoving down the revulsion she felt. Focus. Thanks, Phoebe, for bruising my metacarpals.

“You’re very gracious, Thief-Taker General.” Corvo, speaking up, his voice muted and respectful but lacking the hint of subservience that Keldin’s held. He was the de facto ruler of The City, she supposed. Corvo shouldn’t be offering anything to the man but the pommel of his sword.

Harlan laughed again and waved a hand. “Think nothing of it.” Grinned wickedly. Annabel’s skin crawled. Flirted with Phoebe. Only Corvo’s eyes on her and Phoebe’s hand in hers stayed the murderous impulse. The man was sickening. And on top of it, he expected them to help catch a petty criminal and torture him to death, all for some absurd personal vendetta.

No, Annabel decided. Leon was definitely right. Fuck this shitshow.

“But, now that I have you all here-”

Movement, behind her. Muted, slow, but she finally broke eye contact with Harlan and glanced over her shoulder. The quiet chatter was slowing to a stop, and she was met with a sea of eyes. The Watch had moved around them, closed in - watching.

Well. That was as ironic as it was disastrous.

Keldin gripped her other hand suddenly, tugging. She ignored it, scanning the crowd for Leon, anxiety mounting in her throat. Ignore it. Don’t panic. You can get out of this. Even just three of them were easily a match for badly trained state law enforcement. And it wasn’t just three of them - they had Corvo. No need to panic. She kept looking. Red, red… The only colour that many of the Watch had gone for. Motherfucker. Look for the silver thread. She couldn’t find it. Where the hell was he?

The itch to activate her Dark Vision was overwhelming, but Keldin tugged her hand again before she could and she finally turned back. Harlan was laughing, freely - manically. How could his men not see that he was a fucking madman? How was this travesty of governing allowed? At Harlan’s
throat was the blade of Corvo’s collapsable sword. Corvo stood behind him, twisting one of his wrists behind his back, holding the sword. Completely steady, no hint of hesitation. If Annabel hadn’t known better, then she would have thought he was ready to execute him.

Well, so much for fucking diplomacy. At least Corvo made the call to break it and none of us snapped.

“I will offer you one chance, General. Release Lord Diamandis or we will be forced to retaliate.” Cold, voice threatening immediate and merciless violence. Even knowing better, Annabel felt the shiver creep down her spine. It was followed by the excited heat - the diplomacy, all at once, had fallen over. This was a fight. She didn’t have to hold back! They’ve got Leon. Darts appeared in her fingertips, and Keldin’s free hand dipped into his pants pocket, ready to tug his dagger out.

But Corvo hadn’t given the go ahead yet. The assembled Watch - there was more of them than had been invited, Annabel was absolutely certain - waiting with Leon buried somewhere in their depths. Desperate to watch for Corvo’s signal, Annabel kept her eyes on the two men in front of her - but she heard the movement behind her, in the sudden quiet. Clothes swishing, a hundred tiny clicks. What…?

Harlan laughed again. “Men!” The clicks turned to twangs. Annabel had half a second to realise that she, Keldin, and Phoebe were standing solidly between Harlan and Corvo, and the rest of the Watch. Three consecutive bodies. Meat shield.

The glow of Corvo’s Outsider Mark was blazing blue-gold, and shone through his gloves. Echoey and thick, the whole ballroom turned misty blue and grey, and silence fell. Corvo’s voice was distant, hard to make out.

“Move! We cannot fight this battle.”

There was no room for argument. The order rattled in her teeth, and Annabel turned on her heel, yanked up her stupid fluffy dress, and kicked off the elevated shoes before taking off running for the doors. Footsteps echoed dimly behind her, and everything seemed to move like treacle. By the time she reached the exit, the four of them were running equal, side by side.

Four.

She skidded to a halt, twisted back towards the ballroom, yanked back as someone grabbed her arm. “No! Stop! Wait! We have to get Leon!” He hadn’t moved, a glint of scarlet amidst the sea of blue-grey bodies, free from the constraints of magic as Corvo manipulated time.

Only now did she see the almost flat screen of miniature crossbow bolts that hung in the air, like a black shroud just starting to bloom from the Watchmen. Her skin went cold. If Corvo had hesitated, they’d probably be dead. No wonder he had called a retreat. Just like that, the truce had been ended, and if not for Corvo’s gifts they’d be dead. They’d be dead. Annabel’s breath caught in her throat, even as she allowed herself to be dragged out of the door. How? How had a man like Thadeus Harlan outplayed them? How hadn’t they noticed?

How???

Keldin’s voice hung in her ears. “Anna! Anna, come on! We have to move! Corvo can’t hold this kind of magic for long!” It was distant, but she turned slowly to look at Keldin, stumbling as he dragged her, skirts getting caught under her feet. Keldin’s dagger tore through the fabric as they ran, cutting off outer layers, cutting off colour until it was white, cutting it brazenly short. As the swaths and ribbons of fabric came off her, they spiralled into the air and froze in Corvo’s magic.
The Lord Protector was beside them, silent, face drawn while he kept them moving, made sure they didn’t fall behind. The glow coming off his hand was so bright. It had to hurt.

Anna had seen him bend time before - several times during practice spars, to acclimate them to it, and once in the field. It was difficult magic. Keldin tugged her onwards, away from the mansion, onto the streets of Auldale and then blinking up onto a building. The strange wet heat of magic washed over her skin as Keldin blinked them both, a strangely constrictive sensation when not of her own will. He dropped to a knee once they landed, breathing hard, struggling to push himself up. Keldin was the most observant of them, the best suited to duplicitous spy work, but he was the weakest magic user Corvo had chosen. Blinking a passenger had consumed a great deal of his energy.

Beside them, Phoebe blinked Corvo up with her. His Marked hand was clenched, held away from his body and Phoebe’s. How long had he already held it? How long that Corvo couldn’t blink himself?

“Anna!” The voices rang in her ears, Keldin and Phoebe, screaming at her. “We’re not far enough away! Come on, Anna, snap out of it! We have to GO!” Corvo eyed her as she looked back again.

“But…” Everything echoed in the suspension, distant and boundless all at once. “We can’t leave Leon.”

Pain erupted in her face and she shrilled, staggering back. Phoebe glared at her, hand still raised. Tears sprung up in Annabel’s eyes despite herself, shock and pain combined. She didn’t understand. Why were they running? They weren’t far enough away, Keldin had said, but they were already too far. If they turned back for Leon now, Corvo would lose his hold on the magic and they would be amidst the violence when time resumed. Too dangerous.

Harlan had nearly killed them.

“But…”

Keldin grabbed her, yanked, took off across the rooftops as fast as he could manage. He was breathing hard, his hair lost in a wild blond halo, his jacket - and the star attached to it - gone. He didn’t spare the air to urge her on anymore, just dragged her.

By the time they reached the Auldale Bridge, she was running on her own power. Keldin had blinked them both once more before Annabel had begun to use her own rune, and Phoebe had blinked Corvo across every obstacle. The blue-grey wash around them was starting to move. Sluggishly, as Corvo held it as long as he could, but the man was pale and sweating. More exhausted than Annabel had ever seen him. All from one bit of magic? Time, she supposed, was not something to trifle with.

Phoebe and Keldin didn’t look to be much better. Blinking so many times in such quick succession would have worn Keldin out at the best of times, but he’d taken Annabel with him twice as well. Phoebe had more endurance, but she was blinking Corvo - three times her size - alongside her every time. Keldin and Annabel were either side of them, offering Corvo what support they could.

The river had never seemed so wide.

“I’ll take him.” Annabel’s voice sounded like someone else’s, a suggestion she hadn’t realised she was making. “I have more range than you guys.” Corvo nodded at her, and for half a second she just stared, dazed. They’d left Leon behind. Everything still seemed unnaturally other, but she stepped back in time with Corvo, sprinted at the river right beside him, took off on the same foot.
Midair, she reached for Corvo’s wrist, grabbed it, realised he’d positioned himself so she couldn’t touch his Marked hand, and blinked them to the far shore. Keldin and Phoebe popped in beside them a moment later.

“Hide.”

Corvo’s voice was rough, low. He sounded like he was in pain. Annabel realised she was reacting outside of herself; couldn’t be sure where the action or the words came from. It was like watching someone else.

She pointed up at the buildings. “Phoebe, scout them out. There’s bound to be one that’s empty. Kel, help me. I’ll blink us, just help me keep him on his feet.” Phoebe vanished, even as the blue-grey slatescale world started moving faster. Distant sound began to come back, nothing more than echoey chirps for now. They didn’t have long before time snapped back to normal. Corvo was leaning on them, more than she’d expected - they held more of his weight than he did. His eyes were closed.

*Shit. Shit shit. We left him behind. Corvo’s down. We don’t have any time.*

But they had more time than they would have without Corvo’s magic. “Kel, ready.”

“But-”

“No time.”

She aimed and blinked and stumbled as they came down just barely on the wide wooden slats underneath a window. Phoebe had opened it but she had yet to return. It didn’t matter. Even as Annabel and Keldin hooked Corvo’s arms around their shoulders and heaved him through it, the magic cut out.

Sound returned in thunder, light and colour an assault after the muted blues. Half a second of shrieking sounded from within the building and then went silent. Corvo collapsed, his Mark going dark, and Keldin and Annabel staggered under his weight. When Phoebe came back into the room, she had shallow cuts in her palm. “Through here. Put him on the bed. We need to regroup.” Tired, voice thin, but something jagged and steely in her eyes.

Annabel did as she was told. With Corvo down, Phoebe had seniority. By the time they came back from making sure Corvo was settled on his side, safe from choking on his own vomit or blood in a worst case scenario, and bundled in blankets, Phoebe had dragged the occupant of the elevated house into the main room and bound him.

“... Phoebe...?”

Blonde curls - darker than Keldin’s - bounced as she shook her head. “Just unconscious. It doesn’t matter. We’re already criminals. Harlan’s already decided that. We need to find a proper hiding spot. As soon as Lord Corvo wakes up, we’ll move. He can recover there. This will only be safe for so long, and I don’t want to continuously knock out a civilian. Who’s got the most magic left?”

Annabel raised her hand. She wasn’t on Leon’s level, but she had more magic than Keldin or Phoebe to begin with, and she’d used less of it.

“Anna, stay here and protect Corvo.” Furious. Phoebe was furious. All at once, the numbness fell away and Annabel was left with raw, painful rage that splintered in her chest. It felt like her ribs had cracked with it. Her hands clenched, and only when her fingers slipped did she realise the silk gloves were still in place. “Keldin... I know you’re tired, but you’re with me. We have to move
fast. Harlan played us. As soon as we’re safe, we can figure out how to get Leon out of there.”

Leon. It made Annabel sick, knowing that the General had him. Captive, by now. He was probably too drunk to even realise. Drunk? Or did they drug him? Guilt clawed inside her chest, cracking her ribs out further. She shouldn’t have judged him so stupid so fast. Any of them could have been drugged.

“Go. I’ll keep Lord Corvo safe. Be careful out there.”

She watched them go, vanishing from the outer ledge and leaving behind momentary twin heat ripples. Taking a deep breath, she pulled out a dart from her gloves, gave the civilian a cursory check, and pressed the dart into his wrist. He’d stay unconscious for at least six hours with that in his system, never mind how hard Phoebe hit him. Annabel untied him, laid him out on his side in the same position she’d laid Corvo, and fetched the spare blanket.

He was an innocent civilian. He wasn’t responsible for this mess and he didn’t deserve her ire. It still felt wrong, making sure he was at least somewhat comfortable, that he wasn’t in danger, and that the wound bleeding on the side of his head was superficial. He’d be fine.

She blunted his pair of scissors cutting the fingers off her purple silk gloves, but it didn’t matter. Flexing her hands, she returned to the main room, sat on the floor where she could watch the window and Corvo at the same time, and set about waiting.

The experiments were starting to get worrisome, but Basso put that aside and let Garrett do as he will. The fact was, the thief was here and not fighting him. Honestly, Basso was amazed that he’d been able to get Garrett to cooperate in the first place. He’d half been expecting to have to wait until Garrett literally collapsed and couldn’t do anything else. Thank the gods that Garrett wasn’t a self-destructive moron - but Basso didn’t even want to know how fucking terrible he must have been feeling to agree.

This latest one though… Basso understood why Garrett wanted to take a day off. He didn’t even drink alcohol, never had - Basso wasn’t sure he’d ever tasted the stuff. Hated to be impaired, hated not feeling in control. It must be grating on him, being reliant on something, even if it was just potent medicine. And the reason he’d actually offered was pretty solid too. At some point, even if it wasn’t forced on him before he didn’t need it anymore, he’d have to stop taking the drug. It was important that they knew how that would affect him, what to expect, if Basso would need to be there.

Garrett had been asleep barely a couple hours now. So far, nothing untoward had happened; he was definitely a little restless, where a usual morning dose had him nigh on comatose until the afternoon, but nothing else terrible was happening that Basso could tell.

So, when a pleasant conversation with a jeweller who just couldn’t hold his liquor was interrupted by the sudden shrieking from downstairs, Basso bolted to his feet.

“Eh, nothing to worry about! Just my mangy fucking bird. She’ll shut up in a minute or we’ll have a barbecue!” Laughter, a little that filtered through the cawing, but enough that Basso dismissed the patrons. Drathen could take care of it anyway. Fumbling the key, Basso ran out down to the cellar door, trying to ignore the growing fear in his chest. Gwendolyn hadn’t stopped yet. Deafening, as he finally managed to get the door unlocked and slammed it open, stumbling in without bothering to close it behind him. The key sat heavily in the lock.

“Gwen! Hey, quiet, Gwen, wh-” The rook soothed at his command, but she was still standing on
his desk, wings open, feathers fluffed out. Her beak was open - she breathed heavily, panting, panicked.

Garrett was writhing on the bed, thrashing, the blankets all kicked off. Low moans and whimpers escaped him, fizzing in the air, accompanied with half-formed pleas and desperate little “No-”s. Visible even when his eyes were shut was a blue-green glow that emanated from his right eye, the light thick and pearlescent like smoke. For a moment, Basso couldn’t move and then he jumped over, leaning one knee on the mattress, and reached out to touch Garrett’s shoulder.

He let out a fully fledged cry when Basso touched him, like it was agony, and then he was flat against the far wall, eyes wide and staring. Light coiled from the right one, twisting and flickering like it was fire and smoke at the same time, and lines of pain creased Garrett’s face. In his left glittered a blind panic. He didn’t recognise Basso. Not yet.

Staying back now, Basso raised his hands. He could hear Gwen still panting behind him, open-beak breathing. Not good for anyone here, really. “Garrett… Calm down, Garrett, it’s just me. Just your good old friend Basso… Nuthin to worry about.” Anxiety in his chest - Basso was pretty sure it came through in his voice. Doubted that helped, but he couldn’t stop it. Garrett was recovering well, well enough that Basso knew he’d head back for the Clocktower soon, but he was still fragile. Basso doubted Garrett really understood how fragile he was. It wasn’t just about his body - his mind had been violated by the entire Primal shitstorm, and as far as Basso knew, Garrett had simply boxed it all away and pretended nothing happened.

“Garrett?” As soft as possible. Don’t fuck this up and freak him out now. Basso watched as Garrett stared at him, glanced unerringly at Gwen, looked back to him. The light in his eye didn’t abate. Was he watching them through the Primal - focusing, he called it - on purpose, or could he not turn it off? It had looked… different, last time.

A low noise came from the thief, building so slowly and starting so quiet that it took Basso a minute to recognise the keening. It was the sound of loss. Something deep and fathomless and Basso’s heart stopped in his chest, his whole body going cold.

Amber.

“N-no… no.” Whispered, jagged - the desperation was familiar, and hearing it in Garrett’s voice squeezed the breath from Basso’s lungs. Familiar. Too familiar. No. What? What the fuck was happening? Garrett was panting, hyperventilating as he pressed against the back wall and hugged his knees. The bed shook with his tremors. Basso couldn’t breathe at all, but it swirled under his skin and he didn’t fucking understand.

He knew that cry, that fear. Basso was no stranger to loss that piercing, but Garrett - as far as Basso knew - had never been close to someone like that. He couldn’t afford to be, couldn’t afford to have such an open and obvious weakness. People like the Thief-Taker would use it to crush him in a second. So what-

“No.” Half-sobbed, the light still bleeding from Garrett’s eye.

“Hey-” Basso’s voice shook, but he took a quick, sharp breath (all he could manage) and tried to hold it steady. “Garrett, hey, just… calm down. You’re okay. It was just a nightmare.” Had to be. Right? It couldn’t be anything but a nightmare, because Basso would know if it could be anything else and nothing could have happened in the last hour. Garrett had been perfectly fine yesterday. Daresay… even happy.

Garrett moaned quietly, pained, and then the light pulsed in his eye and he sat bolt upright, leaning
forward, breathing open-mouthed like Gwen. There was something urgent in his expression, and for a second Basso was afraid he was going to throw up (again), but it wasn’t the same grimaced panic as that. It was… something else. “I… Jessamine.”

“It’s okay. I’ll get you some water, alright? Just hold on a second.” The conclusive answer to withdrawal then, Basso tried to reason, and he snagged the bottle and turned back to the desk where they now kept the water jug. Bad shit. Avoid at all costs. For now, he’d settle Garrett down with the dose he missed and discuss it with him that evening. There was movement behind him, sharp and frantic, but Basso kept his eyes on what he was doing. “Sit down, Garrett. You’re safe, just-”

Basso turned back with glass in hand, only to find the bed empty. A quick glance around confirmed that Garrett was gone. Slowly, ever so slowly, he set the glass back down on the desk. Gone. Fucking idiot. It’s the middle of the day. His bow and quiver were gone too. He was armed.

Basso sat down, and Gwen hopped onto him. He stroked her feathers, feeling her start to calm down under the touch. He still felt cold, thoughts spinning - Amber - no - and Garrett was in The City in broad daylight, armed, and out of his mind. Stronger than he had been - but he wasn’t wearing his harness, wasn’t even wearing his leathers. They were tucked neatly away on the bottom shelf of the bookcase, folded as little as possible.

His fucking eye was glowing!

There was nothing Basso could do. He’d never catch Garrett, even if he was still recovering and relatively weak. He’d never catch Garrett, and that was if he could even find the man in the first place.

What had he been- Jessamine. That was what he’d said before vanishing, right? What the fuck did a dead Empress have to do with this? It echoed in his head; Basso knew that. What was he missing here?

Slowly, one hand still petting Gwen comfortingly, Basso tugged closer the makeshift notebook Garrett was using to record his experiments and picked up a pen. Ink spots blotted the desk when he dipped it in the inkwell. Petting Gwen, eyes blank, Amber thoughts flooding his mind like the long-awaited end to a drought, Basso started recording what had just happened. The scratching of the pen was mechanical.

Garrett was already gone. There was nothing else Basso could do.

*Jessamine.* The dagger job. That’s what Raven had said the dagger was called. Not the Empress, the job. *The trap.*

Silently, he prayed Garrett would at least come back.

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HAAHAHAHAHA Nobody look at me. This is pretty much the fastest turnaround I’ve ever produced and I AM A LOSS WOW.

Anyway, I am far too invested in this. I love this fic. FUCK IT I KNOW IT’S MY OWN FIC BUT I LOVE IT.
The terrible things thus begin. Next chapter (I have a few good ideas what will happen and I guess we'll just see if it takes me one or two days oh my god) AND BAD THINGS ARE HAPPENING MY PEEPS.

Fair warning, if you're susceptible to heartburn because I'm terrible to characters I love, it is dangerous to go alone, bring a kitten.

I haven't edited this at all, but I fully expect I'll go through and pick out a few mistakes and fix them as I go. Don't mind my frenetic writing errors! Thanks all. I know this is too fast but eh. Better to get it up than let it sit.
Chapter Summary

In which Garrett is lost.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Fragments and snatched echoes thundered in his head, louder and faster than his screaming heartbeat, louder and faster than the frantic, sprinting footsteps that shook his whole body.

Hanging in the air, helpless, struggling to breathe. Blood, and masks, and rage. The milky white gleam of whale oil stains, glowing at him from faces and hoods he didn’t know.

A sword. Screaming.

An agony that had opened in his chest and swallowed him whole, something so profound and acute that it eclipsed everything. Senses faded and thoughts supernova’d and nothing existed except the splatter of blood and overwhelming, raw pain. It was like being turned inside out and watching his heart beat against frigid air.

Death. Anything. Please.

Garrett kept running, mind spinning incoherently. That pain was fading, easing into a dull ache that filled his chest and drew short his breath, a constant lingering wound that never festered but never healed.

He was so alone.

Didn’t understand, couldn’t think. Had to keep going, keep running. Sweat-slick hands gripped his bow, flashing across the rooftops at top speed. Sounds floated up behind him, odd shouts that made no sense. Who cares?

What was he running from?

No, no, no. Please. Not her. Please.

It hurt too much. Too much. Let him die too.

Who?

Eventually, Garrett had to slow down, or throw up. Déjà vu gripped him, and he leaned against a chimney to catch his breath, quiver hot and heavy against his back, bow slippery. What the hell just happened?

The pain in his chest continued to fade, until it was just a memory, just fear. It was warm today, despite the thin linen draped around his body in too-loose folds - what the hell was going on? Where were his leathers- his… armour? no- wait - but Garrett was shaking like a leaf in stormwind. Wound down in his chest, but a different pain was making itself known in his head, a searing hot
pressure behind his right eye.

One hand against the chimney, Garrett let the bow drop from trembling fingers and bent over, trying to catch his breath, to calm down. He didn’t understand, but even as his thoughts spun and crashed, base instinct kicked in. Settle and breathe and think, Garrett, think.

Where was he?

Pain spiked when he opened his eyes and looked around, and he flinched, right eye closing on it, but he squinted through and got as good a look at his surroundings as he could. It took a while, scanning buildings, before he realised that the world was glowing. Focused. No- shit. He closed his eyes and pressed the heels of his hands into them, trying to suppress the power. No wonder the right side of his head felt like it might split.

When he dared to look up again, nothing had changed. His eyes caught on the blue shimmer of people moving below; they were walking a little too slow, exchanging words, glancing around. Glancing… up. What?

Fear erupted in his stomach, the cold feeling flooding out under his skin until it made his whole body feel like liquid, until even the pain in his head drowned in it. Shadows flecked the streets below, cast by the passersby and snuggled under whatever cover they found. Dropped his gaze for a moment to the mixed shingle and wood slat roof he was not at all hidden on, and Garrett could see that he too had gained a shadow.

That’s why everything is so bright. It’s daylight.

The faint shimmer persisted, picking out the bustle of The City below as it lived its normal day. Confusion coiled in his chest, a billowing marble of smoke against the liquid terror. He was focused - couldn’t stop it - vision catching on the shimmers, and yet the world hadn’t been reduced to echoes and the faint swell of sound that had no source but always accompanied the Primal and the endless monochrome. Colour and shadow still very much existed.

It didn’t matter. He wasn’t safe here, he was highly visible and already compromised. In pain. He’d been seen. How long had he been running? Another quick glance and he was pretty sure he was near Dayport; somewhere in it maybe. Plenty of Watch to be found.

Snatching up his bow, Garrett turned and started to run again. A bit slower, this time, more careful of his footing, trying to keep to quieter routes, trying to stay in whatever shadows existed up here in daylight. Everything seemed unfamiliar. He’d run these roofs a thousand times, knew what secrets lay beneath each and every one of them, remembered which houses had the slippery tiles and which ones could hold his weight and not even creak. Didn’t seem to matter. Everything looked alien, and although Garrett thought he knew where he was going he couldn’t be entirely sure. He kept wondering if he’d taken a wrong turn. Only the semi-frequent landmarks let him know his memory wasn’t faulty.

Not about this, at least.

Basso was going to kill him when he finally managed to find his way back and slip in without being seen. Maybe he should wait until night. Too few shadows around Stonemarket during the day, too many people. All he had to do was slip away and hole up for the rest of the day. Dusk couldn’t be that far off.

Daylight. How had he ended up out here, so far from the Crippled Burrick, in the middle of the day? In his sleep-clothes no less. At least it was summer and still very warm. Garrett didn’t mind
the cold, but if he got sick then his life was going to be a misery. And it would delay Basso letting
him return to the Clocktower without biting his head off.

The ache in his chest was distant, more threat than reality, but he took a pause as he waited for the
street below to thin out a little, flexing his legs in preparation to jump the gap. One hand rubbed
absently, pressing down over his heart.

*I've never felt anything like that.* The nightmare was fading, just flickers of fear and fury and
blood. But he remembered how much pain he’d been in, remembered with such clarity that his
breath caught even as he thought about it. It didn’t make sense. Nothing was broken - he’d
established that, if nothing else, with his reckless sprint across the Highway. Gods, he’d probably
been noisier than Erin. *Multiple* Erins. He had no right to scold anyone on keeping quiet.

But his body was in good working order. Aside from the cracking pain festering in his skull,
everything was fine. Heck, he was healthier than he’d been in a long while, if he was honest. His
muscles were starting to prickle into soreness, a sure sign that he hadn’t been using them enough,
but he was still rebuilding mass and strength. Joints moved smoothly as he flexed them out, testing.
Light pressure against his ribs didn’t hurt, twisting produced no complaints.

Why had it hurt so much?

He couldn’t think about it. The ache in his head wasn’t as bad as it had been, but his Primal eye
still felt liquid, the pressure a constant dull throb that made it hard to piece together the fragments
of nightmare that he could still remember. It didn’t make sense, he didn’t understand. All he knew
was that he hadn’t even been able to breathe. Not even a physical pain, except that it had felt like
his chest was collapsing and his lungs filling with blood; it had felt like he was dying.

Slowly, Garrett breathed out, looked down. *That’s as clear as I’m gonna get.* He hooked his bow
around one shoulder - terrible practice, shouldn’t do it, but he didn’t have his gear, couldn’t hook it
where it was supposed to go, and his quiver was already in the dip of his spine - backed up a little,
and took a running jump.

Shouts went up below him as he sailed over their heads. The landing hurt, shock vibrating from his
heels up to his knees, but Garrett had to resist the urge to roll out his momentum. Bow and quiver
sat badly, only half secure around his shoulders. If he rolled on them, not only did he risk damaging
them but (and more likely) he’d end up wounding himself. Either on an edge of his bow, or he’d
burst one of his more volatile arrows. So instead, he took the bad landing, hissing as the pain
shockwaved up, and stayed half-crouched to let it dissipate.

A strange, unfamiliar bubble rose in his throat as he listened to the civilians panic beneath him. A
hot feeling, choking - *Gods, all of you just shut the fuck up.* Violent. His fingers twitched. Heat
seared behind his right eye, the shimmers almost faded but still… hot and heavy, pressing against
his eye socket. It felt like he was focus flared, except his vision hadn’t twisted, didn’t reflect that.

*Who cares. Deal with that later. You've got more pressing issues.* True enough.

Once the initial pain in his legs had dampened down, Garrett straightened up and started moving
again. Straight across this roof, scaling the side of the adjacent building, a sharp left over that and
then straight down again. Another gap to cross, but a narrow one, nothing but alley beneath.
Shouldn’t be a problem. He’d run this way a hundred times, crossed these roofs backwards and
forward. And there; the faint scorch marks that covered the slated tiles of the elevated roof, still
here all these years later. Garrett had used this roof to test out his explosive concoction when he’d
still been developing it. An accomplished chemist Garrett was not, but he knew how to make
things blow the fuck up. He kept several small flasks on hand, still, stashed away in the
Clocktower (just in case), but they weren’t part of his typical arsenal. Too unstable, too risky to carry into everyday jobs.

He did have one flame arrow in his quiver right now. He usually took one or two, depending on the parameters of the job. A tiny little glass bubble attached to the end of his arrow, blown thin, filled with a delicate liquid that ignited when the glass burst. If he broke that then the whole quiver would go up. There was a reason the bottom was heavily padded and set with little grooves for the arrows to sit in, and the quiver segmented.

Two water arrows - exactly the same design, but filled with water instead of flammable liquid - and four rope. Garrett was rather spectacularly proud of the rope ones. They weren’t infallible, but the biting teeth he’d designed to replace the arrowhead hooked into most wooden beams with more success than failure. The ropes themselves were of his own making as well; thinner than anything he’d been able to find elsewhere, woven so tightly that they could be coiled around the arrow and not fuck up its weight and flight too much. He’d still needed to make a special setting on his bow to accommodate them, and the longest rope he could fire was four metres, but they were lifesavers. Four of them in his quiver currently: ranging up from one metre to four metres in single metre jumps.

Belatedly, Garrett realised he was running his fingers over the ends of his arrows, doing an inventory. The quiver was sitting in a slightly different place than usual, and the strain on his shoulder caused a low buzz in his muscles as he reached back further than he liked. Best not need these today. If he had to draw in a hurry, he was likely to mess up. Muscle memory was a hell of a thing.

The soft triple fletching of his flame and water arrows slid under his fingertips all the same. Rope arrows with stiffer, longer fletching - and tiny notches just below, letting him know which one was which length of rope. Scruffier fletching on the blunts; he used the lowest quality feathers on those. No need for anything better. He wasn’t going to use them for anything special, they were mostly exploratory or for hitting hidden buttons. Five of them, sitting in a cluster in the smallest compartment. Padding at the bottom there, just to ensure the quiver held its weight evenly, but no special grooves for the arrows.

And then the stiff, wide fletching on his lethal arrows. No explosives, but two broadhead arrows and- yes, the feathers extending further down the arrow shaft than the others, a sawtooth. For the most part, Garrett used them to cut ropes at distance, or pin things down if he had to. But they were his lethal options - he held them in reserve for if he needed to maim or kill.

They didn’t get used often.

Sighing, Garrett shook himself. He was high enough here that he wasn’t particularly worried about being seen, even in the bright sun, but he shouldn’t dally. It might be fairly safe to remain, but Garrett wanted to find a corner, a shadow. He was only in light clothes - he was already probably going to burn - and if anyone did come up here for some godsforsaken reason then he had no cover.

His eye throbbed, and pain pulsed across his face and down his neck. Grimaced. Don’t shake. Another sigh. Time to go - he had to get back to the Burrick if he didn’t come across a nice little bolthole to wait out the sun.

Slipping off the far edge, Garrett looked around again, took note of the Watchmen starting to surge in the streets. Yeah, definitely seen. He doubted any of them actually knew who it was they were looking for. If they’d had even the faintest clue that the General’s prize was wandering the rooftops in broad daylight, they’d have mounted a much stronger offensive already. Additionally,
Garrett wasn’t dressed in his leathers - he didn’t look anything like himself. *I wonder if I could wander the streets? I doubt anyone would recognise me.*

Well, it might have been a good plan, if he wasn’t wandering around with a fucking mechanical bow and hellishly expensive quiver. Not that he’d paid for it, but people were only stupid in so many ways. Anyone would recognise the quality of such rich leather and velvet.

Yet another little sigh. “You really fucked up my entire life,” he muttered at the Primal. Not that it would do anything, but he felt a little bit better all the same.

…

He’d made it almost to Stonemarket when he realised it was too quiet. The bubbling heat in his throat hadn’t quite faded, and he had to fight down the impulse to violence anytime he was spotted and the cry went up. He had been spotted far too many fucking times. It was getting hard to remember why he avoided conflict most of the time.

But the Primal pulsed in his eyes, painful, blinding him for a moment. Came to a stop, pressed his palms against them, took a slow breath. *Quiet.*

It was the middle of the day, why was Stonemarket so quiet? The bustling that drifted up to the Clocktower when he slept to little or too light was absent. Garrett lowered his hands, argued with himself for a moment. He could just go home at this point. He’d have to head over to the Burrick later to pick up his leathers and- gods, fucking everything. Harness, blackjack, pockets and pouches and trinkets. He did have half of all the things he’d pickpocketed a couple days earlier to pick up. And the Clocktower was *right there* - it loomed in the bright sun, the ticking loud and ominous in the unnatural silence.

Hmm.

Even under ideal circumstances - a lack of suspicions, fully geared out, at one hundred percent - Garrett wouldn’t have climbed the Clocktower in daylight. He wanted to; gods he *wanted* to. He wanted to sleep in his own bed, wanted to run his fingers over his shining collection of treasures, wanted to sit down and relax and let the mechanical work of fletching arrows soothe his nerves. He wanted to oil his bow.

He wanted normality.

But it was the middle of the day, and he had no hope of climbing the tower without being seen. So he turned away from the Clocktower and surveyed the plaza instead, tucked back against the familiar stone wall, barely a little above street level. The Burrick was very close now. A strange hollowness was growing in his chest, not quite painful but…

The nightmare flickered in his thoughts again. *No. Don’t think about that.* It still didn’t make sense. He’d need time and painkillers to pick that apart. The empty feeling constricted slightly, threatening to open into the same gaping wound that had consumed him. Garrett forced it away, trying to forget the blood splattering in his mind. Didn’t think about the smell or the gleam of a polished sword. He seriously didn’t need that right now. He had to figure out how to cross the Plaza without getting caught.

*Oh, fuck me.*

The Watch knew someone was out and about. He’d been seen enough times that they would have had a vague idea of the direction he was heading in. This was, without a thread of doubt, one huge
And in the meantime, there’d be others, not waiting for him to make a mistake, actively hunting. He’d already seen one or two men prowling the rooftops. He couldn’t afford to sit and wait out the trap - he’d be found. Without the night to shroud it, the outside of the Clocktower and the surrounding plaza was a starkly disappointing place to hide. There was a distinct lack of cover.

A soft, irritated sound. “Who the hell designed this?” Whoever it was, they deserved the sack. The architect. Mm. The noose would have to do.

He needed to drop back, circle around. Turning to study the buildings west of the plaza, one good jump away, and stinging made itself known in his feet. Fuck. He’d been barefoot this whole time, running slats and tiles and now the jagged woodwork above Stonemarket. Just another thing he was going to have to worry about later; he didn’t have the luxury right now. He was about to walk through a great steaming trap, because if he didn’t then the jaws of pursuit would close around him.

Maybe he could draw them out.

He reached back, fingerling his arrows. How to do it though? His normal tactics wouldn’t work - he couldn’t fire a blunt to make noise and draw them away. They were waiting, explicitly waiting for him.

Wait.

What the hell was this even? One stray running the rooftops didn’t warrant this kind of response - clearing out the entire plaza? Who even did that? How? Chills made themselves felt running down Garrett’s spine. Had he been recognised after all? Did Harlan know he was out here, vulnerable, in daylight? Is that what this was?

Panic squeezed the breath out of his lungs. Whoa. Breathe. Think. For a moment, he struggled with it, just trying to get his body working again. A shallow, staccato breath, and then another, and then he managed a full one. Okay. Relax. They haven’t caught you yet.

The violent choking feeling crept up his throat. Harlan hadn’t- had only come close to catching him on- twice. Thrice? Garrett honestly wasn’t sure. The season following his return wasn’t totally clear. He knew what had happened, sure, and all the stupid reckless things he’d done and how utterly fucked up it had all been. Knew the important bits. But it was blurry - had only gotten blurrier as the last year had progressed. So much of that season had been fear, and pain, and desperation. Sleep-deprivation. The Primal haunting his every footstep, Erin breaking into his mind, his thoughts - trapping him in visions. Saving him? Cursing him. Those… things that once but no longer were people.

A faint grinding pain let Garrett know he was gritting his teeth. Harlan had come close, but he didn’t have a prayer of actually catching Garrett. The man was raving and obsessed, and Garrett was clever. Cautious. Running full tilt into a collapsing, flaming building forty stories high, challenging the General directly, breaking into the Great Safe amidst guards and alerts and searing blinding pain in his left hand. Not stopping, not even for a second, chasing after ghosts with blood and bandage the only things holding his hand together, and finding monsters instead.

Cautious.

The pent up violence didn’t abate, but the arrogance did. No, Garrett was right to panic at the prospect of Harlan setting this trap for him. He was getting reckless - he’d been reckless ever since
he’d woken up in the back of that cart.

Erin should have been proud.

Snarls billowed out around him, and after a few moments Garrett realised that they were his own. Choking on it, the heat and anger. He wanted to hit something.

No.

He wanted to fight.

It was unsettling, even as the pulse behind his eye got hotter, the pain slowly morphing into something that still hurt, but somehow felt good. Maybe it was the adrenaline burning through him, fear and violence mixed; maybe it was the faint red shimmers as he started catching sight of hidden Watchmen.

They lurked around the corners of the plaza, looking back and forth, scanning the rooftops and trailing arches and connections that surrounded it. It was, after everything, a miracle that Garrett had slunk to the Clocktower wall unseen. Either that, or the Watch didn’t know how to look for someone on a rooftop in broad daylight.

Garrett wouldn’t put it past them.

The heat pulsed out, overtaking the fear, murdering the panic. His breath caught and his heart picked up, but it was anticipation this time. They were just waiting for him. It would be easy - so easy, to make his way around and pick them off. A little kick, low in his stomach. Pick them off. He could drop and fight them instead if he wanted.

No. Hands clenched, scanning the Watch’s numbers and locations picked out in shining red light. Don’t be stupid. You can’t fight them. Garrett wasn’t a great brawler to begin with. He could hold his own in a small fight, and he was formidable one on one, but in a protracted brawl with multiple enemies - especially enemies who were armed and bigger and stronger than he was - he’d be lucky if he lasted five minutes. Stealth and larceny came to him like breathing, but he’d never been that good in a fight. He’d figured that out early - don’t fight the bigger kids, just don’t get caught.

If you have to, run like hell. There was no shame in choosing life over pride.

But it bubbled up like a withheld scream, and his eyes were wide as he took careful note of the Watchmen, forming a mental map of where they could get to and how fast. He wanted to fight them.

How dare they?

And there it was. Quietly simmering at the bottom of the rage, a burning white indignation. This was his city - his home. It was all his. How dare they make him feel hunted in his own home? How dare they try to trap him like an animal, threaten him, threaten Basso. How dare Harlan take Basso against his will, torture him for information? How dare they fuck around with a power they didn’t understand, how dare they cost Erin everything - how dare they cost Garrett so much.

How. Dare.

Feathers brushed against his fingertips, long and stiff. For a second, the world tilted, and suddenly Garrett realised he was standing on the edge of the plaza arch, looking down on the would-be trap, on the cusp of drawing an arrow, bow held half-aloft. The stiff fletching of a broadhead arrow stayed steady under his fingers.
A long moment passed, frozen. *What is wrong with me?* He’d dead set been about to shoot one of the Watchmen hidden close by. *I’m a thief. A thief. I’m not a murderer. Fuck, calm down.*

His hands lowered, slowly, the bow useless in his grip. The rage was in his chest now, not just his throat - hot and bubbling, boiling away. He could feel himself shaking. Breath came in short, hissed gasps, heart pounding. The Primal thrummed, his vision blurring for a moment - he could hear it, somewhere deep inside himself, like a growl. Was that him?

No, it couldn’t be. *What the fuck is wrong with me. Back up, Garrett. Reset.*

And the shouts went up. From the rooftops, this time, back towards Blackfurrow. He spun to look, catching the rise of red from the plaza as the ‘hidden’ Watchmen started to surge forward at the call. A group of five more were on the rooftops, uncertain of their footing but coming for him fast.

Suddenly, it didn’t matter if they knew who he was or not. A distant *twang* sang through the air, far enough away that Garrett barely heard it. Reflex kicked in. He jerked sideways, dropping his weight into a half-crouch, scrambling back towards the Clocktower.

No. Don’t climb it. They don’t know where you live. He couldn’t show them it was a safe haven for him, that he was capable of scaling the Clocktower. Risk their lives to do it.

A crossbow bolt slammed into the stone where he’d stood not half a second ago, sending up dust and debris as it did. Garrett’s breath came in sharp gasps, his heart thundering in his ears; he didn’t hear the next four bolts as they came, but he ducked and darted forward, closer to the oncoming Watchmen, even as shouting started up from the plaza ground as well. Garrett didn’t hear the bolts strike stone, but he didn’t feel them hit and he didn’t have time to look.

*Run. They aren’t anywhere near you and you know the Highway a thousand times better than them.* He sidestepped as he started moving, haphazard, trying to keep his movements random. If they could predict him, they could shoot him. *Run away.* The Watchmen came ever closer, a couple of them starting to slow, hands going to sword hilts. Confusion, anger, fear - flickers that fell across their faces and swelled to nothing in the glowing red of the Primal, the faint howling ringing in Garrett’s ears, the world washing out to greyscale.

*What are you doing? Run!*

They seemed to move slower, as Garrett approached, sprinting. He couldn’t tell if they were just unprepared for his response, or if it was the focus. Maybe it was both. He reached back as he ran, snagged his fingers on the stiff plumage of a broadhead arrow, tugged it free. It slid out of the quiver and nocked to his bowstring like silk on skin.

As he got close, the Watchman at the back of the group lifted his arm, trying to aim his wristbow - it was like watching someone move through treacle. Slow - sticky. Garrett darted sideways, hit the side of a building with full momentum, ran three- four steps up the side and jumped away.

The world was slow, as he sailed sideways through the air, over their heads. He pulled back on the bowstring, felt the pleasant burn in his shoulders and arms, heard the little pulley gears whir, felt his fingers touch his jaw as he hit full draw.

*No. Don’t.*

He couldn’t see the sunlight glint off the arrowhead, but it glowed a comforting blue.

Garrett canted the bow sharply to the right, and fired.
The Watchman at the back of the group jerked sideways, his whole body twisting under the force of impact. Blood sprayed everywhere as the arrow hit home and struck through his skull with ease; the body crumpled even as it turned, and in half a second the man was nothing more than a limp pile and a bloodstreak.

*Stop.*

A desperate whisper at the back of his mind. It didn’t matter - Garrett couldn’t hear it. The rush of the Primal filled him, a roar of fury and violence and vengeance. He didn’t feel the wooden slates as he landed behind another of the men, skidded back, dropped to a knee to slow his momentum and hold a steadier base.

Everything glowed. Garrett saw red.

How dare they.

The second broadhead was already in his hands, nocked to the bowstring, bow lifted, aim taken. They were all moving so *slowly*. It was almost criminal how easy this was. The four of them yelled, an anger that couldn’t hope to match the spitting rage in Garrett’s chest, and their swords glinted clean crimson. The closest one this time - no hesitation as Garrett released, and the arrow tore through the man’s throat. He stumbled, eyes went wide, choked as the blood rose and streamed past his teeth. Sword clattered to the roof, the sound echoing in sharp clarity, dropped to one knee.

This time, Garrett met his eyes for the long seconds it took for the light to go out, and the body to slump down. More blood, everywhere now, a sickening brindle across the wooden slats. The spurting stopped as Garrett’s second victim died, and he picked his weight up on one foot, adjusted his body, threw himself forward.

Wearing armour, this one, but Garrett didn’t care. His knees connected and both he and the third Watchman went down; Garrett came out on top, his meager weight not enough to pin the man but pressing down on his upper arms with the sharp part of his knees as hard as he could, just above his biceps. The Watchman shouted, gave a groan of pain, bucked. Garrett was too close, the last two right behind him with swords ready, couldn’t possibly use his bow. The sawtooth arrow came out of his quiver as if it were oiled, and cut cleanly as Garrett stabbed it up under the Watchman’s jaw.

Another buck, a spray of blood, and then a choked scream as Garrett yanked the arrow back out, jumped to his feet, and took a running leap off the edge of the roof without looking back.

Strangely tinny, he nevertheless head the whistle of blades as they missed him. They must be so angry. Garrett didn’t recognise the stormy feeling in his chest, somehow heavy and hollow at the same time. He could feel the tension in his face, the faint narrowing of his eyes, as he grinned. A vicious, predatory smile.

Spinning, Garrett leapt back to a higher rooftop, looking down on the remaining two guards. The sawtooth arrow was sticky when he nocked it this time, wet and clinging to the arrow rest. He was out of blade-reach, but neither of the Watchmen lifted their wristbows to him. They were moving faster now - or was Garrett moving slower? Unsure, didn’t care - a blinding scarlet glow.

The arrow loosed, and punched straight through the chest of the Watchman to the right. Hands lifted, fingers curled around the shaft and then spasmed, and he dropped. Not dead - not for a while, probably - but dying. The choking sound filled the air again, even as blood trickled from the man’s wound and mouth the same.
The last Watchman dropped his sword. Surrender flashed through him, slowly kneeling, fear shining in his eyes.

Distantly, there was shouting. It had mixed with screaming, high-pitched fear and wails and anger, rebounding around him. Not his own. Too far away to be a threat. Eyes locked onto the scared Watchman, Garrett reached back again for his quiver. Missed. Out of sharps. Snarled. Another grab, the quiver out of place, and then his fingers closed on the soft banana fletching of his flame arrow.

A twang-whistle-crack made him jump back, and the little bolt all but disappeared into the soft wood of the building next to him. Forgetting about the kneeling Watchman, Garrett looked towards the source of the attack, the Primal howl screaming in his ears. Pain split across his face, heat and fury both, and he took a stride closer.

Stop. S t o p.

Faintly, a glimmer of blue.

Far back from the horde of red that knotted the plaza ground, staying out of the way, but someone was blue back there. For a moment, Garrett’s thoughts twisted, uncomprehending - he was under attack, this was an ambush, a trap. Enough. Run. He was just defending himself.

He recognised the blue.

Pain stung sharply in his arm, just below the shoulder - a sudden, electrifying sensation. He heard the twang too late. The bolt clipped him, opened a wet line in shirt and skin and flesh, sent his emotions into a dizzying spiral.

All at once, it crashed down around him.

Basso.

His hands were sticky. Thick iron billowed in the air around him, the smell hot and foul, a noxious realisation of the blood that saturated the roof. He could hear the stifled whimpers from the Watchman kneeling below him.

Please. Run.

Garrett turned on the spot, red and grey wheeling around him, fingers painfully tight around the grip of his bow. A sharp jerk towards him, pressing up on the little switch built into the back of it, and the limbs compacted, folding down; easier to carry, and impossible to use. The Primal’s whispering howl was earsplitting. Maybe that was the pain that came down full force as Garrett tilted and started running. Everything flashed by blindly, blue and red stars that burned. Grey bled and ran like watercolours, blurring around him.

Just run.

There’s something wrong with me.

What have I done?

Chapter End Notes
And so, in the span of less than a minute, Garrett doubles his direct kill count.

A much shorter chapter than usual (it took longer than I expected, but a nine hour bus trip will do that to a person!), but this won't be a normal occurrence. I chose to cut this one short because for everything that I could add to lengthen it (and there's a lot), I felt that anything would detract from what just happened.

So, enjoy this hanging cliff until I finish my homework and get the next one done! Ah hah.

Also, warning for me changing the fic summary again. I expect I'll fiddle with it as the fic goes on, until it more accurately represents the content.

Ciao!
Better Ways To Kill A Man Than Allowing Him To Die

Chapter Summary

In which Leon learns what kind of man Harlan truly is.

Chapter Notes

Warning in this chapter for torture.

Night had fallen by the time Corvo resurfaced.

It began slowly, little twitches in his limbs as sensation slithered past, brief moments of weight that fell into levity and spiralled away. Echoes of pain, a tight feeling in his left hand, curling up into his forearm. He felt… hot. An acrid taste in the back of his mouth, a peculiar tang that settled like the ash from the burning undead. Memories flickered, the smoke of plague as the pyres piled high and the death kept spreading.

Whale oil burns that stank decades old, and the flash of blood, and the miasma of sweat and adrenaline and decay that dressed him like a wolfpelt. Tension spread through his limbs, the darkness peeling away into the familiar burn of his Mark and the distant, indifferent voice.

"You are about to reach a crossroads in time, Corvo." The black eyes coalesced somewhere - not… before him, but they were there all the same, set in the paper-white face he couldn’t see. "This is a test that even I cannot foresee the outcome to. Tread carefully, Corvo. She hasn’t breathed free in a thousand years. She is wild with it. It may be that even I cannot spare you."

The smell of the Void eclipsed him, setting his senses alight. Twilight shrouded his mind, endless and softly weeping with the lamentations of the dead and dying Leviathans that dwelt there. Black smoke flew apart like butterflies, purple sparks and oozing white-blue liquid like magma seeping under his skin. It twisted in his thoughts, a deeply buried sensation that was not unlike the vertigo of drowning. Not that Corvo was unsure which direction was up, but that he was no longer sure there even was such a thing.

Heat blazed in his left hand, both painful and not, and he opened his eyes.

Silent as he awoke, not moving but to flick his gaze over his surroundings, but the tiny blonde woman rose from the chair she sat in at the end of his bed (he was in a bed) and padded close on silent tread. A quick glance sideways to draw Corvo’s attention - he followed and saw another blond head, lighter, attached to the deep copper of Tyvian skin.

Keldin.

Phoebe shook her head, drew Corvo’s attention back from the bundle of Messenger huddled in the corner of the room, tucked into himself. “He’s only just dozed off. How do you feel, Lord
Protector?" Quietly, whispered in her soft Serkonan accent. Despite all the time he’d spent away from home, it eased the lingering tension in Corvo’s shoulders to hear the familiar cadence.

“... The Outsider spoke to me.” He had been quiet, these past years. Emily had ascended her throne and Corvo had taken his place at her side - half in the shadows, and hellbent on keeping her safe. He wouldn’t fail his daughter like he’d failed her mother. Occasional whispers sometimes passed from the Void to him, and he’d caught glimpses of the Outsider when he’d accidentally slipped between the realms - caught echoes of his eerie, humourless laughter or felt the prickle of it against his skin.

All the same, it had been a long time since the Outsider had spoken to him directly. Corvo had half expected to receive a visit before embarking on this mission, to a lost citystate off the coast of Gristol, a last stronghold against the Empire that had reviled him for so long. The Outsider had been silent, even then.

Phoebe’s eyes widened, the steel blue expanding as her pupils shrunk to pinpricks. “He… did?” Breathless, still held soft and low to avoid rousing Keldin. The ruins of her yellow balldress was tied fast around her small body - the frills ripped from the sleeves and the chest, a strip that had come from her outer skirts knotted securely around her throat and the rest wound in precise patterns around her torso, pulled taut to provide better structure and stability as she moved. The underskirts had been cut and tied down around her legs, strapped like combat bandages. It was a ragged, patchwork job, and the frays where she’d torn the fine fabric were obvious, the yellow bright leached into something darker by sweat and the grime that permeated The City, but it was serviceable. Her yellow silk gloves had been carefully torn down the sides and knotted around her wrists to provide a good solid base for the cutting wires she’d hidden within them. The fingers had been sliced off, displaying the anchors underneath.

Slowly, Corvo sat up. The room swam, and he closed his eyes to give himself time to adjust. “Yes. He… warned me.” But that wasn’t quite right, was it? He had never forgotten a word the Outsider had spoken to him; she, he’d said. “I don’t know who she is, but there’s a woman that we must be very wary of. The Outsider… seemed concerned.”

Insofar as the deity had ever displayed concern. Or any other emotion, really, other than curiosity and a borderline fascination, or distant amusement. Still... it had been obvious from the start that the Outsider had been particularly interested in Corvo. Despite his silence for the last eight years, it seemed that had not abated.

And now Phoebe’s eyes narrowed. Corvo could see the gears turning in her head, thoughts flashing through her eyes like sparks through a Wall of Light. She had always been a calculating, cunning thing. He reached out and put a hand on her shoulder. “We can discuss it when everyone is gathered. For now, I need a report.”

A nod, straightening up. Phoebe was one of the oldest of his Messengers; she’d been with him for six years. Corvo was relieved that he’d chosen to bring her on this mission. It had always been a risky one, as likely to go awry as not - and once he’d met Thadeus Harlan, Corvo had simply been waiting for it. Negotiating with the obsessive maniac was merely stalling.

Corvo recognised the kind of mind Harlan was. He never would have handed over The City. All he cared about was his own power.

Whatever this thief had done to earn Harlan’s eye, it was likely the only resistance left. Corvo had every intention of getting to the man, even if he didn’t take the bait. He hadn’t, so far - an obvious trap, and Corvo would honestly have been disappointed if it had been that easy, but it was always worth a shot. Obscene amounts of money did strange things to men’s heads.
“You collapsed just after we crossed the Great River,” Phoebe murmured. A softness in her tone, affectionate concern, but not undue caution. Phoebe had seen him exert magic beyond his limits before now; stopping time was the most complicated, most dangerous magic Corvo had in his arsenal. He didn’t use it lightly.

He’d been arrogant. Known that Harlan was planning something, known that there was something odd happening with the Watchmen at the ball, that the Captains were rotating in a pattern that wasn’t quite random. He’d seen Harlan’s two Commanders scheming quietly. He’d seen Leon falter and… hadn’t been sure if it was a spiked drink or simply the young Messenger’s folly. He was only in his twenty ninth summer.

Whatever the cause, Corvo had been confident in the abilities of his three lucid Messengers and himself. He had relied on Annabel to scope out any weapons in lieu of Leon’s intoxication, had relied on Keldin to recognise the pattern quickly. He had been too quick to fall back on his team, too reluctant to leave Harlan alone for even a second - too wary to scan the room with Dark Vision more than once or twice in the morning.

Arrogant. Stupid.

He should have known better. It had always just been a matter of time before Harlan decided the threat an official military envoy from the Empire posed outweighed their potential usefulness in his vendetta. Corvo had been arrogant.

And now, his team would pay the price. Phoebe was exhausted, face drawn, the inky smudges under her eyes making their blue seem even darker, Keldin was asleep and distraught - the Tyvian man was tough and quick-witted and did not hide in corners except to cover tears - and Annabel was gone. They were all magic fatigued.

Worst of all, a tight constricting feeling that coiled in Corvo’s chest, Harlan had taken Leon for his own. Corvo was under no illusions what Harlan would do to him; the General had painted an explicit picture of what he would do to the thief. Leon was still young, inexperienced. By rights, he never should have been brought on a mission this critical and perilous - but he was one of the best magic users Corvo had ever recruited. He was already an excellent combatant. Even with his rebellious nature, Corvo had thought that those things would protect him. He had told himself that failing that, they would protect Leon.

And instead, they’d left him in Harlan’s hands.

For the life of him, Corvo wasn’t sure what else they could have done. Wading through the throng of Watchmen would have meant putting someone else at risk as well. Corvo would have done it himself - but he was the only one who could turn time to his whim. He could count on one hand the number of Messengers who had received even a shadow of that particular gift, and those he had with him were not among that number. Leon’s life wasn’t the only one in his hands - he had three others that he needed to protect as well. And other magics escaped him when he broke time like that; it was too much energy, flooding and spilling and evaporating. He’d been ready to vomit before they’d gotten anywhere near the River - and they’d needed to escape Auldale before he failed. If Harlan picked up even a single trace of them, it could be over.

It was a lesson he had learned a very long time ago. Magic or no magic, Corvo was still just a man, and he would still die like one.

We were arrogant. We forgot.

Phoebe’s voice was gentle. She reached up to her own narrow shoulders and placed a hand atop
Corvo’s. “We knocked out a civilian, but he should be awake by now, and with no lasting side effects. This place is in the northern end of the Old Quarter, near the industrial areas of The City - Cinderfell. I’ve been trying to make up some maps with everything I remember about the layout of the Watchmanor. Keldin…” A glance towards the sorry bundle in the corner, shivering slightly as he slept. His jacket was gone, the expensive white shirt and pale green waistcoat doing little to warm him - although the air was far from cool. Perhaps the shivering was unrelated, then. “He’s exhausted. He used too much magic, and I had him out scouting with me.” Regretful, but not sorry. She’d done what she’d had to, and Keldin had done the same. “Annabel helped us seal this apartment and took off. She’s… Well, you know how she is.”

Sighed. Corvo took his hand back and rubbed his face. What a mess. It had been a long time since he’d felt like a fugitive. “Go and find her. We need to come up with a plan of attack, and we can’t risk her being seen.” Getting to his feet and stretching. Sore, the fatigue sharp in his body, but Corvo had felt worse. They needed to take the night and rest, gain back some of their energy, be ready to fight if necessary.

Phoebe only hesitated for a moment before offering a cursory bow. “Yes, Lord Protector.” She turned, slipped out of the open window and scrambled up the side of the building and out of sight.

Wearily, Corvo sighed and turned to Keldin.

His Messengers. He’d let them down. Approaching, Corvo crouched by Keldin and put a hand on his shoulder, squeezing gently. He felt the rune inscribed on Keldin’s chest flare to life as he jolted awake, felt the surge of fear trickle through it, and then the dim connection died down again, pale grey eyes meeting his own.

“Lord Corvo… You’re okay.” Relief, the faint shimmering threat of tears fought down. Corvo offered him a small smile - Keldin had been a Messenger for nearly five years now, but he had never seen Corvo overwork himself before, and Corvo was well aware of the way Keldin idolised him. It wasn’t a particularly comfortable feeling, but perhaps this would help. They were both just human, after all. “I’m sorry, Lord Corvo.” Voice cracking, the relief bursting into guilt, looking away. He sounded rough - exhausted. Running on empty. “I should have- seen. I didn’t realise they were all armed, and I was stupid - I knew they were doing something with Leon, but I figured we could handle it later, I assumed that we would… I’m sorry.”

Gently squeezing his shoulder, Corvo stood up and Keldin came with him, the shivering getting worse. “Don’t apologise. We are all at fault, Keldin, even Leon. We were arrogant. I was arrogant. Don’t waste your energy feeling guilty about it. We need to focus on rescuing him.” Guiding Keldin towards the bed, steps unsteady and stumbling. “Get some rest. I’ll need you in as good a condition as possible.”

Grey eyes looked up at him, uncertain, but Keldin let himself be pushed down on the bed Corvo had just vacated. After a moment, he lay down, curling his whole body into the top half of the mattress. Eyes closed, he took a deep breath, and relaxed. Corvo couldn’t sense anything from him with the rune inactive, but he watched a few moments until he was sure Keldin was slipping back into sleep and then backed off.

In the middle of the apartment, he took a survey. There was a small half-wall that offered a little privacy to the narrow bedroom - barely more than the bed itself - but otherwise it was one single room. Large enough to accommodate their needs as a hideout, but relatively small. A low, little table against the far wall; Keldin’s dagger gleamed atop it, unsheathed. Corvo picked it up, inspected it. Bloodless, perfectly clean. He distinctly remembered Keldin using it to cut Annabel’s ballgown as they ran, but no threads or fabric dust clung to it. He must have cleaned it off in the
Corvo set the dagger back down, frowning. They were in trouble here. Leon taken, and they were in hiding. While he had every confidence that they could salvage their situation, save Leon, and make their way back to Dunwall - he’d made a mistake in restricting their weapon choices for that ball. Phoebe had brought her cutting wires, but as soon as the anchors started to wear she would need to stop using them. If they failed, she would lose her fingers. Keldin only had the one dagger - he was proficient with it, but his usual style of combat necessitated that he have both. And Annabel had forgone her pistols in favour of the little sleeping darts.

His own collapsable sword, the one weapon he had brought with him, was lost in Auldale. He wasn’t entirely sure when he’d dropped it, but holding the magic had been more important than holding the sword.

Corvo ran a hand back through his hair, took a breath, and set aside the weapon problem. *Stupid.* You got complacent. Closing his eyes, he reached out with his mind. Tingles of the Void, always so close by, skittered across his thoughts. Heat rose in his Mark. Pushing the creeping tendrils to the side, he reached out past them, searching. The faintest touch, the echo of a memory of a feather on his skin - he was too far away from Dunwall to pick out the Messengers he’d left behind, or those on assignment elsewhere, but they still existed, their runes binding them to him.

Much closer, the flare of magic as someone blinked. Again, again. The quiet bubble of emotion, too dim to pick apart, but there was a distinctive quality as the rune glowed against his mind. Like tasting colour, like feeling a scent. Flowers - whaleglove, the shiny blue bell clusters that sprouted up in the places where whales had been slaughtered. Annabel.

Orienting himself, Corvo glanced out the window to figure out what way he was facing. The belching ironworks smoked in the distance - consulting the mental map, Corvo followed the tug of Annabel’s rune as it flared again and tried to pin her down by distance and direction. *Near Auldale.*

Teeth gritted. She was new compared to Keldin and Phoebe, a Messenger of not quite three years, but she should know better. Reaching out again, Corvo waited until her rune flared magic and snagged it between his fingers. He tugged.

That done, Corvo cast out for Phoebe instead. The faint distant glimmer, but he couldn’t feel anything concrete. Not using her rune, searching manually. Regret tickled in his chest; he shouldn’t have sent her out after Annabel. It was unlikely she’d look in the right place anyway - unlikely she’d predict Annabel being stupid enough to head back towards Auldale.

Settling, Corvo leaned against the half-wall, keeping an eye on Keldin, and folded his arms. He didn’t need to wait for very long.

Frantic, Annabel’s rune pulsed and glowed against Corvo’s senses, not a physical thing, but there all the same. Barely two minutes passed before she appeared on the window ledge, heat shimmers curling off her body, and scrambled into the apartment. “Corvo!” Breathless, stumbling slightly as she approached him, something glinting in hand.

For a moment, he just studied her, and she shrunk. Then, he held out a hand. His collapsable sword was placed onto it.

“... You risked returning to Auldale for *this.*”

Annabel looked away. “I... I wanted to see if I could find where Leon’s being held.” And shame permeated her voice, because she knew that it was stupid and risky and that she was in no condition
to fight. Her hair was slicked back, a short mess of hawk brown, stuck down with sweat both new and old. Her skirts were cut haphazardly, an unsightly and immodest cluster of fabric that barely covered her thighs, violet and white fabrics jagged and twisting. She too had cut the fingers of her gloves.

At least she wouldn’t trip on the dress. She was barefoot; the lighter purple shoes with the impractical heels abandoned. No great loss there, but shoes were going to have to go at the top of the list. They all needed some good footwear to navigate The City. Little specks of blood dotted the floor where she’d walked.

Corvo pushed off the wall, walked over to the table, and deposited his sword next to Keldin’s dagger. Despite himself, it felt good to have it back. Damn it. He sighed, let his shoulders slump, turned back to Annabel.

“Thank you, Annabel. You’re on house arrest. Keldin will tether you until I can trust you won’t risk yourself and all of us so recklessly again.” Silence for a moment, dark brown eyes blank, and then Annabel lowered her gaze to the floor.

She stripped off her gloves, taking the little rings of darts with them, and set them on the table too. “Yes, Lord Corvo.”

Corvo caught her arm as she walked past, turned her back around to face him, tilted her head up. “I am sorry, Annabel.” Voice low. Her eyes widened. “We blew this mission, all of us, but I should have known better. I failed you, and I failed Leon. We will get him back.” As firm as he could manage, because they were tired and hiding, but Corvo had absolutely no intention of leaving Leon in Harlan’s clutches. Annabel started to shake her head, and Corvo squeezed slightly to stop her. “Get some rest. We all need as much as possible. It will not be easy to break Leon out.”

The spark was coming back on in her eyes, and she nodded as Corvo released her. “Yes, Corvo. I’ll do better. I swear.”

And she slipped past him, carefully settled herself on the open half of the bed without disturbing Keldin, curled up. For some time, she just watched Keldin sleep, and then eventually her eyes began to shut as well.

Corvo leaned back against the wall, fixed his gaze on the window, and once more - waited.

It helped, listening to Annabel and Keldin breathe peacefully. They were all adults, his Messengers, capable of utilising his gifts and trained to do so, willing and able to put their lives down for their Empire and their Empress - and him. All fully cognizant of the risks they took and the decisions they’d made, but… But it didn’t stop Corvo feeling responsible for them. After all that, they were still his Messengers.

So it helped, listening to them sleep, knowing that - for right now at least - they were safe. It helped, but the lingering guilt and slowly festering rage remained. Phoebe was still out there, and while Corvo could tug on her rune without her using it, doing so cost more energy than he was comfortable parting with unless he had to.

It helped, but Harlan still had Leon.

And they were all still lost, within The Eternal City.

Corvo lost track of time as Keldin and Annabel slept, watching the window and listening for any sound out of the ordinary. There was little firelight coming up from the street, this late, in the Old
Quarter, and Corvo could see the distant shine of the stars. Eventually, he started feeling the flickers of Phoebe's rune as she gave up on mundane hunting. Gently, he reached out and gave their connection a quick pluck, calling her back. Her glow wasn't the quick bursts of a blink, like a flashbang, but a constant warm light. The colour-taste pulse of embers and charcoal that defined her, searching in the night with Dark Vision active.

As soon as he called, he felt her turn around and being coming back. The glow vanished from his thoughts. Several minutes later, it fluttered back to him, lasted five seconds, and then faded again.

And then, several minutes later, it shimmered back, and then glowed white hot. Fear and shock rippled back to him, and Corvo found himself pushing off the wall, pulling on her light. Their emotions were always fickle, when he felt them, but it was only the strongest that bled through.

Another ripple, Corvo’s breath catching silently and his heart rate jumping, the fear turning to confusion and the shock bubbling over and then, all at once, her glow died and the emotions vanished. Corvo was left breathless, the faintest creeping edge of a fear all his own that, as her rune remained inactive, slowly threatened into panic. The sensation - a sharp flare of activity and then nothing - was not unlike how it felt when one of his Messengers died.

Finally, halfway across the room, ready to take off after her, breath taken and mouth open to rouse Keldin and Annabel so they could defend themselves - finally, a searing burst from Phoebe's rune. Blinking, confusion and pain flashing through it to Corvo, and then another.

Something was very wrong. Phoebe didn't blink that fast unless she had to. Corvo hesitated at the window, resisting the urge to chase after her. She was coming.

Instead, he turned back and went to Keldin and Annabel and gently shook them. Grey and brown eyes squinted up at him, and then they sat up and focused. Annabel ran a hand through her hair while Keldin rubbed his face, slipping off the bed and onto their feet, waiting. They didn't speak. Well-trained, careful now - until Corvo confirmed the situation.

So he shook his head. “Phoebe is coming back. Something happened. Be ready.”

When she appeared in the middle of the apartment, they were waiting for her. Corvo took a point position, sword in hand, the faint heat tingling under his Mark as he prepared for a fight. Was Phoebe being pursued? Keldin and Annabel stood either side of him, slightly behind in a wide flank - Keldin’s dagger spun quietly in hand, Annabel’s gloves in place on her hands.

Phoebe blinked in, and with her came a stranger. A small male - unconscious. He was dressed in linens, a short-sleeved white shirt that hung too loose on a lithe frame, and light brown pants that were torn around his ankles. Blood streaked up his arms and splattered his chest, and blotched his knees, creeping up his thighs in spotty clusters. There was a wound on his left arm, just below the shoulder, that still wept. Black hair had dried in a bloody mess, short spikes that haloed a pale, narrow face.

Keldin rushed forward, dagger sliding into the sheath that had been relbeted outside his pant leg, and took the man's weight, letting Phoebe stagger up. She staggered, dropped onto her butt on the floor, gave a tired huff. The man’s face was marred by a long scar down the right side, as if it had been torn open. On his back was a quiver; Corvo’s eyes narrowed. Too high a quality for the clothes he wore and the Old Quarter, deep green velvet and supple leather and half filled with arrows that boasted very fine, delicate fletching. As Keldin lowered the man to the floor, Phoebe held up a compact device - it took a moment of study, but Corvo realised that it was a compound bow, mechanical, and folded down into itself, the limbs pressed against the body. Completely foreign in design, something Corvo had never seen. He reached out, and Phoebe
handed it over.

“It’s his, he knows his way around it. Fired a blunt at me when he saw me, but he was passed out by the time I got to him. It's got a little switch on the grip.” Wearily, her voice betraying her exhaustion. “Corvo… When I spotted him, his… His eyes were glowing.” Very softly.

Keldin turned the man's head and opened his eyes. In silence, they watched. The man's eyes were rolled back in his head, the left a cocoa brown and the right a whale-oil blue. Faint aquamarine light rose in smokey ribbons as Keldin did so, stronger in the right than the left.

The light dimmed to nothing as Keldin flinched back, letting the man's eyes close again.

“Look at him through Dark Vision.”

Corvo felt two runes wink awake as Annabel and Keldin obeyed, and then offered twin gasps. Eyes narrow, Corvo drew on the magic too, felt the dim pleasant heat in his Mark, and then--

There was no yellow gleam to his body, the typical sign of life that Corvo was accustomed to. Instead, he shone, a brilliant white-blue, tinged with sea-green - like expired whale oil. For a long moment, all he could do was stare. It was an ethereal colour, like the distant sky in the Void, unnatural - inhuman. It twisted strangely against the magic in his eyes, almost reflective, as if trying not to be seen.

Corvo released the magic, crouched by the stranger, and studied his face. Scowled, a low huff, picking him up despite the blood. “We'll keep him for now. He's seen you, Phoebe, and we can't risk Harlan learning that. Keldin, Annabel, how are you feeling?” They mumbled in response, vague affirmations. It would have to do. “Alright. We need to set up here better. Go scavenge what you can; Phoebe, take a rest. I'll remain with him in case he's hostile.”

The heat in Corvo’s Mark hadn't abated. It tingled quietly, a constant low warning, the Void ever so close by.

The man was set down at the end of the bed, eased into a sitting position, and then Corvo took Keldin’s dagger to his own waistcoat. The ribbony lengths of fabric went around his wrists, and then around the feet of the bed to secure them. Corvo made sure that the fabric was between the man's skin and the wood grain, then tied his ankles together and stretched them out.

They had to restrain him, for their own protection, but they weren't savages. Keeping him as comfortable as possible was only humane.

Drathen was starting to get worried.

He’d heard the shouting that had finally broken in the silence after the Watch had cleared the plaza. Heard the trap go off and seen Basso’s nerves get worse and worse until it did, and then watched the fence slip out of the Burrick. What was one more illegal action, Drathen supposed, but even so it had made his teeth itch, Graves watching with liquid eyes as if he could read his master’s anxiety.

The fighting had come to a halt and eased into angry shouting and the thunder of two dozen running boots, and then even that had faded. Hours later and with night shrouding them, the plaza remained still and empty.

Basso had slipped back in without any of the cowering patrons noticing, come up to the bar with a hollow look in his eyes Drathen had hoped to never see again, tried and failed to speak. Heart
sinking, Drathen had pulled down a glass, an unopened bottle of absinthe, and handed them over.

Now, as the last of the patrons left before Drathen shooed them out with Graves’ teeth, Basso was in the corner booth with a mostly empty bottle, glass overturned on the floor, and distant, vacant eyes. Even as Drathen watched, he picked up the bottle, tipped it up and drank for too many seconds at a time, and tried to put it down. Missed the edge of the table - took his hand off the bottle and let it drop.

Basso didn't even flinch as the bottle smashed on the floor and the remaining green liquid puddled and then oozed into the floorboards. When Drathen approached him, Basso didn't seem to notice, continuing to stare at the floor with a lost, helpless shine in his eyes; expression slack, as Drathen got closer, hair slicked back and hat completely missing, a faint sheen of alcohol sweat filming his skin. Quietly, Drathen came and sat opposite him.

“Basso. Hey, can you hear me?” Didn’t lean on the table - sticky from spilled absinthe - but leant forward slightly, reached out and waved a hand in front of Basso’s face. “You need to come down and sleep this off, Basso. You’re shithoused.”

A gurgled response, not even an attempt at language, and Basso waved a hand at Drathen, leaned into the movement, missed the table again, and nearly fell over as the momentum carried through. Drathen jumped, moved to catch him, and then stopped as Basso seemed to steady himself. Emerald eyes locked onto the broken absinthe bottle, and then Basso surged to his feet, took half a turn (definitely intending to get more, apparently trying to kill himself), and slammed into the floor.

Drathen sighed, pinched the bridge of his nose. “What the hell did you see out there, Basso?” Muttered to himself, leaning down to haul the man to his feet. Blind drunk, Basso was a deadweight that Drathen struggled to lift, but eventually he managed to get some semblance of balance out of him, albeit with both arms slung around Drathen’s shoulders, head rolled against Drathen’s chest, knees buckled. “Come on, you drunk pisspot. Don’t pass out before I get you to bed, alright? The stairs are already going to suck.”

It took twenty minutes, four tumbles, too much bloody cajoling, one toilet stop, and knotting a bit of fabric around Basso’s arm where he cut himself on gods knew what, but eventually Drathen managed the get him the short distance out of the Burrick and into the cellar. Gently lowering him onto the bed, Drathen tried to ignore all the signs of Basso’s recent tenant; the little thief (and Drathen had carefully avoided looking too closely, hadn’t taken a second glance at the clothes or weapons stored on the shelf, but he knew) was still gone. It had been a day now, stretching into the night. Surely, even if he’d fled in a panic, he’d have returned for his things by now?

As Drathen’s experience went, thieves rarely left their own things behind.

“Allright, you drunk bastard, help me out here.” Basso slowly slumped sideways until he was horizontal, body twisted so his legs were still off the bed. Even as Drathen sighed and tugged off his boots, Basso offered a loud snore. “Yeah, that fucking figures. Always doing all the work, aren’t I?” Sighed, without venom. Whatever it was that Basso had seen when the plaza trap had gone off, it was enough to trigger another one of these episodes. Drathen had always hoped to never see another; now, he hoped that it was over in one night. Last time, it had taken over a season.

There was no point trying to strip Basso down any further, so Drathen set his boots to the side, placed a bucket on the floor by his head, and lay a blanket over him. For a long minute, Drathen just studied the man. From her perch, Gwen warbled and then fluttered over to land on Drathen’s shoulder, nibbling on his hair. Drathen gave her a gentle swat. “Watch this one, Gwen. Problems
galore. Course, you are the only tail he’ll even let in here, but... ah, you know.” Drathen rubbed her beak and then shooed her off; a flutter of wings and the rush of flight, and she landed on the bed by Basso’s head.

Chirped.

Drathen shook his head. “Your funeral, Gwen. I’ll be in the attic tonight, yeah? Just in case. Give a scream if he does something else stupid.”

That done, Drathen made his way upstairs. Graves followed him up, quiet and obedient - a good pat and a short command, and he curled up on the floor by the spare attic bed. Drathen took his time bathing, getting the grime of the day off his skin and enjoying the warm water. He had lit only one candle in the room, and the flickering light was both ghostly and comforting; it awoke some deep part of him that feared the things that might lurk in the dark, but was comforted by the flame. At the same time, there was a part of him that feared the pyre.

But the water was warm and the night was quiet and Graves’ indistinct whuffles on the other side of the door carried through. Drathen wasn’t actually afraid of anything here - he didn’t need to be.

Eventually, once the bath had cooled and Drathen had thoroughly dried himself off, he redressed in the warm bathrobe that he kept up here, blew out the candle he’d lit, and sat at the tiny desk by the bed. Two more candles were lit, Drathen took note that Graves had at some point fallen asleep on top of the bed, and then he pulled out a piece of parchment, a pen and inkwell, and considered it.

Garrett slept at the Burrick this past week. He seemed pretty sick; Basso’s been looking after him. He actually seemed a lot better until this morning. Just up and took off, and hasn’t been back. Left all his gear behind, except that bow and his quiver.

You know him better than me. What kinda crazy is up with him?

Everything else seems quiet. There’s been some poncing over in Auldale, and the General’s gotten even more obsessive, but no threat that I’m concerned about. The Primal hasn’t really surfaced much outside of Garrett.

Come soon. The City needs you.

D.

Drathen quietly reread it, nodded to himself, and blew on the ink to dry it. Carefully folded into thirds, and then in halves again both ways, and then Drathen tucked it into a tiny little envelope. A drop of dark blue wax, and an unmarked seal, and he set it aside.

Without disturbing Graves, Drathen slept soundly for several hours, rose in the early chill before the world starts turning and everything is grey, and made his way to the South Quarter and, from there, towards the docks. Few ships were anchored there, as foreign trade was rare and a long time in between. With the Empire of the Isles at odds with them and a complete embargo on both sides, their proximity made it difficult for anywhere else in the world to trade with them as well. All the same, what The City lacked in saleable materials it made up for with saleable culture, and some few ships and merchants braved the journey.

Drathen made his way towards one such ship, tiny envelope in one hand, several gold pieces in the other. The captain of The Brightwater met him with little resistance once his name was spoken - when coins, envelope, and an aged bottle of whisky were handed over besides, she was positively ecstatic. Always glad for his business.
A promise was extracted, a grave warning given (Drathen couldn’t help it if she understood it to be a threat), and Drathen bade her farewell. He took the long way back to the Burrick, but he walked quickly; Basso likely wouldn’t wake for hours yet, too hungover, but he would soon need to start preparing for the day.

After all, a bar never made so much as coin as when The City was at unrest.

Darkness permeated the air with dampness and the faint smoky odour of mould; there was the smell of wet underneath that, warm cobblestones after a sudden rain as the gutters ran with water and shit. Much stronger, and much more exigent, was the thick cloying scent of blood. It layered itself amongst the other smells - fresher and bolder, the hot iron that coated the back of his throat, almost sweet - and the older, dustier tang, like a bitter aftertaste in especially inexpensive wine. The stink of human waste and the faintest chemical whiff of cheap soap meant that after smell, the first thing he noticed was the bubbling nausea.

He couldn’t see, but his head span all the same as his senses started to come back awake. Somewhere in the far distance, liquid steadily dripped. The little splash as it struck stone was heavy, not the faintly chime-like quality of water. A thicker substance, whatever it was. Blood? Perhaps. He had no way of knowing. Oil made the same sort of splash as blood.

On second thought, he might prefer that it was blood. Blood didn’t burn like oil.

Closer, he heard the muted scuff of movement failing to be hidden and whimpers failing to be swallowed. Muffled, slightly - walls between them? The faded noises nevertheless echoed slightly in the dark, as if this place were cavernous.

Slowly, he made himself sit up. Taking it easy, trying desperately not to overwhelm himself, but even without sight his head swam and his body trembled and he stumbled sideways - collided with stone - let the wall take the majority of his weight - felt the whiplash of pain in his stomach and burn of acid in his throat and the prick of tears. A moment’s reprieve after he vomited, and then again.

Eventually, the clenching agony eased, and when several minutes passed since the last dry-heave, he moved away, staggering, until he could collapse against the opposite wall. Shuddering and sweating now, icy cold against the rough hewn stone, but he breathed slowly and closed his eyes. The darkness behind them was lighter than the darkness of the… wherever he was.

His thoughts spun wildly, disconnected from each other. They turned like dust motes, scattering as he tried to grasp them. Where he was would have to wait, and after a few minutes he gave up on how he got there, or what had happened. The acrid taste of bile on his tongue was foul, his whole mouth a little fuzzy, and there was a strange sour note to it.

Okay… one thing at a time. Why was he throwing up? What did he remember?

There had been… swaying... and laughter and sweet wine, the lights dimming and pulsing and somehow his glass had never been empty and why hadn't that bothered him?

All at once, Leon’s thoughts slotted together and his heart turned to ice in his chest.

Stupid, stupid. He’d sipped the first one because the Watchmen had been watching him so closely that he hadn’t been able to see a way to effectively fake it. Outsider, I’m such an idiot. He hadn’t noticed any strange smell or flavour to the wine, but he should have known better.

Wine on its own had never made him so sick. Whatever it was they’d used to drug him, it was a
harsh toxin. The smell of his own vomit in the air made the clenching pain in his stomach sharper, but Leon tipped his head back against the wall and just focused on breathing. Dampness seeped into his hair.

Slowly, once he had control of his faculties again, Leon opened his eyes. The dark pressed back, almost a physical sensation against his skin. Sounds came to him louder now, the quiet crying of what he assumed were neighbours. Two- no... Four? For some time - and he couldn't tell how long, in the wet dark, the only true markers of time the distant *drip-drip* and his own heartbeat - he just listened, trying to pick apart the different voices. They spoke no words, but after a while Leon began to hear the individual tones. The one he thought was closest, behind the wall he leant against, was a soft swell of a whimper, slight and intermittent; more air than sound, almost breathless little gasps. Leon wondered if it was female. Perhaps. Maybe just young.

Further away, the echoes more pronounced in what Leon was increasingly sure was underground, two more distinct voices. One was lower, an adult male Leon thought, a nearly constant undercurrent of panting and sniffing that ran like a hummed bassline. Breaking through in regular sobs was the quiet crying of someone if not in pain, then in despair. Leon couldn't identify anything about that one - it could have been anyone.

And last, so distant Leon wasn't entirely sure he wasn't imagining it, something higher pitched, just an occasional pluck of an imaginary string, skittering echoes like a half forgotten dream. If it didn't raise the hairs on Leon's arms whenever he heard it - almost like a whistling click - he would have dismissed it as unreal.

He was starting to shiver, the cold numbing the ends of his fingers and toes. Finally, with his stomach feeling more settled if a little painful, Leon took an inventory of himself. He was cold, and sore all over, a deep chemical ache in every muscle, but while he still felt a bit skyheaded he could think in coherent strings. Barefoot, he discovered, wiggling his toes, and then reaching down to touch. Still in his dress pants, the waist digging into him uncomfortably in his hunched position on the floor, but his dinner jacket was gone. A moment of loss, as he realised his star was gone with it. Then a touch, fingers to chest, and then slapping his hand against his knee. *Stupid.* The stone was rough and damp against his back, almost enough to graze if he moved too much.

**Shirtless. No wonder it was so cold.**

Taking a deep breath and trying to ignore the fetid mixture of smells, Leon tested for complaints in his chest and abdomen. When he found none, he stretched. A little tug as he lifted his arms above his head, his left shoulder sore. When he ran his hands down his body, applying pressure, he found a matching pain in his left hip. *They must have thrown me.* But there was no disturbing slickness on his skin, no glaringly obvious pains that clamoured for his attention. He was in relatively good condition.

It made his stomach open, and this time it was dread instead of bile that rose in his throat. He was in good condition, but the last thing he remembered was Harlan’s Outsider-cursed ball. Watchmen and wine and - apparently - sedatives. Leon hadn’t looked around yet, couldn’t see with his mortal eyes in the darkness, but he had a pretty good idea what underground dungeons usually sounded like. He was a rat in a cage.

**Good condition, but what artist wanted to start with a stained canvas?** Leon knew only too well what Harlan did to those who crossed him. Being part of the Empire’s envoy, even if it had been ostensibly diplomatic and in no way an aggressive action, would count in the madman’s mind.

“Keldin?!” he called into the echoes, and winced at the fear in his own voice. “Anna?” The names ricocheted off the stone and then faded to nothing. In the cell beside him, the soft whimpering turned
to a terrified whine and then went silent; the sound of scrambling, and then no sound at all. Guilt pricked at him, for scaring another prisoner - but he wouldn’t hurt them. Harlan had that under control. “... Phoebe?”

Silence.

“Corvo?” Almost a whimper of his own now. “Corvo!” He hadn’t expected a response, and in the end it was good that he was met with only echoes. If any of them had replied, it would have only meant that Harlan had caught them too, and more than even escape, Leon wanted to not be responsible for getting the other Messengers - or worse, the Lord Protector - hurt. It was his own fault he was here. As long as he hadn’t taken them down with him...

But it still coiled in his chest, a hard little knot of fear and loneliness. They’d come and save him. They had to. Corvo always saved them.

Trying to control his heartbeat, Leon took a deep breath. Wherever he was, Corvo would feel him. The arcane bond didn’t link both ways, but Corvo would feel him - feel his fear - and be able to tell at least vaguely where he was. As long as Corvo was okay.

Leon’s stomach clenched, but he took another deep breath, drew on his rune, felt the quiet warmth flicker to life on his back. Magic flooded into his eyes. In dim greys and hollow blacks, the room lit up around him. Stone, as Leon had thought - jagged slabs, mounted into haphazard walls and cemented together with liberal and sloppy application. Still; no obvious holes for him to exploit.

A glimmer of wet by the opposite wall, and Leon grimaced. He had little hope of being able to clean the mess up; he was quite sure that he wouldn’t care, come Harlan’s first visit. The back wall was more solid than the stonework, something that had been carved with care and then left to decay. Whatever this hole was, it had been here before Harlan had repurposed it. There was no furnishings inside the cell; it was just a box in which to keep him. The front of his cell was a tightly knitted series of bars. For a moment, Leon’s heart flickered with hope; if there was open space, he could blink.

Unthinkingly, he reached out with a hand, thumb held perpendicular to his palm, the whole hand tilted slightly so he could use the little ‘v’ to aim. A ripple of magic, and he felt it rebound against the bars and Leon let it all go. The cell went pitch black again as Dark Vision went with it.

Stupid.

Blinking was fairly short range - how far they could blink varied from Messenger to Messenger, and of course Corvo could go farther than them all - but it didn’t erase their bodies. Or their mass. If Leon could have physically slipped through the bars, then he could have blinked past them; it didn’t make him disappear, he just moved forward in the blink of an eye. Barred. Still trapped.

What Leon would give to have inherited some possessive ability from Corvo.

…

The sound of stomping boots roused him. He wasn’t sure when he’d drifted off, but it was cold and he was tired and weak, so it wasn’t so surprising. Fear slipped under his skin as he woke, the stomping and rowdy voices sending a warning ahead of even the firelight that eventually flickered into sight. Leon winced as it did, averting his eyes - too used to the total darkness, the encroaching flames painful - but he didn’t dare close them. He had to be able to see them coming.

The footsteps became distinct as they came closer, and Leon’s breath caught and stopped as he
recognised the unaligned triple-tap gait of the Thief-Taker General. Frost curled up inside his lungs, and he felt the thud of his heart against his ribcage as if it was a musician, and Leon its instrument.

Laughter rang ahead of them, even as their proximity layered the smell of torch-oil and faint ashes over the stench of blood and fear and damp and bile and shit that saturated the dungeon. Leon’s stomach clenched, and suddenly he was glad he’d already done all his vomiting.

When the boots stomped close, stopped outside his cell, and Leon had to close his eyes despite himself against the glare of flame that washed over him, he reconsidered. Maybe he could still vomit; the sudden, frantic fear threatening to close his throat said he might. It wasn’t like Leon hadn’t ever been in danger before - he was a Royal Messenger for the Empire of the Isles, he’d lived through the assassination of an Empress and the whole government nearly coming apart and so what if he’d been in Morley at the time, so what if the plague hadn’t reached beyond the coasts of Gristol? He’d still been around, still had to worry and fear about the Empire’s collapse.

He’d gone to Dunwall, applied for military training. Corvo had picked him out specifically, just like he had with all the Messengers. Leon was stronger than this, he’d be fine. All he had to do was wait for an opportunity to escape, all he had to do was endure.

Corvo had endured worse. Leon could do this.

But it didn’t stop the fear that choked him as he listened to the key rattle in his cell door, the screech of bent iron as it was forced open. It didn’t stop the cold sweat that broke out across his whole body, the shivering that came with it. It didn’t stop the little yelp that slipped out when he was grabbed by the hair and dragged up, or the jagged sounds that clawed from his throat as he scrambled to stand and take his own weight, as he was yanked after the Watchman and stumbled and would have fallen if not for the merciless hand in his hair.

It didn’t stop him squeezing his eyes shut and praying as Harlan’s sick chuckles rolled out over the sudden acute silence of the other prisoners. Outsider… Please, oh god, please. Corvo. Save me.

He was shaken, the pain melting into his skull, and he desperately tried to get his feet under him again. He’d walk if it meant not being scalped by default. When he did, the rough floor cutting into the soles of his feet (soft, he didn’t work or spar or anything without his shoes, and already he could feel the blood and heat welling up), the pull on his hair abated somewhat, but the grip didn’t loosen and he was steered with rough jerks. Slowly, Leon forced his eyes open, trying to remember how many steps they’d taken, what turns they’d taken, where they were in relation to his cell. The firelight blinded him, tears puddling and spilling, but he blinked and squinted and tried to see anyway.

Smooth walls, cut into the ground and dark stone. It seemed an off shade of brown under The City. Maybe Leon was just too fireblind to tell. Harlan was talking, as his Watchman dragged Leon in one hand and held the torch aloft in the other, but Leon couldn’t process the words. Cruelty and malice and a sick relish. I should listen. He should focus on what Harlan said, because it could be important later - it might tell Leon his plans, or offer him a way out, or give him the clue to manipulating Harlan. He should. The fear swelled up in his throat again, and his ears were rushing with panic and his own heartbeat, and he couldn’t pick apart the words.

They reached the end of the passage, and the firelight bloomed around them to reveal a room whose dimensions reached further than the flame did. The rock walls fell away, leaving them hemmed in with only darkness.

A few steps more, and Leon saw the glint of shackles.
He tried to fight it, this time, but the guard yanked hard on his hair and then struck him in the solar plexus, and Leon buckled. Gasping, more desperate for air than to escape for the time being, he was dragged into the dip in the floor. It was oddly cushioned under his knees as he was dropped, a strange flaky almost-soft texture. The first manacle closed around Leon’s right ankle, the clang echoing around them. As the second was locked around his left, Leon touched with trembling fingertips, his other hand still pressed against his diaphragm, trying to breathe - flakes came off against his skin, a gritty red-brown.

_Blood._

For an entirely different reason, Leon’s breath stopped.

Light erupted to life far to the right, and Leon flinched away, turning his head and closing his eyes. The roar and crackle of a great flame danced across to him, and the sound of whooshing wind in deep, regular intervals. _That sounds like... No._ Eyes watering, the salt stinging almost as badly as the light, Leon looked over as closely as he could. A mighty pyre and a grate picked out in flickering shadows greeted him. It almost looked like a blacksmith’s bellows, easily thrice the size, built into the wall of the room.

A glance around revealed that this room was a dead end, hewn much more roughly than the passage that led to it, and held open by four great pillars. Each of the pillars had a set of shackles chained to them, at different heights, matching the two that were bolted into the floor and currently around Leon’s ankles. Blood caked the pillars and the floor at their bases, the same dry paste that coated the floor under Leon’s knees.

Plenty of torture had been inflicted here. Leon wondered, if he could hear the walls whisper, what kinds of screams they might relay.

“So, Lord Diamandis!” The voice caught in Leon’s ears, stuck. Words vibrated into his brain and deciphered and finally Leon looked to Harlan, eyes widening despite the way the fire made him weep. Fear took his breath again as Harlan watched him back. Back to the flames, his eyes looked black and cruel. The Outsider made evil. Leon shuddered, trying desperately to catch his breath. He had to get out of here. _Corvo. Corvo, save me._

A chuckle rang out over the bellowing flames, and Harlan turned something in hand. It was in the fire. Heating.

“So, you find yourself here. Not where you expected to sleep tonight, I imagine!” Laughed, as if it was a joke they were sharing. Words vibrated into his brain and Leon could feel the shaking in his body, but he was powerless to stop it. Thoughts spun and panic blazed, and the whimpered name slipped from his tongue. _Corvo please. Outsider. How do I get away?_ “Not to worry. I just want to have a friendly conversation first, Lord Diamandis.” His title was sneered, a mocking reminder of the status he’d enjoyed not a day earlier, of how easily he’d been brought to his knees.

“F-fuck you.” Gasped, his voice weak, barely audible over the bellows, but Leon forced it out. _No. Save me._ Whatever Harlan wanted to know about Corvo, about the Messengers, about the Empire, Leon wasn’t going to give him a single fucking scrap. He’d made an oath. He was loyal - he belonged to Corvo. The Empress had trusted him. Whatever Harlan wanted, Leon wasn’t going to give it to him. _But please Corvo, come get me soon._

The grin that spread over Harlan’s face was predatory. Leon could see the reflected firelight glinting from the metal caps protecting broken teeth. “I prefer something altogether _juicier_ than you, Leon.” His first name spoken with the same contempt as his last, but there was an edge there that made Leon shudder. “Though perhaps you are just as soft.”
Harlan’s head turned, studying the thing he was holding in the flames as he rotated it. A short grunt, and he looked back over. “Captain Strothmorrow.” The guard stood to attention. Leon looked to him despite himself, panic creeping out, fear unfurling along every nerve like a spiderweb being spun in real time, a delicate caress. Strothmorrow almost seemed to be trembling.

“Yes, Thief-Taker General.”

“The lord has a bit of a mouth on him. Cut it down a little.”

“Yes, General!” Hissed back with glee, the guard turning on his heel and dashing off to the far side of the room. Leon felt his insides all turn to liquid.

“And Strothmorrow.” A noise of affirmative, even while a metallic clanging rose into the air and Leon realised the guard was sorting through instruments on a small table tucked against the far wall. “Not the tongue. I need him to speak.”

The answering Yes, General almost sounded disappointed. Leon was shaking so badly that he’d sunk fully to the floor when Strothmorrow finally approached him, struggling to breathe. No. No, no. Please.

When the hand gripped his jaw and forced his head up, panic overwhelming his conscious thought, Leon jerked back and failed to break the hold. He’d never been physically strong; his power in combat came from speed and movement and having excellent aim. His hands came up, closed around Strothmorrow’s wrist, tugged. No give whatsoever.

Stupid, Leon!

Frantically, Leon reached for the magic. It slid straight out of his grasp like oil, sticky and silky at the same time - Leon tried again, panicky, feeling the faint flicker of warmth on his back from his rune. It was like trying to hold whale blubber with his toes. He couldn’t focus, the fear making his vision blur, and the magic danced under his skin and slithered away.

“No…” It broke out of him, a shattered sob, even as his hands slipped from Strothmorrow’s wrist and hit the floor, arms limp. Leon didn’t even feel it. He couldn’t even try and use magic to escape. Been too slow to get his head back after the light and the painful trip down here, had been too afraid to think. Most likely, it wouldn’t have mattered; Leon had seen it happen to another Messenger, once. Not fear, and not the threat of torture, but a hard enough knock to the head and her words had slurred, her thoughts bled into nonsense, and despite the flickering glow of her arcane rune, she’d been unable to use magic. She’d explained it to them all, later, so they would recognise the feeling.

Like drowning, like the magic was a hand offering a way to the surface, blurry in the water, and she hadn’t been able to grasp it no matter how hard she tried. Leon made another attempt, even as the fire gleamed off something metallic in Strothmorrow’s hand and the fingers tightened on his jaw and forced it open. Missed - like bubbles fizzing around him.

Strothmorrow was humming, or muttering, a vague low vocal tone that Leon couldn’t pick apart. A thumb touched Leon’s bottom lateral incisor, and he tried to flinch again - he made no progress, only managed to wrench his jaw. Pain radiated down his neck.

Strothmorrow was holding tapped against a central incisor, one of his top teeth this time. Another vague hum, like bloodflies buzzing in Leon’s ears, and then a sick grin spread across his face. The cold metal - pliers- wait- no- no - touched Leon’s upper left cuspid tooth, Strothmorrow tilted his head, and then he felt them close on it. Resisted the urge to try jerk.
away, knowing it would only hurt more. Leon’s eyes were wide, unblinking, watching the satisfaction glimmer in Strothmorrow’s eyes as he gave a little tug-twist, getting a feel for how secure the grip on Leon’s tooth was. It didn’t hurt, but Leon whimpered anyway, because it felt strange and he knew what was coming.

Strothmorrow pulled first. A protracted pressure, pulling down and slightly out, until Leon felt like maybe it would take the whole section of skull with it, a landslide of bone, and he let out a whine. Didn’t even try to hold it in. Why bother? They wanted his pain. He wouldn’t betray his home or his Empress or Corvo, but there was no harm in screaming.

“If you are ever in that position, don’t pretend to be tough. These people enjoy your pain and if you deny them that, they will only inflict more.” Corvo’s words flitted through Leon’s mind, something tangible to cling onto. Corvo had been tortured before. Corvo had survived. Corvo was okay.

So when Strothmorrow gave up and twisted, and Leon felt his cuspid grind and his gums lacerate and the blood start to fill his mouth, he screamed. Quaking in the hold on his jaw, shaking and trying to pull away, but his head was held fast. The movement came through in his torso, twisting painfuly, neck taut. His hands clamped down around Strothmorrow’s forearm, pulling desperately, fingernails digging in. The old dried blood was like peat under Leon’s knees as he struggled, smearing into the fabric, even as fresh blood spilled over Leon’s chin to join it, staining. It was hot and sticky against Leon’s chest.

Another twist, the other way, pulling as he went, and then-- back and forth, quick, sharp motions, tugging, cutting and grinding and howling until - Leon felt the pop and the tooth came free. The ache in Leon’s throat dimmed as he shrielled and then quieted, and when he was released he slumped forward. His hands pressed into his own chest, curling inward, trying to disappear. With the tooth gone, the sting and burn of the open wound replaced the excruciating grinding pressure. It was better.

Even so, Leon kept his head tipped forward, open-mouth breathing, letting the blood bubble with the flow of air and fall in thick streams of blood and saliva. He tried to swallow as little as possible, tried to keep it out of his throat. He’d inspirated too much already, could feel the wet ache in his chest. Coughing, trying to get a clear breath, trying to settle it.

There was a clatter, and Leon jolted away from it. When there was no additional pain forthcoming, he slowly turned his head to look at it. *Come on, Leon. Think. Focus. Breathe. You can do this.* He reached for the magic again, desperation slurring his thoughts together. Panic and pain and fear was a toxic slurry under his skin, but he reached anyway, and tried to draw comfort from the warmth of his rune. It was still there, *right there*, he just had to reach it. The rune was stability, it was magic, it was freedom. Just focus. *Focus, Leon. Please. Outsider, please. Don’t forsake me.*

It stuck for a second, just a moment; honey dripping from his fingers but slowly enough that he could taste it. The warmth flared up hotter on his back. Noise, a low tone, buzzing against his ears.

Too late, Leon realised that Harlan was limping towards him.

“Now, Lord Diamandis, I do understand that you are not from our City, but we have certain rules here. This… marking, on your back. It reeks of pagan heresy, and that had been outlawed here for many years.” A sick grin, as Harlan leaned down, and waved the thing he’d had in the fire before him. It glowed, brilliant orange-white, an obtuse rectangular shape that Leon couldn’t quite pick out. “The Primal mess was bad enough, but I can’t have foreigners running around with a glowing pagan rune. The people might get ideas.”
Harlan limped around to Leon’s side. His back.

Choking on blood and fear, Leon let out a shrill cry and scrambled forward, away, as far as possible. His hands were still free - stupid - he crawled for a beat, threw himself up to his feet, lunged for the passageway. Ankles caught, the manacles bit in, and he slammed into the ground with enough force to stun him.

Sprawled out now, vision flashing blue then white then yellow, dissolving into stars and whirling blurriness that was enough to nauseate him, Leon tried to lift his head and felt himself tip. His cheek and then temple collided with the floor again. Uneven footsteps behind him, a heavy limp, and ringing laughter.

The panic made his throat close, and he gasped for air, pulling on the manacles blindly. Couldn’t even feel the pain as they cut into his flesh, but he could feel the stickiness.

“No! No, please! No!” Voice cracking, unsure how he even managed to get the words out past the choking constriction around his neck, but wailed in anguish. Because he knew what Harlan intended to do now. The glowing thing in hand was a shape he’d seen before - the slightly uneven rectangle with the central circle and the points above and below. The symbol of the City Watch.

Glowing and hot from the flames. A brand.

Leon felt the heat against his skin before Harlan made contact. He squirmed away, trying to drag himself closer to the way out, the shackles cutting deeper. The tension hurt, spiralling all the way up his legs, knees and hips protesting. No, no, no nonoplease--

Searing, blistering agony, as skin ruptured and fat boiled and flesh scorched, and Leon screamed. He could hear it, distantly, ringing in his ears as it rebounded off the walls with all the force of a physical strike - high-pitched and in his own voice, oddly sickening, as if it was someone else’s. The pain blew out through his whole body like the recoil of a gun, every muscle and nerve alight, and all Leon could do was arch. His fingers curled, nails caught on the stone floor, dug in, broke. Arching, but the white-hot pressure pushed him back down against the floor, solid and endless and nothing - like the touch of a star. The touch of an angry god.

And then, underneath the pain, Leon felt something altogether other as it sang-- spat-- snapped.

Chapter End Notes

Unedited! I'll get around to it - probably immediately as I read and reread my own work to make sure it's perfect ah hah.

Anyway. Is the chapter title referring to Leon or Basso? You'll never know.

So it turns out things are actually easier to write when I'm doing placement hours (aka, actually doing work on my feet all day) than when I'm doing study stuff. Who knew!

As an aside, how are all these OCs going over with you guys? I know there's rather a lot of them.

Thanks for reading!
A Soul Is Light But Yours Is A Shadow

Chapter Summary

In which Corvo and Garrett finally meet.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Waking was not a pleasant experience for Garrett.

The first thing that reached him was the shouting - strange, unfamiliar voices and cadences, accents he didn’t recognise. The fear thrilled up around his spine and he forced his eyes open, trying to get a gauge on the situation, moving to shrink back into the nearest shadow. Pain ruptured in his head, vision blurry, and his ankles twisted strangely when he tried to step, his hands pulled on something wound tight and without elasticity.

Panic tingles replaced the fear, and he blinked roughly, trying desperately to clear his vision despite the throbbing ache behind his eyes. What looked like an apartment slowly swam into view - small, run down - an Old Quarter building. The noise hadn’t abated, and Garrett felt himself going rigid as he recognised the presence of four other people. One of them, clearly the oldest and taller than anyone Garrett had ever met, his shoulders and chest starkly defined muscle under a blue shirt that had once been extravagant, was the main source of sound.

He snarled at the others, words that buzzed a little too wild for Garrett to decipher, accent twisting otherwise familiar sounds. Two girls and a boy danced around him, frantic, hands up - placating. Trying to make him listen. When the man turned away from them, pacing with an aggravated stomp, Garrett caught sight of something on the back of his left hand. A marking, like something from an old religion - it glowed with a strange twisting blue-gold light, like the twinkle of a poppy in a vision. Garrett jolted back when the man’s eyes - the brown of liquid honey - fell on him. A soft snarl.

“He’s awake.”

Garrett’s back met the hard wood of a structure, and with another tug on his wrists he realised he was tied to it. A quick glance back - a bed, low to the ground but set on a solid wood base. His hands were secured tightly to the feet of it, and a panicked glance down himself revealed a light blue knot around his ankles, the turning-brown stains of drying blood on his clothes, the pale raised skin of his bared arms and calves - damp but clean. They washed the blood off me. The thought spun out under the ache in his eyes, vaguely nonsensical. His rushed self-inventory was muddled even in his own mind, as one of the girls trying to restrain the man broke away and came closer; she was of average height, a tight build not unlike Erin’s, shoulders and arms a little more defined than Garrett’s wayward protégé, with a shock of hair the same colour as a hawk’s underbelly and darker brown eyes.

Cold skin, still damp. Hadn’t been washed off that long ago, then, so likely he hadn’t been unconscious for too long. Clothes wet from the water, but still bloody - no extra effort put into cleaning them. His eyes hurt and burned in the dim light, and a faint nagging in the back of his mind reminded him that he could be relieved of the pain, if only he’d stayed with Basso. Tied up,
exhausted, blurry, muscles filled with a low-level ache, but otherwise he seemed okay. Nothing broken, nothing torn. They hadn’t hurt him.

The brown-eyed girl came closer, her skin light with a hint of tan, and she crouched by him. *They haven’t hurt me yet.* She was wearing the tatters of a ballgown, white under-layers and silken violet shells. The bodice had been divested of all frills and ribbons, hurriedly cut (or cut without care) and reinforced with strappings the same pale green as a new leaf bud. Her skirts had been slashed, and hung in a ragged mess that offered a basic modesty but did not reach her knees. When she crouched, Garrett kept his gaze on her face, the rest of her body too exposed. She didn’t seem to even notice. Strips of cloth in a pale blue were bound around her feet; faint red spots curled around the sides.

Leaning slightly closer, peering into Garrett’s eyes. Her sleeves curved beyond her shoulders, but did not extend more than a couple of inches down each arm. Averting his eyes, refusing to make contact with her, Garrett’s attention caught on one sleeve. Peeking out from underneath the fabric was a series of little black marks on her skin; just points and lines and a dot, that he could see, but clearly part of a larger whole. A tattoo?

Faint gold rippled through the marks Garrett could see, light but not light at the same time - a soft shine that looked more like the ink simply changing colours, and yet Garrett knew that in the dark he would have been able to see it clearly. The Primal pulsed inside Garrett’s skull, he looked up at the girl despite himself, feeling the power coil in his eyes, and then the heavy rupture of pain as his focus flared up beyond control.

Her body didn’t offer the soft blue shine of life that he was used to, and nor did it burn red like something intent on harming him. It was a faint glow of colour that took her shape in Garrett’s focus, even fainter than usual; a deep twilight violet, coiling in wisps, lacking solidity. Darker strands, almost black and yet still giving off the pale light, wove through the eerie purple. They came off the mark on her arm - and now, suddenly, Garrett could see the whole thing. A rune not unlike the one that glowed still on the tall man’s hand, the one Garrett couldn’t look at without his breath catching and his body seizing. It glowed like the scratched runes in the forgotten library beneath the House of Blossoms, but it was deep gold-black instead of blue.

An Old mark. Something as ancient as the secrets of the Primal.

Throat tight, Garrett blinked hard and tried to force the Primal down, to end the focus. He didn’t want to look at them through it, too uneasy, too unnatural. It felt like he’d stepped into a dream - nothing quite felt real. Pain rippled out, almost in protest, but Garrett felt the Primal shiver and then release and settle, and quick relief came as he lost sight of the purple glow. *Think, Garrett. How do you get out of this?*

The girl’s eyes, as she continued to study him, twinkled menacingly. There was something in them, a quiet billowing of black, like shadow made liquid. It coiled and twisted, like the darting fish that lived in the Great River during summer, somewhere deep. Garrett could see the black clearly in her eyes, but it somehow seemed distant; the cocoa brown of her irises was - paradoxically - unaffected.

Then, all at once, the inky black dissolved from her eyes, and the gold ink whorling over what was visible of her tattoo died, and she tilted her head with a frustrated huff.

“I don’t know what you are, but I hope to the Outsider that you’re friendly. I’m Annabel.” A slight twitch, like she meant to offer a hand, and then thought better of it. Unable to help it, Garrett twisted his wrists against their bonds, but they’d been expertly tied. He’d need some time, or a knife, to get out. He kept his mouth shut - being a captive had always scared the hell out of him,
and for good reason. He didn’t know who these people were, had never heard their accents before, didn’t recognise their style of dress or their mystical markings. Whatever they wanted, he wouldn’t make it easier. Annabel sighed. “Well… Don’t worry about them.” She gestured behind her, to where the other three were.

The man had stopped yelling now, but he paced furiously, the hand with the glowing mark held up to his chest, clenching and unclenching. He seemed manic, circled by the boy (barely taller than Garrett and with a heavier build, each step measured despite how frantic he seemed, a true brawler but not reliant on brute strength) and the second girl (she was tiny, looked to be a mere child of maybe eight or nine, but there was something in the way she moved, the way her shoulders were set and her head held that made Garrett doubt she was that young; he had no doubt she could fight like a demon). Garrett’s eyes skated over the glowing mark, and stars burst behind them, vivid purple and blue and white, the pain turning to pressure so heavy that Garrett let his head tip back against the bed with a soft groan. It felt like his eyes were bleeding. Both of them now, not just the Primal one.

Fingertips brushed his temple, and he went stiff, not even that pain enough to stop him from opening his eyes and staring at Annabel. She was frowning slightly. “… You’re not Marked by the Outsider, but you’re not normal either. I’ve never seen anything like it. Do you know?”

Primal. What the fuck was an Outsider? Still, Garrett kept his silence. He couldn’t afford to give them anything - he didn’t know what might be the key piece of information they sought, or what might make them snap. He didn’t know anything.

Annabel considered him, glanced over her shoulder as the man snarled at the boy, and the small girl stepped between them and hissed something back, and then shrugged. “Well… we can figure that out later.” She shifted, sat down and tucked her legs under her - immobile. Not easy to move fast from that position. Garrett felt his heart pick up the pace a little. She was either arrogant, or very comfortable in her own abilities. Maybe she thought he wouldn’t attack her if he got free. I wouldn’t.

But it was a defensive thought, insistence on a character he was no longer certain he had. The blood on his clothes was still fresh enough to smell, and Garrett could taste the copper-iron in the back of his throat. The Primal writhed under his skin, the small little kicks in his stomach and chest, the faint remembered heat. He wouldn’t fight her if he got free… would he? He didn’t want to. But he knew the impact of knuckles on flesh and there was an itch under his skin for it. Primal whispers coiled through his mind.

No. No, he wouldn’t. Garrett was the one in control of himself, not the Primal.

“… Are you in pain? You look like you are.” Garrett stared back at her, unmoving, silent. She sighed. “… How about a proper introduction then. I’m Lady Annabel Whitefield, a Royal Messenger of the Empire of the Isles.” She paused then, let him absorb that. Garrett held his tongue, stared at her with what he hoped was the same indifferent look as before, but his head swam, heart thundering in his chest. She was part of the Empire?! If she was telling the truth, then why would she tell him that? Surely this was the first step in the Empire invading The City, in finally conquering the island-bound citystate. What the hell was she thinking, just announcing that she was-- “We were sent to speak with the leader of your nation about your surrender to the Empire. Oh, come on, don’t look like that.” Garrett cursed internally. Was his face really that easy to read? “It was meant to be diplomatic. The Messengers aren’t an invading force, we’re primarily a peaceful unit.” Something odd, as she said that - the rounded way she spoke sharpened slightly, her accent briefly turning to something closer to the Auldale snobbery Garrett was used to. Not quite the same, and it was gone again in her next words; back to the strange hollow openness she spoke her vowels with. “It turns out your General Harlan is an obsessive madman, so there’s no real
hope for a peaceful solution with him, but I’m guessing you knew that already.”

A knowing note in her voice now. Oh. They already knew who he was. He shouldn’t be surprised.

“It took me a minute, I’ll admit. You’re nothing like how Harlan described you - and he described you in **excruciating** detail, let me tell you. Over and over again. But the scar and the eye - and that bow! It’s a beautiful weapon, by the way. How much did you pay for something like that?”

“I don’t pay for anything.” It slipped out, snarled and smug at the same time, and Garrett dug his fingernails into his palms. Fucking hell. Was he that easy to manipulate?

But **Lady Annabel Whitefield** laughed, a soft sound that she hid behind one hand, and the mirth in her eyes seemed genuine. She ignored the scuffle behind her as the man threatened the girl and she slapped him - the boy seemed more stunned than the man who’d been slapped. Genuine or not, there was a tightness to Annabel’s face that Garrett didn’t trust. Maybe she was lying, or acting - maybe there was something else going on that vied for her attention. Given the state of her friends, Garrett was willing to bet on the latter. Maybe he could use that to his advantage.

Although, doing so would require him to actually talk to her. Well, it was too late for that anyway.

“Of course, Master Thief. I should have known. Even so, I’ve never seen a design quite like it. I’d love to know what blacksmith had the idea for it, and managed to craft it. It’s genius, quite frankly.”

**Ah. I see.** She must already suspect the truth there. She was angling for his pride, trying to encourage a boast; Garrett wasn’t quite sure how she expected flattery to work while he was tied to the bed and unable to move, but there was no harm in playing along. Let her think he was stupid enough to fall for such tricks.

He made sure to pick his chin up a little, proudful. Truth be told, he was proud of the bow. “I made it myself, actually.” Clipped. A little smile that Annabel quickly covered. **Amateur.**

“A man of many skills, I see.”

Garrett glanced behind her, careful not to look directly at the man, making sure she caught the movement. Followed it, a tension going through her as the boy was shoved back and stumbled, hit the floor. Curious, the way the man stilled and then finally sat down at that, murmuring what must have been an apology. The two approached him again, settled close, talking in voices too low for Garrett to pick apart without focusing.

Looking back at him, Annabel tilted her head. “... My friends. That’s Lord Keldin Lavell,” she pointed at the boy, pale blond hair askew, “and Lady Phoebe Hellstrom.” The small girl was also blonde, hair longer and darker than the- Keldin’s. “They’re Messengers, like me. **He’s** Lord Royal Protector Corvo Attano. Our leader and the Empress’ personal bodyguard.”

The man with the marked hand. As if sensing the conversation, he glanced towards them - Corvo’s eyes met Garrett’s and the pain suddenly erupted behind them, blinding. His thoughts went white, the hot popping agony in his skull like his eyes had burst, doubled over. As soon as it had hit him, the pain eased back into a dull throb, and Garrett found himself gasping.

Annabel was silent, when he finally managed to catch a glimpse of her face, looking up through his hair. Beyond her, Corvo Attano had put a hand to his head - not quite as if in pain, but more... confused. Annabel’s eyes were narrow.

“... Harlan tried to kill us. Whatever you think, we’re on the same side. Given you’re pretty much
the last bastion of resistance in this miserable city, we should w-” A gasp, sudden and ragged as her words died on her tongue.

And she went silent.

For a moment, Garrett didn’t understand. The whole apartment had gone deadly, eerily silent. Annabel’s eyes were wide, her body trembling - in the main room, the other three were the same. The glow from Corvo’s hand was brighter now, casting them in strange off-golden hues. Garrett couldn’t look at it.

“No.”

It was low, snarled with all the malice of a vengeful god - a deep voice, almost seeming to echo in its own right. The air felt charged, suddenly, something sharp and metallic and electric that Garrett didn’t recognise. It crawled across his skin, searing painfully against the Primal nestled in his eye. It was almost like the falling-floating feeling that was all he remembered after falling into the Baron’s ritual those past two years ago. A tang in the air that swelled without substance.

Conversely, Garrett felt his heart slow, the beats getting further apart even as he felt them like heavy strikes in his chest. He was barely breathing. There was something about the way the air warped and trembled that made him stop, mind blank.

The glow in Corvo’s hand went out, even as he jerked and let out a snarled groan of pain, shoulders twisting as he went sideways, caught himself with one hand on the floor, shuddered. Annabel whimpered, her eyes wide and glassy, and all at once she crumpled, Keldin and Phoebe falling in time with her. The quiver in the air snapped away, like a discharge of static electricity, and Garrett felt himself breathe in as if a weight had just been lifted from his ribs.

For a long moment, there was nothing.

Slowly, Corvo got to his feet. He picked up Phoebe and, barely even glancing at Garrett, carried her over to the bed. Keldin after her, then Annabel, until the three of them were curled up together. They didn’t even twitch - whatever had just happened had knocked them out clean. Then, finally, Corvo knelt by Garrett and looked into his eyes.

His voice, when he spoke, was the same low tone, the distant thunder of an angry deity. It sounded more human now, but Garrett still shrank back. “You are the thief Garrett.” It wasn’t a question, but Corvo still seemed to expect an answer; Garrett considered staying silent again, immediately discarded it, twisted his wrists in his bonds. There was something altogether other about Corvo - something that Garrett could feel under his skin, like a sense he hadn’t been aware of until right now, pressing against the Primal inside him in the steady rush of waves. A tide of something that wasn’t quite real, that rebounded and echoed like thoughts in one of Erin’s visions.

He wondered if Corvo could feel it too. “I sure hope I’m the thief Garrett.” A simple yes would have sufficed. “I’ve been shot at an awful lot to find out now that I’m not.” Motherfucker.

It was the strange current of energy that came off the foreign Lord. Not exactly unpleasant, but it set Garrett on edge, a low hollow feeling that reminded him of dread. He couldn’t help it - he was tied up, and nobody knew where he was, and damn it he was scared. He was at their mercy, and even more than that, Garrett was quite sure that these people, whatever they really wanted with him, weren’t entirely… human. It wouldn’t be the first time. And he couldn’t help it; scared and bound and he defaulted to the only language he was truly fluent in: sarcasm. Turn the blade away, even if it was metaphorical. If he was scathing enough, then maybe they wouldn’t see the fear.
Corvo simply stared at him for a long moment, eyes hard and unreadable. “... Harlan took one of my men.” Voice cold. Garrett felt it go down his spine, icy - Corvo wasn’t here to play. “He’s being tortured as we speak. I’ve heard much about you, Garrett. If anyone in The City knows how to get into the Watchmanor, it would be you.”

_He wants to enlist me._ It dawned on Garrett too late, but it dawned all the same. So the General had taken someone from them - in the process of apparently trying to kill them, if Annabel was a reliable narrator - and Corvo intended to rescue them.

Wrist twisted, and Garrett realised the cold reality of his situation. “So... let me get this right. You want me to help you break into the Watchmanor, risk my own life by getting anywhere near the man who wants to torture me to death, so you can rescue one of your people? Who, by the way, are here as a precursor to invade and conquer.” Voice as steady as Garrett could make it, almost sneered, because if not then he would just sound afraid. He didn’t want to get anywhere near the Thief-Taker. Filled up with terror at the thought, because the truth was that he wasn’t in control - not of this situation, not of his life, not of anything. He couldn’t control his own body, his own decisions. _The blood._ It had been everywhere, slicking the roof and his skin, matted in his hair. He could still smell it, clinging to him like a secret he couldn’t divulge.

Suddenly, Garrett felt sick. _I murdered those people._ And now was not the time to have this breakdown, he couldn’t afford to think about that, because he’d barely been coherent by the time he’d realised he’d fled all the way to Old Quarter, realised he was chasing the scraps of nightmare left to him, the ringing of a name he couldn’t quite articulate anymore. He vaguely remembered firing an arrow at something- _movement-_ and it was just the ghost of motion in his body, his other senses torn and useless from exertion and emotion.

But he had. He’d murdered the ambush party, when he could have easily just run away. Now wasn’t the time, he didn’t have the luxury of it, but Garrett found himself shaking as he met Corvo’s gaze, fought down the rising nausea. _Four people._ As many as he’d killed in his entire life, and he’d cut them down as if they were nothing. He hadn’t even known he had that kind of fight in him - against one person sure, maybe even two, but _five?_

The Primal pulsed and bubbled, and instead of pain it spread a strange sense of warmth. It felt... _pleased._

Corvo’s voice jolted him out of it, but Garrett couldn’t stop the tight clench of his stomach, couldn’t quite hear over the dizzying sickening memory. The acid burned but he swallowed it, turned his head away, let himself slump. The shaking was only getting worse. _No. Pull it together, Garrett._ Tried to concentrate. He could think about that later, he could worry about the Primal and whatever awful emotional games it could apparently play on him _later._ Right now he was a prisoner. Right now, he had bigger problems.

“A-and if I don’t?” Whatever sarcasm he’d managed in his voice before was gone this time, the fear breaking through clearly as it cracked. Garrett’s nails pressed into his palms, but he couldn’t do anything about it.

He couldn’t anything about any of it. Nothing.

Corvo frowned at him, rose to his feet, walked away. Garrett watched him closely, trying to quiet the frantic breaths, forcing himself to breathe through his nose and not gasp, jaw tight. A glint, as Corvo reached the single table and picked something up - Garrett’s blood ran cold when he realised it was a dagger in hand, and despite himself he started to struggle as Corvo came back. Wriathed against the fabric binding him to the bed, desperate to pull his ankles apart, frantically trying to catch the knots in his fingertips. Anything.
He had never hesitated to risk his life for what he loved, but he didn’t want to die. And of all the ways he’d thought he might, tied up and helpless was the worst. A burr caught in his throat, something that was almost words, his voice sent spinning out as it slipped on the fear. Garrett shook his head. No begging, it wouldn’t help - he wouldn’t beg. Not this stranger, not even now. But all the same, Garrett shook his head and pressed back as far from Corvo as he could get, frenetic.

Corvo knelt by him again, spun the dagger idly. “Relax. Garrett, relax.” The accent was strange. Different to Annabel’s. Hyperfixated, Garrett picked it apart. Anything was better to think about than how the blade would feel slipping between his ribs. Not quite as open-sounding as Annabel’s rounded vowels. Corvo’s voice slipped around the sounds as he spoke, didn’t clip off anything; it was almost a rolling accent. As if he was dancing with the language as he spoke it. “No, I won’t kill you if you don’t cooperate. I won’t kill you.” But something raw in his voice, too - not the accent, but more immediate. Whatever had just happened to knock out the… Messengers, Annabel had called them. Corvo leaned in closer, and Garrett jerked back again, feeling the Primal coil up as he lost control of it again, feeling the agony it brought with it as the focus flared up and Corvo took on a faint glow.

It was darker even than Annabel had been. Almost pure black, though somehow still picked out against his surroundings; not quite light, but more like a notable absence of it. Corvo was almost like a silhouette against the world, a living shadow cast by nothing and sustained unaided. The tiniest hints of dark violet colour ribboned through his form, flashing in and out of sight, little writhing things like leeches; a parasitic purple that fed on Corvo’s darkness until they burst and simply bled back into the black.

His left hand glowed, a blinding purple-gold-blue-black, and Garrett could at the same time pick out each stroke of the marking and couldn’t bear to look at it at all.

Corvo paused, dagger point hovering, too close too close, studying him. Something shifted in the shadow he inhabited (or that inhabited him?) and the glow from his hand pulsed, sent tendrils spinning into him, until the gold light settled in Corvo’s eyes. A low noise escaped him, half surprise and half confusion.

Getting used to the shimmers Garrett could see through the Primal had taken long enough. He only half understood the way the Primal made living things light up, as if he could see their souls (and he was starting to believe in them too, go figure) - most everything blue, except for when it wanted to cause him direct harm and turned a fierce red. These foreigners, with their old runes like a banned religion run amok and their inhuman souls and whatever it was that they saw when they looked at him-- Gods, even the creatures Erin made with her corrupt Primal energy had shone blue. They were more human than these people.

Garrett prayed silently that it was blood seeping from his eyes and down his nose, and not tears. It hurt enough that neither would surprise him, the shaking only getting worse. He couldn’t breathe. Corvo had told him otherwise but-- in all likelihood, Corvo had lied. In the next moment, Garrett hated everything, in the moment that Corvo leaned slightly closer again and brought the dagger to Garrett’s wrist.

Everything could burn. Fuck the Primal and fuck The City and fuck these Imperials and fuck himself most of all. This was entirely his own fucking fault. How had he been so stupid? All he’d had to do was stay put in the Burrick, sneak back to the Clocktower when he was recovered enough, remember to check in with Basso. All he’d had to do was chill out and heal. And yet, here he was, his quiver and bow out of reach, all his gear stashed underneath Basso’s pub, the Primal worse than useless while it burned in his eyes and actively harmed him, tied to a fucking bed in the...
godsdamned Old Quarter as if he was some recalcitrant whore, the blade of a hostile dagger pressed against his wrist.

He was going to bleed out in some no-name part of the slum because he was stupid and reckless and out of control.

He probably fucking deserved it.

“I’m not going to hurt you.” The voice cut through the boiling of Garrett’s thoughts, and the blade slid and sliced and withdrew, and for a second Garrett’s vision spun, waiting for the inevitable burning line of pain, for the familiar wet heat and the weight of his life slipping away. When it didn’t come, he was confused, floundering in the sudden lack of dying, and the coldness of the blade touched again, his other wrist - slid, sliced, drew away.

Dazed, quaking, Garrett looked down at his hands. The pale fabric was open, cut neatly just before the knots. His muscles felt like liquid as he pulled his wrists free, disbelieving, heartbeat hollow in his own ears.

He looked up, saw the swirling gold dissipate from Corvo’s eyes, the deep blackness returning to the barely-there wisps of purple, and even the light on his hand dimmed into something almost tolerable. Corvo sat back, just a little bit, and then twisted and hurled the dagger across the room. It sank, point-first, into the wood grain.

Corvo turned back to him. “I told you, Garrett. I’m not going to hurt you.”

For a split second, Garrett fought the blinding impulse to run away. The Primal was strangely quiet, even as it filled his body in focus, curiously lacking the urge to fight that had completely overcome him before. Maybe it was Corvo. Garrett wouldn’t want to fight the man, not for all the coin in the world.

But his ankles were still bound, making sure he couldn’t run. Gaze fixed on Corvo, hands trembling, Garrett tucked his feet up under him and slowly, carefully, reached down to start fiddling with the knot. Corvo watched, motionless - from what Garrett could discern of his expression through the distortion of the Primal, impassive.

“We don’t mean your home any harm. You have to know as well as we do that your martial leader is insane. Harlan would burn down this entire city if he thought it would flush you out into his grasp.” Voice low, a strange metallic quality to it as it filtered through the Primal, making Garrett shudder. He paused in his work, looked away, tried to focus on the knot. His own glow had always been whiter than everyone else’s - because he was alive (still alive, for now) and of course he glowed too. He’d thought it had just been because he was the one looking, but now… maybe it was something else. Maybe it was the Primal itself. “At this point, wouldn’t submitting to the Empire be in The City’s best interests? Your government is decimated and this martial law is strangling your citizens. A land cannot thrive if its leaders don’t care for its health.”

For a minute, Garrett tried to ignore it, tugging on the knot. His fingers kept slipping off it, pulled too tight and too intricately to properly grip. It didn’t help that the fabric was slightly satiny, just slick enough to facilitate the slipperiness. Then, he gave up, dropped his head. Even with his hands, he was at a loss here. Lord Royal Protector. Corvo was the personal bodyguard of an Empress. Garrett could defend himself just fine - even better if he wasn’t caught first - but he wanted to stay as far away from tangling with Corvo as he could. Even just looking at the man was enough to convince him; Corvo wasn’t just tall, he was thoroughly ripped and while it was largely lean muscle, there was a broadness to his shoulders and a hardness to his body that Garrett knew was raw strength. If the whim took him, Corvo could probably break Garrett in half.
Garrett barely recognised his own voice, floating through the Primal in whispers. “He’ll kill me if he catches me.” And then— fuck it, because he was already in too deep, already at their mercy, already falling apart. Focus was making his head spin, his whole body ache; cutting his wrists free had meant to show him mercy, but all Garrett felt was fragile. He’d been given back his hands for no reason other than Corvo wasn’t threatened by him, and in the end wasn’t that just so sweetly poetic? Somehow, Garrett felt more afraid now than when he’d been tied to the bed.

Even with his hands free, he couldn’t have gotten away from this if he’d tried. So, for now, he didn’t. Garrett let his voice shake, let the fear show through. Why bother hiding it? He hadn’t, thus far, succeeded in hiding anything from these people. The flicker of gold that had filled Corvo’s eyes, the strange black mist that had coiled behind Annabel’s. It felt… If he could see the glow of their souls when he looked at them through the Primal, then it felt like the reverse - like they’d been looking into his. It felt… invasive.

“Hells; I’ll want him to kill me if he catches me.”

Corvo nodded. “We would never ask you to risk breaking into the Watchmanor alone. Need be… we won’t even ask you to come with us. We just need a good way in. You’ve gotten in and out of there before without getting caught. We just want your… consult.”

Mind blank, Garrett stared at him. The hollow black light and violet flickers were starting to normalise, the pain evening out as the focus held. Garrett was starting to not see it as separate to Corvo’s body. Disconcerted, he looked away, caught sight of the three swirling purple souls on the bed, looked down at his own hands. At least the white-blue was more familiar. “My… consult.”

“You are a master of your trade. Who better to advise us on the matter?”

It whipped out before Garrett could control his tongue. “You couldn’t afford me.” Internally, he swore, freezing up and risking a little glance towards Corvo. The man shifted slightly, a note of tension in his body that belied the calmness of his voice - feverishly, Corvo’s opening words ran through Garrett’s mind. Harlan had one of his men. Was torturing him right now. What? And again, before Garrett could curb himself, voice still unsteady and fearful and a tad defiant: “How the hells would you know if the Thief-Taker’s doing anything to your man?”

And now Corvo seemed taken aback, shifted away slightly and tilting his head. Then, slowly, he looked down to his glowing hand and flexed. The blue-gold-purple light shimmered up his arm, bright ripples that should have been at odds with the deep blackness and simply… weren’t. The two lights distorted around each other, in harmony and yet unnatural, as if they were two objects existing comfortably in the same space. Garrett’s mind twisted around the sight.

“... What do you know of the Outsider? Do your people worship him?”

The response was quick enough to be automatic. Garrett’s hands tightened in his lap; but he was trapped. Talking was his only tool now. “The old religions are heresy punishable by hanging. Nobody speaks of the old gods. Or the new ones, at that.”

A soft sigh, and Corvo flexed his hand again. The blackness inside him distended for a brief moment, and suddenly the purple hues were more prominent, swirling together like ink in a bowl of water, almost an even mixture of the two. “The Outsider is no mere old god. Do you know of the Void?”

“In passing.” Of course, Garrett had heard of the Void. It was whispered in secret deep below The City, passed between heretics as the place of divinity - or perhaps of death. Sometimes both, sometimes neither. Garrett had always considered the idea to be a fantastical construct, a metaphor
with which to frame the idea of religious miracles. The way Corvo said it… was different. There was no hushed reverence in his voice, none of the vague awe of something beyond oneself. He spoke of it like it was common fact - like he was asking if Garrett knew that Tyvia existed.

“Mm. The Void is the Outsider’s home. It created him - or he created it. It could be both, in truth.” Sighed quietly; tiredly. “It doesn’t matter. The Outsider is a god, albeit one who cares very little for worship. Whatever his reasons, he takes an interest in humanity. I think we entertain him.”

Something else in his voice there, something Garrett couldn’t quite grasp before Corvo continued, sweeping it away. “Sometimes, he Marks a human.” And Corvo lifted his left hand, palm inwards, showing off the glowing rune; his… Mark? Garrett squinted as he looked at it, and the pulsing tidal sensation grew stronger, almost overpowering. It felt like seasickness. “… Garrett?”

As slight a movement as possible, staring at the floor away from Corvo, Garrett shook his head. “I… can’t look at it.” Marked by the Outsider. Garrett had no idea what that meant, no basis of knowledge to compare the information to, but he knew where the secret books were in The City, even the ones held above ground. He could find out more about the Void and the Outsider and what the hell Corvo was claiming to be with his Mark, but… not here. Not bound. Not a prisoner.

“Does it have anything to do with what you are?” Darkly now, something deeper and heavier than Garrett wanted to contemplate. Ice slid down his spine like a tumble of slush when spring set winter to melting. When Garrett didn’t immediately respond, Corvo continued. “You’re not Marked. I would be able to tell, even without Dark Vision. The Marks sing.”

Garrett didn’t even want to think about that. Whatever kind of shit Corvo meant by the Marks sing was way beyond this conversation. Which left-- Dark Vision. Whatever the hells that was.

Suddenly, it felt very much like talking to Erin about the Primal, like begging her to let him extract it from her body.

“… You can relax. I don’t know what kind of magic you’re using when your eyes glow like that, but you need not waste it. I won’t hurt you.” Magic. Magic? Fucking magic? The Primal wasn’t magic, it was just… energy. Linked to The City, bound to its life force. Garrett was simply bound to it too. A glance up, colours and swirling and darkness, the blinding gold glow of the Mark on Corvo’s hand. He thought about the way the Watchmen turned red when they became a direct threat, the way triplines and trapwires took on intermittent red gleams when he focused on them.

He thought about the stickiness under his skin when he focused and crept by the Watch, the way the shadows seemed to cling because even when he was sure he was in the open, sometimes their eyes would skate over him like he didn’t exist. Sometimes, he had felt truly like the ghost he purported to be.

Magic.

Oh gods. Corvo was right, wasn’t he? It really was magic. The Primal had forced its magic on him.

Garrett looked away, shoulders tight, picking at the knot at his ankles again. There was a perceptible shift in Corvo’s silence, as if he’d spoken but made not a sound. The Primal whispered wordlessly in Garrett’s ears, the echoes starting to rise in his chest. Things were starting to distort. If the focus kept up for long enough, this too would adjust and Garrett would be able to trust his eyes to navigate, but it still left everything a little oddly curved, like looking through a lens too strong for his eye. Instead, Garrett closed them. Fuck watching Corvo for physical threats. If Corvo wanted to hurt him, there was no stopping it.

“… You haven’t learned to control it, have you?” Gruff, and then a low grunt. Not angry, Garrett
was sure; not angry, but… something. “How long have you had your magic?”

“Two years.”

Blurted without thought. Garrett was so tired. The constant thunder and pressure of the Primal was burning him out, and the terror of this whole situation, the lingering self-loathing and smell of blood and-- No. Too much. It was too much, too many things, more than Garrett had room for. He was still afraid, but it felt more distant now - like feeling someone else’s fear. Harlan hovered over the conversation like a carrion crow, and Garrett was starting to think that it didn’t matter that he might be the carrion.

“... I was in control of it at first. It’s gotten worse.” Too easy, to admit that. Some part of Garrett recoiled, panicking, pleading. Stop. Concentrate, think. Get away. Run. But what was the point? Corvo had already told him that he was Marked - literally chosen by a god. Garrett couldn’t fight him physically, and he had absolutely no doubt that he couldn’t fight him- magically. It sat heavy in his gut, the word, like a parasite he couldn’t kill. Magic.

Maybe two years wasn’t entirely truthful, though. Garrett didn’t have a damn clue what had happened to him during the year after the accident. Had he actually been infused with the Primal energy then, or had that happened afterwards? As always, the questions gnawed at his mind, tiny plague rats that only made him feel sicker. As always, he shoved them away, tried to bury them - he didn’t know, he couldn’t know, he’d never know. No point in letting it consume him.

Corvo frowned. “… I can teach you control.”

This time, Garrett didn’t even bother to look at him. Shifting, he curled up in the corner between wall and bed, tucking his feet against his butt - trying to ignore the uncomfortable way his ankles twisted together without the freedom to move apart - and his knees up against his chest. If they were going to kill him, he couldn’t stop them, so why bother trying?

It had to be a better death than what Harlan would offer, at any rate.

“And for what price would you teach me control, Lord Royal Protector?” Voice catching on the title with a sneer, half-felt and reflexive. “My consult? My skills, my aid? My life?”

Garrett more felt than saw Corvo lean against the bed. “… Corvo is fine. Lord Corvo if you really must, but I rather suspect you don’t care for noble titles.” A strange, empty note in his voice. For just a moment, Garrett felt the yawning abyss open in his chest again, the nightmare phantom pain that wasn’t physical and yet left him gasping and clawing at his thorax as if he’d been shot. It was gone a split second later, and Garrett tried to swallow the sudden threat of tears. “You’re not even of the Empire. There’s no need for you to pontificate my status.”

“You haven’t answered the question.”

“... Your aid would be welcome, Master Thief. All the same, I won’t ask for more than your consult. I understand why you wouldn’t want to cross Harlan when you need not.” Corvo was twitching. Just a little thing, a tiny constant spasm in one leg, like tapping his toes without actually moving his foot. Corvo was a patient man - Garrett couldn’t even hear the anxiety that tick betrayed in his voice. Then again, Garrett wasn’t the most gifted at reading vocal tone or expression. Still, he thought he was observant enough that Corvo’s self-control was impressive.

Control. It was, Garrett couldn’t deny, a seductive offer. Garrett relied on control; if he wasn’t in control, then he was as good as dead. His current predicament, for example. A seductive offer indeed, when it was not only something he desired but was laid in stark contrast to an unknown
mercy. Corvo could promise that he wouldn’t harm Garrett all he liked, but words were cheap and easily spent.

“... You want to know how to break into the Watchmanor.”

“Yes.”

“So you can rescue one of your people.”

“Yes.”

“...”

“Yes?”

“... Untie my ankles.”

It was a gamble. Corvo had yet to show even a scrap of violence towards Garrett, but he’d been violent with his own people before they’d all fainted. Yeah, gonna keep ignoring that shitshow. He didn’t have the energy to dedicate to that mystery. Not yet. And he had the nagging sinking feeling that in the end, it would just boil down to magic anyway. So it was a gamble, but Garrett was in pain and he didn’t care as much as he should have. Maybe Corvo snapped and killed him. At least it wouldn’t hurt anymore. Or maybe he got his ankles free.

Corvo seemed to have moved silently. He was already knelt by Garrett, the dagger he’d thrown across the apartment back in hand, and yet Garrett hadn’t heard him move, hadn’t heard the creak and shift of floorboards as Corvo walked, hadn’t even heard the silken scrape of clothing. The strange metallic electricity skittered across his skin as Corvo leant close, seeming to spark from him to Garrett by proximity. It stung, and Garrett’s throat burned with the odd ozone scent.

The brief hiss of splitting fabric, and Corvo moved away again. Garrett felt the pressure around his ankles give, and as cautiously as possible, he stretched out each leg in turn; he might not be able to stop Corvo from killing him should the urge take him, but Garrett could do his best not to encourage it. Cooperate. Look for an opening. Then run like hell. Maybe he couldn’t take Corvo in a fight - and Garrett was not going to give himself an opportunity to find out for certain - but he was the fastest person in The City. He would bet good coin that he could move faster than Corvo too. All he needed was an opportunity to flee and never ever fucking look back. So calm down. Breathe. Cooperate.

A faint whistle-thunk-whum-whum filled the air, and Garrett realised that once again, Corvo had thrown the dagger into the opposite wall. Why was he…? That he was just showing off crossed Garrett’s mind, but it couldn’t just be that. Corvo didn’t seem a man prone to needless pride.

He’s unarmed now. That was it. The dagger was necessary to cut Garrett’s bonds, because they’d made damn sure he wouldn’t be able to easily untie them, but it was primarily a weapon, and Garrett already felt threatened. It was probably painfully obvious that he was scared. Corvo was trying to make him feel at ease by making a point of disarming himself.

It deconstructed in Garrett’s mind, an uncomfortable sprawling mess of bluffs and double bluffs. Was he carrying a concealed weapon anyway? Was he genuinely trying to alleviate some of Garrett’s fear? Was it a manipulation to try earn Garrett’s trust, or did Corvo just not care if he had the dagger or not? Was he confident in his ability to handle any fight Garrett might have left with just his bare hands? Or was he trying to show trust first, allow Garrett the opportunity to not take the first opportunity to flee? Garrett couldn’t pick it apart, couldn’t pin down Corvo’s motive. He’d
never really been good at that either; it didn’t usually matter. Get in, steal everything, get out - preferably unseen. That was Garrett’s area of expertise. When he was seen, when he did get caught, he didn’t bother with the exercise of figuring out his enemy. He just got away from them as soon as possible.

**So stop bothering.**

Garrett’s fingers dug into his calves, arms crossed around his legs. It didn’t matter what Corvo was doing. What mattered was that he was unarmed.

“I broke in through the sewer last time.”

A snort. “Was it full of Gloomers?” Somehow, it didn’t surprise Garrett that Corvo knew about the Gloom and how it had affected The City.

“No. I had to turn off the water features though.”

“Good as anything. An empty sewer is nothing compared to one infested with Weepers. I imagine the Gloomers were much the same.” *Weepers?* Garrett wasn’t quite sure what the hell a Weeper was, but he tucked away the thought for later and ignored it for now. Priorities. *Cooperate. Make him drop his guard.*

Garrett shifted slightly, getting his feet under him, putting his weight slightly forward onto his toes. A stinging protest shot across the soles of his feet and into his ankles, and Garrett swallowed the hiss; barefoot. Right. He couldn’t quite pick out the blood spots on the floor, the washed out greys too similar in colour, but he was certain they were there. Corvo turned at the sound, dropped his gaze. Frowned. “You’re injured.”

No point in denying it. Garrett shrugged. “I’ve had a bad day. It’s fine.” This time when Corvo rose, Garrett heard the way his weight made the floorboards shift, the faint groan of effort as he crossed the room. Scooping up a small bundle of fabric from the table, Corvo quickly soaked them in a bowl, squeezed them out, and then padded back to him. Garrett’s eyes caught on his bow, glinting innocently on the table next to what looked to be a small assortment of weapons. His palms itched for it.

“This’ll sting.” Barely a moment of warning, as Corvo knelt by him and took an ankle in hand. Garrett resisted, instinct and reflex, but he’d been right - Corvo drew his ankle out with an exertion of strength that Garrett couldn’t hope to match. A faint burn in his muscles at the pressure, trying to pull away, but Corvo didn’t even seem fazed by it. The motion of Garrett’s leg from bent against his body to held straight looked almost voluntary, so smooth it was. Garrett’s resistance meant nothing.

Okay. Don’t fight him. Just... Just endure it until you can run. Garrett stopped resisting, even though it made his breath catch and his chest tighten. The damp fabric, a pale grey, was looped around his foot, and the sudden sharp burn of alcohol seeped in through the cuts. Garrett hissed, twitching involuntarily, but Corvo’s grip on his ankle was firm and he was held in place. In several swift motions, several lengths of alcohol soaked cloth was bound around his foot, looped back behind his ankle, and tied off. Pulling back as soon as he was released, testing the range of movement left to him and running a thumb over the makeshift bandage, but it was good work. He was slightly restricted in the rotation of his ankle, but not enough to hinder running. The knot was tight, would have to be cut off, but it was secure and didn’t risk his circulation. Quietly, Garrett wondered how many times Corvo had had to do this. Annabel’s feet flashed in his mind - the same
work. Despite himself, he wondered why she’d been running the rooftops barefoot with as much disregard as he had.

Instead of grab Garrett’s other ankle, Corvo held out a hand. For a long minute, Garrett just looked at him, and then - ever so slowly, cooperate, just do it - he slowly untucked and extended his other foot. A minute later, and another hiss at the sting, Corvo had tied off the remaining cloth and released him. The Imperial turned away again, sat back against the side of the bed, faced away from Garrett.

“... Am I supposed to thank you?”

Corvo snorted softly. The little twitch was still there - in his hands now, a constant little flick of motion - but he sounded tired. “You think we’re enemies. I don’t care about your thanks. I just need your help.” Eyes closed, when Garrett convinced himself to lean out and peek at his face. It was strange, the overlay of his body on the deep shadow of his soul, but Garrett tried to concentrate on what was real and not what the Primal was showing him. Slowly, so slowly, trying to check for creaks without triggering them, Garrett started edging away from the bed. The apartment had been pretty well barricaded, but the window was open and waiting.

He needed to respond, but he didn’t want Corvo to realise he was sneaking away. Keeping his voice low, Garrett tried to throw it back so it wasn’t as obvious where he was. “Blueprints would help.” Creeping, slowly, testing each little step before he took it. The burn of alcohol against his feet was painful, but the Primal pulsing in his head was worse and he couldn’t think about either of those. Don’t fight him, you can’t fight him. Quiet, Garrett, quiet.

“Phoebe drew up what she could remember of the Watchmanor. Keldin likely remembers more.” So they had the beginnings of a map. Well, then they didn’t really need Garrett’s help then, did they? Besides, Garrett thought while he crept around the half-wall that separated the bed from the rest of the room, they had magic. Whatever the Outsider was and whatever his Mark gave Corvo, surely that was enough to protect them against Harlan.

Garrett didn’t want to think about how the madman had managed to capture one of them already.

A soft hum, very low, and a glance back. Corvo’s eyes were still closed. Another step, one more. The floor whined under Garrett’s tread.

Whipping around, Garrett threw himself up into a dead sprint, the room spinning in slatescale focus but the window picked out in fine grey details. Two steps, three - Garrett shifted his weight back slightly one step out, preparing to vault through the open window so he could leap to the next building. His whole body protested the movement, a hundred pains that blended together, but Garrett ignored it; better to hurt and manage to flee than to rest and end up dead.

Black and purple light- maybe it was smoke, Garrett couldn’t tell, but it shot past him in wide threads, like tendrils of seaweed in an underwater current, twisting and writhing, and the briefest touch of it against his arm made stars blow open in his vision. Garrett stumbled, reeling, even as the smokelight stopped and coiled and, in less time than it took him to blink, it condensed. The air seemed to ripple as if it had been torn, a wound that didn’t exist and yet bled shadows through the Primal, and then Corvo was in front of him, somehow, calm as anything.

How…?

Corvo caught Garrett’s arm, just above the elbow; the grip was firm and hard, an easy display of strength as he pulled back on Garrett’s weight and stabilised him, kept him from falling. It didn’t hurt, Corvo being careful not to grip hard enough to cause pain. The metal-electric smell filled the
air again, stronger than before, overwhelming. It skittered across Garrett’s skin from their point of contact, the push-pull rush of energy, like waves - he felt it collide with the Primal energy in his body, felt it recoil.

A sound, something like a growl but deeper, something Garrett could feel more than he could hear - it ignited in his chest and vented as a jagged cry of pain, and the Primal inside him snapped. He felt it pull back, a whiplash that wasn’t entirely physical, and he staggered again despite Corvo’s grip on his arm. Corvo moved with him.

When Garrett managed to finally look up, eyes wide, fear rumbling in his gut, the glowing light was gone, the whitewash turned back to colour. It was nothing like the feeling when he suppressed the focus himself, nothing even like waking up in the evening when it had abated on its own. This was… different. The power nestled in his eye felt dim - a pinpoint touch that had retreated from whatever magic came off Corvo.

Garrett jerked back, thoughtless, knowing he couldn’t break Corvo’s grip but wanting-- needing to get away from the touch, desperate; it zipped along his nerves, a thrumming electric current that felt like cold and burning at the same time.

Except Corvo stumbled as he did, and Garrett’s arm slipped free, and for a second they just stared at each other. Disoriented, suddenly not being able to see the writhing shadows inside Corvo, the pulsing little flashes of purple. The light that had come from his Mark was gone, leaving nothing but an innocuous black tattoo on the back of his hand. Distantly, somewhere deep behind Corvo’s eyes, the twisting inkiness swirled, unaffected by the sweet honey-brown irises.

For a long moment, an eternity, they were both still. Stared. When Garrett finally became aware of his own breathing again, he heard Corvo’s - a little harsh, a little ragged. Whatever it was, he’d felt the surge and retreat of power as well.

Heart in his throat, the Primal so withdrawn Garrett wasn’t sure he could have called on it if he tried, he took a step sideways. Honey eyes tracked him, watching him slink around Corvo where he stood, but no movement. Nothing touched him as he eased out the window, one leg then the other. Adrenaline jumped when Garrett ducked his head through, lost sight of Corvo for a moment, but when he looked back again he was met only with the unblinking stare.

And just like that, Garrett slipped away into the night. He made his way out of the Old Quarter quickly, thoughts racing, as fast as he could go without making undue noise. He needed to go over the crazy that had just happened, he didn’t understand any of it, but- but, but. Didn’t matter. Fuck it. He just had to get home, get away from them. They didn’t know where he lived, nobody knew but Basso and- Erin.

He’d be safe there.

But even as he got his breathing under control and made the familiar climb up the Clocktower, even as he collapsed in relief onto his own bed and sank into the comforting tick tick of the clockwork, Garrett knew that he wasn’t just lucky. He hadn’t made his own escape, he hadn’t earned this freedom. No. Whatever his skills were, however stealthy he’d been - Garrett hadn’t escaped the Imperials and their magic. He hadn’t escaped Corvo.

Corvo had let him go.
Well! A bit of a strange chapter but hey magic stuff is weird.

Thanks for reading!
Late afternoon shone into the Clocktower when Garrett awoke this time. A deep golden colour that didn’t reach into the alcove where he slept, but it glistened off his collections, and a thousand thousand dust motes hung in the air like stars, turning lazily. It was blissfully quiet as Garrett slowly blinked himself into sense again, the heavy ticking merely the Clocktower’s steady heartbeat.

A dull headache filled his skull as he sat up, but it was a normal pain; too much sleep - or too little - dehydration, and not the constant low-level pulse of the Primal. Garrett rubbed his face, yawned quietly. The world was familiar, a peaceful comfort. The faint itch of clothes that didn’t fit neatly, a rougher fabric than the leather he was accustomed to, but Garrett simply turned his body and tugged the shirt over his head, threw it on the floor.

Dark brown stains caught his attention, and he squinted at it for a moment, the sunlight a little too bright for him even safely shrouded in a shadow. What…?

Blood.

The memories came rushing back, a violent surge that sent Garrett to his feet. Gasping, as sharp little pains made themselves known in his feet, and a stumble as the floor didn’t contour as he expected it to - the fabric tied around his ankles, the alcohol dry now. The foreigner, the bodyguard - Marked, magic - the way the Primal had recoiled from him. And the blood - it wasn’t even his, it belonged to the Watchmen, the four men he’d--

In a flash of movement, Garrett had darted over to his little kitchen and retched into the sink. Bile came up, astringent, a painful reminder of how long it had been since Garrett had actually eaten anything. Hands tight on the bench, gripping for balance and grounding, and Garrett gagged again, failed to bring anything else up. He could feel the blood as it splattered against his skin - the sticky wet heat of it, the way it had made the ringing in his head louder, a battlecry. The bloodlust. His stomach twisted, and guilt caved in his chest but he hadn’t been able to fight it.

Was it the Primal, like everything else that was fucked up in his life? Or had he just… snapped? Garrett hadn’t ever felt bloodlust, not like that; but he remembered the gaping open pain that had preceded it, and while the nightmare was now no more than a blur, he knew that it had been violent.

And Garrett shook his head. He couldn’t do anything about any of that. The Watchmen were dead. No amount of guilt would bring them back, and… And... No. He just had to… stop. At least just for a while. He needed to stop, and take a breath, and clear his head.

Pushing away, Garrett snagged his glass, poured out a generous measure of rainwater from the
container he kept inside, and downed the whole thing. After a moment, he repeated the process. Another went down the sink, washing away the bile, and then he drank a third. He had to just… put all of that away. He had other things to think about, so many other things to freak out about. Purple lights and golden eyes and Garrett stumbled again as he walked back towards his bed and the chest of clothes beside it, unused to the way the fabric wound around his feet caught against the floor.

Garrett slunk back to his bed and snagged the little knife that he kept on the bookshelf at the end of it, sat down, picked up one foot and let it rest on the opposing knee. The knife was nowhere near as sharp as the dagger Corvo had used to cut his bonds, but after ten seconds and a little effort, the knot came free from behind Garrett’s ankle and he put the knife down before starting to unwind the bandage. The top layers curled away freely, and then pain jarred him and he let go, hissing. More gently, Garrett gave the fabric a little tug; it was a pale blue, stained a dark red-brown, and clung fast to his skin. “Great.” Slowly, teeth gritted, Garrett peeled away the bottom layer of fabric, cursing quietly as he went. Dried blood came off with it, tearing free of the half-closed wounds, and by the time he got it off drops of fresh blood dotted the sole of his foot. Luckily, on a second inspection - the blue fabric dropped, for now, on top of the bloody shirt - the damage wasn’t severe. Lots of grazes and a couple of shallow cuts, but nothing that caused Garrett much concern. The grazes wept serum once the half-formed scabs were ripped away, stuck to the fabric, and the cuts welled up with blood anew.

Careful not to let his foot touch the floor, Garrett leaned over to the shelf, grabbed a small bundle of (real) bandages and sat back again. He wrapped his foot, making certain the bandage was thin enough not to disrupt his walking, cut the fabric, knotted it off around his ankle, and then repeated the whole process with the other foot. It was in much the same condition - scraped and a little bloody and more painful than the damage really warranted. The bandages went back on the shelf - the knife he tossed onto the table just beyond it.

That done, Garrett stood, stripped off the pants and dropped them on the pile, and then opened the clothes chest. There wasn’t much to select from - Garrett rarely wore civilian clothing - but he picked out long dark pants that were a little thicker than the weather really required, equally dark underclothes, and a silken shirt. He didn’t care much for the value of silk (not like he’d ever paid for it), but it was much more pleasant against his skin than wool, especially in summer. It would just have to make up for the light silvery colour of it. Leaving them laid out on his bed, he abandoned them for now.

Summer in The City was a humid, sticky affair, wet winds blown in off the ocean that were pleasantly cool but carried with them moisture that remained in the air once they stilled. Garrett had been running and blood streaked and even without the blood visible on his skin he still felt filthy. Exertion and fear and sweating hadn’t helped; and quite aside from how grimy he felt, Garrett was always careful about his own scent. Smell could give away a thief just as clearly as any other sense. A mirror and a second sink, bigger, sat hidden under the stairs, opposite the kitchen. He half filled the sink and considered himself in the mirror.

His hair was getting long again. Damp-looking and tacky from the sweat of exertion and the sweat of fear and the badly rinsed-out blood, although at least the colour disguised the red. Garrett ran his fingers through it, grimacing, and held the strands out straight; they reached down to his jaw now, and black locks hung in front of his eyes. For a long minute he just stared at his reflection, at the milky blue of his right eye and the brown of his left that it was supposed to match. Garrett was always careful about his own scent. Smell could give away a thief just as clearly as any other sense. A mirror and a second sink, bigger, sat hidden under the stairs, opposite the kitchen. He half filled the sink and considered himself in the mirror.
Too much effort, not tonight. One or the other.

Experimentally, Garrett ran a hair back through his hair, slicking it despite how gross it felt, and considered the result. No. He wasn’t overly concerned with his appearance (after all, who really got to see his face anyway?) but it still needed to be practical. Instead, he tucked his hair back behind his ears, tilted his head side to side. Fuck it, that was good enough.

He shaved first. It took longer than normal, but Garrett embraced it; it felt good, to relax a little. His time in the Burrick cellar had been inactive, but he’d still been constantly doing something, keeping busy, planning experiments - doing Basso’s paperwork for him. He’d tried to ensure he was at least mentally occupied, if not able to do things physically. And he hadn’t stopped. Not, he realised, for a long time. He’d always liked being active, but he couldn’t remember the last time he’d let himself just do nothing for a day.

Before the accident.

Had that been the Primal too? The constant urge to move, the buzzing in his muscles that wouldn’t let him sit still? It was strange, now, languidly taking the time to shave without hurrying through it, being able to relax. Not thinking (actively trying not to think). The Primal was quiet.

Whatever had made it retreat (Corvo, it was something Corvo had done) it had yet to rise up again. Was this how he had always felt, before being infused with it?

He honestly couldn’t remember.

But it was nice, the warmth of summer and protected from the sunlight streaming in, so Garrett took his time washing his face clean, and then tipping the water out and refilling the sink. Next he washed his hair - he could cut it later. The bending and dipping his hair in the water brought the lingering headache to the fore of Garrett’s mind, a pulsing ache in his eyes, but it was gentler than it had been in a while without drugs to kill it. Not pleasant for sure, but not enough to detract from the calming effect of not thinking at all.

The cool water was pleasant on his skin, once he’d rinsed out his hair and started washing himself down. Only when he ran his fingers over his right arm and felt the grit come off, and then the sting of water in a wound and then the red-stained rivulets did he remember the injury there; clipped by a crossbow bolt. For a moment he stared at it, then sighed and for now, ignored it. Garrett tutted quietly to himself when he got to his legs - he should have bandaged his feet afterwards, but he didn't want to have to do it again so he kept careful not to get the fabric wet.

The sun was much lower by the time he finished the routine, and the faint shiver of drying water eased the lingering heavy heat of mid-afternoon. Now he turned his attention to the cut he’d reopened on his arm: firstly, he soaked a rag in the water and cleaned off the dribbling blood from his arm, and then held it over the wound itself. Stung, but a little bit of pressure and at least he wasn’t dripping blood everywhere. Still wet but steadily drying, he padded back over to the table between his kitchen and his bed, snagged a bottle of spirits, another (much smaller) scrap of cloth, paused, lifted the rag to inspect the wound. It was an inch, maybe an inch and a half long, horizontal across his triceps but not deep enough to expose muscle. Blood welled up immediately, bright red, but Garrett was reassured that it was at least a superficial wound. Still, he’d have to close it. Pressing the rag back against the cut, he added a small bowl, a spool of catgut, and a fine needle. He grabbed his bandage knife from the corner of the table and set it next to the rest.

Far from an expert but far from the first wound he’d had to stitch shut, so he’d done it enough (and read enough books about it) that he wasn’t too worried about the prospect. A pause, as the thought crossed his mind. When was the last time he’d read a book? It must have been... no, he'd definitely
read books since the accident. When he’d been letting his hand heal? He must have, but for the life of him, Garrett couldn’t remember what he’d read then.

Another little shake of the head, minute enough not to aggravate the headache, and Garrett poured a measure of the clear liquor into the bowl, stopped the bottle again, considered it. Put the bottle back - he’d seen grown men drop dead from excessive consumption. This stuff had never been meant for drinking, and besides, Garrett had no desire to fuck up his mind right before giving himself stitches. It would just hurt less if he wasn’t sober.

For a moment, his thoughts flitted to the Crippled Burrick. Basso was just as capable of doing basic stitches (you got good at it after a while), and Garrett was quite certain a dose of the cinnamon-y drug would be more than enough to mute the pain. A slight tilt of the head as he considered it. Glanced towards his array of stolen trinkets, watching them gleam in the sun as afternoon began to turn to evening. Too early to risk a climb down the Clocktower - if he was spotted, he compromised his home entirely and he’d spent too many years here to do that. It stuck, the desire to do it anyway, to let Basso do the stitches and sink into painlessness, but he buried it. He stayed alive by not taking risks. Climbing down even in darkness with an open wound would only aggravate it, superficial or not.

He set down the bloody rag, spun off a generous length of thread and cut it with the knife. It went into the bowl of spirits along with the smaller patch of fabric. The spool of catgut went back into place next to the bottle, and then he took the candle from the kitchen, lit it with a small matchbox - one that no bird of Basso’s had ever laid talons on - and picked up the needle. Took his time running the needle through the flame, letting the metal scorch. It hissed faintly for a moment when he dunked it in the alcohol, then fished out the catgut, threaded the needle, and turned, half-leant half-sat on the table. The small cloth went over the wound, squeezed a little to send a ripple of alcohol over it, a sharp hiss at the pain, then the excess mopped up again. Dropped back into the bowl. Twisted slightly, holding his arm slightly out so he could see better, Garrett studied it, took a quick breath, and set the needle to skin.

A low whine slipped through his teeth, but Garrett fought down the urge to clench his hand, felt the tension in his legs instead, and concentrated on breathing evenly while he worked. He took a pause once he’d finished the first row of sutures, set in the lower dermal layers of skin, not quite on the surface. It stung and burned, and Garrett let it be for a few minutes, dunking the needle, remaining catgut, and the knife he’d used to cut it back into the bowl of spirits. The clear colourless liquid turned a light hue of pink as blood came off. Only once he’d managed to get his breathing regular and less of a ragged pant did he pick it back up. Scooping out the small scrap of cloth, Garrett squeezed the excess out with one hand, wiped it over the wound to get rid off the blood - half clotted and seeping - and offered a low moan of pain in response.

Godsdamn that **stung**.

The same process repeated, although this time Garrett stitched the epidermis together over the top of the first set of sutures. Once he tied it off and cut the excess, taking his time to avoid nicking his fingers with the blade, he dropped the needle back in the bowl, took a deep breath, and let it hiss out between his teeth. Gently, he unclenched his jaw, worked it a couple times, tried to ease the tension and heard it pop painlessly.

Then once again, the scrap soaked in alcohol, and Garrett gave the wound a thorough rubdown despite the fact it still burned. Only once he was happy that it wouldn’t bleed easily and that the stitches were secure did he stand up again. His skin was dry by now, the dampness from bathing evaporated in the summer heat. The bandages were scooped up from their shelf, and Garrett wrapped the wound several times, let it unwind so he could cut the right length, and then dropped
the coil of bandages; it was much lighter than it had been when he’d woken up today. *I really have got to stop getting injured.*

Once his arm was wrapped, Garrett knotted it with one hand and his teeth, flexed the arm a little, rotated the shoulder. The faint tug on the stitches was mildly painful, but they held and the bandages didn’t stain with fresh blood, so a success it was.

The alcohol went down the sink, the bowl went back where he got it, and the needle was freed from the remaining thread and placed back with it. The rags he left on the table - he could deal with them later. Garrett dropped the leftover catgut onto the pile of bloody clothes on the floor, put the unused bandages back on the shelf, and then considered the selected attire laid out on his bed. Yes, still happy with it.

Once he was dressed, Garrett took the time to stretch out, being careful of ripping his stitches or putting too much strain on the silk. It clung to his form a little tighter than he’d anticipated; the buttons did up without stress, but the folds and wrinkles from storage smoothed out against his body and faded in the heat he gave off.

Then, finally, Garrett bundled up the bloody clothes and took them upstairs. It was too hot for a fire, but he set about lighting the brazier anyway, tending it until it heated the metal and produced a healthy crackle. The task was menial, something he’d perfected so long ago that he could watch himself do it without much thought, but he let himself languish in it, concentrating as fully as he could on the feeling of movement in his muscles, on all the little aches and way certain stretches felt good, on the familiar twinge of hunger taut in his belly. The Primal was, blessedly, silent.

Outside, the light was starting to turn purple and grey as dusk asserted itself. Still a little too early to climb down. With a whoosh of flames and sparks and spitting heat, Garrett dropped in the bundle of clothes and watched them burn. The scent of cooked blood wafted into the air, teasing Garrett’s hunger. If he ignored the fact it was human blood that he had spilled, it didn’t make him feel sick again.

Watching the fabric curl and crumble into ash and black fibres, Garrett considered eating. He kept a good supply of non-perishables in the Clocktower, although often he just stole what he wanted when he was hungry rather than rely on it. All the same, tonight was not the night to sneak out and steal breakfast. It was tempting, because despite how familiar it was Garrett had never befriended the feeling of hunger, but he held off. As soon as it was dark enough, he was headed for the Crippled Burrick anyway. He needed to collect all his gear, and the bottle of cinnamon liquid along with all his notes about his experiments regarding it, and - not least of all - he needed to check back in with Basso.

After already vanishing for a year, Garrett wasn’t sure if *this* disappearing act would be easier on the fence, or worse. Either way, he had to go back.

As tempting as the idea was, Garrett resisted the urge to read a book while he waited for twilight to fade into night proper. The risk of getting lost in it and losing track of time was too great. Instead he simply stood with his back to the fire and studied the sky, watched The City as it wound down for the day and the nightlife started to show its face. First was the Watch patrols. They seemed louder than usual, torches bobbing along familiar streets as they lit the wall-mounted braziers for the night. Next came the prostitutes and peddlers, picked out in the puddles of firelight and skillfully avoiding the patrols. Garrett couldn’t count more patrols than normal, but each of them had three men apiece.

A shiver went down Garrett’s spine despite the warmth of the air and the flames behind him. That was his fault - they were afraid of him. He couldn’t really blame them; the hunger rolled quietly
into faint nausea as he contemplated it. Absently, Garrett rubbed his hands together, wiping off imaginary blood and remembered stickiness.

When Garrett saw the first shadow flit across the rooftops, weaving around the firelight, he decided it was safe to go. Night had fallen proper now, the stars a distant sheet of pinpricks in the dark blanket of the sky. He climbed the broad shelf of the Clocktower window, studied the speckled lights for a moment, and then turned his attention back downward. It was infinitely more nerve wracking, making this climb without any of his gear and lucid. He was hyper aware of how high up he was, and while it didn’t cause him any vertigo he knew that one slip meant lights out.

He was buzzing by the time he got to the scaffolding and then dropped down through it and onto the stone archway. Pleasant - adrenaline that set his senses alight and let him feel every whisper of wind against his skin, feel the way the stone and wood sat under his feet and how he needed to move to all but become one with it, and completely lacking the shivery echoing buzz of the Primal in his ears.

By every god old and new, he’d missed this feeling.

Itching palms and a tingling quickening of breath, but Garrett ignored the rising urge to carry out a heist and instead slunk over to the edge of the arch, watched a patrol cross the plaza and turn, and dropped down to street level. He caught his weight in his calves as he landed, letting his body fold down into a low crouch and the momentum dissipate through the balls of his feet. His heels dipped, kissed the stone ground, and didn’t carry his weight. Fingertips brushed against it for balance, but took no pressure into his wrists.

It was strange, moving like this in civilian clothes. He felt simultaneously lighter and more exposed without his leathers, or the comforting silent swish of his cloak to break up his silhouette. His feet stung again, by the time he’d skirted the patrol route and slunk into the alley behind the Crippled Burrick, and Garrett decided that boots on was definitely the way to go. All the same, he made himself straighten up and walk like he wasn’t trying to hide, and the people still partaking of all the vices the pub offered took absolutely no notice of him.

When he slipped into the cellar, a little surprised to find the door unlocked, he was met with the sight of Basso sitting miserably at his desk, wrapped in a blanket, reluctantly chewing on some bread and butter. His eyes, when he looked up, were a little sunken into his face, the whites tinged red and the normally wily green dull. The faintest glimmer of sweat stuck to his skin, hair slicked back and unwashed. Gwendolyn sat on her perch, and cawed a soft warning as Garrett took a step closer.

The air stank of alcohol - something sweet - and the delicate tang of vomit.

“... Basso?” Softly, as much as he could, taking another step closer - and Basso leaned back. Something flashed in his eyes, a gleam that brought life back into them, but Gwendolyn cawed again, slightly louder, and Garrett realised that it was fear. He stopped, felt something give way in his chest.

A blue shimmer.

Basso had seen him the day before, on the rooftops, slaughtering the Watch.

He skirted the desk, keeping close to the shadows cast by the long flickering candle thereupon, turning his face away. “I’m just here for my stuff.” Low, keeping his voice as impassive as he could. Garrett tried to ignore the way his ribcage seemed to cave as he stepped over to the bookshelf and gathered up his leathers and his harness and his cloak. Tucked under an arm, barely
even caring about the way he folded them, and then the blackjack was hooked over one finger by the little loop at its end, the various pouches and belts set atop the rest of his gear and balanced against his body, and then finally the Claw, carried in his other hand and well away from where it might punch a hole in the leather despite being secured in its holster. It was a precarious balance, and getting changed here was no longer an option, but Garrett pushed that aside for now. There was no way he was going to be able to climb the Clocktower carrying his gear like this.

Nigh on silent, Garrett slunk back around, following the edge of the shadows, and got halfway to the door, resigning himself to risking entering the pub itself and exposing his face, and borrowing the attic.

“Garrett.”

Basso’s voice was jagged, and Garrett froze. He didn’t even want to think about how shitty the fence must feel right now. Ever so slowly, he turned his head just far enough to look. The fear was still there, hiding in Basso’s eyes, but his expression was open and… concerned. Garrett felt like he’d been kicked in the chest.

“You’re okay.” And that was relief, even though Basso didn’t get up (and for all the quips about his weight, Garrett rarely ever saw the man sit down when he wasn’t sleeping), even as Gwendolyn warbled anxiously.

The guilt dropped from Garrett’s thorax to his gut, as if his diaphragm had dissolved and let his viscera tumble out of place. His shoulders slumped, even as he turned to face Basso more fully, awkwardly aware of the bundle in his arms. For a split second he met Basso’s gaze, and then he looked away. “I’m… I’m something, Basso. Not sure okay quite covers it.”

“I thought the fucking Thief-Taker had caught ya!” Burst out in a rush, voice cracked, and Garrett couldn’t help but wonder how long Basso had been trying not to think that. “Fucking shit Garrett, what the fuck happened?” Still unsteady sounding, and Basso ran a shaking hand through his hair, dropping his gaze but sending it skating across his desk aimlessly, and then back up to Garrett.

Oh. Oh. It registered in Garrett’s brain like a flashbang; Basso wasn’t afraid of him. He’d been afraid for him. “... Where do you want me to start?”

Basso’s hand slammed on the desk, and he flinched from the sound while Gwendolyn fluffed up and cawed, startled; Garrett felt the twitch in his muscles in response, a sudden violent motion that he’d been unprepared for, but it wasn’t directed at him so he let the thrill run its course and dissipate again. No need for the adrenaline here. “How about ya start at the fucking beginning, you bastard?”

“Well… Y’see Basso, when a man and a woman lo--”

“Oh, you son of a bitch. I’m gonna kick your ass so help me…” Trailed off, growled, but even though it lacked the usual fire and carried the echoes of a terrible hangover, Garrett felt the tension ease in his stomach and found himself relaxing; the guilt still overflowed in his gut like a flooded trough, but he could breathe again.

Carefully, Garrett picked his way over to the couches, set everything down, and then leaned against the wall. Not fully concealed, but shrouded enough to hide if anyone barged in.

“... Start with the nightmare.”

Ah. Well… Garrett shook away the urge to lie. Basso deserved the truth, after all. “I don’t
remember much of it.” And a grunt at that, almost disbelieving, but Basso was watching him with a serious frown. “... Someone died.”

“Someone ya cared about.” Said with such complete confidence that Garrett blinked, taken aback, silent for a moment.

“I…”

“You were talkin’, when you came outta it.” He didn’t say anymore on the matter, but a morbid curiosity took hold under Garrett’s skin. For all the years that he’d known Basso, they hadn’t met until after Basso’s safecracking days and there was still plenty about him that Garrett didn’t know. Something hard set in his voice, as he said that, something that Garrett couldn’t identify but could feel was important. What had he said that made Basso so certain the nightmare had been about someone Garrett cared for?

For a moment, they hung in silence. “... I suppose. Like I said, I don’t remember much about the nightmare itself. I remember… that it hurt.” And he hated admitting that, because he’d admitted so much pain to Basso already, allowed too much vulnerability to shine through - but it was easier for that, because for all the weakness Basso had seen, he’d not once taken advantage of it.

“Yeah. I ain’t surprised.” Muttered. Knowing.

“... I guess I must have run out on you. Everything is a blur until I calmed down in Dayport.”

Basso sighed, sitting back in his chair and tugging the blanket tighter around himself. “You ran all the way to Dayport, across the rooftops, in mid-morning? And then you came all the way back? Shit. No wonder the Watch were all over your ass.” And an odd note there, something that made Garrett shift and look away uncomfortably. He felt Basso’s eyes on him. “Garrett. Look at me, damn it.”

Resisting the flinch, but Garrett turned his head back and met Basso’s gaze. It wasn’t guilt that rose in his throat this time - something similar, but it smothered him rather than emptied him. Thicker and heavier than guilt. Shame. Garrett couldn’t help but shift his weight back to the other foot, and he concentrated on the sharp sting of doing so; anything but the shame swelling in chest like helium.

“What happened up there, Garrett? You… You massacred them.”

“I-” Forced, and even then Garrett broke off, teeth clicking as he shut his mouth again, not trusting his voice. The pressure in his throat and chest became enough that just holding an even breath was a challenge, guilty, ashamed, and the prick behind his eyes was equal parts lingering pain and burgeoning frustration.

“Do not tell me you don’t know, Garrett.” Snapped.

Garrett flinched despite himself and looked away. Fuck. “It was the Primal.” Teeth ground as his voice shook, but he couldn’t take it back now. The gleaming red flashed in his mind, the way the glow of their souls had gone out as Garrett’s arrows pierced their bodies. The blood that had spurted back onto his chest and up his arms - how his hands had stuck to his bow and--

My bow.

Stomach dropping, Garrett lost sight for a moment, feeling the shock ripple through him as weakness, and his hand clenched on thin air.
“The fucking Pri-- Garrett?” A spike of fear in Basso’s voice, and with a start Garrett realised he was sitting on the couch beside his pile of gear, hands held outwards and slightly elevated. Met Basso’s gaze, the fence leaning closer but still in his chair, able to feel how frantic he must look but unable to force it back down.

But a swallow and he got control of his voice, if not his face. “My bow.” Okay - choked. Decidedly not under control. “I left- When I ran, I wasn’t thinking. The Primal was… so loud, Basso, I couldn’t think.” And maybe it was anger now, welling up out of the shame and self-loathing. “I got to the Old Quarter and… I got caught.”

“What?!”

Garrett waved a hand slightly, shaking his head. “Not by the General or the Watch. There’s… Basso, there’s a group of Imperials here. In The City.” Stumbling on his words, clashing emotions in his chest and the sinking realisation that he either had to risk going near them again, or give up on ever retrieving his bow. Basso was silent, but his face went ashen and he sat back in his chair, shoulders slumping. “They must have been in Auldale - said they were a diplomatic envoy, except the Thief-Taker apparently tried to kill them so they ran.”

He’s got one of my men. And they were planning to break back into the Watchmanor, to rescue him. The City didn’t know they existed yet, but it was only a matter of time. Harlan wouldn’t hesitate to put them on the wanted list the second he sniffed out foul play. A betrayal, he’d call it.

Garrett shivered. “I’ve seen monsters more human than they are, Basso.” Purple lights and black silhouettes. Shadowed souls. “Do you know anything about a god called the Outsider?”

When, for a long minute, there was only silence, Garrett looked back up at Basso. The fence was studying him, still pale but with a deep frown. A second passed when they simply stared at each other, and then Garrett opened his mouth to prompt a response, only for Gwendolyn to whistle - a shrill, piercing sound. Basso jumped.

A moment later, he sighed and rubbed one hand down his face. “Yeah, I heard of him. Some… Imperial thing. I think it came from Pandysissia.” Tension in his voice, something that Garrett didn’t recognise and couldn’t dissect; whatever it was that Basso knew of the Outsider, Garrett was suddenly uncertain that he wanted to share it. Another hand down the face, and Basso slumped back in his chair. Didn’t meet Garrett’s eyes. “Met one of his worshippers, years back.” A narrowing of his features. Anger, perhaps. Basso’s voice went dark. “One crazy sick motherfucker.”

“In The City?” Garrett was leery of interrupting, when he thought Basso might already be angry - but if there’d been worshippers of the Outsider in The City, how had Garrett never heard of him? Then again, if it had just been one… well, maybe if it had been enough years ago.

Basso grunted, and Gwen let out a soft caw in response. Flapped her wings unhappily. “Not anymore. Found him in Auldale; you know the old… Milcairne estate?” His voice caught on the name. Still wouldn’t look up from whatever he was staring at. Didn’t see Garrett nod - so he let out a short noise of confirmation. Basso sighed. “I was… doin’ a job.” A job? It must have been a lot of years ago. “Found him locked in his own fucking basement. Bastard had… swallowed something. Could see it glowing under his fucking ribcage. Blood everywhere.” It was growled. Reflexively, Garrett found himself edging away on the couch, drawing his feet up under him in case he needed to scramble away. Basso wouldn’t hurt him - except Garrett had seen him angry before, furious even, and this was something… new. Terrifying.

So Garrett let the silence drag out. Watched closely for any sign of danger. Basso wouldn’t hurt
him. Eventually - finally - Basso took a deep breath and sat up fully. Leaned forward and let the blanket fall from around his shoulders.

Put his head in his hands.

“Fucker kept babbling once I let him out. Saying shit like The Outsider walks among us. ‘cept I followed him outside and he fuckin’... looked me in the eye, told me that ‘His children are gods and they found us wanting’ and fucking hurled himself off the gods damned cliff.”

It was mumbled into his palms, quieter than before. Shoulders tight.

Something about this was... wrong. Was it the conversation? Had Garrett fucked up somehow? Was it... the memory? He couldn’t figure out exactly what it was; had never seen Basso react like this. From her perch, Gwen warbled anxiously. Preened her own wings when Garrett glanced towards her.

Another minute of silence went by before Garrett convinced himself Basso was finished talking. Shifted his own weight uncomfortably - tried to remind himself that he could trust his fence. The first attempt died immediately, an awkward little catch at the back of his throat that garnered another little warble from Gwen and precisely no reaction at all from Basso. Might be better that way. But the longer the silence went, the worse it felt; something restrictive, something suffocating about it. Invisible, but getting closer. “… Those Imperials…” Finally, Basso looked up. Unfamiliar darkness in green eyes. “Look, Basso, they’re--” not human. “They’ve got…” Magic.

It shouldn’t be so hard to say. He had magic all his own - well, magic that was under his skin at the least; Garrett wasn’t sure it was his any longer. If it ever had been. And even so, it was absurdly difficult to get the actual word out.

Magic.

Garrett was getting real sick of magic.

Okay, so the magic could wait. But he couldn’t say nothing - he’d already started a sentence. Twice. Fuck. A moment of mental scrambling went by, and Garrett jumped on the first valid piece of information that came to mind. “Their leader said his name’s Corvo Att--”

“Corvo fucking Attano?!” The reaction was instant, Basso finally looking at him. Whatever strange bitter darkness had overtaken him vanished, and wide-eyed alarm took its place. “You’re shitting me, Garrett, what the fuck?!” And then he waved a hand, sharply, like he was trying to cut the air. “No, fuck that. You mean-- You got caught by fucking Corvo Attano?”

The rough fabric under his fingers alerted Garrett that he’d moved back. He hadn’t even noticed; found himself crouched tight against the back of the couch, coiled as if the light would give way to shadows if only he could make himself small enough. Whatever reaction he’d expected, it wasn’t… that.

Wordless, Basso let out a low growl. “What the fuck is he doing here…?” Quietly. To himself. Then he shook himself, refocused on Garrett. Suddenly, it felt awkward gargoyling on the couch; even so, it made his skin crawl to force himself to sit back down. “How the hells did you get away from him, Garrett?”

Garrett dismissed the first remark that came to mind. Sarcasm was unlikely to be received well when Basso was already angry. Instead, he swallowed the taste of acid and forced out the truth. “... He let me go.” Hatred, in Garrett’s voice at that, a low fury that betrayed a distinct lack of anger
and instead a deep sense of humiliation. Garrett had lost himself in the Primal, been reckless and needlessly violent and out of control, and he’d suffered the proper consequence for it. He’d been caught - tied up and...

Well. That was just it. They’d been friendly enough, for foreign captors, and then they’d untied him, and then Corvo had just… let him go. He’d actively sought Garrett’s skills and knowledge - his help - and there’d been no doubt that if it came to a fight, Corvo could crush him. He hadn’t even been worried about the possibility of Garrett fighting back. And his magic… whatever it really was, shadowy purple and tinged in gold, whatever power came from his Outsider, Garrett had seen it in glimpses that outstripped the Primal in both power and control.

There was a flicker of heat under his skin. An echo of heat that reached up behind his eye and vanished again when he blinked. Like a threat.

“... Jacknall’s balls, Garrett…”

“That’s not the point.” Ground out between his teeth, because his own failings hadn’t been the point of this conversation at all, and he didn’t know what to make of it. Why by gods had Corvo just let him go? Doesn’t matter. “Corvo has this… Mark. From the Outsider. Some fucking rune - like the Primal runes, but nothing I recognised.” As if that meant much. He’d barely even been able to look at it. “He’s got some serious--” Say it. “--magic. Stuff I can’t even… I’ve got the Primal, but he could have killed me in a heartbeat if he’d wanted to.”

At that, Basso shook his head. It was an oddly sterile action. “He wouldn’t have killed ya. Probably would’ve made ya wish he had. Word to the wise, don’t ever listen to the horror stories that come outta Dunwall.” A good word. “So you’re telling me… that Corvo Attano, the Empire’s royal bodyguard, is some… chosen of the gods?” Indignant, and then a huff. “… Makes sense, actually. Explains a lot.”

“I think it’s more of a just the one god sort of situation, but yeah.” A pause. “And he’s got three-ah, four others with him. He called them--”

“Don’t say Messengers.”

Garrett shrugged.

“Gods damn it, Garrett!” Hands went tight as Gwen cawed sharply, startled by the sudden lift in volume. It took a moment for Garrett to remember how to breathe, and Basso looked away for a moment. Took a breath of his own. “The Messengers aren’t a fucking team of diplomats, they’re Attano’s official spies.” A blink, this time. “Fucking-- Do you not pay any attention to the damn Empire? Attano’s not just the Empress’ bodyguard, Garrett, he’s her Spymaster.”

“Somehow, I doubt that’s public knowledge.”

Basso offered him a helpless gesture. Of course it wasn’t, but it made sense that Basso would keep track of something like that. The Empire had always been a very real threat to The City, and Basso would need to know who to avoid and who to get in contact with if they ever succeeded in conquering The City.

When.

“The General has one.”

“One- what?”

Basso opened his mouth, seemingly about to reply, and then went suddenly still, eyes widening, gaze slipping off Garrett and fixing onto nothing. A flicker of fear in Garrett’s sternum, just for a second, but no - it wasn’t an adverse reaction to his hangover, it was something… Basso had thought of something, and whatever it was Garrett didn’t think he liked it all that much. “Jessamine.”

“What?”

“Jessamine- Garrett, you walnut, Jessamine.” For a moment, Garrett just stared. The dagger job? The trap job? What the hells did that matter? “Raven was Attano. He set that trap for you - Rork’s festering bite, I’m stupid. How fucking long has he been here?” And at Garrett’s blank look: “Oh, for fuck’s-- Jessamine Kaldwin, Garrett. The previous Empress. I didn’t fuckin’ think -- plenty of people name weapons after royals, and I figured ya at least knew that much about the great fucking blade hanging over our necks, but if that was Attano…”

Something twinged in Garrett’s chest; a spider plucking a string in its web. It wove across his ribs like a knife wound opening, a deep hollow crushing sensation. Jessamine. That had been the name, in the nightmare, the name he’d followed all the way to the Old Quarter.

That had been the name he’d lost.

Like a candle being snuffed, the quiet in his skull blew into the roar of the Primal, a howling screaming whisper that awoke with vengeance. Pain erupted behind his right eye, drew out a jagged groan even as Garrett doubled over and pressed his hands against it. Through his fingers, the world flashed blue and then white and then settled again; a cold feeling swirled under his skin, like wet fog.

“...rrett. Fuck! Come on, Garrett - can you hear me?”

Basso’s voice sounded distant and warped, but Garrett concentrated on it all the same; something external, something that wasn’t pain or the rush of noise inside his own skull that he could cling to like an anchor. Slowly, the Primal lapping at his thoughts like the soft skitter of a dog on his heels, Garrett pushed the energy back down. The throbbing in his skull didn’t ease with it, but Garrett lowered his hands and squinted against the lone candle, tried to take a steady breath. Succeeded - and his heart began to slow, a painful weight in his chest where the hollow feeling hadn’t quite faded. Basso’s face swam into lucidity. He’d come sat on the second couch, perpendicular to Garrett’s, and was leaning forward with his arms on his knees. The blanket was askew on the floor. This close, Garrett picked up the sharp sour scent of alcohol and vomit on Basso’s breath, and without thinking he turned his head away. Grimaced. One hand went back up to hover over his right eye - not applying any pressure, but clearly betraying the pain.

“Guess it’s awake again, then.” Muttered through his teeth, the sharp rush of bitterness almost immediately swallowed by a flood of resignation. It had been two years. Even if he only remembered one of them. The rest of his life was going to contain the Primal - and as time dragged on, Garrett was starting to wonder more and more just how long that would even be.

Slowly, Basso sat back. “Awake?”

A half-shrug was all he could manage against the clenching tension in his shoulders. “I figure it... doesn’t like the Outsider much.” Garrett ignored the way his voice caught and scraped. Thanked the gods that Basso did the same. “Corvo did something with his magic. Touched me. The Primal’s
been asleep all day. Nicest day I’ve had in years.” Muttered, that last part, but loud enough he knew Basso would hear.

His face was deeply troubled, when Garrett glanced towards him again. At least he wasn’t glowing - at least Garrett wasn’t focused. He’d take what he could get.

“Look, Garrett…” A blustery sigh, rubbing his hands over his face, and Basso seemed to slump a little more. There was something else in his eyes this time, when he opened them again - it made the dark smudges underneath seem darker. “We can’t get in between this shit. Let the Thief-Taker and Attano tear each other apart. Stay away from this, Garrett.”

Garrett felt himself shrink away. Fingers curled into the silk that sheathed his arms, and suddenly he wished desperately that he was wearing his cloak; that he could pull it around himself. “The General doesn’t stand a chance against Corvo.” Quietly; mumbled into his own chest. However formidable the Thief-Taker might be, he’d never managed to best Garrett. Corvo had barely even exerted himself, and Garrett’s safety now was purely on his goodwill. Primal heat pulsed out under his skin, reflecting the pang of shame - but denying that reality would only get Garrett killed.

Equally as quiet, Basso’s voice dashed the confidence of that statement. “He already caught one of the Messengers.” This time, it was Garrett who couldn’t bear to return his gaze. “Garrett…” A hollow moment hung in the air between them, and then popped as Basso sighed sharply. “Please, Garrett. Don’t fuck around with this. I…”

Trailed off. What was it that Basso couldn’t even say? Garrett’s fingers dug in harder.

*They have my bow.* It sat heavy on the back of Garrett’s tongue, the excuse. He hadn’t even agreed yet, and he was already ready to argue. His bow was… special. Unique. He’d crafted it himself, but the designs hadn’t been exclusively his. Echoes from Erin, and from--

Well. Echoes.

“Garrett.” Reproachful. Pleading? Garrett couldn’t tell; could a single word be both? *Corvo has my bow.* But how could a bow be worth the unstable raw sound in Basso’s voice? Not even *his* bow.

Exactly how did he think he’d be able to take it back anyway? It had already been proven beyond a doubt that he didn’t stand a chance against the Imperials. Even if he dared go up against Corvo directly, he had *three more* allies who also wielded magic. Garrett would only be going to his-- well, if not his death, then perhaps something worse.

Basso was waiting.

“I… Yeah. I’ll keep out of it.”

A sharp exhalation and Basso slumping back on the couch marked relief obvious enough Garrett could read it. Maybe that was even worth the bow. It wasn’t an impossibility for him to make a replacement, if it came to it. If he had the time left. *Besides,* Garrett silently rationalised, *I shouldn’t risk helping them anyway.* If they were going after the General’s prisoner, then by default they were going after the General, and Garrett had no doubt that they’d don’t hesitate to kill him. However corrupt and violent it might be, the Watch’s chokehold was the only thing preventing The City from falling into complete anarchy.

Silence rose between them. Like tiny fruitflies on his skin, Garrett felt Basso’s gaze on him until, eventually, he couldn’t take it. “I should get back to the Clocktower. I only came by for my gear.” Laying forgotten on the far end of the couch, still folded wrong, but it offered as good an escape as
Basso’s expression was pinched, when Garrett dared glance at him. It made creeping back towards his leathers all the slower. “Wait.” Another beat of silence. Something inscrutable crossed Basso’s face. “... You could stay. The Primal’s woke up anyway, yeah? We got that stuff for a reason.” A haphazard gesture, but Garrett followed it and landed on the medicine bottle. It winked innocently in the candlelight.

He didn’t get the chance to voice a refusal before Basso had lifted a hand. Had it shown on his face? Tension across his chest like heartburn. Maybe Basso could just read his fucking mind.

“A’ight, don’t worry about it. Just…” Trailed off again. Was the conversation equally as difficult for Basso (for once), or was Garrett just that fucking hard to talk to? “Take it with you, alright? I know the Primal’s still fucking up your head. Take some when you get home.” Maybe it wasn’t an order. Basso had rarely - if ever - given him orders before. Logic said that it probably wasn’t an order; but Garrett couldn’t stop himself from nodding all the same.

Pulled back when Basso got to his feet. Tracked him as he moved to pick up his blanket, sling it back around his shoulders, and dig out a rucksack from by his bed.

“Here. Easier to carry. I... I gotta go up and check in with Drathen anyway, so... take ya time. No rush and all.” A pause. Basso shifted his weight. There was an eerie heaviness to the air, something that was going unsaid that Garrett couldn’t pin down. For a moment, green eyes held on him. Flickered; tension that swelled and released in Basso’s jaw, a breath cut short. He rubbed his face. “I’ll see you tomorrow. Right?”

When, eventually, Garrett managed to nod again - and if he hadn’t planned on coming back so soon then it was too fucking late now - Basso nodded back and turned away. Hesitated another moment, and then shuffled his way out of the cellar and up the stairs.

Shut the door behind him.

---

*Drip.*

...

*Drip.*

...

*Drip.*

...

For a long time, that seemed to pass without time, that was all Leon was aware of. The steady, distant drip of liquid that wasn't water, and the searing numb feeling that shone from his shoulder blade and radiated out through his whole body. It was almost like warmth, except it did little to warm him. His skin felt like ice against the ground, his hands and feet numb, the air like winter fog in his throat. He remembered the vaguely nauseating sensation of movement, remembered the tug of his entire body weight on one shoulder and the scraping of his legs, but...
Eventually, Leon opened his eyes. A blink, just to make sure he actually had succeeded, and then he let his head drop back to the floor again with a soft noise. It was so dark that it didn't matter.

Slowly, Leon took an inventory. He was overwhelmed by the taste of blood, and when he picked his head up to spit, slick coagulated globs of it slid from the crannies of his mouth. He heard them splatter. Grimacing, but Leon probed with his tongue, looking for any clots that had remained - when he found the gap where his cuspid tooth had been, and felt the soft mass of clotted blood that sealed it, he fought down the urge to spit that as well. Squishy and gross, and not doing anything to help the iron-copper taste, but it was better to leave it than to risk fresh bleeding again.

Leon shifted away slightly from the blood he'd already spat out, and wondered how long he'd lain here. He must have passed out at some point, because he just didn't have the memory of enough time to allow an injury in his mouth to actually seal.

The tooth (lack of) wasn't really what worried him, though it provided a nice distraction from the brand that had been scorched into his back. The injury pulsed heat in time with Leon's heartbeats, a mocking imitation of the warmth that always suffused his arcane rune when he used magic. His chest constricting, Leon reached out towards the magic, searching for the Void bond between him and Corvo. Nothing from the rune burned under the brand, no flicker of warmth. He found an empty silence, somewhere deep inside himself, where magic had once been - and he found nothing else.

It felt like his chest collapsed, like his heart and lungs had been scooped out and abandoned - it hurt just trying to breathe. He curled in on himself, barely feeling the rough floor scrape against his skin, and shuddered- again- a jerkier motion, his stomach and chest contracting, and then the sob broke through. Painful in his throat, tight and choking and he opened his mouth to breathe and couldn't swallow the wail that came free when he did. Scrambling, from the cell next to him, a panicked movement, but Leon didn't care.

Harlan had broken his bond to Corvo - Harlan had stripped him of his magic. He couldn't even see down here anymore, had no way of measuring time, and now Corvo wouldn't even be able to sense him, to tell where he was.

He was utterly trapped, lost, at the mercy of a man who had none.

For a long time, Leon just let himself cry.

When, finally, he was exhausted and fell quiet, and his echoing sobs turned to whimper-sniffles, Leon didn't feel any better. His stomach hurt now too, chest and throat raw, eyes stinging from the salt so badly that even with light he'd have been blind. A throbbing ache in his fingers had made itself known as he cried - Leon was pretty sure his nails were broken, couldn't remember how that had happened. Trickles of fresh blood slicked his tongue and the back of his throat from where he'd torn the clot in his gum, mixing with the sweet-salt mess of snot and mucous. His back still burned. The other prisoners, the three (four?) of them, were silent. Leon had no doubt they'd listened - if they were conscious, or still alive - but they said nothing.

Leon followed their lead. This was not a place where friends were made and solidarity found. They were each alone in the unique agonies Harlan visited upon them.

_Drip._

…

_Drip._
The faint noise he'd heard the first time was still there. A distant whistle-click-click, except it was not longer so distant. Louder - closer, Leon's mind whispered - there was a distinct deliberacy to it; a measured, probing sense that made the sound skitter across Leon's skin like a physical touch. The whistle-click swelled for a second, the clicking getting faster, the whistle spiralling into a higher pitch, and then a slightly different noise softly broke it. A whooping sound, sharp at genesis and termination but rolling in between like a gentle tide, somewhere between a chirp and a howl.

Not ambient sound and not another prisoner - it was strikingly inhuman. Chills chased the noise down Leon's spine; not human, but definitely alive and aware. The darkness pressed in on him, and he wished desperately that he could see.

The sound again, overlaid on the perennial whistle-clicking, reminding Leon of a crow's call but slower and heavier. There was a sense of deep curiosity and hunger to the sound, a complete lack of fear or caution. Leon shuddered. Curling into himself, he let the low not-quite-chirping billow out again around him, and prayed that whatever animal was making it was as blind down here as he was.

Suddenly, he was grateful for the bars. He was trapped inside them, but everything else was trapped beyond.

He wasn't sure how long it took, the distant drip-drip and the exploratory chirps. They changed timbre when he moved, ruined pants scraping on the ground; faster and more excited. Almost… communicative.

The flicker of fire was visible to him long before he heard the footsteps. It came from the far end of the dungeon, indistinct, a faint amber glow that didn't reveal anything about the dungeon itself.

A shrill call, sharper and shorter, and the clicking went wild, there was a skittering sound like wet leather being dragged along the ground. Close - so close, enough that Leon went still and felt cold, close enough to have been right by his bars. A flash of shadow, slightly darker against the faint firelight; movement. It faded into the distance and the calls went dead. Only the faintest clicking remained, almost drowned out by the heavy liquid splash and Leon's own breathing.

Only a handful of heartbeats later, Leon heard the heavy footsteps coming down and the firelight became more defined - Leon looked away, both to try and preserve whatever night vision he could, and because the light was bright enough to hurt.

No voices, as the footsteps came closer. Just one tread. It was an even pace, a steady double tap - not Harlan. Strothmorrow's face flashed in Leon's mind and he dug his fingers into his upper arms, choking on a breath infused with blood; suddenly his teeth ached, each an individual painful weight in his mouth. Please. He couldn't offer a more coherent plea than that, not even in his own head.

Eyes averted when the torch came into view proper, torn between preserving his vision and getting a look at the layout of the dungeon. The latter won, and Leon glanced up - the room was low but wide, and he could see the distant dull glister of metal lining the walls: cells, maybe thirty of them in total. Far off to the left, the light yawned into darkness. The passageway that led to the torture room, the shackles and pillars and immense bellows. Leon looked away from it, focused on the Watchman carrying the torch and tried to shove away the clawing memories. He couldn't pick out any features even when the Watchman turned towards him - the gleam of polished armour and the thud of heavy boots, broad shoulders and narrow hips. He stopped outside a cell on the right wall, dropped a bowl in front of it. The contents slopped out the sides, but a spindly hand shot out and
Leon shrank back as the Watchman came towards his cell. No more bowls, and for a moment
Leon’s heart stopped - the man came right up to the bars, and Leon narrowed his eyes trying to
keep track of him, the light blinding. Tears welled up despite himself, and Leon found himself
blinking uncontrollably, salt stinging - there was a screeching grinding wood-on-metal and the
firelight stabilised out of sight. A bracket, then, on the wall between cells.

The Watchman took a ring of keys from his belt, and disappeared from view. Leon heard the
scrape of key in lock, and then sudden screaming cacophony as the door was slammed open (by
hand or shoulder or kick), the shrill adjuration, and then the quiet whimpered sobs of his
neighbour.

There was a low snarl from the Watchman - “Swallow, ratshit.” - and then a wet, muffled sob, and
then Leon heard the sound of a body collapsing to the floor. Coughing and gasping, but no more
words. The door squealing as it was shut and then the grind of it being locked again.

The silhouette stopped outside Leon's cell, jangled, scraped. Leon scampered backwards as the
guard kicked the door open, ignored the screeched protest, and stomped inside. Shrinking, Leon
moved away to the back of the cell, squashed the urge to go to the corner, and watched.
Wait for it.
If he let the guard get close enough (far enough from the door) without trapping himself in
the corner, if he timed it right, then his way out was clear. Wait. Not yet. The guard stomped closer,
the heavy tread of impatience and frustration.
Now.

Leon darted, feeling the semi-closed wounds on his feet open up again as the rough stone dug in,
and swerved around the guard, sticking as close to the wall as he could. A little jump, as he went
past, trying to dodge the inevitable grab - for a moment hope soared in his chest, closing on the
door - and a hand clamped around his upper arm. It slipped as Leon's momentum jerked them
towards the door, the man’s nails dug into Leon's skin and caught, and he slipped and collapsed
and the guard let him drop. Leon caught his weight on his elbows, forearms flat to the floor to
avoid shattering his wrists, and felt his right one open on the stone.

A spat curse, a wordless snarl, and Leon caught the steel toes of the Watchman’s boot in his ribs.
Breath fled, and Leon gasped desperately as he felt the crack reverberate through his whole thorax.
Unresisting, Leon let the guard grab his hair and drag him up, and an airless moan slipped out as
the guard straightened him, choked. Pain rushed out from the damaged rib (ribs?) as Leon's body
was extended, overriding the blistering agony of the brand.

“Stupid guttershite,” hissed, and Leon’s jaw was grabbed, forced open. The low, terrified keen was
entirely involuntary and weak, struggling to take a full breath, sharp pain cutting into his side
whenever he tried. Please please don't. Pain sparked in Leon's teeth now too, a phantom grinding,
the feeling of cool metal. Strothmorrow’s face swam in his thoughts - but he could see this face,
older and more grizzled, the beginning (or the leftovers) of a salt-and-pepper beard. A different
man. It didn’t stop Leon from panicking, from trying to pull away and spare the rest of his teeth.

But the Watchman produced no plier or clamps. Instead, he took a vial from a pouch on his belt,
flicked the cap off with one thumb, and poured the contents down Leon's throat.

He choked but wasn't released; a sharp, astringent flavour to the liquid. It didn't burn, but the scent
made his eyes water. The short scuffle he'd heard next door bubbled to the front of his mind and as
best he could, Leon swallowed. The hand on his jaw dropped him, and he fell to hands and knees
and coughed, only to break down into a sobbed whine as the contraction on his ribs erupted into
open agony.
“Don't be a fucking idiot.” Growled. “The General ain't as kind as me.” And then silence but for for his boots as he strolled out, closed and locked Leon's cell door, and then took the torch and left them in their darkness.

It couldn't have been more than twenty minutes before Leon heard a faint groan from his neighbour. A few minutes after that, a strange tingling sensation bubbled to life in his lips, as if he'd kissed a poppyfrog. Almost as soon as he noticed it, it spread to his hands and feet, and then slowly crept proximal. A deep moan from nearby, Leon's neighbour obviously in pain. Fear spiralled into Leon's chest, as a heat under his skin began to bloom. In under a minute, he was sweating; saliva and thin ribbons of blood spooled from his lips, panting desperately for air. The cracked rib shrieked a complaint when Leon tried to take a deep breath, but it didn't matter - his lungs felt tight, like they'd collapsed, and the air seemed too thin. A sob carried through the wall, pained and desperate. Starting to shake, Leon tried to crawl closer to the wall, felt his elbows go out from under him, and slammed into the floor.

Everything hurt. Ribcage, back, head, feet - scrapes and cuts and splintered bone, jagged grazes that had torn his trousers open, the sudden headache quickly morphing into a thundering migraine. Feeling the shuddering of his body and unable to convince his muscles to work, the terror starting to swallow him as he realised that he couldn't move, senses eclipsed by the ever-growing excruciation, and Leon tried to scream like he'd been taught, didn't hold back. It came out gurgled, spit-slicked from bleeding gums and hypersalivation, and the faintest vibration in his throat.

Nothing would work how it was supposed to. He couldn't even scream properly. Panicking, tears spilling over, Leon listened helplessly to the sudden wet convulsion of vomiting from next door. Anticipation made the panic worse, breathing fast and shallow, the motion irregular. Something was wrong in his chest, something had happened to constrict his lungs. Leon didn't understand - couldn't think, couldn't breathe. Dying. I'm dying.

There was nothing but bile in Leon's stomach when he brought it up, the spasm sending white-hot pain through his ribs. Unable to move, head tipped at a painful angle against the floor, the vomit splashed and pooled under Leon’s cheek; acid found its way into his sinuses and burned.

Stiffness gripped his limbs, a sudden tension that jolted his body and seared like muscle cramp, and the shaking became violent and for a moment all Leon could think was that he didn't want to die like this - he didn't want Corvo or Keldin or Annabel to find him like this.

Leon's body seized, and then he was lost.

Chapter End Notes

Yes, Garrett's suture technique isn't hecka sterile but eh, he does what he can. Poor dude.
For anyone that's curious (and because I doubt it'll ever be explained in the course of the fic), what Leon was forcefed was water diluted tetrodotoxin, courtesy of the little scorpions mentioned earlier. Nasty shit.

Sorry that took so long! Meant to get this up a bit faster but what can you do haha. Thank you for reading!
We All Make Deals With The Devil

Chapter Summary

In which some choices cannot be made, but must be forced.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Seams and folds of clothes not fitted for his body dug in as he moved. They were running the rooftops, the four of them, but the Messengers were slower than usual, just by fractions. Movements that they’d done a thousand times ever so slightly off kilter - slips and moments lost that did no real harm to their progress, but frustrated them. Corvo moved easily; Keldin was grateful that at least he had his own shoes. Less slippery, with little grooves cut into the soles with his dagger, and at least properly fit for his feet. Phoebe and Annabel, having had to abandon the impractical formal footwear of the ball, had made do with stolen pairs.

But at least they were okay.

It still stung, somewhere deep inside him, some place he couldn’t have exactly identified but knew was there. Like taking a lash - it was partly numb and partly caustic, and if Keldin thought about it too long then it grew and exacerbated until he could hardly think of anything else.

Keldin couldn’t have even begun to describe what it was. He’d been anxious and on edge, and sore from where he’d hit the floor, but he’d been conscious. Aware. Murmuring to Corvo with Phoebe’s help while Annabel dealt with the thief.

And that still made him shiver too, the memory of seeing Corvo like that. Not once, not once in his five year tenure as a Messenger, had Keldin ever seen Corvo lose control like that. He’d seen Corvo react, when a Messenger was harmed; the nature of their bond meant that if a Messenger was harmed, Corvo would feel it. Often, the Messenger in question would reach for their magic reflexively, and the bond would strengthen, and Corvo would feel it acutely.

This… had been different. As far as Corvo had managed to explain between the soft little hisses of pain and the furious snarls, Leon had touched his magic - alerting Corvo to his return to consciousness - and then gone silent. Several hours had gone past in tense limbo, while Corvo waited for Keldin and Annabel to return with their scavenged supplies. The thief had still been out when they finally had, and Annabel had taken to washing the blood off him. It came off his skin easily enough, and with a little more effort she’d managed to get most of it out of his raven black hair. They hadn’t even bothered with the clothes.

When Corvo had stopped pacing, the three of them had looked around. He’d been stock still, his Mark glowing bright gold-blue, and when he’d let out a yell - half pain half fury - they’d run over to try and calm him. It had taken all of them to convince Corvo not to just leave and follow his bond to Leon right then and there.

And then the thief had woken up, and Annabel had done her best to occupy him, and Corvo had been so on edge, so out of control. Keldin’s heart had stopped when Phoebe had hit him, and yet Corvo had barely seemed to feel it. Whatever was happening to Leon… it was bad. Hand pressed
to mouth as if in pain, and Keldin had stepped in and found himself on the floor and finally Corvo had seemed to get a hold of himself - and yet, he’d still been shaking when he sat with them, and finally started talking.

Leon was in pain, he was terrified, panicking. Corvo could feel him scraping for the magic, struggling against it without success. Keldin shivered; he knew only too well the feeling of being too scared to grasp the magic. He was eight years Leon’s senior, and the memory of realising his magic was out of reach still chilled him. Whatever Harlan was doing to Leon, it must be the stuff of nightmares.

Pain pricked in Keldin’s eyes, thinking about it. They’d all heard Harlan’s plans for the thief, should he ever catch him. Explicit, excruciating detail of tortures and horrors that Keldin knew Harlan had already carried out on others. Nobody could describe such repugnance without first experiencing it. Not so specifically. Not with such delight.

But after all that, without warning, Keldin had... felt him. The arcane bond with Corvo was only one way - Corvo had tried to explain to them many times what it felt like, their distant glowing runes and the warmth of their souls - but Keldin had never understood until now. He’d felt Leon like the faint press of warm fingers on cold skin, like a puff of hot breath on a winter morning. He’d felt him, and then he’d felt a flash of searing pain on his back, over the left shoulder blade - where Leon's rune was - and then something had… snapped.

Keldin had felt it as if he’d been whipped. It felt like when Corvo had inked their bond onto Keldin’s skin, but in reverse; the slow swell of magic making connection inside him instead decompressing, a violent and breathtaking sensation, until Keldin wondered if this was what drowning was like. The sudden extinguishing of heat, a gut wrenching sensation of separation - like being flayed.

The next thing Keldin remembered was slowly waking up, floundering and disoriented. He’d been curled up on the bed, Phoebe and Annabel curled around him, very warm, sweat-slicked. When he’d sat up, Phoebe had stirred, Annabel had whined, and Corvo had looked up from the floor where he was sitting. Keldin was never going to forget the look in his eyes when they met; Corvo had looked… hollow. Dead eyes. When he’d slipped off the bed, he’d stumbled and hit the floor. A twitch, in Corvo’s hands, like he’d meant to blink over and steady him - but no movement, no touch of light in his Mark. For another long moment, until the two women had gotten their wits back enough to look around, they’d just stared at each other.

*He isn’t dead,* Corvo had told them, while they pored over the rough-drawn maps of everything they could remember of the Watchmanor. *Harlan did something to cut our bond, but it wasn’t death.* Keldin clung to that, as they moved like shadows over the rooftops of the Old Quarter, steadily closing distance on Stonemarket and the Auldale Bridge. Corvo knew what it felt like when a Messenger died and their bond dissolved. If he said Leon wasn’t dead, then that was good enough.

But it remained all the same, the faint open stinging sensation deep inside him; like a magical bruise. It pinged faintly, every time Keldin blinked along behind them. Holding it for when he absolutely had to, making his way across the rooftops by mundane methods where possible. It was easier here than in Dunwall.

The patrols underfoot were irksome, making them slow down and detour when they got too close or stood too still, but it was only to be expected. Keldin shivered, thinking that they were the cause; Harlan couldn’t be happy with four Imperials loose in his city. At least The City didn’t boast any whale oil technology. It was reassuring not to hear the stomp of tallboys or the distant hissing of a
Wall of Light. At least the worst they had to worry about in The City was the twang of crossbow bolts.

He tried not to think about the sheer curtain of them that had forced their retreat. Easy to forget that a crossbow bolt was just as deadly as an arc of lightning.

Corvo had stopped, and the three of them came to a stop beside him at varying speeds - the Clocktower stood several buildings behind them, and Keldin glanced up at it. He wasn’t sure why it was unfinished. There seemed to be no attempts to complete the structure despite the scaffolding that remained curled around it, or the glow of the clockface. Nearly eleven.

“Keldin.” He snapped back to attention, meeting Corvo’s eyes, trying not to think about the odd waspish tone in Corvo’s voice. It wasn’t directed at the Messengers, so they let it be. “You’re not coming into the Watchmanor.”

His heart dropped. “What? But-” and he hadn’t meant to argue, but the assertion was madness; they needed to get Leon out of there before Harlan broke or killed him. Even if he had lost his arcane rune, he was one of them. They had an obligation.

Corvo didn’t even need to speak to silence him. The glare was enough. “We cannot remain in The City, but we cannot leave our weapons or technology to the General either.” And it clicked into place in Keldin’s mind - all their things were still in the small estate Harlan had housed them in, and they’d brought with them no small number of weapons and scrolls. They’d been careful, of course - nothing potentially incriminating and everything in Messenger code - but it wasn’t the information that Corvo was worried about. Even just Anna’s pistols would be bad enough; The City had yet to show any evidence of having figured out firearms. Offering their state enemy a boost in weapons technology right before an invasion was disastrous. If Keldin hadn’t known how high a regard Empress Emily held Corvo in, he might have even guessed it grounds for execution.

Nodding, Keldin glanced towards Auldale, hunting for the lights of the estate. “I understand, Lord Corvo. Collect or destroy?”

A moment’s silence spent in thought. “Collect the most important things. Destroy the rest.”

Already running a mental catalogue, Keldin nodded again. He understood why he had been chosen for this part of the mission: he was weaker with magic than Annabel or Phoebe, and he’d already burned some of it just getting here. Breaking into the Watchmanor was going to be a perilous quest, and more than likely would end in combat and death. Keldin was more valuable ensuring he wiped their presence from The City than becoming a liability rescuing Leon. Keldin was a good fighter with military training and experience under his belt, but his true talents fell elsewhere.

Not for the first time, all the same, Keldin wished he had his other dagger on him. Oh well. That definitely falls under the most important category. He’d burn all the documents. Most of their biotoxins - Leon’s poisons, Annabel and Corvo’s sleeping draught - could go to the flames as well, although he’d have to salvage the vials of MANA. Not only were they immensely valuable, but they would blow half the mansion if left to detonate. All of their personal weapons would be salvaged: Keldin’s second dagger, Annabel’s pistols and chainblade, Phoebe’s rapier. Corvo had his sword, but his mask and crossbow were still hidden in their rooms. Leon’s throwing knives were lost, but Keldin would need to take his chakram. Their clothes could burn with the documents.

They hadn’t brought a whole lot else that might hold consequences. Ammunition could be left behind relatively safely, so long as it didn’t contain gunpowder or other special substances. Keldin would break the incendiary bolts for Corvo’s crossbow and Annabel’s explosive clips on his way out.
Let the whole thing burn.

When Keldin rose from his crouch and turned for Auldale, Annabel rose with him. Oh. Right. Surprising, for a fledged Messenger to be put on house-arrest in the middle of an active mission, especially when they didn’t have any backup. Surprising - as mild as Keldin could put it, even for Lord Corvo. It was stupid. Pausing, Keldin turned back to Corvo; surely he wouldn’t keep a strong Messenger like Annabel tethered to a mission he could do alone out of spite.


“Thank you, Lord Protector.” And Keldin turned and dropped to the balcony before heading off towards their estate. He didn’t bother going down to street level - he needed to preserve his magic as much as he could, but swimming the river at night in formal clothes, even ruined formal clothes, was out of the question. He wouldn’t dry like he would in Messenger gear and in the end he’d just do himself more harm.

Instead, Keldin got to the building closest, took a running leap off the ledge, and blinked down when he got close enough. Momentum dissipated as he landed, and then he took off again.

Annabel and Phoebe were quiet. At least ten minutes went by in silence while Corvo waited, before Annabel finally broke and asked why. Honestly, Corvo was impressed at their restraint.

“I have no desire to risk our one chance of rescuing Leon by not having every advantage possible.” They exchanged a glance they thought he didn’t see. “But you’re right; there’s little point in us all remaining.” And Corvo genuinely had no desire for them to see the altercation. Whatever he was, Garrett was something far more dangerous than a thief. Last time Corvo had been arrogant - still, again, you never change - and thought his magic would give him an easy advantage. He’d never seen anything yet that challenged the power of the Void or its reticent god.

But when he’d blinked to grab him, the Void smoke that burned from his Mark whenever he used it had bled into the Cityzen thief and convulsed. For the briefest moment, he’d felt the power that dwelt inside Garrett - something writhing and unbearably bright and alive. It was altogether foreign to the Void that moved through Corvo.

The two energies had clashed and recoiled, the light in Garrett’s eyes going out at the same time Corvo’s Mark went cold. He hadn’t intended to let the thief leave, not yet, not without coming to some sort of agreement, but he hadn’t been able to think. Only Daud (and old Granny Rags) had ever managed to match him magically: only others that the Outsider had Marked. And even then, their magic had cohesed with his as they’d fought. The same energy put to opposing uses - they were all proxies of the Outsider and his Void, after all.

Garrett decidedly wasn’t Marked, and his power had felt so foreign and strange, and yet Corvo had slipped the magic and been unable to grasp it for some time. He’d felt it creep back to life ten minutes after Garrett’s exit.

And so whatever came of a second confrontation, Corvo had no desire for the Messengers to see it. What advantage of raw power that Corvo had lost, he still had experience and knowledge that Garrett obviously just didn’t have. Strength meant little without a clue how to use it.

“You mean to seek the thief,” Phoebe deadpanned, meeting Corvo’s gaze.

He merely tilted his head.

“Why do we need the thief?” Sharp, from Annabel. “We know how he got in last time, and that
wasn’t even that helpful. We’d have found that out without him. And he’s not exactly friendly; plus, you know, we tied him up and I doubt he took that well.” No mention of how Corvo had let him go. He wasn’t surprised - he hadn’t given them the details of how that happened. Simply, I let him go. They assumed he’d gotten all the information they would ever extract from Garrett; Corvo let them.

But he raised a hand. “I will handle him. I want you two to head over to the Watchmanor. Do not enter it, am I clear?” As hard as he could, watching their expressions fall blank. He knew they weren’t afraid of him - he was very careful to prevent that kind of relationship - but they still understood when it was time to shut up and follow orders. A pair of nods. “Scout out their security, what kinds of protections are in place. Get a feel for guard rotation - if you can, safely, try to find out what the internal security is like. Track down all our ways in without making a mess. Do nothing further until I arrive.”

Unless an unmissable opportunity presented itself, like Leon being walked out the front gate, but his Messengers weren’t sheep. He didn’t need to specify that.

“Annabel. Leave the bow.” A sour look, as she slipped the bow from around her shoulders and set it down gently, and then the quiver right beside it. They hadn’t dared leave it when they’d abandoned the Old Quarter building, and for what it would be worth, Corvo intended to return them to the thief. From what he could tell, Annabel was mostly upset she wouldn’t get the chance to use it. “Go.”

“Yes, Corvo.” Murmured together, and they rose together and disappeared into the night together. Corvo watched them go, and then turned to watch the Clocktower. Leon had been the one to find the hideout hidden within it - long-lived and comfortable - but Corvo knew. He’d returned the night after Leon’s excursion to investigate. That it belonged to the ‘Master Thief’ was obvious.

But now, surely, he would have returned. Corvo kept his ears open, listening for any disturbance from Auldale, but he waited another five minutes before moving, eyes locked on the tower. The other Messengers didn’t know anything about Garrett’s residence, and it was going to stay that way. Foreign nation or not - technically an enemy or not - Garrett hadn’t done anything to warrant destruction of his life. His secrets would remain his.

With ease, Corvo scooped up Garrett’s weapons and blinked back across to the Clocktower - twice the distance his best Messengers could make. They all knew the scope of which Corvo’s magic outclassed theirs, because Corvo wanted them to know just how vulnerable they were should another Marked end up in their paths, but he tried not to show off needlessly. All the same, nobody would see him blink up to the scaffolding, and then further up and make a quick leap onto the wide windowsill. Dark Vision after the second blink, and he quickly scanned the interior.

A fire burned merrily in a large brazier on the top floor, the faint aroma of ash that wasn’t wood hanging in the smoke. It shone a bright yellow amidst the flickering light, viewed through the Void - but even with the way the air seemed to distort around it and betrayed its noise, it posed no threat. The rest of the tower was empty.

Deactivating Dark Vision, Corvo entered the hideout proper and explored on silent feet. Very little had changed since his first visit: aside from whatever Garrett had burned, there was a pair of bloody rags on the downstairs table, water drops still clinging to the inside of the sinks, and clear evidence the bed had been slept in. Otherwise, it was practically identical.

Had he just not been here much in all that time, or did Garrett keep the tower this immaculate? It could have been either, really.
For a few minutes, listening for the sound of anyone climbing the Clocktower, Corvo appreciated the collection of trinkets. Paintings that Corvo didn’t recognise but knew would rival Sokolov’s on the open market - twelve of them, hung proudly up the walls. Brooches and pins and charms, and a large stand of city plaques.

It looked the same as last time. Nothing missing, nothing added. Turning away, Corvo made his way back up the stairs, considering his options. He could risk looking for Garrett since he wasn’t here, but he’d only really have the chance to search one area of The City before he needed to meet up with Phoebe and Annabel. On the other hand, if he stayed here then he lost the chance to search altogether and would rely on the hope that Garrett returned.

It was a safer gamble. He didn’t have the first clue what the thief might be doing, or where he might have gone. More likely, he’d return before Corvo had to leave; Corvo had at least an hour of leeway. They hadn’t been able to plan much for this task ahead of time. Lack of information, lack of blueprints. No knowledge of the Watch rotations. Most of the night would go towards building an understanding of the patrols and where they looked and what the safest routes by would be. It always was, for infiltration and stealth.

The actual breaking in would be over in a flash.

So, for now, Corvo climbed the windowsill again, narrowed his eyes at the rafters shrouded in the dark crown of the Clocktower, and blinked up. Both feet landed on top of a thick beam of wood, and Corvo slunk across to an intersection, sat down, and glanced around. Set down the bow and quiver. Birds had roosted up here, nests littering the roofscape, although only one was actually present. Small grey gull - black wings. For a while, Corvo studied it. It stared back at him, fluffed up for the first ten minutes but Corvo remained motionless, just watching, and eventually it relaxed. Hopped around a little, plucked a tiny insect from the wood, went about its way.

An hour passed.

Corvo was scanning with Dark Vision every five minutes, searching for any sign of someone climbing the tower. He was stiff, but The City summer was warm and he had experienced worse waits. All the same, he was starting to get anxious. At most he had another half hour before he needed to meet up with his Messengers and start sorting out a solid plan of attack.

They had to get Leon tonight. Leaving him longer risked his life as he refused to give up whatever information Harlan asked and the General grew unstable.

Because Corvo believed without a doubt that Leon would say nothing.

Yellow figures crossed the plaza when he checked again, a close group of three. They stuck together as they patrolled - the same route and pace as the last two dozen times. Nothing interesting. The gull had settled in a nest and fallen asleep, and offered a faint yellow shine. Just as Corvo was about to deactivate the magic again-- there. A smaller glow, dimmed by the walls and objects between them - but a swirling white-blue, like a blizzard condensed into light, creeping its way around the plaza.

It shot up, presumably climbing, and then rotated around, came closer. In no time at all, it was scaling the tower.

When Garrett slipped over the edge of the window and into the tower proper, Corvo let go of the Dark Vision. Watching, he crept forward a step, avoiding the rafters he’d already identified as creaky.
Garrett looked like a different man. Clad in form-fitting leathers, it was even more obvious how slender he was - almost unhealthily so. A cloak swung down to his knees, the ends jagged and asymmetrical, and even as Corvo watched the hood was tugged back and a scarf or mask settled around his neck. The thief glanced around quickly, saw nothing amiss, and headed for what looked to be a workbench by the brazier. A large rucksack was gently deposited and Garrett opened it.

Whatever was inside it would have to wait. Corvo aimed and blinked and half a second later he had grabbed Garrett’s wrist and twisted it back around. Garrett gave a panicked shout and tried to twist away - whatever wiry strength he had failed against Corvo’s, but he was very agile. For a second, Corvo wasn’t sure that he’d actually succeeded, and then his arm closed around Garrett’s neck and the thief went deadly still, breathing shallow and fast and silent.

“Relax,” Corvo started with. “I’m not going to hurt you.” He doubted Garrett believed him. The thief hadn’t believed him last time either. “I just need you to listen.”

Void tingles fluttered off Corvo’s skin, tiny snapping charges like electrical sparks, and he felt them connect with whatever was inside Garrett. Inactive, this time, and the blue-white power snapped back, and Corvo felt the Void ripple within him - but neither recoiled, and Corvo held steady.

Garrett remained silent.

“... We’re assaulting the Watchmanor. I can’t force you to come with us, and I-”

“No, you can’t.” Snapped, still motionless but Corvo could feel the tension under his hands. It must be taking immense self-control not to tremble. Corvo sighed, turned Garrett in his grip, bent him backwards until he lay flat on the workbench. Fury flashed back in mismatched eyes, but with one hand pressed hard against Garrett’s chest, Corvo dragged the wrist he had across until he could snag the other; both of Garrett’s wrists fit in Corvo’s hand with minimal effort. The man really was tiny.

No wonder he’s such a good thief.

“And I’d rather not try. But I would ask your help. You know the building, the layout, the best places for patrols to hide.” Garrett wasn’t struggling, but he was shifting on his toes, trying to find traction on the floor with his feet even though Corvo had him pulled taut and a little too high on the table to allow it. Corvo watched Garrett’s feet out of the corner of his eye, waiting for the inevitable attack. “... I don’t want to try and force you to accompany us, Garrett, but you do have information that I need. If you don’t help of your own volition, I will take it.”

And Corvo disliked the threat, but it wouldn’t hurt the thief in the long run and he was willing to commit almost any atrocity to save Leon from the one already in progress. Garrett stiffled again, a twitch going through him. Even through the leather and the harness, Corvo felt his heart accelerate against his palm.

No wonder he’s such a good thief. “... Threats kind of make the ‘my own volition’ bit a little meaningless, don’t you think?” Gruff, even as Garrett subtly started twisting his wrists and stopped scrabbling for the ground. Slowly, Garrett got his feet against the edge of the workbench, settling for leverage. Flexible.

“... Threats kind of make the ‘my own volition’ bit a little meaningless, don’t you think?” Gruff, even as Garrett subtly started twisting his wrists and stopped scrabbling for the ground. Slowly, Garrett got his feet against the edge of the workbench, settling for leverage. Flexible.

Corvo sighed again. “I don’t care about your city. I want to go home and see my daughter.” A risk for sure, but no one could ever prove Corvo was talking about Emily, even if Garrett knew or cared about that particular scandal. It wasn’t a well-kept secret to begin with. A twitch, under his hands, but no other reaction. “I can’t leave Leon behind, so I’m getting him back and leaving the second I do. There’s no negotiation to be had with General Harlan, Garrett. You know this. Our presence here is pointless, and only puts us all in danger.”
There was no point in lying to Garrett. The truth was the thing he most likely wanted to hear anyway - Corvo knew all too well that The City would be threatened by a group of Imperials. They’d kept their liaison quiet for that exact reason. No need to panic the whole citystate if peaceful terms could be met.

With that no longer an option, Corvo was honourbound and dutybound to return to Dunwall and inform Emily of the situation. Every moment longer spent here put them all in danger of Harlan’s madness - it put his Messengers in danger. It prolonged Leon’s torture. And even beyond that - Corvo wanted to go home. He wanted to spend the evening talking with his daughter about her reign or her mother or whatever else struck her fancy. He wanted to watch her sneak out and freerun the rooftops of Dunwall with a freedom that escaped her daylight hours in court. He wanted to go home and give her a hug.

He wanted to reassure himself that she was safe, that his Messengers hadn’t failed. That there wasn’t another Daud.

But for all that Corvo wasn’t lying, there was… another reason. “Agree to help me, and I will help you in return, Garrett. You aren’t in control of your magic. I can teach you.” At least, Corvo prayed that he could. If normal training methods for teaching the Messengers control of their magic didn’t work, Corvo had other ideas - testing how Garrett reacted to runes or bonecharms, or maybe even soliciting the Outsider’s advice, if he could be convinced to impart some - but nothing that guaranteed success. Garrett’s magic was entirely other to Corvo’s, even if he didn’t know why yet.

Garrett pushed off the table and twisted, fighting the pressure on his ribcage and trying to hook a leg around Corvo’s neck. A low snarl as he did, but Corvo had been waiting for it and lifted his hand from Garrett’s chest as he moved. Without the expected resistance, Garrett rotated further than he’d meant to, unbalanced, even as Corvo turned with him and caught his ankle midair.

They overbalanced and tumbled, and Corvo slipped of one of Garrett’s wrists, but they collided with the wooden floor and Garrett was underneath. He lost hold of Garrett’s ankle but kept the wrist, and Corvo dropped his weight to pin the thief down, and after several seconds of struggle they both went still again. Garrett was twisted against the floor, shoulders rotated slightly even as his chest faced the sky, hips contorted sideways under Corvo’s and legs all tangled together. His hand was held fast against the floor, and Corvo quickly plucked the other one mid-attack and pressed it down too.

Light blew to life in Garrett’s blue eye, smoking off him into the air. For a split second, Corvo tensed and readied himself for magical combat, even feeling the charged metallic coil of the Void retreat from the light, and then the thief went totally limp, letting out a low noise of pain.

The fight left him entirely.

“... I can’t,” Garrett managed through his teeth; resigned, angry. An edge there that made Corvo want to let him up. He didn’t dare.

“You can’t.”

“Yes. Even if I wanted to help you kill your way through the Watch - and I don’t - I’m not… I can’t.” Still limp, although a quiver of tension went through him at that, a ripple of self-loathing that Corvo realised he didn’t have a big picture for. After a moment of silence, Garrett hissed and bucked before dropping again. The glare that met Corvo’s gaze was weak and half-winced.

Corvo tilted his head. “Your magic… causes you an awful lot of pain.”
Now Garrett looked away. “Really? Hadn’t noticed.”

“New deal. Help us and not only will I help you control your magic, I’ll help you understand what it is and where it comes from.” The mismatched eyes flashed over to him, widening slightly, and Garrett squirmed.

“You know?”

A shrug. “Not yet. I doubt it will be that difficult to find out. A magic source powerful enough to rival the Outsider won’t simply remain hidden.” And wherever it had suddenly sprung from, Corvo intended to find out.

He assumed it had to be new. Surely a power that strong would not have gone undiscovered in the Empire for so long. Nothing even out of Pandysia had given him the slightest clue that such a power existed. The City can’t have had it that long - surely nothing could be contained so well within one tiny citystate off the coast of Gristol.

Doubt nagged at his mind as Garrett snarled at him.

“You Imperials never learn, do you? How the hells do you think we’ve resisted you this long?” The thief was talking about his magic, but it didn’t make sense. If The City had been resisting the Empire with such magic for centuries, there would be record of it somewhere. The Empire would have taken note of such things, especially given the general climate surrounding the Outsider.

But… then again, it would make sense. There was no logical explanation for how The City had remained independent for so long.

Shaking it off, Corvo put that away for another time. “Okay, how about a different deal? You come with me to the Watchmanor and help me plan our assault - you don’t have to join us - and I’ll let you up. And not break your arms.”

And he didn’t like it any more than he liked the first threat, but he needed Garrett’s mind on this. Whatever crazy Harlan had cooked up to protect his headquarters, Garrett was the one who’d foiled them again and again. Corvo couldn’t forget the ball. No matter how confident he was in his magic, in his Messengers, they had already been bested by the General. He’d already nearly killed the lot of them. Even if it felt cruel, even though he normally wouldn’t be so insistent on outside help - Harlan had already nearly killed them all.

I’ve already underestimated him, and Leon’s paid the price. Corvo wouldn’t do it again. If it came down to it, he’d protect Garrett - he was the one putting the thief in this position after all - but he couldn’t forsake the opportunity.

Under him, Garrett had gone pale and still. Even obviously still in pain, but this threat seemed to have worked.

If it hadn’t, Corvo honestly wasn’t sure if he would have carried it out. Making empty threats was dangerous business, and if he made too many then he would only be forced to carry out the ones that weren’t - but Garrett hadn’t actually done anything to earn Corvo’s ire. He would just be collateral damage, just something broken because Corvo wasn’t getting his way.

Needless. Petty.

No. He likely wouldn’t actually hurt Garrett should he continue to refuse. But the panic in Garrett’s face told Corvo that he fully believed he would. He wasn’t sure how to feel about that; it was good that Garrett took him seriously, but it still felt bad, seeing the man so scared of him.
At the same time… some part of Corvo thrilled, like always. Yes, he had the will to decide what Garrett’s life was worth, and the power to exercise it. Corvo pushed that part away.

“…Fine. You got yourself a deal. Now get off me.” Spat, pained and equal parts angry and frightened, but when Corvo released the thief and got to his feet, Garrett didn’t try to flee. He slowly followed suit, one hand against his glowing eye, even as the light slowly dimmed and faded. It appeared to take some effort. Garrett seemed rattled - Corvo didn’t blame him - as he padded back over to the rucksack, took out a bottle of faintly red-pink liquid, several items that glinted silver and gold, and then a pair of dark pants and a silver silk shirt. Left the rucksack where it was and didn’t look twice at the trinkets - instead, Garrett snagged the clothes in one hand, carefully picked up the bottle in the other, and pushed past Corvo to head downstairs.

He was unhappy, but that was only to be expected. A vague sense of curiosity tickled under Corvo’s skin, but it didn’t matter and would never be sated. He had more important things to do. Blinking back up to the rafters, Corvo gathered up the bow and quiver and then blinked back down to the lower level. Garrett had poured out a measure - no, a half measure of the ruddy liquid, and as Corvo watched he swirled it into a glass of water and downed the lot.

A flicker of something in his face, as he turned and went too still for half a moment - caught off guard by Corvo’s presence, the movement without sound. It was dark and angry, but non-aggressive. Shame.

Then his eyes caught on the bow and widened, his shoulders dropping in astonishment. Corvo held it out. “This is yours, I believe.” Slowly, Garrett came closer and closed his fingers on the weapon - he took its weight with the ease and familiarity of years of use. The bow was flipped in his hands, studied briefly. He ran his fingers over the limbs, gave a gentle tug on the bowstring, and then pushed down on the switch on the back of the grip and unfolded it with a little flourish. Another tug on the string, all the way back to full draw, and then an easy let down.

Apparently satisfied that it was in good working order, Garrett looked back to Corvo and seemed once again taken aback to be offered his quiver. “Phoebe broke one of your water attachments, but the rest should be fine.” And a scowl this time, but Garrett compacted and slung the bow behind his shoulders and Corvo heard it slide into place with a faint click. A clip for it, built into his gear - presumably the harness. Despite himself, Corvo nodded approval.

Garrett removed all the arrows from the quiver and laid them out on the table. Four blunts, another with the water accessory and another that looked similar except the thin glass contained a substance that was altogether more viscous than water, and offered a subtly different reflection in the distant firelight. Four arrows with wide, flat teeth instead of arrowheads, and wound tight with a thread or twine Corvo had not seen the like of.

Suddenly, Corvo regretted not taking the time to inspect Garrett’s weapons.

Head tilted, Garrett studied them for a moment, inspected the quiver, and then dropped the blunts and the toothed arrows back in. After a moment’s consideration, he added the water one and then left the last where it was. “Don’t- touch anything.” At Corvo as he turned and walked past, a tense hand gesture-clench to accompany the warning. Corvo let him climb the stairs and then blinked up after him, leaning against the safe side of the railing and crossing his arms; studied Garrett carefully. He wasn’t sure what it was that Garrett had taken.

It could be a toxin just as easily as it could be something benign. Perhaps Garrett was chronically ill and the liquid managed the condition. It could be as banal as pain medicine. It could be something altogether more dangerous.
Garrett stopped dead when he caught sight of Corvo lounging against the railing, as patient as he could manage. They were in a hurry, but Corvo didn’t want to harry the thief into moving faster - it was a tenuous agreement they had to begin with, built on threats and distrust. “... How the hells are you doing that?” Hissed as Garrett stalked across to a chest half-hidden beside the second workbench near the back of the tower. When he opened it, Corvo caught sight of neatly arranged compartments full of arrows, and several more full of arrow-making supplies. Garrett dug out four more blunts, another arrow with the teeth and twine, two with hollow points, and two thin glass containers that could be attached.

“I told you: I’ve been Marked by the Outsider. I have access to many of his magics.” As mild as Corvo could manage. He didn’t often speak so candidly about it to non-Messengers - the Outsider was still a touchy legal problem within the Empire, and that Corvo was his emissary was not common knowledge - but this was not the Empire, and Garrett had his own secrets. Garrett’s fingers brushed over the sharps - fairly typical broadheads, and another small compartment housing sharps that jutted further out and boasted jagged teeth and a hollow centre. Another pause, and Garrett shut the chest, set the quiver and his selected arrows atop it, and walked back past with the glass attachments. This time Corvo stayed where he was, but he listened to the sound of Garrett filling them with water and tracked him with Dark Vision. The same blinding white glow, easily twice as bright as even Daud’s had been, but there was the slightest weave to Garrett’s step as he came back up the stairs and Corvo deactivated the magic again.

It was so well controlled that Corvo wouldn’t have heard it in his gait.

“I could show you if it would help.” And Garrett glared at him, affixing the water-filled glass heads to the hollow-ended arrows and slipping them carefully into his quiver alongside their kin. Arrows safely housed, he settled the quiver along his back and tucked the straps into place around the leather harness. The whole setup interlocked tightly enough that Corvo wouldn’t have ever guessed it came apart so cleanly if he’d not seen Garrett carry the quiver on its own.

But there was something softer about this glare than the others. A faint rounded edge that set Corvo's nerves paresthetic, because it didn’t seem much in character. The missed gait. Corvo was getting more concerned about whatever it was Garrett had in that bottle. “Go on, then.”

Quirking an eyebrow, but Corvo rose from the railing, made sure Garrett was watching, and then offered an exaggerated gesture of his left hand. The Mark glowed and spat for a fraction of a second and Corvo blinked. Just for good measure, he blinked back to Garrett’s side as well.

Holding him in line outside would be easier if Garrett understood just how easily Corvo could catch him - he was cooperating under duress, and Corvo had no doubt that given half a chance, Garrett would slip away into the night and a city he was infinitely more familiar with.

“It’s called blinking.” No response, but for a moment the light flared up in Garrett’s eye again while he studied Corvo closely. A wince, the faint tension of pain rippling through his body, but it seemed much reduced now than it had before. Maybe it was because this was more voluntary. Maybe it was the stuff in the bottle. A point towards pain medication, then.

“Are you certain you should be arming me?” Almost snide as the light went out and Garrett shook his head slightly. Corvo didn’t even answer the question; it didn’t matter whether it was a good idea or not. Corvo couldn’t ask Garrett to accompany him to the Watchmanor, even if he wouldn’t ask him to enter it, without a weapon. Harlan was far too dangerous for that. Instead:

“Are you ready to go?”

A soft snort and something muttered so quietly Corvo didn’t catch it, but Garrett rolled his shoulders and turned away. “Yeah.”
Corvo walked this time. He’d made his point about their magics, so he led the way to the window, keeping track of Garrett’s movements by sound, and swung over to start the climb down. It was equal parts enjoyable and frustrating, making the climb down without blinking, letting Garrett keep up. The thief was, arguably, better at the task than Corvo was but he lagged behind a little, keeping a certain distance between them. Tense, waiting for an attempt at escape, and starting to feel the nagging worry that he had taken too long to do this, to secure an enemy that he didn’t trust but needed. It was approaching one in the morning - they needed to get a move on.

But at the same time, it felt good to make the descent using his muscles and not his Mark.

When they reached the stone arch that marked the plaza entrance, Corvo paused and watched Garrett make the last drops and head slightly closer before stopping. Still ever so slightly unsteady, something not quite lucid about his movements - but eyes sharp, glare in place. He hadn’t seemed to have much trouble climbing down. Corvo would just have to keep an eye on him; it was too late now, whatever the liquid had been.

“We need to meet up with Annabel and Phoebe. This way.” And when Corvo took off running, heading for the Auldale Bridge, he heard Garrett following, footsteps quicker and lighter than his own. The thief caught up easily, and visibly had to take pauses to let Corvo keep ahead; agile and fast, and armed with a far greater knowledge of The City landscape. When they reached the river, Corvo slowed to a halt and gestured ahead. “You lead. You know The City better than I do.”

And he’d know the ways across the Great River that weren’t swimming or blinking. Even if he thought Garrett would accept being tandem blinked - and Corvo didn’t think that he would for a second - he wasn’t sure what might happen if he pushed their differing magics together like that. Even the brief touch in the Old Quarter had been enough to shut them both down.

Corvo didn’t dare risk such a task if he didn’t have to.

With another quiet grumble Corvo couldn’t decipher, Garrett scanned the Bridge, dropped down to street level, and made his way towards the bank. Corvo followed like he was Garrett’s shadow, and made no comment.

It’s dark here, wherever here is. Fog surrounds me - I’m not usually afraid of the weather, but there’s something about this fog that makes me want to hide. It’s dark, but it’s also light enough to see. I can’t see through the fog, exactly… I can see that it goes on forever. When I eventually take a step forward, there’s nothing under my feet except more fog, coiling and swirling and boiling.

And just like that, I run.

It’s not like running for real (is this not real? I’m not sure. Everything feels wrong, here), but I can sense the fog whipping past me at breakneck pace. I’m moving, if not forward then somewhere, but nothing changes. Just fog, endless and infinite, a sort of lit darkness that both blinds me, and doesn’t.

I’m not tired when I stop running, I’m not even out of breath. At least it doesn’t hurt here. My body feels whole and unbroken; I know that if I wished it, I could simply run forever.

But now that I’ve stopped, faces coalesce out of the fog around me. Long curled hair and dainty features - short spiked hair and a narrow face - another with short hair, straight, and the deepset eyes of Tyvia. Another face, hair swept to the side with the stern jaw and fine features of nobility. A fifth, the same jaw as the fourth but with wider features, a dark expression, rough-shorn hair.
I know these faces. It tickles in the back of my mind, thoughts turned to fog and blown out into these people who I can’t quite... remember. I’m not sure who they are - but I know these faces. I know they’re important to me.

When I reach for them, they split and billow into misty eddies around my hands; my skin is coal black. Not my normal, Morlesian black, but matte and cracked and scorched. A dying black. Whispers erupt all around me, the faces restoring and pressing closer. I can’t understand what they’re saying, but their voices crowd in my ears all the same, pressing ever deeper until I can feel them inside my skull, like the tongues of unwanted lovers.

This time, when I run, I don’t stop. It doesn’t seem to matter - the fog never ends, and the faces are everywhere, whipping past and spiralling into nothing as I disturb them, only to already be waiting for me ahead. Are they whispering or screaming? I can’t tell anymore.

I try to shout over them, to beg them to stop or at least- maybe- help me? I try, but the fog rushes down my throat when I do, and I feel the cold of it in my lungs, spreading to my blood, to my heart. My whole body shudders with the cold - I don’t stop running. I can’t breathe, I realise, and it doesn’t seem to matter. I’m still running, unbreathing. The whispering keeps up.

The fog is lighter now, though it oozes darkness in the same way a bright moon finds itself shrouded in clouds. Dark and light at the same time. I’m concurrently blind, and blinded, but I can still see the faces in the mist.

And then the faces scream. Their eyes flash - moon-white, then Void-black, and back again. Cyclical - as endless as the fog I’m running, as the breath I don’t have.

All at once, I realise that the faces have changed. It’s been happening constantly, and underneath the twisted features I can still see their original visage - five different entities, five people that I recognise, that I care for. I must care for them. They feel so important. But they’ve changed as well, and even as I run and they dissolve and reappear, I watch them start to merge together. They flicker, when they finally become one - flash and bulge and burst apart as I run through, and then the amalgamated face condenses in front of me again and this time - this time I run straight into it - the fog tightens around me - flows back into me again, freezing, breathless.

I’m knocked down, and I tumble. Further and further down, relentless. I’m falling.

I’m falling.

And I should be scared, but I’m too cold to feel anything else. I fall, endlessly, the fog pulsing in and out of me. The combined face melts out of the fog beside me, and now it has a body as well. It seems comfortable in freefall.

It whispers to me, comes closer. Misty fingers slip past my teeth, and I feel them stretch down inside me in ways that biology shouldn’t allow - I feel the fingertips touch every part of me. The cold makes me numb to the invasion, and I do nothing. Simply stare as the... entity explores everything it can find. Only when it finally withdraws, and takes the cold with it, do I realise we’re no longer falling. I’m laying in the fog as if it was a bed, sprawled out languidly - my body feels more real now.

Still painless, but I can feel the cracking in my charred skin, feel the slow thud of my heart. Echoes of a breath in my lungs, although I don’t inhale. A faint tingling in my muscles, twitchy and excitable - puddling heat in my gut, tight and warm. The distant ache of untouched arousal.

I feel these things like someone else’s touch. Distinct and provocative - and yet while I feel them in
my body, they don’t feel like my own.

The entity whispers louder, words and symbols I don’t understand branded on the inside of my skull, and wavers closer. Its form billows when it reaches its hands for me again, closes them either side of my face. Its touch is hollow - cold and nothing, lacking substance. I know that it is touching me, but it feels like merely a memory.

I tilt my head up. What am I looking for? Approval? Admonishment? Do I want this creature made of fog and echoes to reassure me?

Kiss me?

The sensations flutter around inside skin long burned and muscles unused, and I can’t quite understand them. I’m not sure what I want. When I try to speak, the reflected breath spools out from my lungs and no words come forth - only a thick cloud of blackness, smoke. It bloats as it leaves my mouth, and then dissolves into the fog. In an instant, there’s nothing left of it, and I am silent.

The entity brings its face close to mine. I see the moon-white and Void-black in its eyes even as they remain dim and fog-grey; I can see them layered atop each other, like concentric circles in the vertical. It warps my thoughts - my mind spins and dips and pirouettes away, and yet I do not stop looking. I cannot stop looking. The memory-touch of its hands on my face holds me steady, and I stare into its black-white-grey eyes as it stares back into mine.

I wonder, briefly, what it sees there.

The whispering dims, lifting into something that sounds like water dripping, if voices were liquid. Over it - or perhaps... woven from it - I hear the creature’s voice.

Not yet.

Not yet, but soon.

Not yet, but soon—wait upon me.

Not yet, but soon—wait upon me, my kindred.

Not yet, but soon—wait upon me, my kindred. Listen for my heart.

Not yet, but soon—wait upon me, my kindred. Listen for my heart. Let yours become mine.

The words reverberate around me, inside me - I don’t so much hear them as remember their sound afterwards. I do not know if the entity cradling me has truly spoken at all. Finally, I close my eyes and tilt my head up again.

Yes, a kiss. I desire a kiss.

The echoes vanish, the whispering fades. When I open my eyes again, I realise that I’m standing in the dark, surrounded by fog. It is dark, and yet it isn’t darkness - light enough for me to see. The fog is endless. Beneath my feet, it boils and curdles, and I don’t understand how I do not fall through it but I know that I will not.

I take a step forward, the fog an endless blizzard around me.

I run.
You'll note that I've altered how magic works a little bit from the source material - this is mostly because I think that it was tweaked to allow for proper gameplay mechanics to begin with. I mean, obviously Dunwall isn't rampant with a mystical red solution that magically closes sword wounds and whatever other injuries Corvo accrues over the course of gameplay.

That said, I wanted to keep some of it just for the sake of it, so that's where MANA comes in. Officially, it's an updated version of Piero's Spiritual Remedy that Empress Emily commissioned from him when Corvo was forming the Messengers. MANA stands for 'Messenger Assisting Neuromagical Analeptic' but you couldn't pay the Messenger Corp. enough money to make them call it that, so they all stick to MANA.

Every couple of years, Piero comes up with some new improved formula and the Empire officially buys the recipe off him so that it can't be distributed. After all, enemy groups of magic-users can't be that common, but Emily will probably never forget the Whalers, and the Brigmore Coven was a thing and generally it's just better that Emily's enemies don't ever get hold of the special magic booster her spies use.

Also, Serkonos yields Serkonans, Gristol yield Grists, Tyvia yields Tyvians and Morley yields Morlesians and you're damn skippy I'm going to take the pun and say The City yields Cityzens. I may never get another chance XD
The climb across the Auldale Bridge was the most nerve wracking climb Garrett had ever made. Slow, checking each hold before taking it, watching anxiously for scorpions, weaving around the nests. They skittered close several times, and Garrett went still any time they approached, let them tap their tiny claws against his hands and decide he wasn’t a threat before retreating again. Behind him, so close Garrett could hear his slow, even breathing, Corvo followed - mimicking each movement, quickly realising that the scorpions weren’t a threat if he just didn’t threaten them.

Never before had Garrett been envious of a scorpion.

More than once, Garrett let the critters leave and simply forgot to move to the next handhold until Corvo quietly cleared his throat. So quietly that it posed no risk of detection from above, but enough to remind Garrett to move again. By the time they got to the far bank and slid down from the bridge, Garrett was not wholly succeeding in holding down the ball of rage and frustration in his chest. His eyes stung, and his concentration was so split between controlling the emotion and controlling the faintly disconnected feeling of his body that he didn’t even notice Corvo close their gap until he touched Garrett’s shoulder.

Leaping away, Garrett caught his weight wrong, stumbled, and fell into a low crouch - arms held wide - to try and stabilise himself. The rage boiled over, the Primal writhing in his eyes. Painful, but dull and distant - muted by the cinnamon drug even at a half dose. It didn’t flare him, and Garrett looked away after the soft hiss escaped him. He just had to be grateful for small mercies.

The gods knew that Corvo wouldn’t offer him any.

It shivered through him as he straightened up again, ignoring the Imperial’s cold piercing gaze, the knowledge of just how helpless he was. It reminded him of--

Of… something. Not his childhood; even at the lowest point, he’d never been helpless like he felt now. There had always been something to steal, someone to anger, some trick to play. The season spent hunting down Erin - the year since, even pinned down by the Primal and the headaches and weakness it had brought with it. No, not even that had felt like this. And it feels so familiar.

But he couldn’t ponder it right now. Corvo was watching, waiting for him to move again, expression drawn and curled down. There were a thousand boltholes and paths out from Auldale, a thousand ways Garrett could have slipped away. He could outrun Corvo - he’d made sure of it, on the run over. He was faster, knew the Highway, almost as steady-footed even drugged.

“It’s called blinking.”

There hadn’t been any warning for it. A split-second glow from the Mark on his hand, and in the
same moment he’d vanished - his body turned to nothing, to the faintest trace of blue mist - and he’d already been at the other end of the Clocktower. Looked back, met Garrett’s eyes, and with the tiniest, minute gesture-- already back beside him, the trace of blue mist dissolved. The metallic electrical charge had hung around him like a cloak, effervescent, and the Primal had squirmed behind Garrett’s eye in response. Corvo’s expression hadn’t changed; cold and precise, calm. Calculating. It hadn’t even seemed to take any effort whatsoever.

And he’d been doing it… constantly. All the movement, moving faster than Garrett could, in absolute silence. He was so confident in his magic that he’d freely gifted back the bow and quiver, allowed Garrett to arm himself with whatever arrows he wished.

Garrett was quite sure that the man wouldn’t have even blinked if he’d armed himself to the teeth with lethal arrows. That he hadn’t… The blood splashed back, coating his hands, sticky against his bow. No blood now. They cleaned it. Even subdued by chemicals, Garrett couldn’t trust himself carrying a bunch of sharps. Last time, he’d slaughtered men who were - more than likely - innocent Cityzens bent under the General’s conscription.

Wouldn’t have even blinked. Haha. Fuck.

And Garrett lacked choices. He hadn’t even realised Corvo was there when he’d gotten in - the first he’d known was when Corvo had twisted his arm behind his back and locked him in a chokehold. Helpless. Garrett had never been a particularly gifted brawler. It was a skill that he’d never really needed before - he rarely got into a situation where he might, and even then he preferred to disengage and escape.

From Corvo, Garrett had realised, there was no escape. Corvo was stronger and faster - blinking - and worse, he wasn’t barely recovering from a year of chronic pain and weight loss. Against anyone, Garrett was at a disadvantage that he hadn’t had to account for before. Against Corvo, attempting to resist was an exercise that would end only with broken arms.

Garrett had absolutely no doubt the man would follow through on the threat. He didn’t have the first clue what other magic Corvo could perform, and the stare had never wavered. Expressionless - unmoved by anything Garrett had done. Even fighting back had only landed them on the floor, and Corvo was easily three times Garrett’s weight. Effortlessly pinned, without hesitation or remorse - the blank stare as he threatened him, emotionless.

And a man like that had a daughter? Garrett pushed that away. Corvo reminded him so much of the cold, efficient assassins that he stayed the hell away from in The City. It was hard to reconcile that image - cold, sorcerous murder - with the idea that Corvo not only had a child, but genuinely desired to return to her.

But Garrett believed that he did. It had been the only shift in his face the whole night, when he’d mentioned her. Something… softer, in his eyes. Longing, maybe.

“Are you alright?”

It broke through Garrett’s thoughts, the voice low and rough, but lacking the usual commanding tone. He jumped, blinked until his vision cleared, and realised that he’d been standing there daydreaming. Corvo was watching him, head tilted ever so slightly, the frown apparent.

Blood frozen in his veins, Garrett shivered and turned away. The rage burning in his chest did nothing to ease the feeling, all but doused by the corrosive mixture of fear and shame. It was too obvious, that he wasn’t alright - but he shrugged it away, concentrated on taking steady steps up the riverbank and heading for the shadows along the riverside estate walls. “I’m fine.”
Why was Corvo even asking? He’d made it quite clear that he didn’t care for Garrett’s wellbeing at all - just that Garrett had something Corvo wanted, and he had no power with which to refuse. It made Garrett’s skin crawl, the knowledge that he had no choice but to let himself be used.

Primal whispers, in his mind. He couldn’t outrun Corvo, but if he got the chance to kill him instead, would he take it? No. Wasn’t capable of it, even if he’d wanted to. Even if the Primal got louder than his own thoughts, even if the glowing red light overtook him again - he hadn’t brought any sharps. No flame arrows, no explosives. Nothing that he might be able to kill with easily. He hadn’t wanted to risk it. Whatever else was going on in the Imperial’s head, he wasn’t worried about Garrett fighting back, but Garrett had been.

Starting to regret that. Would he kill Corvo given half a chance, just to get away? Maybe. He wasn’t so sure anymore, reliving the light going out in the Watchmen while he watched, and smiled. He wasn’t so sure, fully understanding that he was nothing but a tool to Corvo; like a particularly troublesome book that Corvo was intent on reading. He was nothing.

Was this why Erin had killed her way out of the House of Blossoms? Why it was so easy for her to end lives? Was this why she’d always reacted so badly to being scolded?

They really hadn’t ever listened to one another. No wonder they’d nearly destroyed each other.

“Garrett.” Softer now, and fingers on Garrett’s elbow. He jerked away again, tripped as his feet slipped further than he’d expected - dropped to a knee. The impact jarred up his leg to his hip, painful. What…?

The wall loomed over them, casting protective shadows as they lingered against it. He’d stopped again, got lost in his own head. Fuck.

“It’s time you told me what you took.”

Not a question. Corvo wasn’t asking for the information, he simply expected an answer. Garrett glanced back at him, a sudden squirming sensation replacing the anger as if he’d snuffed a candle. There was no feasible way to deny him. Either Garrett gave Corvo what he wanted, or “I will take it.” There was something about Corvo’s face, leaning down to pull Garrett to his feet. The grip on his upper arms was firm - about as breakable as iron - but it didn’t hurt. Helpless, but Corvo was being careful not to hurt him, had returned his weapons without demanding a price, had let Garrett arm himself for this trip.

He didn’t understand.

Instead, Garrett looked away and tried to shake off the strange sense of physical dissociation the cinnamon drug had filled him with. He’d taken it because the Primal had flared up and he’d been in agony, and this was less impaired than he would have been without it - but he still hated every moment, every time his body slipped further than he’d intended, every time he had to pause because he couldn’t tell if his muscles had tensed appropriately or he’d simply fall if he trusted them.

Quiet and bubbling, more frustrated humiliation than anger, but the heat frothed up in his chest again, like a second diaphragm. “It’s nothing.” And at the stark silence, he gestured towards his eye. “It helps me manage the- my… magic.” The Primal. Corvo didn’t know what it was called, surely he’d have said the name by now. Even admitted that he didn’t know what it was, where it came from.

And Garrett had nearly just told him, unprompted, unforced.
“It diminishes the pain.” Garrett just nodded. “You’re not lucid, Garrett.” Darker now, sparking against the conflict in Garrett’s stomach, igniting briefly against the Primal. It didn’t flare, but he felt the coil behind his eyes, and he turned as sharp a glare as he could manage.

Don’t run. You can’t escape. “I’m perfectly lucid.” Snapped. “I’m not steady. That’s not the same.”

Fucking fuck, Garrett. He shouldn’t have admitted that. Even if it was obvious, he shouldn’t have admitted that; now Corvo knew that Garrett had understood the effect the drug would have prior to taking it. Now Corvo knew Garrett had done it anyway. What if he assumed that he’d done it to inconvenience the Imperial as much as possible? If all Corvo knew about Garrett came from the General, it would fit his apparent MO. To be honest, that part was probably right. Garrett got a deep sense of gratification from pissing off the Watch, and Harlan specifically.

But this was different. Corvo already had him by the balls. Defiance like that-- Garrett had learned very quickly as a child that open defiance only ended with the cane, and even if it was a metaphorical cane, he had no reason to believe this might be different.

Corvo tilted his head, released Garrett’s elbows, lowered his centre of gravity. Met Garrett eye to eye. Fear thrilled down Garrett’s spine and he leaned back slightly, felt his shoulders press against the clean cut stone of an Auldale wall. Still hidden, still in the shadows. “Relax, Garrett.”

As if it had been a command, Garrett felt his shoulders lower and his breathing slow somewhat. His heart remained a racing drum against his ribs, frantic and heavy, but the tension eased from his limbs a little and he found himself settled in a half-crouch as if nothing was wrong. The Primal pulsed, a full-body sensation that wasn’t quite pain but wasn’t exactly anything else either, a shivery vibration that drew in a sharp breath even as the lingering pain faded somewhat.

The fear tightened in his gut, a physical thing, cold and heavy. It’s fine. You have to do what he says anyway. Shit, calm down.

“Let’s go. We’re running out of moonlight.”

And that was it. Corvo didn’t do anything further but gesture for Garrett to take the lead again. Expression calm, guarded, emotionless - but not quite as cold. He didn’t push when Garrett hesitated, and he simply slunk up the wall behind him when Garrett finally scaled it and led the way towards the centre of Auldale.


I don’t fucking understand.

Corvo shadowed him as he wove towards the Watchmanor; he kept pace easily enough, making jumps with a lighter step than he looked like he should be capable. Whatever else Garrett thought, the Imperial was clearly accustomed to freerunning - even if he occasionally blinked instead of making a particularly nasty leap or climb.

When Garrett slipped off the edge of a balcony, feet just not quite where he wanted to put them, Corvo caught his arm before the panic could even set in, before Garrett had even touched the Claw. For a moment, Garrett just stared - heart thundering, stuck halfway through the act of grabbing the Claw and catching himself, eyes wide. Corvo slowly pulled Garrett back into position, released but hovered a moment, and then withdrew. There was nothing in his eyes that
betrayed the violence Garrett knew was there.

Instead, Corvo looked away, his expression drawing tighter. He gestured for Garrett to keep moving.

They reached the Watchmanor in good time, even with Garrett less than sure of his footing. Climbing over the wall and dropping down was a terrifying experience - Garrett slipped and caught himself on the way down, landed a little less silently than he’d wanted, and then darted across the open walkway and up onto the pillars that ornamented the waterway: above the direct line of sight, and shrouded in shadow.

He’d been met with voices - “...ck that one out an--” - and then there was an arm curled around his side, hand splayed against his chest. The prick of something sharp at his throat, palpable through the scarf, kept him from struggling even as his heart rate soared and he felt panic permeate him. How had he not seen them? What the hells was--

“Annabel, release him.” Growled, as Corvo blinked onto the pillar in front of him. Knowing who it was did nothing to calm Garrett as he was let go and Annabel jumped silently back to a different pillar. For a moment, he remained motionless, tense, and then Garrett forced himself to lower into a crouch, aware of the eyes on him.

Three pairs, now that he could think. Annabel and the small one- Phoebe- they shared a pillar near the opposite end of the water feature. Jumped? How did she…? Suddenly, Garrett felt cold. His gaze caught on Annabel’s arm, on the rune he knew was there, had seen turn gold before, and then back to Corvo. Whatever Corvo saw on his face, even mostly hidden, was enough for him to lift his hands placatingly.

“Annabel, keep your distance.” Met with a glare, and Annabel folded her arms in silence. Garrett got the impression that somehow, he’d just made an enemy. “Relax, Garrett. Phoebe, give me the report.”

Phoebe turned away from him, gesturing out across the manor grounds, and Corvo followed her. Keeping still, Garrett watched Annabel; she glared at him from her perch, all but unblinking. Corvo wasn’t watching, but Garrett didn’t feel any safer; one stray movement, and he had no doubt Annabel would call him out. Besides which… even if he could have gotten far enough away before Corvo blinked after him, Garrett could only think about the rune Annabel had. It had turned gold in much the same way Corvo’s did, only weaker. If it was the same thing…

Just how liberal with his Marks was this god of theirs? If Annabel could blink after him too, then there was no point in trying. He’d only anger them, and while Garrett had no doubt Corvo could hurt him if desired, Annabel looked like she wanted to.

“There’s the guy in the corner here - see him? He’s practically asleep already, Annabel was just saying she could knock him out and nobody would be any wiser. No dogs here, and one more Watchman who wanders down here every eight minutes or so, does a circuit, leaves. Doesn’t even speak to drowsy over there.” Phoebe whispered low enough that Garrett had to strain to catch it, but he tried to ignore Annabel and do so. He was here for his knowledge of the manor, after all. He may as well not make her repeat the whole briefing and waste time. The sooner he was out of here, the better. “There’s a larger waterway up there, basically a bigger version of this one, and the fountain. Four guards actually watching the place; fifth one who might as well be face-down in the water he’s so drunk.” Distaste in her voice. “Couple of doors underneath the fountain, didn’t get a look inside but I think it’s maintenance.”

“Water controls are in there,” Garrett interjected. Still unsteady, heart racing, trying to get his
breathing back to something resembling even, but \textit{this was what he was here for}, and it was in his best interests to be as helpful as possible. “Turning it off opens the sewer entrance.” Jerked a thumb over his shoulder.

Annabel was scowling, but Phoebe just nodded thoughtfully. “I wondered if that was it. Anyway, the other side is the same as this one, minus the sewer gate. Same security, only the set guard is actually awake - not that it matters. Not much for us over there. The main entrance is over there,” and she pointed towards the enormous statue. It had been torn down during the Graven attack, but the Thief-Taker had replaced it with a grisly imitation of himself stomping on the throat of some unfortunate; visible even from outside the manor grounds proper. Garrett tried very hard not to think about the lithe build of the General’s stone victim. “About five guards on it, disorderly rotation. I don’t think they know what they’re doing, really, but they manage a good coverage most of the time. I’d rather not try to slip past them; I don’t think this is a front doors kind of mission, anyway.” Corvo nodded, and said nothing. “This side goes further back. Couple more dogs, long recreational strip from what I can tell. It’s got a stairwell - Annabel thinks it’s a cellar door, I think that’s a stupid place to put a cellar door. Three guards patrolling it, all alert. They haven’t rotated since we’ve been here, so they’re probably about due.” Again with a little wrinkle of distaste. Guard rotation would mean the sleepers would be replaced with more awake men, and even the alert Watchmen would be getting tired after such a long shift.

Not that it was a problem. “Don’t worry about that. The General would watch his men drop dead on their feet if he could. They’ll be on shift until dawn at least.”

Phoebe and Corvo glanced at him, then at each other, and then Phoebe’s hands clenched. “I hate him.” Hissed with such vehemence that Garrett shifted uncomfortably. “The sooner we free this city, the better.”

Like the recoil of his bowstring fired without the protection of his leathers. It stung on the inside of his arm even as the sensation spread and filled his body; skin unbroken, but a ragged feeling all the same. \textit{Free this city}. Is that what they thought they were doing? It struck Garrett just how bad this situation really was. Imperials were always bad news, and Garrett had always held a healthy fear of them - but it was different, hearing it firsthand. These Messengers - spies, \textit{Basso said they were the Empire’s official spies} - actually thought that conquering The City was the correct solution to its problems. And Garrett would be the first to admit that they had problems aplenty - but bowing out to some distant Empress and her spies wouldn’t solve them. They’d only bring with them more problems.

Garrett shuddered slightly, unable to stop it rippling out from the sudden pit in his gut. Crouching lower, curling inwards. They were still watching him: Annabel’s glare remained, and Phoebe was utterly unreadable, but there was an odd tilt to Corvo’s features that Garrett didn’t recognise. It reminded him a little of… Basso.

\textit{Nope. Not gonna deal with that.}

“... Phoebe, go scout the possible cellar door. Find out what it is and where it goes.” A quick affirmative and Phoebe gestured towards the side strip - vanished in a burst of nothing blue. \textit{They can blink too.} “Annabel, how many darts do you have?”

“Twelve, Lord Corvo.” Voice cold, tightly controlled.

Corvo frowned slightly. “Knock out as many guards as you can. Don’t get caught, don’t let them see each other go down. Be fast. Chokehold if you can, dart if you have to. Don’t let anyone drown.” The orders offered in a low voice, no emotion that Garrett could read but spoken quickly. Corvo had complete expectation to be obeyed. He was a man used to command.
It was met with a scowl, but Annabel nodded and blinked down behind the nearly-sleeping Watchman below them. Her arms went around his neck, locked, and tightened. Garrett watched as the man woke with a strangled sound, scrabbled uselessly at Annabel’s arms, and then slumped into unconsciousness. The Messenger held him for a few moments after he went still, and then dropped him unceremoniously. The man collapsed to the ground and didn’t move.

In silence, Corvo and Garrett watched Annabel scale the pillars again, jump across to the far end, and wait for the patrolling Watchman to show himself. A minute went by - two - and then the man came down the stairs, whistling quietly to himself. He had enough time to spot his passed out colleague in the puddle of firelight, open his mouth to yell - and the knot of his brow made Garrett think it was more likely to be accusatory than calling for help - and then Annabel blinked behind him and choked him out too. She didn’t try to carry the man as he collapsed, but she caught him under the arms and dragged him further down the steps, dumped him just around the turn of it. Hidden.

One last glance up at them, her eyes flashing as they caught reflected light, and then she climbed over the railing and slipped into the upper area.

Corvo jumped over to Garrett’s side, keeping a foot of space between them. Crouched - met Garrett’s eyes. “... I’m sorry.” Silence. What could he say to that? Sorry??? What in the hells? “I shouldn’t have forced you here. Truth is… Harlan bested me. Leon has paid the price for that. The truth is, I spooked. You know Harlan better than us, you understand how he thinks, and you’ve broken into this place undetected before. I need every advantage I can get.” And now Corvo sighed, swept his gaze across the manor grounds. There was a flicker of light off his Mark, and he tracked something Garrett couldn’t see. When the light died, he looked back. “But I shouldn’t have brought you here. My Messengers are capable of doing this, and they know that we screwed up just as well as I do.”

“What?” And he sounded incredulous, but Garrett couldn’t help it - swimming in his own head, staring. What the fuck did Corvo mean, sorry? There was no fucking reason to what he did. Threats and reassurances given just as freely as Garrett’s bow; offered back with seemingly no thought to the consequences. Corvo just didn’t seem worried about anything Garrett might do.

Was he so utterly unthreatening?

Corvo glanced away again, eyes narrowing, and then lowered his voice, leaned slightly closer. “I’m sorry, Garrett. There’s no need for you to risk your life by being here. If you think you can make it, go home. Otherwise wait here, and I’ll take you before we leave.”

“Fuck you,” snarled this time, slipping out before Garrett even realised he’d spoken. And he wanted to take it back, fear thrilling through him, because he didn’t understand these Imperials and Corvo made no sense, but he knew they were his enemy.

They had to be his enemy.

Right?

This time, Corvo offered a tiny, crooked smirk. It made his face look… different. Almost friendly. “You’re welcome to stay and help. Of your own volition. No threats this time.”

Fuck no he wasn’t going to stay and help. He didn’t trust Corvo as far as he could throw the man - and Garrett wouldn’t have even been able to lift him - but if he was being let go then he was going to get as far away as he possibly could. Even so… Garrett didn’t understand what had just happened in the slightest. It reeked of a trap. “And the second I turn my back, there’ll be a blade in
The smirk fell, and Corvo sighed. “I deserve that. You have my word, Garrett. You’re free to do as you will.” Softly, the Primal pulsed through him. It didn’t hurt, but it swelled under his skin and pulsed again, and Garrett clenched his jaw to swallow the sound. Dropped his gaze, closing his eyes to suppress the focus he could feel rising; the Primal was restless, writhing out from behind his eye and filling every cavity it found inside him. Conflicting feelings, cold and coiled and melting hot, boiling over and forced suspension at the same time.

What… what are you doing? When Garrett opened his eyes, Corvo had leaned a little closer, balanced on one hand, the other ready to catch him. Only then did Garrett realise he’d tilted, the whole of his right leg flat against the pillar and taking his weight, palms open and fingers splayed wide.

He looked away as Corvo spoke. “I don’t think you should climb the Bridge alone. Wait somewhere safe.”

The words cut him, but somewhere beneath the Primal buzzing in his veins, Garrett knew Corvo was right. He’d get himself killed trying to cross the River like this, no matter how he did it. But Corvo was an Imperial, a sworn enemy. There was no reason to trust him. Threats and glares and ‘freeing The City’ and being bound.

Only the faintest sound of boots against stone gave away Phoebe’s return. She paused spotting them so close together, gave Garrett a frowned once-over, and then turned her attention to Corvo. “It’s a cellar door.” Disgruntled. “And I owe Anna fifty coin.”

Corvo nodded to her. “Where is she?”

“She took out the men by the cellar. Everyone in the main area is already down. She should be back soon.” A pause. “Is he alright?”

And she sounded like she was actually concerned. Garrett swallowed the odd fizzing bubbling in his throat, pushed back against the Primal as it fluttered against the confines of his body. Why were they asking him that? As if some thief from a rebellious little citystate on the outskirts of their Empire actually mattered to them.

A little half-shrug from Corvo. “He’s free to go. If he stays, we’ll take him home before we leave.”

Garrett expected resistance. He expected Phoebe to question her leader’s judgement, or at least look like she wanted to. He expected her to call bullshit, because why in the hells would they take the time out of escaping such a hostile environment right on the heels of breaking out the military leader’s most valuable prisoner to make sure a criminal made it home?

But Phoebe just nodded and looked at him. “Don’t worry about Annabel. She’s just possessive.”

Reassuring. As if Garrett was an ally, as if Annabel was just miffed she’d had to share a toy with him. Possessive? Possessive of what? Garrett posed absolutely no threat to these people. None. In every interaction they’d had, Garrett had been utterly vulnerable. He was alive because Corvo had let him go, he was armed because Corvo had returned his bow, he was here because Corvo had given him no choice - and Garrett hadn’t been able to do a damn thing to stop him.

It seethed under his skin, the Primal, even as Garrett acknowledged it. He had the Primal - painful, wild, out of control - and it meant nothing in the face of whatever Corvo could do because Corvo had the Outsider. Whatever god the Outsider truly was, he outstripped the Primal by far.
This time, it *hurt* when the Primal surged, and the whole world went white. Abstract, somewhere deep in his thoughts, Garrett was glad he’d taken the cinnamon drug before he left. Whimpers spilled from behind his teeth, and he couldn’t quite feel his body through the rushing of the Primal, and he wondered miserably how much worse it might have been. It felt like rage, the sudden burn and spit, as if the Primal had coalesced into magma and bled through him.

It *hurt*.

When it subsided, Garrett got his senses back one by one. First, sensation - heavy, a peculiar weight to himself, and something warm and hard across his chest. Warmth at his back. Then smell - moss and mildewed stone and the tang of soured water, and the deep wet scent of human waste in the distance. Something darker and a little more pleasant, much closer; an alive taste. Sound next - voices.

A feminine voice, low and anxious. “...oing to do with him? We can’t leave him here; Outsider’s eyes, where is Anna?” And a masculine voice, even lower, quietly shushing the first.

Sight: blonde hair and blue eyes, inspecting his face, close enough to pick out colour in the dim flickering light. Lastly came sense.

Garrett jolted away from the proximity, felt the tension in his muscles like whiplash as vertigo overtook him, whimpered again as he was jerked back upright. Corvo didn’t let go of his arm this time.

“Garrett? By the Void, Garrett?” Not Corvo - Phoebe’s voice, close by. Too close. Garrett twitched away from it, scrambling to make sense of what had just happened, struggling with the Primal as it simmered angrily.


The world went white again, accompanied with a clanging sound, and only when Garrett registered the panicked shouts beside him and a tug on his arm did he realise it wasn’t the Primal this time. Shining down on them, blinding and bright and revealing, was a massive spotlight. A matching spotlight shone down behind the statue, where the front door would be.

Thunderous over the hissed commands from Corvo and the ringing in Garrett’s ears as he was bodily picked up and they fled the spotlight, came the voice of the Thief-Taker General.

“You thought to break into my home, Empire slop? With a weak little girl and that child and your pathetic boy? Wait.” And terror took him, because the General’s voice dipped low into a familiar sneer - struggling and feeling his feet touch the ground and taking off blindly. Something flickered and then there was someone in front of him, running and beckoning and it wasn’t a guard and it wasn’t Harlan and Garrett followed him out of the light and away from the Thief-Taker and then down into shadows. “You brought that rat to my house?!”

Laughter, now, earsplitting, his whole body shivering and pulsing with the Primal as it turned rancid against his fear, frantic gasping for air that shook his shoulders and scraped in his throat. He felt Corvo’s touch as he was turned to face him, met his gaze, but didn’t see. His left hand ached under the boiling energy spilling out from behind his eye.

“Well, you should have led with that, Corvo! If I’d known all it would take to make you bring him to me was taking your pet spy, I wouldn’t have wasted all that time with diplomacy!” And he kept
laughing, even as a vaguely familiar voice swore back at him, even as Corvo gave up trying to reach Garrett and turned away again, even as he felt as if bone and muscle and organs were turning to liquid inside him.

The world spun, a distant exclamation, and then he was dragged and stumbled and caught. Harlan’s voice dimmed, and there was a quiet, faint click. Shadows ensconced him, something safer, and the scent of wine reached him. It was out of place here, the wine. Surely whatever Primal hell this was wouldn’t offer wine. He didn’t want it; he felt sick enough.

For a single blessed moment, there was silence, and then the white was inside his head, and the Primal exploded, and Garrett was certain that he had finally failed, and this was death.

It had been a long time since Corvo had felt this angry.

It ignited low in his gut as the spotlights went on and he realised they’d - once again - been made. Fed on the guilt as if it were oil, building and bursting into an inferno that threatened to incinerate him. Rage and the faint red tinge of murder, but as much as Corvo wanted to give in and simply slaughter his way out, he resisted.

He hadn’t fallen to this bloodlust last time, and he wouldn’t now.

Instead, he grabbed Garrett and leapt down, hit the ground running. Phoebe blinked along beside him to keep up, skirting the second spotlight, but they glanced into it as they passed.

Harlan stood proud in the centre, the manic, wicked grin plastered to his face. In his arms, hanging limply, was Annabel.

Corvo felt as if he’d been kicked in the nuts, but he kept going anyway. Too many people, too many responsibilities. He couldn’t risk Phoebe or Garrett to get Annabel, he’d get her himself once they were safe. How the hell had Harlan caught her? She was quick and attentive, she was aware that he was a dangerous foe, and she had magic that Harlan didn’t.

Fuck. I hate this city.

Harlan was talking, but Corvo blocked it out. He didn’t need to listen to that shit, and frankly it didn’t matter what the hell Harlan said. If he was lucky, Corvo would kill him tonight. It not well, Corvo hadn’t hesitated to make the lives of those who crossed him a living hell before.

Halfway down the far staircase, and Garrett seized in Corvo’s grip, thrashed violently. Letting go, Corvo paused for half a second and prepared to grab him again in a more secure hold, but Garrett’s feet touched the ground and he took off. Outsider, he’s fast. But he was wild; whatever had happened just now, with the burst of light from his eyes and his collapse, Garrett wasn’t coherent anymore. He was terrified.

Corvo blinked ahead of him, beckoned him and prayed that Garrett understood. From what he could see of Garrett’s eyes, he wasn’t sure that the thief did - but he fell into line and ran with them past the curve of the manor, over the wall of the stairs, and down into the shadows that otherwise hid the cellar door. He tensed to kick down the door as Garrett skidded to a halt with them. The thief was panting desperately, breath guttural. It sounded too similar to a Weeper’s deathrattle, and ice crept down Corvo’s spine reflexively.

“Wait!” Squeaked from Phoebe, and she ducked past and tugged off her gloves. Cutting wire spooled at her feet as she released it, dropped the gloves next to it, and broke open the anchors. “We need to be able to lock it behind us.”
There was a good reason that they didn’t have time for this, but Corvo failed to articulate it so he turned to Garrett and let her pick the lock. She was a quick lockpick anyway. Instead, Corvo made Garrett look up to meet his gaze. “Garrett. Snap out of it, you need to pay attention.” They couldn’t have left him in the open, now that Harlan had caught them. It was Corvo’s fault that he was here, and he’d burn the whole Watchmanor down before it became his fault that Harlan caught Garrett too. But Garrett stared blankly back at him, pupils blown wide enough to all but eclipse his irises, uncomprehending.

“Fuck, fuck.”

“Fucking eat me out, asshole!” Annabel’s voice, in the distance; pained but defiant. A shrill cry followed it, and Corvo felt himself tense.

Click. “Come on, let’s go, hurry up!” Phoebe ducked through and yanked Corvo after her, and he grabbed Garrett and dragged him inside as well. Garrett staggered against him, even as Phoebe whipped around and got the door locked again. “Corvo, he needs to move!”

“I know.”

But there was no way they could get through to him. He was lost in panic. “Corvo.” They had to get moving, because they’d been made and they had to get Annabel away from Harlan, and they still had to find Leon and break him out, and Corvo had absolutely no illusions regarding the state Leon would be in - they’d have to carry him out, and if Annabel was hurt then they just didn’t have the hands to carry everyone out, “Corvo!” and it was--

“Corvo.” Softer, tugging on his hand. Corvo’s head whipped around to meet Phoebe’s gaze. “Possess him.”

Corvo took a breath, felt the panic recede, and thanked the Void for Phoebe Hellstrom. Still, he hesitated when he looked at Garrett, calling up the magic but holding it within the Mark. It burned softly, but it was a welcome distraction from everything else that burned within him. If just a touch of the Void against whatever power Garrett had could shut them both down, then Corvo didn’t want to test out something as volatile as possession, especially with Garrett in this state.

But Phoebe didn’t know about that, and she offered him a quick shove. “Hurry up! We have to move!” Didn’t understand why Corvo hesitated. She’d seen him do it before, in the field, when a Messenger broke. He’d done it to her, before.

It was invasive, but it was better than dying.

Taking a quick breath, here goes nothing, Corvo focused on Garrett and gestured towards him, let the magic flare out and consume him, felt himself dissolve into Void wisps. There was a moment of… dissonance. It almost felt like an Overseer’s music box, like the odd nauseous sensation of being cut off from the Void.

He touched the energy within Garrett, raw and open - touched and then blew apart. It erupted around him like a furious swarm of bloodflies, inside him like Corvo had swallowed a canister of whale oil. White-blue and boiling and furious and the bloodlust ignited again and all Corvo could feel was the cacophonous lightning crack of emotions he couldn’t quite name.

They burned red in every part of him, and when they burst it was like being gutted a second time.

A dim screaming, as Corvo felt himself coalesce again, felt the Void flee. He hit something solid and collapsed, flared pain in his knee, tried desperately to control the sudden nausea. Nearby, the
screaming caught on a wet choking sound and then broke into the splatter of liquid hitting stone with some force.

Mark cold, Void silent, Corvo felt savaged. Nothing quite seemed to be in the right place in his body, but he forced his eyes open and tried to breathe. When he could pick out the stone under his feet, he looked around and found Phoebe standing absolutely motionless before him, eyes wide, mouth open. She was barely breathing, somehow staring at Corvo and Garrett at the same time.

Turning further, and Garrett was on his hands and knees against the opposite wall, shaking. He’d thrown up, but he didn’t even seem to notice the liquid creeping closer to his fingertips. As Corvo watched, the thief seemed to come to his senses, jerked back a little, and then turned to look at them.

Coherent, now; at least more than he had been. He met Corvo’s eyes, and guilt added itself to the toxic whirlpool of emotions in his stomach. There was a faint hollow shine to Garrett’s gaze that Corvo recognised: he felt violated.

And then, suddenly, that switched off. Equally as sharply, Garrett tilted his head and looked down; through the stone, searching for something beyond. Light coiled in his blue eye, not bright like it normally was, but dim and faded. It didn’t curl into the air, but it was there - a distant star. All at once, Garrett got to his feet, unsteady and stumbling, and then took off deeper into the cellar.

Fuck, fuck.

Everything had fallen apart.

“Phoebe.” No response. “Phoebe!” And she jolted, took a sharp breath, focused on him. “Go. Get. Annabel.”

She didn’t even hesitate. Didn’t nod, didn’t confirm the order. Corvo heard his voice grind and scrape as he spoke, wondered how angry he must sound, decided that he didn’t fucking care. Phoebe blinked away, a warmth against his senses that Corvo could barely feel, and was gone.

Forcing himself to his feet, Corvo reached for the Void as he turned and started after Garrett. It didn’t respond, but he could feel it lurking somewhere in the distance; like the threat of a thunderstorm. Chasing Garrett ever deeper into the manor, round and up and flashing past guards who didn’t have time to react before they were gone, always just a step behind. He reached for the magic again, felt it stir, reached. Demanded that it return.

Just beyond him, almost teasing. Corvo’s sword flashed out as they passed a Watchman who was too close on Garrett’s tail, and a line of blood and sinew opened down his chest. Corvo didn’t pause.

Deeper into the manor they went.

Their rooms had been swept clean. Of course they had. Keldin had wasted an hour tracking the movement of lights in the little estate near the edge of Auldale, and by the time he’d slipped into the room he’d shared with Leon and Phoebe, he’d already realised something was wrong.

It had been stripped and emptied. Next door, Annabel and Corvo’s room - exactly the same. Beds and chests overturned, everything gone. Cursing internally, Keldin stood in the wreckage and took a breath, considered what to do. He couldn’t just leave - even if he’d been willing to abandon their weapons, he couldn’t leave them in City hands. It would be a disaster if they reverse engineered the firearms, or the explosive ammunition, or even the carefully brewed sleep draughts.
Keldin didn’t even want to touch on the MANA.

“Okay, okay. Find out where everything is. One step at a time.” Murmured to himself, even as he knelt and peered through the keyhole. The hallway was lit, but from what little Keldin could see it was empty. The temptation to use magic as he leaned back was strong, but he needed to conserve as much as possible for if he really needed it. For now, he’d have to operate mundanely.

A little click as he turned the doorknob, and then he gently pulled it open. Peeking out, Keldin confirmed no one was there, crept out into the light, shut the door behind him. If the movement of lights from the outside was correct, he should have another six minutes or so until someone came through here.

Keldin snuck over to the other side of the hall, made his way down to the end, and considered the stairs. Up or down? There was an empty floor above them - he and Annabel had used it for sparring practice, but it otherwise seemed uninhabited - and the majority of the light was below. Keeping close to the banister, Keldin made his way down; peered around the corner before moving on to the next flight, ears straining for noise. When he picked up the distant murmur of voices, he paused.

Crept to the bottom of the stairs, looked for open doors. At the far end: two open, opposite each other. Keldin held his breath, waved his hand slightly, activated Dark Vision. Flickers of light came to life beyond the walls, four in the room to the left, seven in the right. Another above him, roaming the halls - two more in the main atrium. Their voices distorted and turned to thunderous whispers through the Void, and Keldin couldn’t pick them apart. No matter - the group of four were scattered throughout their room, but the seven were wound tightly around something (a table? Likely), and had their heads tilted together.

Releasing the magic, Keldin darted out across the carpet, grateful for the lush fabric as it muffled his steps and ducked into the room adjacent on the right. It was a duplicate of the rooms a floor above it, two beds neatly pushed against perpendicular walls, and - there, an adjoining door. Keldin slunk over to it in the dim flickering light, turned his ear, and listened.

“...absolutely remarkable. Look at the trigger mechanism here - links straight into this whale oil contraption. I’ve never seen such delicate clockwork!”

“I wouldn’t even call that clockwork. See these troughs? I know, I know, I nearly missed them too - but look here, the whale oil will run right into it when you fire! And they’re so tiny--”

“Gods above, even that small amount of oil would last for... Oh, dozens of shots!”

“Have you seen these… ammunition wells?” Internally, Keldin cursed. Clips. “They hold ten shots each, and look here, I disassembled one. These grooves all up the inside? I think it automatically reloads!”

Great. Hushed, excited whispers as they tore apart what definitely sounded like one of Annabel’s pistols. She’s going to be so mad, fan-fucking-tastic. Second thing second: Keldin had to get into the room without being caught and clear it out. Which would definitely be easier if the people were gone. Leaning back a moment, Keldin blocked out the voices and thought. He could steal a Watch uniform from the wandering guard, but even assuming he got lucky enough that it fit decently, the others didn’t know his face or his voice; or if they did, they knew he wasn’t one of them. It didn’t look like a promising solution, but Keldin followed the thought to its conclusion all the same.

What would he do? Poke his head into the room and offer some fake emergency? It wouldn’t likely clear out all of them even if he did, and it would only give him minutes, at best, before the
ruse was discovered.

No.

That option discarded, Keldin debated the merit of knocking out the rotating Watchman anyway. It would give him relatively free reign of the second floor, so long as everybody remained where they were. It was readily apparent that most everything he was after was no longer up there, but Keldin didn’t really want to make his way out the front door once he’d cleaned up.

The trip back up to the second floor was as uneventful as the trip down, and it took only a minute of waiting concealed around a corner for the Watchman to go past. Keldin was sure he’d have been spotted if he’d waited, but he shot out as soon as the man got close, locked his arms around a narrow neck, squeezed. The torch dropped to the floor, the man struggled, but Keldin was no scarecrow like Leon. Muscles flexed, and the Watchman slowly drooped, stilled, and passed out. Stomping as quietly as he could to extinguish the torch flames - why was he patrolling with a flame torch, The City had electricity damn it, even if it had appeared to be limited - Keldin dragged the guard into the room Corvo had been given, dumped him on the floor, and left him there.

Once he was back downstairs, Keldin slipped into the same room as before, paused again, and then nodded to himself. He didn’t have any of his stealth gear, but he still blended with shadows better than the light-skinned Grists or Serkonans. Extinguishing the only light in the room, Keldin ducked over to the adjoining door, took a breath and held a hand back in preparation, and pushed it open. Even before the confused voices turned to alarm, he’d blinked back to the far side of the room, hidden atop the wardrobe.

“No, you check it out!”

“Call the Watchmen in here.”

“Oh for fuck’s sake, you’re all so pathetic, I’ll go.”

“Be careful!”

And it took so long for anyone to actually walk through that Keldin could have made it to his hiding place without magic. It sat sour in the back of his throat, even as he glared at the rather portly man who ventured into the room. Such a waste of magic, and he didn’t have very much to spare. He was already feeling the fatigue of it.

Hm. Just where had they stashed the MANA?

Keldin waited until the man had done a (not very thorough) sweep of the room and turned around to drop from the wardrobe. Slunk up behind the man and drew his dagger, “There’s no one h-” and slammed the pommel of it into the man’s temple. Held back a little; too hard could easily kill, and Keldin just wanted to knock him out.

The man tottered, slack-jawed, and then collapsed with a muffled crash. Keldin jumped away from the evidence, pressed himself against the wall beside the door - out of sight. Cries went up amongst the remaining six people, and he heard one rush out into the main hall, panicking. Ah, fuck. Well, here goes nothing.

Another - a tall, narrow woman wearing rugged pants and a strapless shirt - followed the portly man into the dark. As soon as she stepped across the threshold, Keldin grabbed her and swung her sideways, twisting until she was pressed against the wall. A shriek, cut short, and cries went up on the other side. Only four in there, now. Keldin struck her in the temple too, and she crumpled.
He wasn’t sure if she was unconscious or dead, hadn’t really measured the strength of his strike. A little nibble of guilt at the possibility of her death, but Corvo would understand. He didn’t have the luxury of worrying about it right now.

Flipping his dagger in his hand so the blade faced backwards, Keldin stepped into the light. One of the remaining four fled the room, two more men stepped away from in fear, and the only other woman screamed at him to stop, “Don’t fucking move!” Keldin obeyed, eyeing her - the barrel of Annabel’s pistol stared back at him. It wavered, the woman unsteady as she held it; the other one was on the table in pieces, dissected.

The reflexive trickle of fear, somewhere deep, because it always sucked being on the receiving end of a weapon - but Keldin had faced down guns and crossbows and mechanical death a thousand times on the practice field, and all of those opponents actually knew how to use a gun. He held his face in a glare and met the woman’s eyes, even as she tried to edge around towards the door, and lifted his dagger.

“Go on. Fire. Kill me before I kill you.”

Damn. Blurted without thought, but people were here to witness the threat and Keldin could hear the sound of feet as others began to be alerted and head towards the ruckus. Empty threats only meant carrying out the ones that weren’t. Good job, Kel. Successfully back yourself into corners more. But the woman offered a frightened shout and pulled the trigger.

Keldin dove forward as she did - why warn me by shouting? Civilians, honestly - and felt the rush of air as the bullet passed over him, heard the crack of it hitting the far wall, and then the pain-shocked cry of the woman. Caught off guard by the recoil of it, her aim terrible. Keldin scooped up his second dagger as he passed it - left abandoned at the edge of the table, presumably not as interesting as the guns - and in a flash he had them both pressed against the woman’s neck. A clatter as the pistol hit the floor.

Shouting outside, and Keldin spun so that the woman was between him and the door, daggers held crossed over her throat to ensure her obedience, even as he heard the twang of a crossbow. The woman jolted back against him and let out a gasp-whimper and slumped. Fuck. But she was either dead or dying now, so Keldin pulled his daggers back and kicked her towards the Watchmen.

They scrambled for a second, unprepared for the response, and Keldin took the chance to blink back towards the darkness of the adjoining room. He stumbled as he landed, gripping his daggers harder, and ran across to the beds, slid under one. the Watchmen followed him, shouting to each other and threatening him. Keldin held his breath - it ached in his chest, the oncoming headache of magic fatigue and the desperation to gulp air. He couldn’t blink much more unless he found the MANA.

He hadn’t seen any of it in these rooms. All their weapons and Corvo’s mask were in there, scattered on the table, but only Annabel’s standard pistol clips remained with them. Documents, toxins, MANA - they must be elsewhere. The room across the hall was Keldin’s next bet.

When a Watchman passed too close to the bed, Keldin struck out, severed the tendons in his ankles and then listened to the furious cries as the man screamed and collapsed. Two faces appeared on the floor, and Keldin hurled his daggers out at them. One struck hilt-first, with a sickening crunch as the man’s nose shattered and caved, and he screamed too and clutched his face, weapons dropped and all thought of fight abandoned.

The other sunk point first through the thin flesh of a cheek, past teeth, and blood erupted as he gurgled and died.
There was still screaming from beyond the walls, but nobody else was immediately forthcoming and Keldin slithered out from under the bed, grabbed his clean dagger from the floor, and then came to get his other. The point protruded from the back of the man’s neck - it had cut clean through his throat. There was a wet sluicing of blood as he yanked it out, and Keldin hurriedly wiped both hilt and hand off on his clothes. He needed a good grip to fight with it.

He could think about the mess he’d made later.

Darting into the room full of weapons, Keldin grabbed a chair, slammed the door shut - grateful everyone else had cleared out - and barricaded it. Grabbing another chair, he ducked back into the adjoiner and barricaded that door too.

Okay. Grab everything. He sheathed his clean dagger, set the bloody one on the table, and did as fast a sweep of the room as he could. A small pile of bags, at the bottom of the wardrobe, shoved against the far wall. Keldin picked the biggest one, came back to the table, and started loading things into it. Annabel’s broken pistol went in first - it was useless to him, but he still couldn’t leave it. Next went Corvo’s mask and crossbow, then the three remaining ammo clips, then a quick check to make sure Leon’s chakram had the protective ring in place and it too was dropped in. Keldin couldn’t risk the blades slicing the bag open when he moved. One more visual sweep, confirming Annabel’s chainblade wasn’t there, and Keldin closed the bag, slung it over his shoulders, grabbed Phoebe’s rapier. Tucked it through a belt loop, scooped up the second pistol and gave it a quick check - in working order - and held that between his teeth. He made sure to pick up his bloody dagger on his way past.

He didn’t bother trying to make his way into the hall. The door rattled as he ran over to the window and shoved it open, angry shouting went up. It was trickier than he’d like, getting out the window with a bag full of weapons and a sword he wasn’t used to. He threw his unsheathed dagger first - he didn’t have the sheath for it, and he couldn’t risk it puncturing the bag, but he also couldn’t put it through a loop like the rapier (its edges were sharp to cut through by virtue of its own weight), and his teeth were occupied.

Besides which, he really didn’t want the taste of the Watchman’s blood on his tongue.

There was a thunderous cracking as he scrambled through the window, the chair and door splintering under furious assault, but Keldin just dropped down, risked a half-second of Dark Vision to find the flash of his dagger, tugged it out of the ground and took off running.

Angry shouts chased him into the darkness, but he didn’t look back.

Once he’d made the perimeter of the estate, Keldin slowed and circled back. One of the thick hedges made good cover, and Keldin made a note of the exact spot, set down the bag of weapons and slid Phoebe’s rapier from his belt. It was laid next to the bag, and Keldin’s bloody dagger lay with it.

Absentely, Keldin rubbed the back of the pistol against his shirt as he took it out from between his teeth, cleaning off the saliva even as he licked his lips and swallowed. It tasted of gunmetal and whale oil residue, but a grimace and Keldin moved on from it. Better than blood.

Okay. Now they know you’re here and you’re armed. You’ve got maybe one more blink in you if you don’t use Dark Vision and you still want to be able to fight. Barring MANA. How are you getting back in?

He needed a distraction, but he also couldn’t risk giving away this spot. For a minute, he debated the merits of moving around the estate and firing off the pistol to get their attention, but he didn’t
want to waste ammo - nine bullets, and he shouldn’t need them but even so. Maybe it was worth it to draw them into one location and get past without having to kill anyone else. As far as he knew, the Watch presence was all but eliminated now; it was mostly those who’d been deliberating over the Imperial property.

Keldin was making his way towards the front of the estate, almost convinced to waste a bullet and distract everyone, when he saw the spotlights go on in the distance. Huge, blinding white things - two of them. Eyes wide, he stared towards them, confused. Electricity - see? - and yet, they seemed more like the searchlights of a tallboy than anything that might be used for estate illumination.

Wait. That was the centre of Auldale.

The Watchmanor.

Keldin’s blood went cold.

He scrambled up the estate wall and looked out across Auldale. From every direction, the Watchmen and guards were starting to stream into the streets, abandoning their posts at the various estates. Some weren’t in uniform - captains and their sons who’d been off duty - but they carried their swords or their crossbows. Shouting, and lights started to go up across the whole suburb in response to the spotlights. From the estate behind him, one lone Watchman fled into the street as if the spotlights were a call to salvation.

Well, Keldin didn’t necessarily blame him.

Even so, his thoughts spun away from mere pistol shots. Whatever was going on, the Watchmanor was compromised. Corvo and the others weren’t safe. It felt like he’d eaten a bloodfly, buzzing and crammed in his chest, but he wasn’t there and there was no point in trying to get there. He was low on magic, near exhaustion, and he hadn’t completed his own mission.

As desperately as he wanted to help the others, he needed to follow his orders. He had to finish gathering their stuff and get away from Auldale to their rendezvous point. MANA and incendiary rounds and--

Oh.

Maybe he couldn’t help directly, but he could definitely cause one hell of a distraction.

Caution abandoned, Keldin turned his back on the spotlights and dropped back down, ran full tilt into the estate through the front doors. Two men were in the atrium, and they panicked when they saw him: Keldin wondered how must look. Dressed in torn, ragged formalwear, smeared in blood and brandishing a dagger in one hand (when had he drawn that?) and a weapon they didn’t understand in the other.

“Out!” he roared at them, running closer and lifting the pistol. “Get the fuck out!” One of the men broke into a feral sprint and fled, but the other froze up and stared in terror, panic cracking in his face. Unlucky. But if his response to fear was to freeze, then a quick death was better than what Keldin had in store for this place.

And maybe the rage building in his gut sang approval as Keldin levelled the pistol at the man’s face and fired. The kick sent pain through his palm and wrist, and the bruise was as close to justice as the murdered man would ever get - blood and bone fragments exploded from where his head had been a moment later, pink-grey brains unspooling like cut wires, flying in every direction.

Screams broke out from the far corners of the little mansion at the sound of the gunshot,
Keldin heard the stampede as whatever sorry souls still remained started running. *Good. Let them flee.* He ignored it and made his way across the atrium towards the rooms he’d been in earlier.

The one he’d escaped from leaked jagged shafts of light into the hallway, the door a splintered mess, scraps of what had been a chair visible underneath it. Ignoring that, Keldin spun on his heel and kicked open the door opposite; nobody remained within. Equal parts relief and disappointment clawed against each other in Keldin’s chest - he was glad not to have to kill anyone else, and the fewer people died the happier Corvo would be, but at the same time… *Fuck this city. Fuck everyone.* The whole City had offered them nothing but pain and hostility. Leon had been tortured and cut from his arcane bond, and Harlan was a fucking madman, and now he’d caught them again and nobody Keldin cared about was safe here. The more people paid for that, the better he felt.

Shoving it away, Keldin strode into the room and immediately found what he was after. Strewn about on the table were the half dozen documents they’d brought with them and at least twenty attempts to decode them, alongside piles of books on ciphers. Keldin didn’t care if they’d been successful at figuring out what anything said, and he didn’t check. Ignoring them, he instead studied the second table, pushed back against the far wall, atop which was strewn a dozen beakers and even more equipment in which bubbled rainbow liquids.

Half chemistry, half alchemical, and Keldin honestly didn’t care what they’d been trying to do. Eight incendiary bolts lay scattered on the far left end of the table, alongside four clips of explosive rounds, and then - laid out from the middle to the far right - was six glowing blue vials of MANA. More than enough.

Pausing again, he scanned the room. Annabel’s chainblade wasn’t here either. She was going to be furious, but it was - in the end - merely an augmented sword. If it was lost in the mansion, then so be it. He didn’t have time to fuck around hunting for it more thoroughly - and more than likely, he wouldn’t find it regardless. Instead, Keldin approached the table, picked up the closest vial and gave it as cursory an inspection he could, before snapping the end and drinking it. It felt like swallowing a sun, but he dropped the glass and bent over coughing, heaved in a solid breath, and shook himself hard. *Handle it, Kel.* He’d dealt with the feeling before, knew what to expect. Even as his Dark Vision dazzled him, beyond control, and the trembling broke out in every muscle, Keldin straightened up and started collecting the rest of the vials. Void whispers rang in his ears, and he did his best to ignore them, focusing on the task at hand. Heat licked up from every nerve, like his skin was on fire - it wasn’t unlike the feverish, melty feeling that came after being possessed.

Tucking a second vial of MANA in his pocket, Keldin gathered the incendiary bolts and the explosive clips, sheathed his dagger and put the pistol back between his teeth - he bit down too hard, feeling his jaw ache against the metal, but he couldn’t quite control it, and it gave him something to feel aside from the blistering magic surge - and walked out with it all.

He dumped the whole lot in the middle of the atrium. Everyone was gone, focused on the spotlights and whatever degenerate plan Harlan was executing. Keldin took one clip of explosive rounds with him and ran out. He blinked across the grounds, the heat of his rune on his chest almost cool against the MANA fire inside him, venting it in incandescent light as he went.

It was like waking up after an aeon of sleep. Blinking felt easy - *freeing* - instead of draining him. He took barely four steps across the estate, instead blinking to his limit each time until he reached the stash of weapons. He wasn’t as practiced as Annabel, but he knew his way around a pistol and with deft movements Keldin replaced the normal clip with the explosive one.

Dropped the normal clip into the bag, secured it around his shoulders and tucked the rapier back
through his belt loop again. The bloody dagger he held backhand and then he blinked his way back across to the front. Heart racing, breath coming in excited little gasps, but Keldin blinked over to the front steps, took the pistol in hand, and aimed at the little pile of explosives on the floor. In the other direction, he held out the hand clenched around the dagger, and then took aim down the pistol sights.

Held his breath, adjusted slightly for the recoil, tensed. For a single, shining moment, there was nothing else - silence and the burn of magic within him, vision narrowed to pinpricks on his target.

Keldin fired, felt the burst of pain as the pistol recoiled against his already bruised palm, and in the same moment he blinked away. Let out his breath, blinked, breathed in, blinked. He kept going, outrunning the initial blast of the explosive bullet, the secondary crackling eruption of the other clips and the incendiary bolts, and then finally - a concussive *whoomph* as the MANA vials broke open and ignited.

The whole estate went up in a fireball behind him, and Keldin felt the shockwave catch him as he blinked, felt the heat at his back that rivalled the heat under his skin, and skidded into an alley between the lesser buildings of Auldale, closer to the River.

The air itself seemed to shake, but Keldin just gulped in frantic breaths, body alight with MANA and adrenaline, his heart a jackrabbit kick against his ribcage, and then as the screams started rising and the crackle of flames reached his ears, he lifted his dagger, aimed, and once again began to blink away.

Chapter End Notes

I'm less sure about this chapter than the others - it's a bit of a mess haha - BUT I did enjoy Keldin. Yes, let's blow Auldale to all hell.

SO. I now have actual PLANS for plots in this series and things, so it's a little less on-the-fly (although honestly those plans are delirious enough to still really be called PLANNED as such). How about dem apples, eh?

**P L A N S**

Thanks for reading!
Where Our Realities Meet, They Crack Apart

Chapter Summary

In which the Primal rises.

Chapter Notes

Ah, so fair warning. If I'm gonna lose anyone in this fic, this is where I'm gonna lose ya. This shit is about to get W I L D. Like just so utterly hellbent wild. I hope you're ready for some absolute nonsense, let's go.

(don't say I never warned you)

When Corvo finally caught up with Garrett, the thief was running his hands around the frame of a painting that depicted… honestly, Corvo wasn't sure. He recognised Harlan’s face, painted in broad, sloppy strokes, and that the background was either fire or blood - or both - but beyond that… it was hard to tell. There was a limit to how far Corvo was willing to let artistic licence go.

Garrett didn’t seem bothered by the subject of the painting, focused entirely on his task. His fingers caught on something, pressed down, and kept searching. “Garrett,” Corvo tried, panting and out of breath, blood running off his blade as he lowered the point. He had done his best not to slay any of the guards, but even if they all yet lived, he knew he’d dealt some mortal blows in his chase. It plucked harshly in his chest, that knowledge, but Corvo did his best to ignore it - he needed to stay focused on this. Keep Garrett safe, get Leon out, make sure Phoebe and Annabel got out safely too. Find Keldin. That was it.

At this point, everything else could hang.

A quick glance at him, registering his name, but Garrett narrowed his eyes and turned back to the painting without responding, searching for another catch. Corvo stared at him, glanced at the painting, looked back - did a double take. Little harsh edges to this wall, sunk just the tiniest fraction deeper than those either side of it. Corvo stepped closer, inspecting it with narrow eyes now, and then Garrett found the second mechanism and pressed it and the groan of the wall rotating filled the air.

No choice but to follow Garrett through, and the other side was gilded and gleaming with gold, pillars and paintings and half a dozen alcoves of varying glitter - and two men with wristbows trained on them who didn’t hesitate to fire.

Corvo spun them around even as he lifted his left hand. Garrett went dead still as Corvo’s other arm went around him and forced him close, shielding him - a sharp burn and glow of Corvo’s Mark and he felt the Void surge up again, spitting with the metallic charge that coated Corvo’s tongue and set his hair on end. Wind condensed and blasted across the small hidden room, and one of the Watchmen guarding it flew back even as his bolt was knocked out of the air, struck the far
wall with a **crack** and was still. The second bolt struck Corvo in the back of a shoulder and he let out a low groan as it pierced and unleashed burning pain.

Turning back, Corvo blinked across to the second man, and for a split second he lost the fight against the rage and bloodlust scorching through him, and a split second was all it took to plunge his sword through the man’s throat. He blinked back to Garrett, gave him a quick once over. “You alright?”

Garrett stared back, wide-eyed, and nodded as if by instinct. A low grunt of approval, and Corvo turned slightly. “Snap that bolt. Don’t pull it out.” It didn’t feel too bad - had likely only pierced and cut muscle, no major nerves or blood vessels, and it didn’t scrape against bone - but Corvo would rather not deal with the possibility he couldn’t tell through the roaring Void and adrenaline. With shaking fingers, Garrett reached up, tried, lost his grip on the bolt (was it bleeding that much? Maybe), and then tried again. Corvo felt the tug and then the sheer cold agony as the blades **twisted**, and then finally the jolt as the bolt snapped.

*Yeah, okay. He doesn’t know how to do that.* Noted. Holding back the curse, Corvo just offered a low groan and rolled his shoulders. The movement stung like a motherfucker, but it was better than bleeding out.

“Why…?” Whispered, the thief uncomprehending. His voice was low and thin, shivering.

Corvo shook his head to try and dismiss the claws of guilt trying to grip onto his chest through everything else boiling inside him. “I’ll heal faster than you.” Strictly speaking, the truth. But it was Corvo’s fault Garrett was even here, Corvo’s fault he was vulnerable and scared and exactly in the worst place he could have ever been. Damned if Corvo would be the reason Garrett suffered like Leon suffered. “What are we doing here?” Glancing around the secret room, unmoved by the glint of gold and wasted wealth. Right in the middle, spiralling down darkly, was a staircase. The cut in the floor was narrow and rectangular, and the gleaming tiles cracked and broken around its circumference. Four large holes adorned the corners of the stairwell, yawning the jagged teeth of something that had been ripped up without a care.

Taking a step closer, Garrett’s gaze fixed again on something distant and below, eyes hazy. “Can’t you hear that?” he muttered, even as he got close enough to descend into the narrow gaping hole. “It’s… singing.”

And that was all it took to douse the flames under Corvo’s skin, replaced with the same suddenly creeping ice of being submerged in cool water while feverish, a slow-moving pain that engulfed him in seconds. *Singing?* “What are you talking about?” But Corvo followed as Garrett started the descent, and after only one turn of the stairs he activated Dark Vision so he could see, the world turning orange-grey and pulsing softly. Garrett glowed like a beacon, swirling white-blue, and there was a blinding blue-green shine to his eyes, like freshly processed whale oil, that Corvo couldn’t bring himself to look directly at.

“It’s this way.”

All the response he got, and even though Corvo itched to abandon whatever Voidsong Garrett could apparently hear - and it burned under his skin, the confusion, the realisation that Garrett had heard it when Corvo hadn’t - even though they **needed** to find Leon and just get the absolute fuck out, he couldn’t bring himself to drag Garrett back.

He’d done enough of that.

They reached an intersection of stairs. To the right they opened wider, spiralled downwards, an
open space from which rose the faint stench of waste and decay and death, and Corvo held his breath because all he could think was the cells of those accursed to Coldridge and it made his vision swim. But Garrett turned left, even though Coldridge sparked in Corvo’s brain and he thought prisoners and Corvo was forced to make a choice.

Harlan was upstairs. They needed to get Leon - but Corvo needed Garrett to be able to walk himself out of this place, and knocking him out was the only way to stop him following the Voidsong, lost in it as he was. Harlan was busy with Phoebe and Annabel, and that didn’t make it better because they were at ever greater risk the longer they fucked around with him, but- but Leon wasn’t in immediate mortal danger.

Corvo hated himself, but he turned down the narrowly cut left path and followed the thief. This path wove more or less straight, dipping up and down as they went, and after a minute of silent jogging the Void whispers that always accompanied Dark Vision were suddenly warped into a higher pitched dissonance that felt like physical sensation across Corvo’s face instead of sound. He stumbled, and then sped up a little - Voidsong.

Why was there Voidsong down here? What the fuck was going on? Did Harlan have runes? Bonecharms? Outsider forbid, did he have a fucking shrine down here?

But it didn’t take them long to reach the end of the tunnel then, and when it opened it spat them out into a small room. Corvo let his magic go, the expertly carved walls lit by an ambient glow that Corvo couldn’t source. It didn’t seem to cast any shadows, as if the light just existed in its own right, and Corvo tried not to think about it. Head spinning, Corvo took quick stock of the room.

It was roughly rectangular, and Corvo could have crossed it end to end in ten paces. The walls were a painstakingly carved grey stone (or, if it held colour, Corvo couldn’t tell in the nauseating, omnipresent light), and torch brackets hung unlit every three paces or so. The far wall was nothing but bookshelves; for the most part dusty and stripped bare, but for maybe half a dozen tomes that looked so ancient Corvo expected them to crumble at his touch. At the far end there was a statue - a simple-looking affair at first glance, a figure shrouded in robes, bare toes peeking out at the base, hands held before its chest as if in supplication and a shallow bowl balanced thereupon. Long hair, head bowed. Stained glass opened behind it like vestigial wings, whorls and curves whose origin and design Corvo didn’t recognise.

There were a few more books scattered on the floor, pages torn out, some turning to powder and mould. In the middle of the room was a low table, perfectly hexagonal. Four books lay atop the table, the largest of which was jet black. It didn’t seem to luminesce in the strange, Void-like light, and when Corvo approached - Voidsong ringing in his ears, filling his body in an electrical buzz until he lost his grasp on emotion entirely, and there was nothing but the whispered shrieking and spinning nothing that felt like the Outsider had reached through his ribcage and squeezed. Corvo reached out to touch the black book, touched before he’d expected to - wondered briefly why his depth perception seemed so off. His fingers slid right off the cover and it felt like running his hand through warm water, almost frictionless. There were no visible markings on the book, but the centre was set with a triad of what looked to be gemstones, or maybe the finest Serkonan glass. The topmost jewel was perfectly clear and colourless, and Corvo could only see it by the refractions it cast. The bottom left was milky blue and pearlescent - he glanced up at Garrett for half a second, who was utterly absorbed by the other thing on the table, thinking of how he looked through Corvo’s other eyes. The last jewel was a deep violet swirled through with cobalt blue, and when Corvo touched it a jolt shot up his arm like touching a Wall of Light - like the energy released when he broke a bonecharm. Void.

Lain in a curve beneath the black book were the three others. The first was bound in white leathers,
the second in black velvet, and the last in something that glinted every colour but none, and almost appeared to be scales. Corvo ran his fingers over them, felt nothing, and decided they could wait. Turned his head and moved around to Garrett’s side - inspected the last and perhaps the strangest thing.

It hummed quietly where it sat on the table. A spiderweb weave of-- metal, it had to be metal, but it was nothing that Corvo recognised, and it was warm when he touched it. It coiled at the base of the thing like a sparrow’s nest, and as it rose the wires broke apart into delicate filigree, twirling up and out like the world’s most confused tree, almost ivy-like as each thin tendril spun and danced around its fellows. The wires came apart and writhed outwards as if they were a snapshot of themselves exploding - and they came together again to form a thin circular shell. It was as if the designer had heard of shields before, but hadn’t understood the concept - the wires curled around the entire exterior without touching each other, vibrating and singing softly and utterly ineffectual.

Within it, three spheres were held. Two of them were suspended by whatever magic permeated the thing, drifting in patternless circles around each other. One was such a deep, transparent black that Corvo wasn’t certain that it was black at all, and the longer he stared at it the more certain he became that it was actually a rainbow condensed into something solid, flickers and flashes of colour that Corvo could only see when he stopped trying, and that coalesced right back into the same deep sable. It rivalled the Outsider’s eyes. If pushed, Corvo might have said that the orb was somehow even blacker. The second of the spheres still floating was a maelstrom of swirling white-blue, constantly turning and almost violent; as if mist had been turned to light and then locked into physical form. Garrett’s gaze was fastened to this one, his head bobbing as he followed its lazy orbit within its cage. Singing, he’d said, but the orb was silent.

No, the Voidsong clinging to Corvo’s body like a nightmare he couldn’t wake from came from the third orb. It lay at the bottom of the wire cage, a twilight purple that winked turquoise the more Corvo looked at it, that would have - if it had floated with its kin - gleamed with an otherworldly golden sheen like a translucent shell. Instead, it was like a violated corpse, tipped towards the side of the wire cage that had been torn apart, cracked open. Fissures marred the purple-blue orb, deep flaws that Corvo thought should have shattered it entirely, and couldn’t fathom that it had survived. Gold flecks bled from the wounds, somehow powder and liquid at the same time, and dissolved into nothing an inch from their origin.

A chunk, no bigger than the end of Corvo’s finger, was missing from it.

“Stop singing,” came Garrett’s voice, finally, low and hissed - and Corvo felt as if the world shattered around him, the odd trance fracturing and splintering and breaking down. Voidsong still buzzed in his ears, but emotion returned and the sense of urgency that slammed into him set his heart fluttering like a dying bird. Corvo breathed in sharply, felt his hands clench, and the hilt of his sword dug painfully into his palm.

He clung to the sensation, an anchor against the pull of the Void.

Some part of him, some deep instinct that didn’t deserve acknowledgement but Corvo knew he’d never be rid of, wanted desperately to pick up the broken orb. It called out to him with Voidsong as if for his help.

Corvo shoved it away. There were others who actually needed him. Like little brands that he’d forgotten about, he felt the runes of his Arcane Bond flare up against his senses - close, too close, and not above him as he had expected. They were fighting, wounded - panic and pain burned through the bond and Corvo took an involuntary step backwards as it all flared back to life and whatever spell this place had cast on him broke.
“Fuck,” he swore, vehemently, turning his back on Garrett. “Just- stay here.” He could grab Garrett on his way back. But even as he strode back towards the door, he stopped again, hand tight on his sword, Mark fluttering and spitting energy. As much as it appealed to him, the idea that Garrett could be safe in this room abandoned, Corvo knew that he was lying to himself. He had no idea where Harlan was - and somehow, somehow, the man had managed to outwit them at every turn, to track them and catch them and corner them.

Garrett hissed something else, directed at the floating orbs and the ravaged cage they spun within, and Corvo let out a growl of frustration. He had to take Garrett with him. Didn’t have a choice in the matter.

“Fuck!”

When he turned back, the thief had put his hands around the base of the wire cage, bleeding Void energy and whatever it was that had attracted Garrett to it in the first place - the other orb, linked to his magic - and the other thing, and too late Corvo saw the indent where the cage sat. It rose when Garrett lifted the cage, rose silently, and Corvo heard the distant catch of ignition underneath the shrill of Voidsong.

He’d blinked to Garrett’s side before he even registered what he was doing. He put an arm around the thief’s waist, and the cage slipped from his grip even as Corvo felt the first billow of heat around them, and the Void ripples coming off him met whatever magic was within Garrett and discharged and Corvo felt the recoil but this time-- No, not this time. He dragged back on the Void, clenched his left hand, felt the zapping sparks erupt under his skin as the Mark flared to life, but Not this time, and Corvo enveloped them both and blinked them away.

The connection came through, spacial pin to spacial pin, and then Corvo felt it catch - drag - tear. Garrett was like a writhing inferno in his grasp, and the memory of flaying skin and piercing agonies overlaid the magic and even as Corvo hollowed out the smell of lightning surrounded them.

…

When he could see again, the air was cold and weightless against his skin, and the sky had warped into endless smokey blue. Chunks of rock floated and spun around him, the distant pealing call of a leviathan almost out of range, and yet so strikingly audible that Corvo felt it vibrate under his skin. He sucked in a breath, felt it twist in his lungs without expansion, and released it. Garrett wasn’t with him, he thought, at first, and when he lifted his head he was met with the emotionless black eyes of the Outsider.

The god hovered amidst a softly pulsating whirlwind of black, but he was close - much closer than he usually came, almost nose to nose with Corvo. His expression, normally so unreadable, was twisted with the faintest curl of something about his lips. Corvo couldn’t tell if it was a sneer or a smirk - or, perhaps, a smile - but it was there, and his eyes shone with the liquid blackness so brightly they looked like ink instead of fathomless nothing.

Then, even more shocking, the Outsider drifted back slightly and offered Corvo a hand.

So unusual was this behaviour from the normally haughty immortal that Corvo simply took it and let himself be set on his feet. He didn’t quite understand what had happened, why the Outsider had drawn him here, now, and he couldn’t see the thief anywhere so he could only assume that Garrett hadn’t been drawn in with him. The Outsider’s skin buzzed when they made contact, like Voidsong made solid, something that was almost alive and also somehow not, like remembering how it felt to drown in a dream. Corvo shivered when the Outsider released him.
“Do you know that there are fixed points in time, Corvo?” the Outsider asked him, and the distance was there, in his voice, the normal sense of condescension, as if it was some great blessing that the deity deigned to inform him at all - but there was something else too, some low incandescence like Voidsong that scraped and grated. In a human, Corvo would have almost said it was excitement. “Some things, for all the millions of windows I see, must always be. Some things none, not even I, can change.”

Corvo said nothing, simply stared back. He’d long ago made his peace with the Outsider’s antics; he seemed, at heart, to be simply bored. Humanity was an interesting toy for him to play with, and he lacked any concept of moral quandary. As far as Corvo could tell, the Outsider’s interest in any given individual was based purely on how fascinating he found them to be, with zero regard for other merits - or lack thereof. There was no point making a fuss.

The Outsider tilted his head and floated lower, closer. For once, he did not vanish and reappear, instead maintaining a solid barrier with his body between Corvo and whatever Void landscape was behind him. It struck Corvo as odd - normally, the Outsider enjoyed making Corvo’s head spin with his frequent teleporting. Then again, thus far nothing about this particular visit was normal.

“You’ve encountered a fixed point already once, in your short lifetime, dear Corvo.” And there was a suggestive dip in the Outsider’s voice, and Corvo flashed back to a gazebo long ago, and pain seized his heart and he stilled. Taunts, run loose from the Outsider’s tongue as if Corvo’s agony was a curiosity and little else.

Youcannot save her you cannot save her you cannot save her you cannot save her.

Was this what that had meant? Not merely a cruel derision from the Outsider, but a warning? A fixed point? Did that mean that no matter the actions they’d taken, any of them, Jessamine had been destined to die?

It crumbled in his chest, like his ribs were turning to mulch, the idea that no mere failure or success could have changed it.

“Yes, there is is. That realisation. How does that feel, Corvo?” And Corvo bared his teeth at the god, felt himself snarl - and yet, he didn’t move. Something… strange, about the question. It lacked the calculated mockery he was used to. The Outsider sounded… almost… delighted. If he were capable of such an emotion. “This is not a fixed point, Corvo. This nebulous spiderweb of decisions that led you here was entirely your own. What happens here, now, is wrought by your own hands.”

“What does that even mean?” Huffed- gasped, more air than voice, because he could feel Jessamine going limp in his hands again and he could barely keep from collapsing, even now, after so many years - but the Outsider drifted closer, nose-to-nose, so close that Corvo felt his lack of breath as acutely as he would the warm puff of a mortal’s, and the heavy vibration of pure Void energy contained within him.

The curl was more obvious in his lips now, and Corvo still wasn’t sure what it was. “You have surprised me again, dear Corvo - as usual. In all the possibilities I saw, I dared not believe you might end up here.” And now the Outsider drifted back again, straightening his back and rising slightly, folding his arms. A tilt of the head. “You have done well, Corvo.”

The black mist closed around the god, and Corvo felt it coalesce again behind him, signalling that the Outsider was not gone, but suddenly Corvo didn’t care. What the Outsider had hidden with his form threatened to break Corvo’s mind as he studied it - an otherworldly and fractious splintering within the Void that defied logic and senses alike. Excuses spooled into thought in Corvo’s brain, a
physical sensation that only hurt the more Corvo fought it, like the unwinding of a person’s guts when they were sliced open but not slain.

Winking and glistening as they turned, forming an arch that looked to be no larger than a grand door and yet expanded endlessly across the non-existent horizon, shards of… reality turned, shards that were nothing, a substanceless illusion that carried more weight than the islands that drifted around them. Light refracted off them as the shards quietly spun, and yet Corvo knew looking at them that they were light and at the same time were not, and he was only seeing the fragments of the echoes of a collision he couldn’t understand, a wreck - the ruins of a doorway that shouldn’t exist and yet did and held and continued to just peacefully be.

On the other side was an infinite shadow, lit in patches with small puddles of blue-green light that, as Corvo stared and tried to remember what breathing felt like or how his heart was supposed to beat, he came to realise were… flowers. Wicked bells that did not bloom, and yet shed whistling light instead of petals, that offered odd disharmonious clicking instead of pollen.

Kneeling within the place, back arched and head tipped up, in the Void chasm that was not the Void, was Garrett.

And before him hovered a creature woven of light and smoke and mist, bent close to study Garrett’s face. It - she, his mind supplied, even though there was no basis for such an assumption - tilted what must be a head, form billowing and radiant, and Corvo could no more tell if the light formed a sheath for the being or emanated from within than he could have hazarded a guess at the Outsider’s real name.

Even as he watched, the being dimmed slowly, coalesced into a figure that Corvo recognised as human, and when he could process her visually it flipped a switch in Corvo’s brain that made him wonder how he hadn’t been able to see this before, and he fumbled on the transcendent image she had conjured prior. For she was distinctly feminine; unlike the Outsider, who retained a largely humane appearance and modesty, this entity hovered just above her pointed toes and studied Garrett with skin softly luminescent and fully exposed. Something shrouded her, whether it was her starlight hair or some form of flowing robe or both, but it did nothing to conceal the curves of her body. Garrett was motionless, staring back at her as she studied him, and for a moment Corvo wondered - deeply, almost violently - what was going through the thief’s mind.

“Who… What is…?” Corvo heard himself stutter, utterly confused, and then shudders overtook him as the fizzing sparks of Void came too close, black mist curling past his vision like invasive vines. He sensed the Outsider very close before he spoke; his voice came from right beside Corvo’s ear, leaned across his shoulder, and this time there was a very definite sense of delectation in his voice that somehow made him even more unsettling than the uninterested overseer Corvo had come to think of him as.

“That, dear Corvo, is my sister.”

Corvo’s mind went blank. In the silence of it, he heard the goddess’ voice, and shuddered. Almost lower than the Outsider’s - who spoke with the voice of a boy - and where his words whispered over themselves and withdrew, hers ignited inside Corvo’s gut and seemed to burn with something so deep and carnal he couldn’t decide if it was rage or desire. Maybe, at that base a level, there was no difference.

“You… are one of mine.”

And he saw it ignite in Garrett too, wild instincts as he tensed and snarled and reached back for an arrow without ever unclipping his bow, heard it in the eruption of vile curses as his fingers brushed
across the feathers and didn’t find what he sought - something… primal.

The Outsider was still hovering very close, his head right next to Corvo’s, emanating a glee that made his Mark crackle and spit. “I’m glad you disregarded my warning, Corvo. Had you spent much time worrying about the woman you believed me to be concerned about… you would have failed to find her Attuned one.”

For a moment, Corvo’s thoughts swam and he didn’t understand - and then the brief interaction the Outsider had offered in The City surfaced and Corvo understood. Even I cannot protect you, the Outsider had said, about some mysterious ‘her’, and Corvo had taken it as he took all of the Outsider’s riddles - and then everything had fallen apart and Corvo had been so focused on Leon that it hadn’t mattered.

And if this goddess was who the Outsider had meant, Corvo was glad to have forgotten. He would never have been prepared. “Wait… What do you mean-- Attuned one?”

“You have struggled to understand the nature of Garrett’s magic for some time now.” Without further answers, the Outsider gestured past Corvo, towards Garrett and… the other god.

A different god.

Hovering quietly in her own, different realm, as the collision between the two twisted and twinkled and broke.

Something… entirely other.

“He’s like me… but not you.” Corvo didn’t have anything more eloquent to offer. How had he never--? All this time, his whole life, he’d known that the Outsider was something that (potentially) existed, he’d known of the Void. It had meant very little to him until he’d been drawn into it and bestowed the Mark and made a heretic, but this black magic - this god was a known entity, at least. Never - not once - had he ever heard even a whisper that there might be another god to rival the Outsider’s power, not ever had he heard of another place that was like the Void but not. Beside him, the Outsider hummed, and Corvo couldn’t tell in the slightest what it meant. “But…” and Corvo ran a hand back through his hair, everything scattered. “How have I never heard of--”

“A thousand years is a long time for humanity, Corvo. I watched you all forget.”

And suddenly, the cold whispering expanse of the Void and the distant whistle-clicking of whatever place the goddess inhabited died under the sharp, piercing squeal. It was gaseous in Corvo’s ears, like helium igniting and burning out in the same instant, and he flinched - but the Outsider vanished in a swirl of fractured nothingness and reappeared by the split in reality.

“Levi!”

“Hello, Prim.” Spoken low, almost snapped back to his usual aloofness, except there was a distant warmth in his tone. The goddess drifted closer but did not cross the twinkling archway, light and mist blooming and swirling and condensing as she did. “You have been free of your Stone prison for some time, now, and yet you chose to wander.” For a moment, staring at the exchange, some part of him that Corvo barely recognised and didn’t control keeping track of Garrett, the pair of deities almost seemed human - and Corvo drowned in it.

The light rippled through her, a sudden burst of red, and suddenly her face seemed to shift into something terrifying, something that Corvo simply could not process in the split second it showed and could not remember beyond a lingering fear and racing heart. The goddess tilted her head.
“You didn’t call. Whose fault is that, really, Levi?” And Corvo felt the shimmer in the Void, felt the Outsider about to respond - and the goddess cut him off. “Five thousand years, and you’re just the same rude boy.” But it was teasing, the way she said it, and she twirled merrily in her light and the nakedness that meant nothing.

The Outsider sighed. “I have kept watch over you, sister. There is an agent of mine within your prison still.”

Corvo reeled on that. An agent? Was the Outsider talking about-- a Marked one? Inside a prison that had somehow managed to contain a god? Nothing he was hearing made sense, and as he slowly accepted that, he slowly began to settle.

Nothing here made sense, and Corvo doubted that it ever would. The Outsider was enigmatic at best, and downright duplicitous at worst, and whatever… this was, it was beyond him. Gods hovered before him now, exchanging pleasantries like bratty siblings, and if it blew Corvo’s mind then it was all the more reason to distance himself, and focus on things that he could do. Time was different here, and he felt no urgent need to be returned to his own world before the Outsider’s leisure (insisting so would only anger the god anyway), but that meant… he had time to think.

Wiped away immediately, as Garrett’s finally found his voice. “You… You’re the Primal…” Dazed, pain making it shake, but Garrett was watching the gods and struggling to his feet.

She turned away from the Outsider, and the Outsider drifted sideways slightly and folded his arms, seemingly content to watch. Corvo realised, suddenly, just how close to the reality chasm his floating island had come. “Why yes, I am the Primal.” Capricious, and little ribbons of red and blue spiralled out under her skin like dye in water. “And you are Attuned, but I did not Attune you. Isn’t that funny?”

Garrett was on his feet now, visibly shaking, hands clenched at his sides - but he met the goddess’ - - the… Primal’s eyes and stared her down. He didn’t succeed, but his gaze held, and Corvo felt - for the first time - an immense swell of respect for the little thief. “I don’t even know what that means.”

The Primal drifted back to Garrett, rainbow colours undulating through her before settling back to her blue-white, and then she leaned down, right in Garrett’s face, and tilted her head. “I see… I did not give you my Light, mortal, but there it is, right there behind your eye - a piece of me that you stole.” Her voice turned hard on the last word, and then - in a flurry of light like snowflakes that came off the weave that may have been hair and may have been fabric - she burst into laughter. “It broke from me when I was trapped for a third time, didn’t it? Found its way into your body and dug itself a nest.” Even from here, Corvo could see the iniquitous grin, the Primal’s eyes indistinct in her face and yet the gleaming rows of fanged teeth plain. “It must cause you such delicious agonies, Garrett.” And her voice embraced his name like the slow confinement of a chrysalis around a caterpillar - viscous and inexorable and breathless.

Flinching, Garrett finally broke eye contact and took a step back, shoulders tight. The smokey light rose from his eye, and it struck Corvo - like being dropped from the top of Dunwall Tower. This was why their energies repulsed, why the Void tendrils withdrew from whatever it was that the Primal exuded. That was the vaguely empty feeling, when they’d connected and Corvo had lost touch with the Void. These shards that spun lazily between them, the fragile tear in reality as the two mystic planes touched - it had happened in miniature, in real time, inside them.

For just an instant, a single curious moment, Corvo wondered what would happen if the Outsider
and the Primal touched.

“I never asked for this,” Garrett hissed back, and now Corvo looked away too. It was a feeling he could relate to only too well; he hadn’t asked for the Outsider’s Mark, and he hadn’t been offered a chance to refuse before he’d felt the brand bubble up under his skin and the immense mystical energy that it bound to him snap open within him. But at least he’d understood what was happening. Everything he’d seen so far only proved that Garrett hadn’t even had that.

The Primal tilted her head the other way, considering him, when the Outsider chimed in. He sounded bored again, gone the strange echoes of human emotion. “Cease toying with the poor creature, sister. He won’t live much longer anyway - free him or kill him.”

Something violent rose in Corvo at that, something that set his Mark alight - he’d been drawn here without weapons, as usual, couldn’t attempt any aggression beyond the raw magic of his Mark, and even as it lit up turquoise-gold, the Void roared to life around him, reacting in ways only the infinite could, not funnelled through the Outsider’s leash but rather ignited by it. Turning, the Outsider considered him silently, black eyes inscrutable, and something - something flickered across the Leviathan’s face, something Corvo couldn’t read but only served to turn his vision red.

Corvo hadn’t made as big a fucking mess as he had just for the Outsider and his Void-forsaken sister god to snuff out Garrett’s life. He stood not a single hopeless chance against them, but Corvo still took a step closer, hands clenched, his left fist lifted slightly in preparation for magical combat.

What by the Void are you doing? But it didn’t fucking matter, because their lives had meaning damn it, even if the gods saw them as insignificant.

Across from him, Garrett had gone still and pale again - the same look he’d had when Corvo had threatened to break his arms to force his cooperation. The memory rose in his thoughts, a wound that blistered and burst, and the Void swirling around Corvo died in an instant.

Just how, in the end, was he any better?

“No,” came the Primal’s snarl, and soft yellow dappled her skin briefly now, like ink. “He’s mine.”

She reached a hand towards Garrett, fingers curling, and Corvo saw her nails long and sharp like delicate claws, but they didn’t make contact. Instead, she hovered just before Garrett’s face, and then wisps of light began to rise out of the man’s body, spirals like wind currents made visible from mouth and nose and ears, and then he convulsed - dropped to the black nothing ground - screamed. Even as a ball of light no bigger than a marble came to life in the Primal’s palm, flickering and writhing, flecked with unnatural vivid blue and specks of black, Garrett’s howling rose up and filled Corvo’s ears, overriding the distant whale calls and the Voidsong and the spitting hissing whispers of unbound magic until he could hear nothing else - not even his own thoughts. It was a wet scream, something so uncontrolled and deep that Corvo knew the thief was likely not aware he was making the sound. His body was taut, balanced on his knees and arched, held stable by nothing but the misty coils of light that rose from every inch of him, linking him to the pulsating light in the Primal’s hand.

Unaffected, she lifted the little ball to eye level and blew on it. Corvo’s jaw ached, teeth grinding - but he didn’t dare cross the barrier to reach Garrett. Even just an echo of it had severed his magic, the Void retreating; if he tried to cross it, it could kill them both.

He wasn’t entirely sure the Primal wasn’t killing Garrett anyway.
The Outsider didn’t look bored anymore, studying the Primal with a very distinctly displeased frown. It was the most blatant emotion that Corvo had ever seen on the creature. Was it Garrett’s screaming that made him look like that? Was he just displeased by having to listen to it? Corvo wouldn’t put such callousness past him. All the while, Garrett didn’t even pause for breath, because in the Void there was no need for breath and the empty movement of Corvo’s chest was out of habit rather than necessity and he could only assume that it was the same in the other place. Corvo could feel his shoulders starting to hunch in, feel the sick empathy rise up and draw him into himself. Only too well, he understood the agony of torture. What he’d give to never hear it again.

As the Primal blew on the light she’d torn from Garrett’s body, the blue and black seemed to dissolve, and then she pulled back and examined it critically. Again, she blew on it, and as it pulsed and turned pure white, she straightened up and seemed... pleased. “There. All- Oh.” And now she looked down at Garrett where the man was held motionless and bayed, and her form twitched - a strange sideways jitter that, on a human, would have almost been embarrassment. “Erm, sorry, sorry. My mistake.” And it was... mumbled as she bent down and pressed her hand to Garrett’s face again.

The ball of light dissolved back into wisps that shot back into Garrett’s body, and all at once he went silent, jerked, and then collapsed and was still. The Primal tilted her head back. “Hm. I forgot how fragile humans are. Best not rip my Light out of them. My mistake!” Half-sang, her voice shuddering with the carnal flames it inspired in Corvo’s stomach, as if she’d merely forgotten an obscure court etiquette.

Corvo stared at her, barely aware of the Outsider vanishing and reappearing on his other side, closer. “Your... mistake?” he managed, hoarsely.

She turned to him. “One of yours, brother? He’s adorable. Yes, of course my mistake, I have been trapped for--” And she turned on the Outsider suddenly and offered a wolfish, feral grin - sharp teeth glinted with a light that was somehow different to that of her body, and mixed orange-pink swirled under her skin for a brief moment. “Levi, do you not tell them that-”

Never did Corvo ever expect the Outsider to sound harried, and yet when he interrupted the other god his voice was brusque. “You have another Attuned in the world still, Prim. If you will insist on possessing them as if they are your pets, you might wish to cleanse them both.”

The Primal tilted her head, and then offered a delighted laugh. Snowflake light shimmered around her. “Yes! Oh, you’re right, brother - I sense it. Mm, so far away… Let’s see. Marked one, has Levi ever told you about me?” And before Corvo could even shake his head, before he could even think to answer the question, she let out a chirp and purple ribboned through her form. “Found her!”

The god gestured, a strange archaic motion of her hand that Corvo didn’t recognise and - afterwards - couldn’t even quite recall, and the darkness of her realm swirled and tore and collapsed, all the while remaining black, and then a clutch of the unsettling glowing flowers blossomed anew and amongst them stood… a stranger. But a human. She stood completely still, stance narrow but balanced - a tiny slender figure, with a jagged waterfall of black hair and eyes that even at this distance Corvo could tell were milky blue-white like Garrett’s right one.

(Corvo risked a glance at Garrett’s prone form, was sure it wasn’t breathing, but then that didn’t matter here, right? It meant nothing except Corvo’s skin crawled).

She was dressed in a fine fabric that Corvo didn’t recognise, one skin-tight piece from knees to collar to elbows, dyed black with little accents of forest green. Stared for a moment longer, an open
expression of shock and fear that Corvo couldn’t begrudge her, and then all at once it closed off into the kind of iron stoicness that Corvo had only ever seen in the royal court, betraying nothing. A second later, it had lit with an undefinable rage.

“It’s you!” the woman snarled up at the Primal, who honestly seemed taken aback. “You-- It’s been a year! Wh-ha- What the hell took you so long?!?”

And then many things happened at once.

First, the Primal pulsed red - not just swirls under her skin, but her whole body, her whole light, everything - for a second she turned scarlet and the shimmer of fear that opened in Corvo’s chest and nearly consumed him whole was so primitive and beyond his control that he almost fled. Barely resisted, eyes wide and unbreathing, and the Primal turned to a cluster of light and rage and swarmed the woman she had summoned.

Equally as fast, the Outsider reacted, materialising so close behind Corvo that he felt the shockwave of it against his body, and then something he had not felt before radiated out around him - a strange oscillation in the Void, like a thunderstorm made of sand. Black flutters that Corvo could only see out of the corner of his eyes, completely invisible when he tried to catch sight of them. The Outsider, hovering on his spinning tendrils of black unreality, held his hands at his sides, open and ever so slightly abducted, and on his face was a dark frown.

And Garrett was suddenly on his feet, and he didn’t seem like he was in pain. In fact, he stood utterly straight, hood thrown back to reveal the tangle of hair the same raven black as the woman’s, and his bow was somehow in his hands. A blunt arrow waited at full draw, and the end shone with pearlescent white light - wisps and smokey curls of blue-green wafted into the air around his head, and Corvo couldn’t see but he knew it was from his eye. There was no tremble in Garrett’s arms as he held full draw.

Hands, disembodied from the fragmented light the Primal had turned back into, hovered inches from the woman’s face, clawed and crimson. “You.” Almost soft, and Corvo found himself shivering in fear. “You’re the thing they trapped me in the third time. Wet. Weak. A worthless prison. They couldn’t even extract me without making us bleed.”

This time, Garrett’s voice resonated and Corvo wondered if this was the man he’d been before the unstable mess Corvo had met; the man Harlan hated and feared in equal measure. “Do. Not.” Growled, low, perfectly steady while he aimed a weapon at a god. “Let her go.”

And then the woman took her eyes off the Primal, off the furious immortal being of limitless power that clearly wanted to squeeze her skull until it burst, and focused them on Garrett. Those eyes narrowed.

“Garrett. Fancy seeing you here. Kind of surprised you’re still alive, to be honest.” And there was lilt in her voice, recognition and emotions Corvo couldn’t begin to decipher without context, almost flirtatious except anything but. “Guess I’m impressed.”

“Is now really the time, Erin?” Garrett returned, lacking the fear or resentment or pain Corvo had unconsciously associated with him - oh fuck me, is that why I’m so Voidbent on protecting him? - and instead reeking of snark.

It was the moment Corvo gave up on the whole thing. The Outsider having a sister - another god - was something that, given time and a bottle of brandy, he could come to terms with. That sister god being able to choose human proxies with which to share her power in the same way the Outsider Marked people - yeah, that only made sense, in context. Even just the bare fact that the Primal
acted more like a pissed off noble than the esoteric god Corvo was used to was something that he could, if given half a minute to just think, probably handle.

But, as it turned out, the Primal’s proxies were both absolutely mad. Fearless, reckless, stupid mad. It was one thing to sass one’s patron god - Outsider knew Corvo did that enough - but it was quite another to do it while threatening that god in the same breath she clearly wished genuine harm.

Nope. Fuck this. I’m never coming back to The City ever again.

And yet… slowly, the red melted out of the Primal’s tornado light and she gradually coalesced back into a shape Corvo could stand to look at. Her body swam with colours, but the glow that haloed her dimmed and flickered and returned to the beacon white-blue. Garrett didn’t lower his bow, and- Erin? Erin hadn’t moved in the slightest, and slowly the sandstorm electricity around Corvo faded. The Outsider whirled away through the blackness to appear closer to the archway-rift again.

“Are you alright?” Low, adjusting his aim for where the Primal’s heart would be if she were human.

Erin offered a snort and a scowl. “Just dying, Garrett, nothing to worry about.”

Now, finally, a twitch of movement in Garrett’s body, like he wanted to take a step closer but didn’t dare for some reason. Erin took her eyes off him and looked back up at the Primal.

“... But I suppose it was not your choice either.” Erin merely shook her head, but there was no reverence in the motion - not even a distant grudging respect for the power her god wielded. “Hm. And you desire life, then, even after what was done to us?” Merely curious, now, the colours in her body fading to a pale cornflower blue that then itself dissolved.

At that, Erin rolled her eyes. “Hard yes. If I wanted to die, I’d be dead. Oh, shut up Garrett.” Who hadn’t said a thing in response to that, who Corvo hadn’t even seen lift his head or shoulders in preparation to speak. “I’ve been waiting for you to fix this mess for a year, you know. I’d really appreciate the headaches stopping.”

Pink tickled through the Primal’s form and she laughed again. “Oh, you… I like you. You’ve been mine for far longer than my Light’s consumed you, haven’t you?”

Even Erin seemed a little startled by that, but the Primal put her hands to Erin’s face and the woman gasped at the shock of the touch and then the Primal kissed her. Colours undulated through the Primal like paint splatter, and Erin went rigid. Garrett lowered his bow, let down the arrow. The light shining at the end of it dimmed and went out.

Corvo just stared, the mortal in her god’s embrace, even as light shone up through Erin’s eyes and from her ears and then from her fingertips. Nearby, he heard a low hummed sound that echoed with Voidsong and disapproval, and realised belatedly that the Outsider was watching the display as well - and scowling.

It went on for a long time.

When they finally broke apart, the Primal’s colours dissipated back into white-blue and for a moment there was silence. A moment later, Erin erupted into hysterical, uncontrollable laughter.

“Mm... You taste of the Void,” came what Corvo was sure was meant to be a barb, teasing. Erin’s laughter only got worse, doubling over with her arms around her stomach, and the Primal
shot a look over her shoulder that Corvo could almost feel as it reached the Outsider. The latter still scowled, and he crossed his ankles the other way in what Corvo didn’t believe could be sheepishness, but there was suddenly a thoughtful gleam to his eyes.

After a few moments, still lost in heaving laughter, Erin attempted to speak. “Holy fuck… haha… Kaede’s gonna…. Hah!” And Corvo caught the way the Outsider drifted back, didn’t understand the flicker across the god’s face.

Wondered when dealing with the gods had become such a twisted reflection of a royal court and decided right now was when and prayed it would never happen again.

And then Erin shot upright, mirth still in her eyes but her mouth pulling into a snarl as Garrett got closer. “Heh- No. Just… no, Garrett.” There was something in Garrett’s face that broke, Corvo saw, but Erin turned back to the Primal and either didn’t see, or didn’t care. “I’d like to go back now, thanks.”

And the Primal bared her razor teeth. “Of course.” A gesture, and the blackness ripped and the flowers wilted - and Erin was gone. Garrett’s shoulders slumped. “Well, as fun as this has been, isn’t it time we put our toys away, Levi?”

The Outsider was eyeing the Primal with something unreadable in his face - which was a norm more comforting than Corvo would have admitted even under torture - but his eyes shone with the inky reflective blackness that betrayed something else going on in his immortal thoughts. “It is, indeed, dear Corvo, time to return you to your world. I would advise that you remember what you witness here today.”

Corvo felt the shift in the hum around him, the Void turning cold and metallic as the electrical charge began to warp and flicker, and knew that he was about to be dropped back into his body. Remember my ass. Corvo shoved it all as far down as it would go and tried to think about the clusterfuck of the real world he was about to be dumped back into. Trigger mechanism under the orb-cage thing. Garrett tripped it. Right, we’re about to be blown up. Fantastic.

In a flurry of black coils, the Outsider was right in front of Corvo again, and his brow was knitted together in a way Corvo didn’t want to try and decipher. The Outsider was a god, not a human. Human emotions and expressions just didn’t apply. “I would advise, in future, not to mix my magic with hers.”

A pointed look at Garrett, and then - the Primal’s laughter ringing in his ears - Corvo felt the whole world snap and condense and a spacial pin popped around him as he completed a blink.

Garrett was still against his side, held there with his right arm, sword held away from their bodies. The heat and shockwave blew behind them, even as Corvo realised he was just warned not to tandem blink them again, and Corvo deliberately dropped his sword as the trap went off and they flew forward.

Well… whatever the mystery artefacts in that room had been, they were surely destroyed now.

And as Corvo stopped skidding and pushed himself up, trying to get his bearings through the ruins of his senses, feeling like a flashbomb had gone off in his face, and he saw Garrett flung against the far wall in much the same state, little flares of magic went off against his own like torches, and he felt Phoebe and Annabel too close, and Keldin too far away, and then a boot stomped down in front of his face.
Fingers tightened in his hair, and Corvo growled as he was bodily lifted. Sickening grin - eyes that shone green and manic - thinning black hair slicked back with its own grease. Corvo met the wild gaze of Thadeus Harlan, realised too late that he needed longer to recover from the blast, and then spotted the glint of purple-blue-gold held between gloved fingers as Harlan lifted it.

The glinting sharp thing was forced past Corvo’s teeth even as he finally began to struggle, dissolved, and Harlan stepped back - let him go. “Fight me now, Void rats.” Sneered, distorted through the ringing in Corvo’s ears, not understanding and hating the strange grittiness on his tongue from whatever Harlan had just given him - curbing the fear into anger, because right now fear was worthless and Corvo was So. Utterly. Fucking. Done.

Cold snapped through him, electric and piercing, and Corvo felt his Mark go dead.

Chapter End Notes

OKAY.
Anyone still with me? Yes? No? Because we're about to forget the twilight zone fucking bullshit that just happened and get back to the real world next chapter. Except we're not, because WHOO BOI Garrett is... whoo, haha. Damn.
Y'all still with me on board the Harlan hate train? Because we are about to fuck. up. his. gods. damned. day.
Annabel’s footsteps were uneven behind her, frantic as they chased Harlan deeper into his lair. If
Annabel was wounded, then Phoebe wasn’t in much better shape; the wrong end of a crossbow
bolt still stuck out from her thigh where she’d snapped off the rest, and blood welled out around
the bolt head with every step, the pain muted by pounding adrenaline and the warning headache of
magic fatigue. She’d taken a welt across the face from Harlan’s cane, and her hair still smouldered
in the aftermath of an explosive bolt. Burns, wet and tacky, blistered up the back of her calves.

Unsteady behind her, Annabel had taken burns to what Phoebe was sure her whole back, when
she’d thrown them both to the ground and ended up on top. Later, Phoebe would hate herself for
that - she was not only older, she was the senior Messenger - but right now they couldn’t think
about that. Annabel was blind in one eye, swelled around the impact of Harlan’s fist and streaked
in blood from a cut on her scalp, and another cut was shallow and open across Anna’s ribs where
she’d narrowly avoided being shot by another bolt.

Annabel had still been blinking, as something on Harlan’s hand had flared up with purple-blue light
and he’d abandoned them, but they’d been forced to keep their distance. The Thief-Taker couldn’t
run fast with his crippled leg, but when Phoebe had gotten close he’d brandished a hand at her and
something had forced her back, down to her knees. A flare of gold-blue light, like Corvo’s Mark,
and then a throttling sensation that crackled around Harlan and felt like echoes of Void magic
turned against her. Annabel had stumbled, and Harlan had laughed and sneered at them - “Corvo’s
worthless pets,” - and so the chase had continued.

They couldn’t get too close and Phoebe was unarmed, Annabel exhausted of sleeping darts. All
combat would have to be melee - and they just couldn’t get close enough. Too much time lost, as
they’d watched Harlan stop beside a painting on an otherwise nondescript section of wall, fiddle
with something behind the frame, and then disappear with a jaunty one-fingered salute in their
direction as the wall rotated.

Running ahead, Annabel had almost reached it before it completed its turn, flinched back and lifted
a hand as if to touch her own temple. Pain flashed through her face. More slowly, Phoebe came up
behind her and studied the wall. The painting was grotesque - a facsimile of Harlan’s face and a
background of a flaming, bloody purge - but it looked to be the same as the one on the other side.

Heart thundering with rage at their own helplessness, Phoebe reached up to run her fingers along
the bottom of the painting and gestured for Annabel to follow suit; it wasn’t worth wasting time
trying to reach higher herself. Thirty seconds later, they found both catches and flicked them, and were dumped into the most ornate waste of space Phoebe had ever seen.

Teeth gritted, Phoebe ignored the gleam of gold and ivory and headed straight for the torn up hole in the floor. Annabel was on her tail, and despite the way it made her eyes burn Phoebe called up Dark Vision as they dropped into darkness so that she could see.

Moments later, a rumble came through the stone under her feet and was followed by a deep *whumph* of heat and outward force. The crackle-blast of an explosion hit them a second afterwards, and Phoebe dropped to one knee as the stairwell shuddered, let go of the Vision with relief as the flickering light of flames licked around the corners. Pain seared up her leg as it took her full weight, the bolt head twisting, but she bit down on the moan and tried to get up.

Annabel grabbed her arm, and together they staggered up, panting, and headed towards whatever had just blown up. Around the corner, and the tunnel diverged - a sinking darkness from the right, wafting up traces of a stench so foul Phoebe wanted to vomit, and to the left a longer narrow hallway that glowed with loose flames.

It was down that hall that Phoebe spotted Harlan’s limping silhouette, several metres away, and then her eyes landed on the two bodies just starting to move on the floor. Corvo’s clothes were singed and smoking, little white puffs of smoke coiling up from his hair, and patches had been burned off his back entirely, sections of cloth that ran over his butt and down the back of his legs and were gone in favour of shining red burns. A little way back lay the thief, equally struggling to get up, his quiver and cloak aflame but the leather he wore underneath merely scorched.

Harlan grabbed Corvo by the hair and dragged him up - Corvo flailed for a moment, clearly disoriented from the explosion, feet scrabbling for grip underneath him, but he met Harlan’s gaze clearly enough and bared his teeth. Phoebe stopped just outside the danger zone of whatever thing Harlan could do to them, and saw a tiny glint as Harlan withdrew something from a pouch on his belt. She couldn’t see what it was this far away, squinting, but it flashed and Harlan forced it into Corvo’s mouth. The Royal Protector grimaced and tried to pull away, lit up his Mark - spitting gold and turquoise - and he staggered as he was let go, barely staying on his feet.

His sword, where was his sword?

Phoebe spotted it, glinting further back down the corridor, red smudges burned onto the blade, and without thinking about she ran for it. Past Harlan, who cackled and sneered at them and fully ignored her. “Fight me now, Void rats.”

Behind her, Annabel was shouting. “Corvo!” As loud as she could, trying to make sure Corvo heard over whatever damage the explosion had done to his senses. “Corvo, he’s got- something, I dunno- it shuts down our magic!” Frantic, voice laced with pain. Phoebe shot past Garrett, still struggling to his feet, dodging the patches of fire that littered the hallway, and scooped up Corvo’s sword. The leather of its hilt was scorched black and cracked, and the metal burned as she touched it - like her skin was melting and blistering, but she turned back all the same.

“Corvo!” as Phoebe snagged the catch and folded the blade down, and then threw it. Corvo’s face was a mixture of anger and shock as he turned towards her voice, and she saw his Mark dead on his hand when he registered the sword in the air and caught it. Her blood went cold; Harlan had shut down his magic too, and not with whatever proximal weapon he had used on them.

The faintest flinch, as Corvo registered the hot steel in his hand, but he unfolded the sword and let the mechanisms click into place. Eyes back on Harlan, watching his every move - Phoebe saw the angle of his shoulders as he waited and the seconds stretched out. Angry; his sword was already...
covered in blood, even if it had been flash-cooked to the blade. Corvo had already cut down guards. Phoebe and Annabel had run past enough of them in their chase of Harlan, some moaning - and some not.

Laughing, Harlan slowly tugged off his gloves and dropped them. On his right arm was strapped his wristbow, and a line of bolts curled further back under his sleeve, semi-automatically reloaded. On his left hand glinted a ring, and Phoebe found her eyes drawn to it; a tiny jewel set into the gold band, flashing purple and blue and gold in the flickering firelight. Even looking at it made her feel nauseous.

It pulsed the faintest gold-purple light as Annabel made a move, and Harlan half-turned - keeping the wristbow trained on Corvo - and held the ring towards her. It flared up with light again, and Annabel crumpled and screamed, hand flying to press against her rune. “Anna!” Thoughts stopped and Phoebe could barely see, and she knew better than to work emotionally in the field, she knew better than to let this control her - but she leapt back past Garrett (on his feet now, throwing off quiver and cloak and scarf as they fell to fire) and towards Annabel, choking on rage and panic.

She got too close, and when pain erupted in her right hand from her rune, Phoebe stumbled and felt herself hit the ground, the impact shuddering through her. The screaming got louder, and it took a moment for Phoebe to realise it was hers too.

The pain died down, and when Phoebe could form a coherent thought again she scrambled to Annabel’s side. Limp; sprawled loose on the floor and passed out, her breathing shallow and jagged. Phoebe’s hands shook when she gathered Annabel’s head and made sure there weren’t any worse injuries, and then she turned towards Harlan, vision swimming.

“I’m going to kill you.”

Her gaze caught on Corvo’s face, blurry - and only now did Phoebe realise that the blur wasn’t from pain, but from tears. Furiously, she swiped them away, trying to ignore the stricken expression Corvo wore; and realised why he looked like that. He hadn’t even flinched when Anna had gone down, and was watching them with wide eyes.

Mark dead. Could Corvo not even feel them? What by Void had Harlan given him?

“Duck!” It came out without permission, but Phoebe didn’t care. Corvo obeyed immediately, dropping into a low crouch and wincing in pain, and the bolt went over his head and buried itself in the stone ceiling behind him. A little disappointed tut, and then Garrett leapt into the fray, jumping past Corvo with his bow in hand, but he hadn’t folded the limbs out. Instead, he spun past Harlan and swung it, and made contact.

A snarl, as the mechanical bow connected with Harlan’s shoulder, and both he and Garrett stumbled as they came back to stillness, facing each other. Turned out the bow wasn’t sharp, and Harlan’s clothes were uncut by the blow, but he held his arm lower and closer to his body, so it must hurt. Good. “Aligning yourself with the Empire, rat king? I should have expected treachery from you.” Spat, but Garrett merely took half a step back and shifted his stance.

“You know how it is, General. Enemy of my enemy.” And it was mocking - and Phoebe didn’t understand. Where was the frantic terror of before, how was he so calm right now? He was hardly in a better position than they’d been in before, stuck underground in a tight space with not only the Thief-Taker, but with three Imperials, two of whom weren’t much help.

And it burned in her chest, the admission that she wasn’t any use here, but she stayed on the ground and cradled Annabel’s head and admitted it. She couldn’t get close to Harlan without whatever he had in that ring bringing her to her knees. At that point, she was little more than a distraction, and not for Harlan. Corvo would try to protect her, and he’d get himself killed doing it.
No, it was best she stayed away.

Hating it, Phoebe finally rose, but she hooked her arms under Annabel’s and started dragging her back towards the intersection of the tunnel, to get them out of the way. At least Harlan wasn’t using explosive bolts right now - this confined, it would probably just kill them all.

“Pity. Though I can’t say I’m surprised at your taste in allies, thief.” Snarled, turning to aim his wristbow at Garrett. The second it was off him, Corvo moved - and even wounded, he was a whirlwind with a sword. He flashed forward, sword twisting and then rising in an uppercut that would have severed Harlan’s arm from his body if it had landed.

If.

Wristbow locked on Garrett, Harlan half-turned and all but shoved the ring in Corvo’s face. The light flared off the jewel, blue-gold like it was a Mark, and the sword fell from Corvo’s grip and clattered on the ground; the sound was lost under the sudden roar of pain Corvo let out, even as he dropped hard to his knees, doubling over, hands clutching his own head. Laughter - again, the snide, smug laughter that made Phoebe tremble. They were far enough away, so she gently set Anna down, gave her a brief check again, and then crept a little closer to the confrontation. Corvo was almost silent now, shuddering little whimpers of pain.

“You think you can come into my city with foreign magic and the curse of some pathetic god, and I won’t know about it?” Harlan leant down, closer to Corvo - his wristbow rose as he did, the aim slowly lifting off Garrett, and Phoebe watched the thief track the movement, coiling and half-crouching. “I own this city, Corvo. Nothing happens here without my authority.”

Garrett made his move. Phoebe watched, saw him dart in even as he clipped the bow into place on his back with one hand, saw him make contact and then flutter away, and Outsider’s bleeding eyes the man was fast. Faster even than Corvo. Harlan shot the wristbow, buried another bolt in the wall, rotated his wrist to quickly reload, but the reaction to movement was so slow that Garrett had already disengaged by the time the bolt touched stone.

On the floor, Corvo relaxed, slowly, and lowered his hands. Harlan didn’t see, focused on Garrett. With a grin that reminded Phoebe of Leon, the thief offered a flourish and held something up in his fingers. It glinted gold in the firelight, and then caught purple-blue.

Harlan’s face was comical as he glanced down, and realised that Garrett had stolen the ring right off his hand. “This is the second time I’ve taken a ring off you, and right under your nose.” And there was an edge to Garrett’s voice now, something furious and dangerous and unbridled. “Maybe avoid getting married.” Cutting, voice full of scorn. Looking at him, Garrett looked different, somehow… His right eye was still the odd blue, startling against the brown of his left (it looked almost black, in the shitty light), but maybe it was… different? Phoebe couldn’t think properly, half her attention still on Annabel behind her, watching Corvo ever so carefully reach for his sword.

“Garrett.” Barely even a glance, even as he got his sword in hand and threw himself back to avoid the bolt that cracked into the floor where he’d been, Harlan reacting to his voice wildly. “Get Leon.”

There was a moment, almost suspended, while Harlan reloaded and Corvo got to his feet. Phoebe watched Garrett narrow his eyes, considering the order. She wasn’t sure that the thief had ever followed an order before - who was there to command a criminal? He was a Cityzen, criminal or not, and he had absolutely no reason to obey. Until fifteen minutes ago, he’d all but been their prisoner.
And then Garrett tucked the ring into a pocket and shot past Phoebe and Annabel and vanished into the darkness.

Harlan turned after him, looked like he wanted to pursue - outrage lining his face like a cheap mask - but suddenly Phoebe understood and she rose to her feet and barred his way. The ring was gone. Harlan couldn’t stop them now. It made her head pound, as if her brain was melting, but Phoebe drew on the arcane bond and blinked right in front of Harlan and thanked the Outsider that whatever he’d done to silence Corvo’s Mark hadn’t silenced her as well.

“No,” she snarled, hands curling into fists, looking up at the man who’d inflicted so much pain on her and her family. Leon, Annabel, Corvo. The man who’d looked upon her and seen a child and flirted. It made her blood boil, wondering how many times he’d done such a thing. “You should forget about him.

“Worry about us.”

The stone was icy, against his back, but he hadn’t felt it in a while. In fact, Leon hadn’t felt anything in quite a while. His body was all but numb, quivering quietly in the dark. The hunger had devolved into nausea and then into clawing hollowness, and even that was gone, now.

Pain, still, shivering under his skin. His jaw ached, and there was a sluggish burning heat from his back that made him think the brand must be infected. It didn’t surprise him, all things considered. The most that had been done to clean him was a bucket of ice-cold river water the last time he’d been dragged out of his cell, and only because the Watchman hadn’t wanted to touch him without it. He kept his hands tucked against his chest, numb except for the hot sharp pain when he brushed the raw flesh where his nails had been torn out.

Whatever poison he’d been fed had only been given once more, again in tandem with his neighbour. It had been worse the second time - he didn’t remember a lot of it, just nausea and pain and waking up in his own body fluids. Vomit and urine, shit and blood. He was beyond caring anymore. His neighbour hadn’t survived it that time - Leon had listened in silence as the guard had remarked on the corpse in disgust, eyes shut tight against the torch.

Then, when his bars had rattled and the man had shouted at him, Leon had looked up and the flames had flickered and something had slotted out of place in his head - pain and tension and seizing, and then nothing again until he woke up to the man shaking him violently.

Blood in his mouth, searing agony in his tongue, and once he’d made eye contact the guard had snarled and spat, locked the door behind him, and (blessedly) taken the light away. His tongue still hurt where he’d bitten it open, and Leon did his best not to jostle it. He was grateful he hadn’t been made to swallow anything since.

So when the sudden crash-whoomph-crackle of an explosion came screaming down into the darkness and the whole world shook, Leon stopped breathing and simply pressed back further into the corner. The tears stung, wide-eyed even though he couldn’t see anything. The movement shifted the way his legs were tucked against himself and he let out a low moan; three thin metal prongs that had been put through his calf, and they moved with him and molten agony shot up his leg, puddled in his foot.

The explosion wasn’t normal. He’d heard something similar, when one of the prisoners had been dragged - pleading incoherently - from the far left cells and then off down the tunnel into the torture room. The bellows had come to life, offering enough light that Leon could see the reflections of it in the yawning opening, and he’d listened to the screams until finally something
that reminded Leon of an incendiary bolt went off and shook the air, and blessed, cursed silence had followed.

This was different, and it had come from above. Something was going on. Fighting? Mixed hope and fear made themselves known, tiny weak ribbons in his chest underneath the pain. He wanted it to be Corvo - his salvation. More desperately than anything, Leon wanted it to be Corvo, but he struggled with the hope and pushed it away. It couldn’t have been the eternity it felt like, down here, because Leon had been keeping track of the water he’d been given (almost none) and he wasn’t dead yet; but he’d felt the hope every time he’d heard footsteps coming down in the dark, and he felt like seeing the flickering torch and Watchman uniform round that far corner might be the end of him.

Then, distantly and echoing, came the screams. One- then two. Then silence. Feminine voices, high-pitched and piercing, and something flickered in Leon’s stomach. Did he know those voices? He’d yet to encounter a woman in Harlan’s association, not even a prisoner.

Sometimes, he’d thought about how angry Annabel would be about that, because imagining her fury offered him an echo of it in his chest, and it was as warm as it got in this dungeon. This time, he felt the hope curl around his heart and he eased the tiniest bit forward - moaning again as the rods in his leg shifted and scraped.

Another cry, short-lived and faint - but Leon felt it like a lash, and at once the fear and hope were obliterated under the weight of Corvo’s distant cry. That’s his voice.

They were here.

They were coming for him.

But they were fighting, screaming, in pain. Annabel and Phoebe. Two female screams. It was an odd balancing hollowness now, shuddering in his chest like a whirlpool, even as he crept a little further out of the corner. Were they losing? Somehow- had Harlan bested them? And Leon’s breath came in short gasps now too, unsteady. He stayed away from the cell bars, because if Corvo blasted them open with his wind magic then Leon didn’t want to be anywhere near it, but his eyes were wide and he searched the darkness for anything - anything that might promise him freedom.

And minutes passed in nothing, and Leon felt the cold slowly creep back into him.

He didn’t know when he’d looked away, maybe he’d just closed his eyes - he couldn’t always tell anymore - but Leon yelped when the voice rose out of the dark. “Leon?” And it was one that he didn’t know, not low and gruff enough for Corvo, and lacking the older Tyvian twang of Keldin, but definitely masculine. For a moment, terror made him stop breathing, because the accent registered and it was the same as Harlan’s - Cityzen- and then, close by, Leon saw the soft blue glow. A small light, bright enough that he couldn’t quite focus on it but dim enough that it didn’t offer any illumination.

He swallowed, whimpered, and then nodded. Realised it was too dark to see that, braced himself to reply aloud. Felt chills go through him when the voice responded as if he’d seen before Leon could say anything.

“Are there any other pris-” click, and the door whined as it was pushed open, and he’d picked the lock that fast? “-oners here?” Leon hadn’t even heard him messing with the pins. Nodded again, pointed towards the right, where the last remaining prisoner besides himself was. The glowing little light turned, vanished for a second, and then came back. “Okay. Come here, quick - we have to go. Can you walk?” The glow came closer, and Leon realised that is was circular, a narrow ring and
shot through with tiny darker lines, and the faintest sound of movement came with it, the scrape of leather on stone that Leon wouldn’t have heard if he hadn’t been straining for it. Only when the glow stopped very close by did Leon see the faint illumination it gave, and he realised that it was an eye.

Leon could only see the curve of his eye sockets and the shadow of his nose - and his eyes. The left-no, Leon’s left, the man’s right eye was lit up with a powder blue-green glow, a delicate ring of iris that gave away how wide his pupils were in the dark. Tiny stars, so utterly tiny that Leon wasn’t sure he wasn’t imagining their presence, except they moved when the man turned his head and his iris dipped, betraying the sweep of Leon’s body. Remembering the question, Leon tensed, shifted his right leg, and moaned. Shook his head.

A soft sound, almost a hiss. “Oka-” he began, and went silent as the sound of voices carried down. Familiar voices - Corvo and Phoebe, and then snarled under them, Harlan. Leon froze, feeling the fear return, spilling through him like a landslide breaking free of a mountainside. His breath caught, and it sounded like a sob - the crushing tension in Leon’s chest stopped him from pretending it was anything else.

Rapidly, the voices grew louder. There were no words from Corvo, and only shrieked insults from Phoebe. Harlan was more articulate, and the threats danced in the air and Leon knew that some part of him understood but he couldn’t process them, shaking. He closed his eyes and dropped his head to his knees, pressing his hands against his chest, feeling the whine rise from his throat. Please.

No more threats, no more. Leon didn’t know if he’d survive another seizure. He heard the stranger’s voice, soft, and he couldn’t comprehend that either. The shouting was close now, echoing. In the dungeon proper. Phoebe was speaking fast, something... “... your left!” Directing. Leon didn’t understand - the dark? Corvo had Dark Vision, he didn’t need direction. Was it for the stranger? But he could already see, had been able to see Leon nod and shake. It didn’t make sense.

And then Harlan gave a furious roar and Leon heard the *snick* of a wristbow, and the ground shook again with the *whumph-crackle* of an explosion and fire. Heat and light bathed them, even through Leon’s screwed shut eyes, and he cringed, another sob ripping out of his chest.

Something touched his shoulder and he jolted away, keened in mixed fear and pain. Heard his name. He was almost blind in the light when his eyes opened reflexively, the torches along the right wall lit by the explosion, but he met the stranger’s gaze almost by accident.

A narrow face, spiky black hair that framed high cheekbones and a sharp nose and deepset eyes. No longer glowing, but the man’s right iris was a bright, pale blue, like a dawn sky - the left was soft cocoa brown. And Leon hadn’t been imagining the stars; tiny white dots that swirled through his eyes like a galaxy, like the night sky. Leon felt his breathing stop.

The stranger’s hand on his shoulder, warm, and there was a little wrinkle to his nose and Leon understood because the dungeon stank of humanity in the middle of death and decay, of the worst that life could give - but the stranger just scowled as the sound of Corvo’s blade meeting metal and screeching rang out behind him. “Wait here.”

And the glow came on in the blue eye again, and he rose to his feet and swept around, stalked out of Leon’s cell with the grace of an angry cat. A shout went up, and Leon finally looked past the stranger to Corvo and Phoebe. Phoebe was on the ground near the stairs, her form half-hidden in the shadows that the firelight didn’t quite reach, but she was sitting up and watching the fight. Between them, Corvo had twisted his sword, and blood erupted as the odd *thud* of dead flesh hitting stone slithered out under Harlan’s cry of pain.
His wristbow hung askew from his arm, bloody, even as Harlan stumbled and fell and drew the arm close to his chest. His hand was not attached. Snarling, Corvo took a step forward and then stopped as the stranger came closer, between him and Harlan.

“Come to gloat, rat?” Harlan spat, even shaking with pain, even as he bled out against his own chest. “You're nothing.”

The stranger considered Harlan, and then Leon saw blue-green light wisping into the air in coils like smoke, and as the stranger leaned down and reached for Harlan’s bloody wrist, Leon saw that it came off his eye. Glowing brighter now, bright enough to cast odd shadows onto his face, and when he made contact and gripped Harlan’s fresh stump, the other eye lit up as well.

“You lose.”

Light burst from the stranger’s hand, and a faint shrill noise filled the air, a whine like carving metal. Leon flinched away, closed his eyes and tucked his head against his knees. Harlan screamed.

When it ended, there was silence.

Slowly, ever so slowly, Leon dared to peek out. The stranger stood motionless, staring down at Harlan, and the light pinwheeled in his right eye but the left was back to normal, the lightsmoke absent. Phoebe stared in horror, eyes wide, mouth open, frozen. Behind the stranger, Corvo lowered his sword, let the point nose the floor, and glared.

What remained of Harlan barely even looked human. His clothes hung loose and scorched, bloody. He bled no longer, though, the stump where he’d just lost his hand closed and narrowed into a puckered scar that showed the shape of the bone underneath. The rest of his body was no better off - all the fat and muscle he’d carried before had been stripped away, dissolved by whatever the stranger had done to him. Skin, stretched so tight across Harlan’s bones that Leon could have counted them, and pitted with odd furrows and folds. Even the cartilage of his nose had been melted away, the unsettling crevice of the skull underneath visible. Hairless.

His mouth was gone entirely, sealed over with stretched skin, and instead of eyes he had twin bulges that seemed too big for his head. They too were sealed over, folds of skin that pulled taut and folded at the seams like badly sewn fabric. On the hand that remained, the skin had drawn so far back that the nails were exposed to the beds, and the nails themselves curled out into red-tinged claws.

Corvo gave a grunt of disgust and looked away, and the stranger didn’t even react when the creature he’d made of Harlan let out a shrill screech and twisted to all fours. Faint clicking filled the chamber, and the creature offered another scream that cracked and echoed, and even as whatever was left of Harlan shot by and vanished into the darkness Leon felt recognition and went so cold even the pain numbed.

Whistle-click-click.

It seemed to Leon that he blinked and the stranger was back before him. Fear thrilled through him, but there was no light in the stranger’s galaxy eyes and he simply offered Leon a hand. “We need to go.” And there was something rough in his voice now, finally emotion that proved he wasn’t untouched, and as if he was observing himself, Leon put a hand into his.

The rest was a blur. The stranger swept Leon into his arms, didn’t even seem to care how filthy he was or how awful he must smell. Movement and voices, and Leon realised his head was against the stranger’s chest and he could hear the man’s voice vibrating in his own body as well as through his
ears, and Phoebe and Corvo were there and Corvo was carrying Annabel up through more stairs, more more more, and then into a room that gleamed so bright Leon squeezed his eyes shut. Fast but steady, Leon could hear the stranger’s heartbeat.

A deep grinding sound, and Leon tried to focus on what was being said.

“... can’t climb like this,” the stranger was saying, and the vibration was somehow comforting. He was a man, not a monster - and he’d turned Harlan into a monster but Harlan had never really been a man.

“We need to meet up with Keldin.” Phoebe, breathless as she ran to keep up.

“The grounds will be crawling with guards. I’m amazed we haven’t encountered them already.” Corvo, and something gritty and angry and dark in his voice, and Leon felt all the better because Corvo was on his side and Corvo would protect them.

“You could blink us out.” The stranger. He knew about their magic.

And Corvo offered a low sound of frustration, even as they all stopped and slipped sideways. “I can’t.” And he didn’t give more explanation, but Leon felt it like a splinter in his chest. They must all be so tired if Corvo didn’t even have it in him to blink.

Keldin’s absence made itself known in Leon’s thoughts like a razor, but he tried to quell it. Corvo didn’t seem worried - Phoebe had just said meet up with, not find.

“I can scout ahead--” Phoebe, except she stopped because the air shuddered and shook and snapped around them. The whole manor quaked. It came in the distance, the crack like fire and thunder combined. Movement again, quicker. Leon didn’t dare open his eyes to the light. “What? That--”

“He sent the whole estate up.” Corvo again, and something that almost sounded like satisfaction. “That was MANA combusting.” A familiar sound, deeper and sharper than other explosives, burning hot and purple-orange as it went. Outside, Leon heard shouts go up, scrambling and yelling and panic. “That’s as good as we’re gonna get. Let’s go.”

It wasn’t running, but the stranger moved swiftly all the same, and before Leon knew it he was struck with the wet, distantly salty smell of open air in The City. He took a deep breath without thinking, shifted and opened his eyes a slit, and felt the low grunt reverberate through the stranger’s chest. “Keep still,” muttered - without warning, almost a request.

Leon relaxed, but he slid his arms out from between them against protest and looped them around the stranger’s chest. Contours and buckles and something like rope pressed back as he did, but Leon ignored it. It would be easier for the stranger to move if Leon was a less awkward bulk, so he held on and ducked his head against the stranger’s chest and tried not to stick out too much.

The light out here was no less bright, and Leon didn’t know if it was night or day or why it was so blinding, but he kept his face turned to the stranger’s body and scrunched his eyes all the way shut again and stayed there.

There was shouting, and the sound of Corvo fighting, and for a time Leon lost himself in the movement as it became quick and jumpy and sharp, and when the faint nausea returned he focused on suppressing it and tried not to think about the something out of place in his head, because if he vomited or seized then he was going to get them all killed. He’d get the stranger with the starry eyes and the fast heart killed.

And then, eventually, the movement slowed and Leon heard Keldin’s voice.

“Later.” Sharp, from Corvo. “We need to get somewhere safe and lick our wounds.”

The stranger shifted his weight. “I’ll take you to the Queen of Beggars. She won’t turn you over.”

And a moment of silence that stretched out, humming and heavy with a tension Leon didn’t understand but could feel like an oppressive force. He didn’t dare peek out into the light, still wasn’t sure if it was daylight or not, but he had to do something, couldn’t stand it. He squeezed his arms around the stranger, who shifted his weight again, and then Corvo offered a blustery sigh.

“... Thank you, Garrett.” His name is Garrett.

“Hm. Thank me later. We still have to cross the River.”

...

...

...

Later, much later, Leon let himself be peeled away from Garrett and offered only sharp moans of pain as Keldin slowly and gently cleaned him down. Keldin was quiet in his task, eyes glazed and movements sluggish; the aftermath of MANA hitting him hard. Beside them, Phoebe did much the same for Annabel, although she worked much faster and when she was done, she turned to help Keldin.

There was a lot to clean.

Leon was only too willing to let them, and he made sure they understood he was grateful without forcing his voice across the wound he’d bitten in his tongue, but really he was watching the stranger.

Garrett.

He and Corvo were in low conversation with a woman who was so old Leon suspected she might be a ghost, eyes pearly white with blindness and almost as thin as the monster Garrett had made. It went on for a long time, long enough for Phoebe to pull his attention away from them once she was satisfied he was clean. The Queen of Beggars - didn’t she have a name? - had scrounged up new clothes for the Imperials, and all of them but Leon had discarded the ruined formalwear and changed swiftly; matching brown trousers and white cotton shirts, and if they were ragged then at least they were clean and didn’t smell of blood.

Keldin had cut what little remained of Leon’s red dress pants off him, and now they carefully slipped the shirt on him and then touched his ankles. Phoebe said his name softly, and when he tore his eyes off Corvo and Garrett and the Queen, she hovered her fingers over the metal pins that remained through his calf.

“... I don’t want to pull these out here, Leon, but the pants are going to scrape.” Understanding, Leon swallowed but nodded. “... Okay. I’ll do my best, okay? Keldin. Hey, Kel…” And once Keldin had registered her voice and done his best to focus: “Help him stay upright, alright?”

And Leon couldn’t help the jagged moan despite Phoebe using her hands to try and keep the fabric from catching and pulling on the ends of the prongs, and they nearly fell over when he had to put his weight on the pierced leg (which in reality meant his weight went on Keldin, who was shaking...
with the effort), but once it was done and they set Leon back down, he did feel better for being
clothed. Panting hard, trying to control the pain and the way it made him sweat, but Leon nodded
his thanks at them all the same.

Turned his gaze back to Garrett and Corvo. It was easier, to think about them.

Dawn was fast approaching now, the sky already turning dim grey. For a few minutes, the
conversation continued, and then Garrett seemed to excuse himself, nodded to the Queen, and
turned away. He didn’t pause on his way out, but he glanced over - one piercing blue and one
gentle brown - and Leon met his gaze until Garrett was out of sight.

Around him, on the ratty mattress the Queen had offered them, near the back corner of the
abandoned chapel, Keldin and Annabel were long unconscious. Phoebe was curled up with
Annabel, favouring her legs - the backs shiny with burns - but her eyes were open and she watched
Leon closely.

“We need to get some sleep, Leon,” she murmured. Nodding, Leon carefully twisted until he could
lay down, his head tucked against Keldin’s stomach. It was far from cold, in the outside air of The
City summer, but their bodies were warm all tangled together and Leon let himself dissolve into it.
His friends, his family - safe here, now, warm.

Corvo and the Queen spoke still, Corvo finally sitting down. It seemed an urgent conversation.

Stars swirled in Leon’s dreams when he slipped into them, and the warmth of the Messengers
stayed his nightmares.

Chapter End Notes

Another chapter that's a little on the shorter side, but I want this section to stand on its
own. AAAAA I've been looking forward to this bit for ages.
We're near the end of the road here, folks! Soon to be wrapping up and getting
everyone home again. I wouldn't worry though - I have PLENTY of plans for the
sequel, and given how ravenously I've been writing this one I can assure you it'll go up
pretty dang quickly.
If I had to guess, I'd say we've got one or two more chapters left at most, but don't
worry. I know all the unanswered questions that I've left and they will continue to be
asked in the sequel.
(Title ideas anyone? Ugh, titles are so damn hard).

Thanks!
The Enemy Of My Enemy Is Just As Fucked As I Am

Chapter Summary

In which Garrett turns a thief's hands to healing.

Chapter Notes

This took me a while! Partially because it was a big butt of a chapter, and partially because I had an idea and spent an entire all-nighter writing it up because it would not leave me the hell alone.
Also, here it is so all my Dishonored peeps should go read it okay shameless self-whoring over.

Onwards!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

His body ached in every possible way.

Garrett had slipped back into the Clocktower mere minutes before the sun had shown its crown over the horizon, and The City had begun to wake to a new nightmare that it didn’t even realise was happening yet. More than anything, he’d expected to have to fight the desire to sleep as soon as he was safe, but curiously it didn’t come. He was weary and sore, but upon considering his bed for a moment he found that he was, oddly, not particularly sleepy.

He’d assumed it was just the adrenaline failing to fade and instead unclipped his bow from his back, set it down on the table, and looked down at himself. The stench of Harlan’s underground dungeon was faint, now, but it still clung to him the way it had clung to Leon. It was impossible to blame the man for the mess that had been made of him. Even once they’d made their escape, it had taken the other two Messengers hours to get the water to run clear off his dark skin. Remnants of muck and blood clung to every part of Garrett’s leathers - evidence of the single-minded depravity that Leon had been subjected to.

So Garrett had stripped, rinsed himself down, dressed in the dark pants and silver silk shirt, and set about cleaning his gear. It was… peaceful, working with the leather as the sun rose and day overtook The City. For as long as it took, he cleaned down and dried every bit of leather, every buckle and strap. Cut the ropes that had scorched and rethreaded the Claw and his climbing harness, buffed off the scorch marks. There were some few pieces that had been damaged beyond repair and he would need to replace, but for the most part it had survived intact.

In fact, Garrett himself had survived intact. It was an odd feeling, knowing that he’d not only aided a group of Imperials who had - for all intents and purposes - essentially kidnapped him into
Auldale in the first place, but come out it more unscathed than them. It was too hard, to think of them as foreign invaders. Not when he’d seen them fight and bleed for each other, not when he’d found Leon curled up in the dark and his own filth with nothing left to offer but terrified sobs. It was too hard, to think of them as enemies, when they were all just tired and wounded and wanted to go home after everything Harlan had done to them.

And it was too easy, to think of them as allies, while they’d fought the Thief-Taker General. Harlan had been The City’s enemy for so long - Garrett had known it, even if he’d turned a blind eye to it. At some point, he had to concede: maybe it was better for The City to flounder than to asphyxiate.

Corvo and his people weren’t just faceless enemies, couldn’t be. Garrett had seen their faces too clearly. They were people. Foreign or not, they didn’t deserve what Harlan did to people, like they were playthings - and Garrett didn’t want to abandon them like he’d abandoned--

His hands clenched on leather, teeth gritted, and all in one movement Garrett threw it down, pushed away from the table. Spun on one foot, found his hands carding back through his own hair. His heart thumped against his chest, and he felt the magic rise up inside him, felt it burn painlessly in his eyes. Slowly, Garrett made his way back to his mirror, taking slow breaths and forcing his hands back to his sides.

Leaning in, Garrett finally allowed himself to study his reflection. He’d seen it, caught a glimpse when he’d washed himself off - and he’d known, of course he’d known, ever since the Primal had…

She’d…

_Gods_, and he had to apply _pronouns_ to her now, because the Primal had a face and a voice and an entire realm that had split so impossibly down the middle and crashed together with… Corvo had stood, through the arch, observed with wide eyes and no regard for the warped unreality space around him. He hadn’t even seemed bothered by the definitely-not-a-man who’d watched at his side, who’d quarrelled with the Primal like bitter siblings.

_Void_. He didn’t want to think it, but he knew better. That had been the Void, which meant the entity Corvo had conversed with had been the Outsider. _Attuned, she said_.

His right eye shone back in the mirror. The milkiness he’d finally grown accustomed to was gone, replaced by a powder blue of perfect clarity that was contained within his iris as colour should be. Tiny white flecks that moved with a shine all their own - invisible in the late morning sunlight streaming into the Clocktower.

Garrett pushed away from the mirror, ran a hand through his hair again, and then just sighed. “Maybe I can make friends with some moths, now.” Muttered snidely to himself, but he made his way over to his bed, sat down, and put his head in his hands. He hadn’t had _time_ to think about it when he’d been spat back into the real world. Hadn’t had the luxury to worry about the Primal, or what he was doing or why he suddenly felt _so good_. When he’d found himself in control of the focus, when he’d found that it didn’t hurt - not even in the slightest, and the magic swirled inside him when he called on it but it felt different, smoother - he hadn’t even paused to question it. Too many questions, too many mysteries.

The world had been on fire and Harlan had been _right there_ and they were in the middle of a battleground. He’d acted on instinct as much as anything else. And he’d been just fine that way, too far gone to worry about _control_ because it had been indisputably proven to him that he had none and he just hadn’t wanted to fucking die.
And when Corvo had told him to get Leon, he’d been on the verge of defiance. Light and magic had bubbled up in his chest and Garrett had wanted nothing more than to tell Corvo to go fuck himself. Familiar rage and searing red and Harlan had been right there and Garrett’s hands itched with the desire to crack open his ribcage and rip out his heart. Overwhelming, like the day on the rooftops with the Watch - and yet somehow, this time had been different, and he’d felt the surge of bloodlust riding the Primal as it swirled out under his skin, and been able to say no.

Later, when he’d found Leon and seen his soul glow such a weak yellow it was almost nothing, when he’d picked out the evidence of torture on every part of him, the bloodlust had become… something else. Even the smell of the dungeon hadn’t made Garrett want to vomit as much as the sheer scale of suffering that must have occurred in it.

He’d avoided pain as much as possible in his life, dodged fights and steered well away from violence. He’d thought what had been done to Basso had been bad. This… Garrett had never witnessed something like this.

When Harlan had been forced down the stairs by Corvo and Phoebe, when Garrett had turned and looked upon him in the flickering torchlight and realised that the man had not only inflicted this on Leon - on so many people - but enjoyed doing so, would continue to do so, was carrying out his perversions on The Whole Fucking City, it hadn’t been bloodlust that had roared to life then. It had been something else, something deeper than Garrett had words for, something base and carnal and… primal. It was rage and fear and desire all forced to exist at once. It was the terrified, broken sob ripped from the throat of a terrified, broken man.

Theoretically, Garrett knew what he’d done. He’d seen enough of the… creatures before, slinking in the dark, corrupted and changed by what Erin had done to them. In the most technical sense, Garrett understood that he’d twisted Harlan into one of the primitive monsters.

He’s always been a monster. I just gave him skin that matched.

And Garrett shied away from the thought, dug his fingertips into his temples and tried to forget how desperately he’d just wanted Harlan to suffer. To live, and anguish in it. It hadn’t been bloodlust - he had no desire to see Harlan’s blood. Death was too kind a mercy.

Taking a slow breath, Garrett forced down the memory of the light spilling out from the Primal inside him, forced away how rapturous it had felt, the euphoria that had cascaded after the magic and ignited along every nerve. Tried to ignore the heat that chased the memory even now and puddled in his gut, and the way it made him want to feel nausea - and didn’t.

Even once he succeeded, a thousand other thoughts rose up in its place, memories and feelings that had happened so fast, one after the other, things that Garrett didn’t have the first clue how to process. Indescribable, unimaginable pain as the Primal had torn- something- his soul- out of his body, so devastating and consuming that his senses had broken down, all thought had stopped; as if he hadn’t even existed anymore. The pealing whistle that had echoed and danced like a vibration instead of a song, and drawn him down into the darkness. How heavy and how simultaneously light Leon had been, clinging to him all the way to the Queen of Beggars’ chapel, face pressed desperately into Garrett’s chest.

Erin.

It had been an age since Garrett had carried anybody; not like that. Sure, while Erin had been his apprentice he’d had to help her home sometimes, but she’d always been at least able to get her feet
under her. The last time... it was a vague and blurry memory, lost in the parts of the orphanage that Garrett did his best to forget.

Everything in him hurt, but it was an almost pleasant hurt - the burn and complaint of muscles overused. The pain he was used to, the noxious headaches and twisting stomach... gone. Whatever the Primal had done to him, in the... Void, it didn't hurt anymore. He could feel it, even just now, simmering quietly in his bones, an echoed caress in every part of him. The magic was there, waiting for him to call it up.

Almost reflexively, Garrett did. Felt the heat rise in his eyes like the pleasure of a flame in winter, utterly painless. The Clocktower turned greyscale, light and shadow dissolving into bleached flatness. Garrett's body glowed white-blue when he looked down at himself; turned his hands, flexed the fingers. When he looked up, he could see all the way into the top of the rafters, where even the sunlight didn't quite reach. Tiny flashes of blue betrayed the insects flitting through the air - a bird hopped quietly along one beam, visible only by the glow of its body.

Garrett's eyes fell on his bow, winking innocently on his table, unfolded. It filtered down under his skin, the memory, until his hands felt like they were buzzing, the vibrations playing back up his arms. It was a curious tension, a low susurrus that sang through his chest and down into his stomach, coiling there. Almost arousal, except his heartbeat slowed and his breathing deeply evened and he felt so... focused. The other things cleared out of his mind, easing back into nothing but a clear light. It had felt like this in the Void place, when he'd realised the Primal had been threatening Erin and everything had sort of just... stopped inside him.

Feeling his body move like it belonged to another, Garrett rose and picked up his bow, turned it over in his hands. The metal was warm against his skin. Erin. She'd looked... good, despite her claim of dying. Longer hair than she'd ever grown out in The City, and she wasn't as whip thin either; the narrow slant of a thief had been replaced with the light curve of hard muscle, something Garrett associated more with an assassin who might be required to fight, except she hadn't borne any weapons when the Primal had summoned her. Her eyes had mirrored the milky blue-white at first, both of them, and then cleared to a crystal blue so pale it was almost white once the Primal had... cleansed, the other god had said.

Had the Baron been right, after all, in the end? Had Erin - and, by extension, Garrett himself - actually corrupted the Primal when it had lodged inside them, even though she was a literal god and not just nameless energy? Was that the only reason everything had gone so wrong?

He felt so good now, agile and powerful like he had before. Except it was more now, the constant embrace of magic and energy. It was the same sort of feeling as when he'd first figured out the right way to shoot a bow. Everything before had been struggle, even with instruction, trying to make the bow sit comfortably in his hands and hold the arrow steady and learning to release without force. The day he'd gotten it right hadn't offered instant mastery, but the whole thing had suddenly settled into a feeling of rightness, body and bow finally striking a harmonious note. His aim had still been terrible, but he'd realised that it wasn't a struggle to conquer the weapon - rather, that he needed to let his own movement flow into it, until they were all but one unit.

And this... This felt like that. Like the Primal had stopped fighting against his control and instead become streamlined with it. Garrett didn't need to stomp down on the magic and force it to obey - all he needed to do was relax into it, learn how it moved, and then ask it to move the way he wanted.

Bow in hand, the world in slightly curved slate greys and highlighted white, a faint blur that was somehow picked out in excruciating detail, Garrett made his way upstairs opened his chest of
arrows. Without looking, gaze in the rafters, watching the bird hop about in a flurry of glowing blue, he trailed his fingers along the feathers until he found the stiffest ones, and drew out a broadhead. It nocked to the bowstring and slid against the arrow rest, and Garrett pulled back to full draw like drawing in breath.

Aimed up, and for a moment he contemplated the bird. He was drawn to the flashing blue, found himself wondering if he could strike the moving target with precision. It wasn’t like shooting a man - it was just a bird. Holding his breath, bow utterly still in his grasp, and instead Garrett plucked on the magic that shivered in hands and gut, teased it out into a weave until it breached his skin and clung to his arrow. It felt… different, this time - he was chasing the light clarity that had overtaken him when he’d levelled his bow at the Primal herself, like the ringing of a bell, but this… It spiralled around the arrow and consumed it, a shadow he could see even through focus, and the magic knotted into the arrowhead so tightly that it looked like ink; dark and softly undulating. Instead, he felt… undone. It wasn’t a bad feeling - Garrett held the magic, the heat in his eyes and the feather-touch ripples of almost-arousal and his body remained steady even as he felt like he was made of spiderweb. As if the slightest breeze would take him apart, unravel him into shadows; into a ghost. It wasn’t a bad feeling.

Garrett didn’t even blink, and when he released the arrow it was nothing more than the relaxation of two fingers and a slow exhale. It was utterly silent, lacking even the usual thin whistle, and it struck the rafter just below the bird - the creature startled, let out a raucous screech, and took off in a flurry of panicked feathers. Exactly where Garrett had meant to put it: just a bird, but the animal was alive and didn’t deserve to die.

Relaxing, Garrett lowered his bow and watched curiously as the shadowy magic he’d attached to the arrow billowed out around impact. It looked similar to black smoke, except it clung to the wood as if it was liquid, twisting against it until it - slowly - consumed itself and became nothing. Releasing the Primal, Garrett watched the world snap back into colour and proper depth. Sunlight filled the Clocktower; it didn’t reach the very top or the very bottom, but Garrett studied the rafter he’d struck. The arrow was buried halfway into it, far deeper than it should have sunk, and where the shadows had clung was… eroded, for lack of a better word. The wood was pitted and black, as if some unfathomable creature had taken a bite and left decay in its place.

All at once, Garrett shivered, closed his arrow chest, set his bow atop it. What in the hells would happen if he did that to a person? If he’d pushed more energy into the arrow than the small fragment he had? Staring at the damage, and realising he had no easy way of retrieving the arrow, a thought occurred to him. “... Damn. I really hope that’s not load-bearing.” Well… if the beam decayed and broke, he’d be sure to find out.

Different, to the glowing light that had shone at the end of his arrow in the Void, but Garrett decided he could chase that later. Maybe it was best not to try and test the bounds of whatever new magic the Primal had awoken in him while he was inside the Clocktower.

Not yet noon, when Garrett glanced out the window to gauge the sky. He was a little unsettled, when he paused to take stock of himself again. The adrenaline from the fight, from carrying Leon across half The City and then the harried discussion with Corvo and the Queen about how they were going to get back to the Imperial ship, which apparently had been moored several leagues away from the low coastline beyond the farming districts - there was no doubt it had long since faded. Considering everything that had happened in the last few days, Garrett should have been exhausted. Instead, he merely felt sore. Weary, yes, but he didn’t have it in him to sleep through the day.

Stretching, he made his way back to the workbench by the brazier, burned down to embers now.
The rucksack was still on it, coins and trinkets he’d pickpocketed and hadn’t done anything with yet. Absently, he traced his fingers across the surface. It hadn’t even been twenty four hours since Corvo had pinned him against the bench and forced his cooperation.

And he’d since broken into the Watchmanor, helped break out a man who amounted to little more than a prisoner of war, been an accessory to blowing the hell out of an Auldale estate (and he’d had nothing to do with it, but it wouldn’t matter when it got out he’d helped the party responsible), hidden away the now-terrorists, and…

And.

Garrett leant against the workbench, fingers curling around the edge either side of him with enough pressure to hurt. *And.*

And he’d turned the Thief-Taker into a monster.

It only made sense, that if Erin had been able to do it while possessed by the Primal, that it would be part of the magics they had access to. It only made sense, that he was capable of such a thing. *It only made sense,* because he had felt the chokehold it had had on him fade and he’d been able to choose through the burn and the haze, able to choose that he didn’t want to kill, because he never wanted to kill - except he *had* chosen not to kill, and what he’d done instead was arguably… worse.

Garrett shook himself, tried to bury that as deep as he could. He couldn’t do anything about it. He had precisely twenty thousand things to think about, and he could do something about very few of them; what he’d done to Harlan, what he’d seen in the Void, whatever had happened with the Primal - all of those things were out of his control. *Everything is out of my control.*

No. Not everything. There were things he could do, things he *should* do. Dwelling on it… Garrett didn’t even have words for the storm in his chest, emotions he’d never experienced, that he couldn’t have articulated if his life depended on it. It had only been one night, but everything was so monumentally different, and Garrett needed… normal. He needed *normal.*

“So…” There were endless things he couldn’t change, but there were things he could do. He’d need to get hold of some fabric to replace his cloak and scarf, lost to the fire - but he always had leather on hand. He needed to sit down and replace the bits of his gear that couldn’t be repaired - and repair the bits that could.

*That.* That was a good idea. Not only was it necessary if he ever wanted to safely leave the Clocktower again, but it would be time consuming. Perhaps enough so to get him through the whole day. Tonight, he’d gather up his medical supplies and the bottle of painkiller, and make his way back to the abandoned chapel. Basso was on the way - he’d explain what he could and probably take some of Basso’s supplies as well. Garrett kept enough stocked in the Clocktower for himself, but nowhere near enough for five people.

The sooner the Imperials got out of The City, the better for everyone.

If Garrett was honest with himself - *When have I ever been honest with anyone?* - then it wasn’t just hurrying to get them out of The City. It was too hard, after last night, to hate the Imperials. Unsettling, still, their loyalty to a Crown and it sat lodged like ice that idea that they would still return to conquer them, that they thought of the subjugation of The City and everything that set it apart from the Empire as *progress,* as something to be *celebrated* - but they were each and every one of them a product of circumstance. He could hate someone born of different circumstance all he wanted, but it didn’t mean a damn thing in the end.
And they had protected him. He was their enemy just as much as they ought to be his, and they’d captured him and bound him and threatened him. And they’d protected him. Garrett had gotten out of the ordeal largely unscathed - but he remembered only too vividly the feeling of being pulled into Corvo’s chest even as it had jerked with the impact of a bolt.

He’d been frozen. It stung in his throat, the acknowledgement, but Garrett made it anyway as he pushed away from the workbench and headed down to get his leathers from where he’d left them. He’d been frozen, immobile with the whistling distant song in his ears, watching the guard who’d aimed true between his eyes and fired without hesitation. Garrett hadn’t even felt the adrenaline of imminent death hit him - just a yawning hollow pit that brought with it the certainty that this was how he died.

All but forgotten about Corvo until he’d acted, a split second later. So much taller than Garrett was he that the bolt meant for Garrett’s forehead had struck him in the back, and just as with everything else about the man, Garrett didn’t understand.

But… He’d protected Garrett. Followed Garrett into the room that looked eerily like part of the Forgotten Library, even when he’d been desperate to find Leon. Swirling white-blue and calling to him, singing, wanting - and then dragging him away when Garrett had stupidly picked up the mesh cage and the orbs inside it. “... I never could resist something shiny.” Bitter.

Blinked them away, even if the feeling of Corvo’s magic consuming him had been like having his skin peeled away and replaced with sewer water. In the end, even as incoherent as the memory of being dumped back into the real world was, Garrett was sure that only Corvo’s quick hands had saved them both from dying in that explosion.

So… for all that everything was so utterly fucked up, and that he’d been threatened and scared and coerced, Corvo had still protected him. Still saved his life.

“Does saving my life count if he’s the one who put me there in the first place?” Garrett asked the air. The Clocktower ticked back, its mechanical heartbeat deep and steady, and that was all the answer that Garrett was ever going to get. It would just have to be enough.

The rest of the day passed drowning himself in whatever work he could put his hands to. Once he’d finished restoring his leathers, he’d taken up his bow and completely recalibrated it, despite knowing it didn’t need it. After that he’d taken one of Erin’s leftover sketchbooks (it was, save for one picture he hadn’t been able to bring himself to burn, empty) and begun designs for his new cloak and quiver. He was no master of art, but for simple concepts and blueprints he had serviceable skill.

The last few hours of sunlight, Garrett actually convinced himself to sleep through.

…

When he walked into Basso’s cellar, the man glanced up, offered a vague grunt of recognition, and then looked down again. A moment later, he look up and stared.

“... What the fuck…?” Muttered slowly, the paper he’d been frowning at still in hand but coming around the desk to get a closer look. “What fucking happened?” And Garrett shifted on his feet uneasily - bow clipped in place but hidden under the rucksack, cloak and scarf missing, quiver gone. He wasn’t entirely sure, but he thought he was probably standing differently; he felt different. It usually showed.

Instead, Garrett gestured to the couches and slipped the rucksack off his shoulders. Confusion
showed more acutely in Basso’s face, but he led the way over and sat down. He took the paper with him. Following, Garrett set the bag down and folded himself onto the other couch; he trusted Basso, but it didn’t mean he liked sharing a seat with him. It wasn’t personal - Garrett generally disliked proximity. He allowed it, when he had to.

“Well?” Basso added impatiently, when Garrett remained silent. He set the paper down, leaned forward with elbows on knees. “Seriously, Garrett, what…” Watching him, trying to figure out what to say, Garrett saw the moment Basso spotted his eyes. “Garrett…”

A nervous little lick of his lips, something Garrett hadn’t slipped up on in years, and he looked away. “Well… the good news is, I’m cured. The bad news is, I was dying.” Not the most eloquent thing he’d ever said. Still, it echoed in the back of his mind, what the Outsider had said. He won’t live much longer. It left no doubt, anymore; the Primal had been killing him.

“What?”

Basso didn’t understand, and Garrett watched him turn over both of those things together, a full blown freak out forestalled but not entirely averted. Before Basso could add something else that, no doubt, would be wonderfully articulate, Garrett shook his head slightly and sat back. “You mean my eye? Yeah, not the makeover I’d have picked.” The glib comment went right over Basso’s head, and Garrett couldn’t help the sigh. He also couldn’t quite meet Basso’s gaze, and he wasn’t entirely sure why. “… I met the Primal.”

A blink. “Ya… met… What in all twelve hells are you talking about, Garrett? You were dying and now ya ain’t?”

Garrett nodded. “You remember that scintillating conversation we had about the Outsider?” As if Basso could forget, but Garrett was already uncomfortable; he wasn’t used to feeling like this, and sitting down he was restless. He’d sat down all day, night time was for action. When Basso nodded, opening his mouth to reply, Garrett cut across him. “She’s… like him. Like the Outsider.”

Green eyes unblinking, Basso slowly sat back in his seat and stared. “… She.”

“Mm.”

“What the fuck, Garrett.”

Sighing, but Garrett ran a hand back through his hair, pushing his hood back as he did. “… Those Imperials I told you about. Well… Corvo was waiting for me when I got back home.” At that, Basso went shockingly pale, and Garrett watched his eyes do a thorough sweep of his body, searching for injuries. Shook his head. “I’m fine.” And if his tone was all twisted and odd at that, then who the fuck could blame him? “He… dragged me off to the Watchmanor.” And maybe Garrett didn’t want to tell him exactly how Corvo had done so, and maybe it had nothing to do with his pride, but when Basso just looked closer to that freak out, Garrett decided that he had to tell him everything else.

So he did.

When he was done, Basso had fetched a bottle of whiskey, offered Garrett a glass - seemed utterly unsurprised when he’d declined - and sat back down to take a swig directly from the bottle. “… She’s a fucking god? And you… What, you got a piece of her stuck inside you?”

Frowning, Garrett shook his head. “Having seen her, I’m pretty sure I’d just burn up. It’s more like…” And he couldn’t quite parse what it felt like, so he summoned up the magic and focused,
studying Basso’s gleaming yellow absently while he contemplated it.

Basso jerked back, and then leaned forward. “... It don’t hurt?”

“No. Not anymore. Like I said, I think we - Erin and me - ended up with... bits we weren’t supposed to have.” And he shrugged, released the magic. “Used to feel like someone holding my head under the river. Now it’s... I dunno - good.”

For a long minute, Basso just studied him. Bastard waited until Garrett got uncomfortable under the scrutiny to snort. “So. Erin, huh?”

A hum. “Looked good, for a dead woman. Told me to go fuck myself too, so she must be okay.”

“No, she didn’t.”

“Do you want a transcript?”

Basso rolled his eyes, but there was a more relaxed line to his shoulders now, sitting comfortably on the couch, stress melting away as his fear dissolved. Or - well. Maybe it was the whiskey. “So these Messengers.” Nodded towards the rucksack. “You’re really gonna help them get away?”

“Bit late for that, Basso. I’m sure as hells not gonna help them stick around.” And the tension returned a little at that, Basso squinting up at Garrett with slightly less clear eyes than he’d had earlier. Thankfully for them both, he corked the whiskey bottle and set it on the shelf before leaning forward.

“Garrett... Look, ya did what you had to, I get it, but the General’s gone. The Primal’s gone - and from what you said, I doubt she’s gonna give a rat’s shit if we’re invaded or not. The Empress is coming for us.” Voice low. “You gotta stay outta this.”

This time, Garrett’s eyes narrowed. “You’re a bit late for that, too.” And besides, what was he supposed to do? What was he supposed to have done? Once Northcrest had been killed and Harlan had taken over, once they’d lost the Primal... it was only a matter of time regardless of what any of them did.

“So you’re friends with them now?”

“Haunting might be a more appropriate term.”

And Garrett wasn’t prepared for Basso to slam his hand down on the table. More frustration that Garrett had expected spilled out from the action, and he twitched back, found himself crouched on the sofa, feet wide and unsteady under him, waiting for attack. Twitchier than he should be. Hard to forget. Something that might be regret flashed across Basso’s face in a grimace. “You’re not a fucking ghost, Garrett. You get too involved with this shit though, and you might become one.”

“Well then, I’ll be sure to bang on your windows.”

“It’s not a fucking joke, Garrett!” Shouted, and even as Garrett eased over the back of the couch so he was standing closer to shadows and had a barrier between them, he recognised the edge of fear in Basso’s voice.

Given everything he’d learned, Garrett wasn’t sure why he was so afraid. “I really doubt they’ll try to hurt me, Basso. I’m not an idiot, I’ll keep my guard up, but they just want to go home.” And he wasn’t even sure how to begin explaining why he was so sure of that, but it came off them in waves - their desire to leave and never come back.
At least… Corvo’s. Garrett wasn’t really sure of the others.

“And you trust them? They dragged you off and practically delivered ya to the General, never fucking mind how. Which, by the way,” and Basso pointed at him, although he kept from leaning forward, eyes flashing to the couch now between them, “I know you ain’t told me how he got you there.”

“I also told you Corvo saved my life.” And it grated, again, admitting it, but--

But what? Garrett’s hands curled at his sides, holding Basso’s gaze out of pure stubbornness. Why was he so hellsbent on defending them? In theory, Basso should be right. And yet…

Basso snorted, throwing himself back on the couch with a disgusted glare. “Yeah, sure. It doesn’t count if he’s the one who put it in danger.”

Well. Turned out Garrett was going to get an answer to that question.


“Yeah yeah, you had to carry him out yourself. I heard you the first time.” But there was something dark in his face now, something troubled, and the fire had gone out of his voice. Not angry, anymore. Garrett wasn’t entirely certain what had set him off in the first place. Why was he so scared? It wasn’t as if Garrett was in any danger now.

Pointedly, Basso looked at the rucksack. “… So, what in the hells have you got in there?” Garrett wasn’t sure he should tell him.

“It’s a nice night, Basso. I was going to have a picnic.”

“You’re going back to help them, aren’t you?” Growled, and there was something… The Primal tickled, not in his eyes but in his chest, a strange little feeling that almost felt like knocking. It wasn’t anger in Basso’s voice, no matter what he wanted Garrett to think. It was… He was…

Garrett shook himself. “You should be honoured that I asked.” Teasing, a little. The tension was getting to him, a conflict he probably should have expected, but it hadn’t even crossed his mind that Basso would be so at odds with Corvo and his people after learning the truth. So easy, far too easy, to forget that they were part of the faceless aggression of the Empire.

But he couldn’t do it. He knew their faces now.

Scowling, Basso didn’t even bother to get up and instead offered a violent gesture towards the ceiling. “You know where I keep my shit.” Muttered, even as he reached for the whiskey and uncorked it again. Garrett hesitated, trying to think of something that wasn’t Sorry Basso, your ass doesn’t do it for me, and before he could put together something halfway placating Basso fixed him in a glare. “Go on, fuck off. You’re wasting shadows.”
Giving in, Garrett picked up the rucksack and slipped out without another word. He could fix whatever Basso’s damage was later; it was better to let him seethe it out anyway. Besides which, Garrett wasn’t exactly good at conflict resolution. He was more a conflict avoidance kind of man. The Crippled Burrick was closed this late, approaching midnight, but Garrett scaled the side of the building and let himself in through the attic window.

Once he’d gathered up what seemed like enough bandages and catgut, along with another bottle of clear spirits that even Basso wouldn’t drink, a jar of ointment that did nothing to heal burns as far as he knew but damn well made them hurt less, and another (larger) needle, he made his way to the chapel.

Corvo was awake, when he got there, standing watch by the pile of Messengers sharing a mattress. The Queen greeted him as he passed, alerting them to his presence - and Garrett was too used to her uncanny ability to sense him coming to wonder how she knew when he was concealed in shadow - so Garrett murmured a greeting back. Tension, in Corvo’s shoulders as Garrett approached, but no aggression.

All the same, Garrett stayed a few steps back and carefully put the rucksack down. Corvo glanced at it. “Medical supplies,” Garrett offered. “Figured there’s no point saving your sorry hides if you all just bleed out afterwards.”

Something in Corvo’s face twitched, at the implication that Garrett had somehow been their saving grace, but then it turned into a little half smile. “Thanks. I appreciate it.” A glance down at his people, no hesitation to take his eyes off Garrett. “... You any good at using them?”

Taken aback, Garrett absently flexed his arm. The stitches he’d put in - gods, was it really only the night before - tugged slightly as he did, but they’d held even after carrying Leon all this way. “Pretty good.” With a little smirk, not that he intended to explain the joke. “Why? Aren’t you?” And Garrett wasn’t really sure if he’d actually intended to stay and help patch them up at all, but he knew before Corvo even replied that he would. The little grimace said it all.

“I can do a field dressing just fine, but I never got the hang of the fiddly stuff.” Honestly not sure if he was being played, or joked with, but Garrett glanced down at the Messengers and found Leon and Phoebe staring back at him in silence, and realised that he didn’t really care.

So he shrugged. “Training costs extra.” Even as he knelt and opened the bag, keeping half an eye on Corvo just in case. Instead, he got a snort and Corvo knelt too, offering Phoebe a hand to her feet. She winced and bit down on a moan as she moved, too light on her feet for it to be anything but pain. A darker patch on the leg of her pants showed where she’d bled over the day. “Got an inventory?”

Corvo helped Leon sit up, left Phoebe to wake Annabel, and gave Keldin a little shake. “Burns, cuts, couple of bolts. Leon’s… worse.” Garrett glanced at Leon as Corvo spoke, caught his gaze for half a second before he looked away sharply. Frowned. “... Keldin’s our best medic, but he took a shot of MANA yesterday, so I wouldn’t trust him to clap his own hands together.”

Keldin remained asleep after the single shake, and Corvo seemed content to leave him. “This is MANA,” Phoebe forestalled Garrett’s next question, and offered him a little glass vial, almost like a bottle in miniature except the neck expanded into a bulbous curve and was fully sealed. The contents didn’t glow, exactly, but they were fluorescent blue. For a moment, they all just exchanged looks, and then Phoebe shrugged. “What? He’s got magic, it should work fine. Besides, you said training costs extra.”

“Keldin combusted the rest of the MANA.” From Corvo, more stern than Garrett had expected. He
inspected the vial.

Phoebe rolled her eyes. “He took an extra. I don’t see the problem, you trust him.” She jerked a thumb at Garrett. At that, Garrett just raised an eyebrow at Corvo - trust? Garrett would readily admit that he was helping them half (more) for selfish reasons, and trust had nothing to do with it.

Despite what he’d espoused to Basso.

*Ah, shit.*

Corvo sighed. “... I do, and that’s not the point. Piero designed this stuff with Void influence, Phoebe. He’s not connected to the Void.” Mm. On second thought, Garrett offered the vial back to Corvo, who took it. He had very little desire to fuck with that.

“What are you doing here?” It came waspishly, even as Annabel sat up and gritted her teeth in pain. She remained leaning on one arm, trembling faintly, but it was with a glare that she met Garrett’s gaze.

Raised eyebrow, but Garrett just dug out the burn stuff and tossed it to Phoebe. He was sure that Annabel actually considered him an enemy, but he just... wasn't threatened by her. He felt too good, the Primal a quiet constant and somehow comforting now. “I was going to sit on my ass and stargaze, but I suppose I could help you out instead.”

“Anna,” came Phoebe's low voice before anything else could be exchanged. “He has no reason to help us, and he is. Leave him be.” While she spoke, she turned Annabel where she sat and opened the little jar.

Ignoring the warning, only Corvo's sharp voice stopped her from snapping again. “Annabel.” Enough to make her click her mouth shut. “Enough. Don't make me tell you again.” There was a distant thunder in those words that set Garrett’s hair on end, even when it wasn’t directed at him. Silently, he reminded himself not to fuck with Corvo Attano.

Avoiding the weak glare he found himself locked in, Garrett turned away from the Messengers and looked at Corvo. “You still got that bolt in your back?” A nod. “You gonna take it out, or is this a fashion trend in the Empire?” For a moment, Corvo gave him an odd look, even as Garrett started digging out all his stuff for sutures and set up. Garrett was beginning to wonder if he was wasting his time here, but when he held out the spool of catgut with a length pulled taut, Corvo slipped the dagger from Keldin’s thigh holster and cut it all the same. “Turn around.”

“Can you show me?” Slunk closer, Phoebe’s low voice as she moved away from Annabel and peeked.

“You got one too?” Blood on her thigh.

“Mm, but it’s not that. Anna’s got cuts.” And they both knew she wouldn’t likely let Garrett close enough to do anything about them - and Garrett had zero interest in trying to make her. If she wanted to bleed, let the bitch.

Rolling his eyes, Garrett turned back to Corvo, frowning at the bolt head - a jagged wound in an expanse of tan skin. Corvo still held his shirt in his hands, a faint tension in his shoulders that suggested he disliked not wearing it. Relatable, but Garrett seriously didn’t have the patience for it. “Sure, whatever. Sit down, Corvo, you think I can reach up that high?” A little tut of impatience as Corvo obeyed. “And relax your damn shoulders. You’re just gonna make the stitches loose.”

Too much tension while Garrett stitched the wound shut, and the thread would only be loose when
Corvo finally relaxed. It was a lesson that Garrett learned one too many times the hard way.

The bolt was a mess. Dried blood formed a thick crust around the puncture, and where it had rotated as Corvo moved was torn flesh. Unbuckling his gloves, Garrett stripped them off and set them by the rucksack; if he could avoid getting them covered in blood again, that’d be great. “Hm. This’ll suck.” And it was Corvo’s own fault, really, so Garrett flicked off the dry blood until enough of the bolt shaft (what remained of it) was visible for him to get a grip on, got a good hold, and yanked the whole thing out in one go. A shudder ran through Corvo as he did, and a low choked noise slipped out, but he didn’t scream so Garrett counted himself impressed.

New blood welled up and spilled down his back immediately, a deep crimson, but after a second of observation Garrett felt reassured enough that it wasn’t a life-threatening bleed and picked up a scrap of cloth from the pile of supplies. It went into the bowl of spirits, soaked a moment - and Garrett ignored the way it already swirled faintly pink from the blood on his hands - and then he got to work cleaning up the wound. Corvo hissed at the touch of alcohol, and his shoulders pulled taut again, but he didn’t flinch.

Until Garrett had gotten it as clean as he could and threaded the needle, he let it be. Then, “Seriously, relax.” He was obeyed; Corvo held the tension in his abdomen, Garrett could see, but as long as it wasn’t his shoulders it didn’t matter.

Phoebe asked questions, as he worked, and part of him was reminded of teaching Erin. She’d been as perceptive as she was willful, and had peppered him with questions about everything they did - from why it was done that way to what the point of it was. It made Garrett’s chest tight, made it all too obvious that he was acting emotionally, without the control of logic.

He wasn’t here because he trusted these Imperials. He was here because Erin was alive, and not because of Garrett - in spite of Garrett. He was here because if he helped them, when he’d failed to help Erin, then maybe it wasn’t too late.

But Garrett buried that, because it sucked, and besides that it made his hands tremble. He needed to be steady.

So he answered Phoebe’s questions as concisely as he could, in short clipped tones and the odd bit of sarcasm, and it helped when she nodded sagely and simply took his answers on board, because it was so utterly un-Erin that Garrett could put his lost apprentice out of his mind. When he was finally done with Corvo, the man tested his range of movement, seemed a little disgruntled by it, and slipped his shirt back on. For a second, Garrett wanted to voice opposition - he’d brought bandages with him for a damn reason - but then he thought better of it. Let Corvo do what he wanted; if he got the damn thing infected, on his head be it. Garrett turned to Phoebe.

“Well, this is gonna be a real bitch. Press down.” Gestured vaguely at Phoebe’s thigh, above the wound. “Hard.” Garrett wasn’t particularly well versed in the circulatory systems of the human
body, but he knew the basics; it wasn’t spurting, and Phoebe was still alive and lucid a day after receiving the wound, so Garrett wasn’t too worried about her bleeding out, but Corvo’s had largely clotted up already. Pulling the bolt had torn open some fresh wounds, so it hadn’t been bloodless - but the more blood there was, the bigger pain in the ass it was to stitch shut. Snagging another rag from the rucksack, Garrett got to mopping up the excess blood. The wound kept bleeding as he did, and he glanced up at Phoebe; frowning. “If it doesn’t hurt, you aren’t pressing hard enough.”

Her frown deepened, but she shifted slightly and leaned down on her own leg, pressing harder. Pain flickered through her face, already drawn, but she didn’t ease up. There was a faint noise, from Annabel - if not for Corvo’s presence, a steady dark thing at Garrett’s back, he was sure that it would have been something far sharper.

It didn’t stop the bleeding entirely, but Garrett got it down to a degree he was happy to work with, wiped it with the alcohol cloth, and murmured to keep the pressure up. Phoebe groaned softly when he first put the needle to her flesh, but she didn’t flinch away and she didn’t let up. They were tough, these Messengers. When he glanced up, evaluating her face as best he could, there was something shining in her eyes that he couldn’t identify.

Corvo stayed close, observing everything Garrett did, but he didn’t ask questions; didn’t say a word. That, too, Garrett was grateful for. It took longer to stitch up Phoebe, but once he was satisfied Garrett dropped the needle back in the bowl, dunked his hands to get the blood off, and considered them.

“Right. You can wrap your own leg?” he asked Phoebe, who scooped up the smallest roll of bandages and nodded. “He’s unhurt?” gestured towards Keldin, and when it was met with nods he hummed. “Leave him to his beauty sleep then. You think you can take care of her?” At Phoebe, because Garrett didn’t expect anything resembling a reasonable response from Annabel, and he didn’t have all night. When she nodded, he returned it and picked up the bowl to go dump the bloody contents. Was back a minute later to refill and soak everything again. Cut five lengths of catgut from Basso’s supply, considered the spool, and cut three more. “Use the bigger needle,” at Phoebe. “Your girlfriend can handle it.”

Annabel sputtered and Phoebe went red, but even their apparent willingness to sleep together as four didn’t explain how close Annabel was to Phoebe all the time, how deeply she’d glared while Garrett had worked. Maybe it wasn’t true - he didn’t really care.

“For a moment, Leon’s gaze flashed to Corvo, something almost like desperation in his gaze, and then he - carefully, too carefully - swallowed and leaned forwards slightly, tilting his chin up. Took a slow breath. “Aw-ite.” Slurred and unsteady, as little movement as necessary. Garrett’s eyes narrowed. It almost sounded drugged, or drunk, but everything else about the man seemed lucid. In response, Leon looked away, swallowed painfully again, and opened his mouth.

Blood and saliva mixed, his teeth stained red. He hadn’t been swallowing it or spitting it out enough, and it was immediately apparent why; it had mostly clotted, only a red smear of fresh blood as it was revealed, but Leon had bitten his tongue clean through. Despite himself, Garrett winced as he saw, all too aware that without his scarf masking his face it was obvious, but then inspected it a little closer. It was a messy wound, uneven and to the side. It didn’t look as if it had
been inflicted with intent. “Must’ve been a hell of a party,” muttered, and feeling guilty a second later but Leon only forced a painful smile as he shut his mouth again. Garrett tried to forget about the two missing teeth. “Dunno what I can do for that.” Sighed. “But I can have a look at the rest. Leg first?”

Leon paled, but there was no hesitation as he shifted and eased his leg out, whining softly as he did. The uppermost prong was holding up the fabric of his pants, near the top of his calf - the other two had been put through further apart, one through the meat of the muscle and one close to the ankle, slightly sideways. Garrett studied them, frowning. “… I can take them out and stitch up the wounds, but I have no idea if that will do you any good. Might be able to walk on the damn thing, but not for long if it goes bad.”

“No.” Corvo, rumbled at his back. Garrett glanced up, and then looked back at Leon without moving. For them, Corvo might make the calls - but Garrett was not theirs, and he wouldn’t do it without Leon’s consent. Eyes wide, Leon stared back and then, slowly, nodded.

Only then did Garrett shift forward, gently taking a grip on Leon’s ankle and twisting slightly so his leg was turned. That was enough to elicit a whimper. “Okay, forget what I said before. This is gonna suck.” A glance up at Corvo to get his attention, and he seemed… unsettled? “Hold him still for me.”

And Garrett expected fear, when he glanced up to meet Leon’s gaze as Corvo knelt and got a grip; gentle but firm, holding Leon in place. Instead, shining copper-brown, he was met with unwavering trust. It made something flip in his chest, and Garrett looked down to get away from it.

Nope. No.

Gods, how the hells did these idiots conquer all the Isles?

Leon screamed, when Garrett drew out the first rod. Jerked in Corvo’s grasp, and dissolved into shuddery moans and whimpers as Garrett stitched him up. Again, on the second. By the time Garrett braced and yanked out the third, he was ashen and shivering, head rolling against Corvo’s shoulder - incoherent. For as much as it made Garrett’s heart race - and it did, listening to pain, let alone knowing he was causing it, let alone not even being sure it would help in the long run - it also made the job easier, that Leon was all but limp.

They looked at the brand, after Garrett had wrapped Leon’s leg in bandages, and they did nothing. It was hot to the touch, angry red, and when Corvo pressed a little too hard on the swelling, the skin popped and thin rivulets of sticky white and blood seeped out. Infected to all hell, but Garrett couldn’t do much about it. It would just have to wait until they got back to their own physician. Internally, Garrett hoped they hadn’t been stupid enough to sail all the way here without bringing one on the boat, but he didn’t voice the opinion.

He wasn’t responsible for them, damn it. Not even if he was acting like it.

His failure to Erin didn’t make him responsible for them.

Fuck me.

Instead, he made them soak Leon’s hands in the bowl of alcohol. That woke him up again real quick, but Garrett grabbed his wrists when he jerked and was surprised to find he had enough strength to hold them easily. Leon sobbed quietly as he was denied, but Corvo murmured into his ear, and Leon’s eyes landed on Garrett, and he calmed even if the pain was still obvious on his face.

Afterwards, Garrett stood up and stepped back, stretching out the kinks in his body. Joints popped, loud but painless, and he relaxed again as Corvo approached him. Leon watched them.
“Thank you,” Corvo began, his voice low. “You didn’t have to do all of this, and yet-”

“No, I didn’t.” Quite casual an interruption, but Garrett made sure he had Corvo’s eyes. “So when you invade The City- Don’t bother denying it, you’re Imperials, and I’m not stupid. So when you invade The City… just remember that I did you all a favour.” And it wasn’t the real reason he was here and Garrett didn’t care. If they thought he was heartless, then they’d leave him alone - and besides… Opportunities like this didn’t present themselves very often.

In the end, Garrett still had to look out for himself. Surviving an invasion and the drastic shift of government and law that was sure to follow would take everything Garrett could get his hands on.

Instead of seeming upset, Corvo just nodded. “I will.”

“Mm. One more favour then, before I go.” Stepping away, Garrett picked out the last two things from his rucksack: the bottle of cinnamon liquid and a last second addition, a canteen full of water. Ignoring Corvo’s narrowed gaze, Garrett opened the canteen, measured out a dose of the drug, and poured it in. A moment of consideration, judging the volume of water, and he measured out another dose. Added it. Sealed up the cinnamon bottle and put it carefully back in the bag. Corvo’s eyes tracked every movement - no doubt he recognised it. “Do not drink the whole thing, that stuff is powerful. Too much and it’ll mess with your head. Even with a little, it might screw up your balance.”

Not quite meeting Corvo’s gaze, this time, as he handed the canteen over. They both knew that, all too well.

But the voice was gentle when he responded. “... Thank you.” Like it was all he had to offer. Well… as of this moment, it sort of was. “... In the Empire, it’s a capital crime to refuse to assist a Messenger,” and Garrett’s eyes narrowed, but Corvo sounded almost… sheepish. “But we’re not in the Empire, and you’ve taken an incredible risk to do so.”

“We’re not gonna hug,” Garrett interjected before that could go any further. No way was he going to stick around for some mushy speech. “You owe me. So when you get around to conquering this place and murdering whatever’s left of the aristocracy, just leave my head on my shoulders, thanks.”

There was a shadow of a smirk on Corvo’s face. “And your hands in working order. You have my word.”

...

When Garrett returned the following night, all the Imperials were gone.

Chapter End Notes

Disclaimer: Do not follow Garrett's medical advice! Seriously, just don't. He makes do with what he knows, precious magpie, but he's not exactly aseptic and mostly just doing what seems to work without a deep enough understanding of why. Also, Corvo is a sneaky bastard, acting like they couldn't have stitched themselves up without Garrett's help.

Mmmmm this chapter. It works fine for what it's supposed to do, but eh... It gave me a
lot of trouble. Idk. On the editing sweep, it's not so bad actually haha. Next up - epilogue! And then we're all done! Wild fucking ride, friends.

The sequel has a title! It will be called *What Lurks In The Dark.*
Chapter Summary

In which, perhaps, the music begins.

Chapter Notes

A sincere thanks to Haethel for letting me nick her name!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There was darkness, now, in this room that had once housed not only light but arcane knowledge so utterly lost that even the one who’d hoarded it could not have comprehended it all. The far end of the room, whence the light had come, was cracked - the statue’s head lay sundered on the floor, and where glass had given it wings, there was now only shattered fragments. Even the wind, if it had dared to venture so deep into the dark, could have bled on the glass.

Embers burned, still; tiny things that clung on for dear life in the last ashes of what had once been books, like mewling kittens left to die. There was rubble, too, a ruin of stonework that may have once been a table, or a chamber, or both. It lay strewn around the corners and walls of the room, a makeshift summoning circle around what was, to the trained eye that studied it, a very deliberate detonation. What shelves there had been were splintered firewood now, small fragments clinging to the walls where the rest was blackened and crumbled on the floor.

And everywhere, scorch marks.

A trespasser slipped into the room, stepped over lost tomes and cracking wood without regard. Not a glance was spared for the beheaded statue, nor for the last burning remains, nor for the black stain that remained on the floor. Around her neck hung an oblique orb that glowed bright purple-blue, illuminating her way. From the centre of the room, she studied the wreckage.

Her head cocked. Listening. There was silence, but yet she listened.

Then, with precise steps, she crept to one corner of the room and overturned a chuck of rock. Underneath lay a book of average size and length, bound in white leather. It bore neither scuffage nor charring from the the explosion it had endured. Carefully, irreverent but not without respect, the trespasser slipped a bag from her shoulders, picked up the book and brushed the detritus from its surface, and placed it within.

When she stood, she once again frowned and listened intently to the silence. Twice more, she wandered without fault to where more books yet lay intact. One, wrapped in scales that seemed so many colours as to be translucent, she retrieved with only finger and thumb, as if afraid it may bite her, and it was hurriedly put to rest within the bag. The last was bound in a soft black velvet, and this she nigh upon worshipped as she touched; ran her thumbs gently through the velvet, kissed the cover and breathed in its scent. This, too, was deposited within the bag.
Finally, again, she waited as if for instruction, and then made her way unerringly to the largest spot of rubble left. It took no small amount of struggle to turn the stone away, but when she had, she was rewarded with the sight of a fourth tome; a black so deep that it almost appeared more to be nothing than *something*, and when she knelt and reached for it, she was almost surprised that her fingers touched substance - even if it was a substance that slid and moulded as if, perhaps, *it* was in fact touching *her*. Three jewels shone inset in the cover, an upright triangle.

One was so clear and so colourless that she saw it by the reflection of her necklace, as if without the flashes of mirrored light, it would not exist. This, she tried to not even look at. The bottom left jewel glistened with a pearlescence that made her eyes slip off it, a faint phosphorescent snowdrift made solid, shone with iceflower blue. The last, on the bottom right, was a swirling liquid violet, shot through with deep blue as if by ink.

This, when she lifted the heavy book, she kissed. A moan was torn from her throat as she did. For a moment, the trespasser then studied the tome; when she turned it over in her hands, the black bindings almost seemed to ripple and loop and, through some twist of reality that no mind - living or dead - could process or even remember, the book remained right side up, gemstones glinting.

She didn’t place this book into her bag, when she rose to her feet again. Instead, the low heels of her shoes clicking against the stone like an ominous heartbeat, she strode back to the centre of the room and opened it.

Whispers erupted around her, a faint breeze that billowed around her ankles as if an affectionate cat, and then wound up around her body in spirals that became brighter and more tangible as they went. They came to rest above the open book, spun tighter and tighter in on themselves, and it became apparent - were there to be an observer - that specks and dust of colour and sand were sweeping into the currents from every crevice in the room.

Minutes passed, and the trespasser simply stood, head tilted back and mouth open in rapturous bliss.

When eventually, it came to an end, three orbs floated and spun above the book’s pages. Whether those pages were black or white, scrawled with ink or blank, was not readily clear. Two of the orbs were whole: one a deep black that, upon a second inspection, was not black at all but rather scintillated in every imaginable colour and several others besides, that she was certain her hands would sink into and cease to exist should she touch it. The other that stormed and spun like a blizzard caged, bitter and glowing, whites and blues of every shade that tore at each other in a fight with no end, and the longer she looked at it the more she could pick out shapes and faces and creatures she wondered at, or if she should recognise them.

The third orb, to her dismay and fervent attempt to repeat the ritual, remained cracked and broken for all that it orbited its kin: a deep dusky purple like liquid glitter, ribbons of bright turquoise squirming and writhing in its depths, visible - as eels - only when they dared risk to touch the surface. A golden sheen encapsulated the sphere, winking in and out of sight as it turned in the trespasser’s dim light. Where it bled out into the world, powder gold dripped and then dissolved like gas.

Tilting her head, the trespasser listened, gathered the orbs and the last tome into her bag, and then vanished away into the dark, leaving nothing behind but the hollow absence of magic stolen and the imprint of the thorns adorning her hair.

With one hand, Corvo silenced Annabel’s protests. Instead, he knelt by Leon and searched his eyes. It felt… wrong, being eye to eye with his Messenger and not being able to feel anything from
him. Was it just what Harlan had done to Leon to sever their bond that was causing it - or was it entirely on Corvo?

He had tried, over and over, when the others weren’t paying attention, to call up the Void inside him and ignite his Mark. He had, over and over, failed.

“... You have to be sure, Leon,” he murmured, and then the protests came despite his warnings.

“What? No! Corvo, you can’t let him do that! He’s not in his right mind, he just needs to be treated and it’ll be fine.” Annabel, indignant and vehement.

Phoebe was more subdued, but almost plaintive. “He’s one of us, Corvo, we can’t. How would we explain to the Empress? To everyone? It’s a political nightmare. And he needs medical attention.”

Only Keldin spoke to Leon directly in the wake of Corvo’s response. “Leon, come on. Don’t be stupid, ‘kay? Once you’re healed, Lord Corvo can give you another Bond rune, r-”

“No!” Yelped, pained, and Leon flinched and whined for it, but he kept frantically shaking his head. Dark copper eyes wide and liquid, Leon looked to Corvo desperately, because he understood that Corvo was the only bastion of support he was likely to get; and because, in the end, it was Corvo’s permission he needed.

Slowly, Corvo frowned. “You… wouldn’t want the Void back?” Leon shook his head. “No matter what?” A nod. Corvo sighed, pinched the bridge of his nose, tried to ignore the faint tug on his stitches. Garrett had, admittedly, done a much better job than Corvo had expected from a thief. “... Well… that’s your choice, of course. You don’t have to bear the rune; I would still welcome you back as a Messenger.” But he made sure to keep his tone easy, trying not to sound like he was pressuring Leon into it.

And besides which… as it stood, Corvo wasn’t sure that an Arcane Bond would actually take if he tried to forge one. Annabel, Phoebe, and Keldin seemed to be unaffected by whatever had sealed Corvo’s powers - a fact he was intensely grateful for, if not for that their magic kept them safe, then because it meant they didn’t ask after his - but a new one… Serruptitiously, Corvo clenched his left hand and called for the Void, reached for it like it usually reached for him - felt nothing.

Shaking his head, Leon shrank. “I wan’...” he began, voice thick with pain, “to sthay.”

“You can’t stay!” Annabel exclaimed, drawing the attention of a pair of beggars conversing quietly in the far corner. “You’re a Royal Messenger, you belong in Dunwall! With us. Or at the very least, if you really want to quit, you belong back home in Morley! This… place…” Annabel’s nose wrinkled in disgust as she glanced around - and if not for their immediate surroundings, then for The City at large.

Corvo scowled at her. “Annabel, you will be silent. Am I clear? These people have risked much to keep us safe, and you’d do well to remember that.” Not that he liked being so harsh on her - the whole mission, and he wondered just how much she must resent him by now, and he hated not being able to tug on their bond and find out, if only to see how much damage control he needed to do.

She stared at him for a moment, a betrayed little glare, and then she turned to Phoebe and set about ignoring him. Internally, Corvo sighed. He’d allow it for now, because he had other things to worry about, but in an instant his previous sentiment reversed and he wondered why she had to be such a brat about this, right now, on a mission this crucial that had gone this wrong.
Or maybe that was why.

His eyes met Phoebe’s before returning to Leon, and she just looked like she wanted this to be over. “Leon… I need you to understand what you’re asking. If you stay here, then I can’t protect you from everything. I can tell them that you honourably resigned your post as a Messenger, I can tell them that I don’t know where you are, I can tell them what you’ve given for the Crown, but… If I do that, I cannot help you. Not openly. If you stay here, you can’t come back to Dunwall - at least not for a long time, until The City is properly integrated into the Empire. If you’re discovered here before that… and even after that, I can’t protect you.”

Voice low. Corvo could only fathom Leon’s reasons for wanting to remain, despite being so injured. As it was, Corvo had half a mind to only allow it if he came to their ship first and got proper medical attention. While he had no doubt that The City contained exceptional physicians of its own, that was a nebulous and irresponsible hope in comparison. For a long moment, Leon looked back into Corvo’s eyes, and there was an ocean of indecision behind the gaze.

But, eventually, Leon nodded; swallowed. “I und’rs’and.” Beside him, Keldin’s face fell.

“But… why?” he asked weakly. Keldin had yet to really get up - they were lucky, as dusk fell, that he was awake and lucid. Corvo had been wondering how he was going to carry both him and Leon.

At that, Leon looked away. “I… I have t-o.” Pained, eyes scrunched up while he forced out the words past savaged tongue and missing cuspid.

“That’s not an answer,” Annabel hissed under her breath, and something in Corvo’s chest gave him whiplash; that she was upset wasn’t the issue, but she had steadily defied him all day and Corvo only had so much patience left to give.

Voice sharp, he snapped at her. “Lady Whitefield, you are dismissed. Keep watch by the perimeter and be ready to move out when the rest of us are ready.”

Her eyes went wide at that, wounded brown, but then she stiffly got to her feet - her burns soothed if not healed by the jar Garrett had left with them, in a sick twist of fate - and offered him a formal bow. “Yes, Lord Attano.” And she went, hands tight at her sides, while Phoebe worried at her own hair.

“I- Lord Corvo-” she stammered.

Corvo sighed, already feeling guilty. At worst, Annabel was struggling with the idea she would lose her friend. It only made sense she’d be upset - but she was a Messenger, and she had to put her emotions aside and obey her damn orders. “You may do as you wish, Phoebe.”

His fellow Serkonan bit her lip anxiously, then turned to Leon and as gently as she could laid a hand on his arm. “I don’t understand why you want to stay, Leon, but… if you really have to, make sure you’ll be happy, okay?” Leon’s eyes glossed over, but after a long moment he nodded. With one returned, Phoebe got to her feet, tilted her head to Corvo respectfully, and ran off after Annabel.

And so they were three.

Corvo let Keldin tilt forward, getting into Leon’s line of sight. “Lee… I don’t get it. You love Dunwall.” And Leon nodded. “And you love being a Messenger.” Another nod. “And you love magic!” And this time, Leon looked away, anxious guilt on his face. He struggled, for a minute, to come up with something he could say succinctly, and then it fell into place in Corvo’s mind.
He offered a low hum to get their attention. “I understand, Leon. I… I don’t ever want to feel the Bond snap again, either.” Soft. Leon flinched, looked away again, and nodded tightly; and Corvo didn’t blame him. He’d felt Messengers die while they held his Arcane Bond before, and every time was just as awful as the last - feeling the echoes of the Void they carried drain and empty and crumble into nothing, and finally feeling their winking heat go cold - but what had happened with Leon was startlingly different.

When a Messenger died bonded to Corvo, it was like feeling a part of himself die, but nobody had ever succeeded in breaking the Bond before. This had felt… abusive. An assault - a violation. Harlan hadn’t just broken Leon’s bond to Corvo, he’d defiled it.

Suddenly, Corvo wondered if he’d want to renew it even if Leon was willing. It crawled under his skin, the memory. So violent had the break been that even those Messengers nearby had felt it. In wondering, Corvo hated himself.

“But you don’t have to take it back, if you don’t want to,” Keldin insisted. “It doesn’t mean you have to leave. You can still come home.” Almost begging.

Leon’s shoulders slumped. “I… wanna sthay.”

Despite himself, Corvo was trying to understand as well. Going over everything he could remember, all of it, looking for anything that might explain how Leon could be drawn to this place, of all places. Somewhere deep, in a hollow, Void-twisted place that he did not acknowledge, Corvo wished he had the Heart to offer some insight. In the same moment he wished it, he condemned himself, and buried the thought anyway. “Do you want us to know why?”

Leon didn’t respond immediately. He looked pained - more so than just physically - and then he looked guilty. Like a light, Corvo thought about how Leon had watched, after they’d rescued him - but not Corvo, or the other Messengers. He’d watched Garrett, his every movement. He’d barely flinched when they’d held him to pull the rods out of his leg, and while Corvo could be explained away by virtue of knowing him and trusting him and having shared a bond with him, Leon didn’t know anything about Garrett except that he shared an accent and a nation with the man who’d tortured him.

And that he defied the laws of that nation. And that Corvo trusted him. And that Garrett had rescued him - because the fact it had taken all of them aside, it had been Garrett who’d carried Leon back. And that in itself was a feat to admire, because Leon was taller than Garrett and if not thicker in build, then equally as narrow.

Corvo dismissed the thought as it crossed his mind, because it made no sense and there was no basis for Leon to abandon his home and the safety it offered for the sake of a foreign stranger who very likely didn’t want to ever see him again - and then, Corvo dragged the thought back up again. Leon was traumatised, and while he understood all too obviously the implications of such a decision, he couldn’t be thinking clearly. Beyond that even, Leon was not only still fairly young - not quite into his thirtieth year - but he had always been fanciful, taken to foolish decisions based on fits of whimsy.

Then again… it was thus such that he had come to Dunwall in the first place, that Corvo had caught sight of him one morning pestering the Watch recruits to spar with him and fairly flying through them when they agreed. It was his very nature that had brought him to become a Messenger.

If this was what he thought was best for himself… how could Corvo deny him? No matter the reason.
“Leon… I have to ask. Is this… about Garrett?” Because despite everything Corvo had just thought, he had to know. Or no. He wanted to know. Corvo’s jaw tightened. “You don’t have to answer that,” he added.

Frowning, but Leon considered it. Nodded. “Bu’,” he added, wincing at the sound of his own voice, “not… jus’.”

Keldin seemed stricken, but Corvo sighed and rubbed his face, before carding his hands back through his hair. “… Okay. Look. If this is what you really want, Leon, I will release you,” and they both ignored the tinny squeak as it escaped Keldin’s throat, “but we have another three or four hours before we leave, and I want you to seriously consider the fallout first. Okay?”

Leon nodded, and there was something in his face that set as he did.

“Okay. I’ll leave you to it. Keldin, sing out if either of you need something.”

The wounded look didn’t fade from Keldin’s face, but he nodded. “Yes, Corvo.”

“Good.” Corvo rose. He would, he knew, have to head out and speak with Annabel; he didn’t really expect her to remain on the perimeter for three hours, but by Void they needed to get her shit straight. She was free to have as much of a meltdown as she wanted in her own time, but they were still on mission and they were wounded - their public safety was gone and their protocols had broken down, and all they had left was their chain of command. For the next few minutes, at least, he was happy to avoid that conversation.

Instead, he approached the Queen of Beggars, and waited until she took notice of him to sit. She offered a little smile - half mischief, and half tooth. “Hello, again, Marked one.”

Out of habit, he inclined his head. Then, embarrassed: “Hello. I-”

“Spare me your thanks, Royal Protector. Again. You have need of sanctuary, and that is what this place is. Sanctuary.” And now, a wicked little tilt of her head. Corvo was starting to wonder how she had fooled so many into thinking she was merely a blind old woman living amongst beggars. “Your young one. The dark boy. He thinks he may stay?”

Corvo hummed. “He… wishes it, yes. Tell me; if he did, would he have any chance of being treated for his injuries?” Because that, more than anything, was Corvo’s primary concern. There was little point in giving Leon leave to remain if he would simply expire here.

“There is a doctor who treats the beggars where he can. We do our best not to flood his doorstep, you understand, but he would see your one. Beyond that, I can make no promises.” There was a dark shrewdness in her that made Corvo shiver; not threatened by her, no, not even without his magic - but… it seemed familiar, somehow. It tingled under his skin, unsettling and comforting at the same time.

He leant forward, studied her face intently. The Voidsong was faint, in the air, but undeniably there. “I think it’s time you answer the question I asked you yesterday.” Quite a long yesterday ago, all things considered, but close enough. He had held off, for as long as it took for Garrett to head back towards the Clocktower and for them to have a moment alone - and she had told him, in utterly cryptic terms, to wait. And so he had.

The Queen laughed, a sound that rasped from her throat like old parchment crackling in flame, and in response she merely offered him her left hand.
Some days, still, she felt like the child who had been crowned in her mother’s absence. It fluttered in her chest, the excitement that she could not show, and could not fully contain. It seeped out, in moments spent giggling with her father, in stolen hours where she practiced firing a crossbow only Corvo knew she owned, or nights when she didn’t sleep and instead practiced stances, movements, balance, stealth. With it came an unending anxiety, the uncertainty of her own convictions and what ability she had to carry them out; and that too seeped out, when she sought Corvo’s counsel and pored over reports she had already read six times, struggling to come to a decision.

This was not one of those days.

Her Protector - her Spymaster - her father - had returned a month prior: wounded, with wounded Messengers (one too few), and with news that The Eternal City’s military leader was dead, and his regime obliterated.

At nineteen, Emily was now truly her own Empress. Over a year of it, and she knew she still relied on Corvo too heavily, asked too much of him when he was shouldering so much of the burden left in the wake of her mother’s death, but in this - she was certain. There had been a darkness in his eyes, since returning from The Eternal City, a darkness that she had yet never seen before. Every time she looked at it, it made her hands clench and her chest tighten, and some days she wished such utter destruction upon those who had put it there that she wondered at her own breath still in her lungs.

So, in this, she had no doubts.

Corvo stood at her right shoulder, as ever he did, and she drew comfort from his presence even as the shadow she could not see but feel served only to feed her anger. “Supreme Commander Atherton, have you chosen the generals who will assist in leading this venture?” Her voice was unwavering, even as she sat with as straight a back as she could manage, in her austere throne, and offered as cutting a gaze as ever her mother had bore.

Atherton nodded a head of grey hair; a young man he was not, and she would never send him to battle in his own shoes - but he was a gifted strategist and had held command of the Empire’s standing military for longer than Emily had drawn breath. “Yes, Majesty. Generals Minnk and Listras. They each have instructions to select two battalions to join with the Naval force.”

Considering the numbers, Emily stared at Atherton without seeing. She knew it made her face look cold, but the Supreme Commander didn’t seem fazed; he merely shifted his helm under his arm and waited in silence, quietly meeting her gaze. There was no fear, but he was polite all the same. Four battalions of two hundred soldiers each was eight hundred soldiers just from the standing ground military. Add to that the actual Navy forces - easily twice that, and Emily had refrained from even assigning the entire Fleet, albeit only at Corvo’s behest - and the tiny citystate didn’t look to be offering any resistance.

With their government gone and The Eternal City all but in anarchy now that even martial law had broken down, Emily was certain of a swift and decisive victory. She prayed for it. If they could prevail quickly, then fewer people had to die to allow it - and the citystate would fall and be brought into the Empire and (likely) renamed. Once so, Emily could establish temporary martial rule of her own, with Grand Admiral of the Fleet Penny Haethel at the head. She was relatively new to the position - appointed by Emily and Corvo both in the wake of the Rat Plague - but she had thus far served well, and Emily had every confidence that she could safely and kindly manage The Eternal City until a proper Minister could be installed.

But even in the worst circumstances, a city could prove wily and stubborn. Emily prayed more for their sake that they would fall quickly; a protracted battle would be unpleasant for the Imperial
forces, but ultimately it would only mean razing the farmlands that sustained the island, and then not only would Cityzens die in the fight, but many more would starve.

Finally, Emily nodded. “Excellent. Grand Admiral Haethel, you’re scheduled to sail in a little under six months. Is that sufficient preparation time?”

The woman offered Emily a salute instead of a bow. “Yes, Empress. Everything will be ready.”

“Okay. Have either of you any questions?” They shook their heads, and when she dismissed them she received one respectful bow, and one slightly more formal salute that had her hiding a smile. Once they’d returned to their duties - and it was ever busy, organising an invasion - Emily turned to Corvo. “Father. Have you chosen which of the Messengers will accompany them?”

Corvo offered her a short hum. “I’m sending seventeen,” he murmured, and Emily had to swallow her shock. She had given him leave to send as many and whomever he chose, of course - the Royal Messengers were, at heart, an organisation purely loyal to him, despite that their allegiance ultimately fell to her. Corvo hand selected each and every one of them, oversaw their training, and - in the dead of night and hidden behind walls that none could know - forged bonds of ink and magic that branded all of them as heretics.

Each of them had to be highly trained, and trusted, and above all devoted. There were, in total, only thirty one Royal Messengers at all. And Corvo was sending over half, for merely a citystate? A small pocket of resistance that not only posed no threat, but was all but decimated in its own right?

Twisting in her throne, Emily reached out and grasped his hand. For once, he allowed it, and when she laced their fingers together, he squeezed back. “... I know you reported to me about... The Eternal City’s heretic, but are you truly that concerned, Father? Should we send more troops?”

At that, Corvo shook his head. “No. More troops will only overwhelm the island. It isn’t our side that I’m concerned about.”

Her mouth turned upside down. “... Father... Has the Outsider spoken with you?” Her voice lowered, and it was a risk they normally forsook, speaking of such things outside their own quarters. Corvo merely shook his head, and for a moment squeezed tighter before carefully extracting his hand from hers. They were clasped at his back. “And... your- skills?”

Another shake.

“... As you wish, Father. You are under no obligation to indulge me, of course, but I would know what your Messengers mean to do.” And she meant it true; not because she was giving him dispensation, but because the Messengers didn’t answer to Lord Corvo Attano, Royal Protector - they answered to the Royal Spymaster, and in that he was unbound by traditional law.

For a moment, he simply scrutinised her, and then he offered a quick, rare smile. It did nothing to diminish the shadows in his eyes. “I have a promise to keep.”

It was quiet, in the attic above the Crippled Burrick, this late. Finally, blessedly, quiet. Drathen lay comfortably on the worn bed, Graves sprawled out across his feet with one paw in the air, twitching softly in his sleep. Much as it was disobedience - hounds were meant to sleep on the floor - Drathen hadn’t the heart to kick him off. Basso might be right about the creature being dopey, but he still loved the dog to bits.

The boy-- well, actually Drathen hadn’t been able to tell because under the salted skin and ever-
present sheen of grime and the uncut clothes of a deckhand, the child could have been anything, but they had come all the same several hours after dark. They hadn’t left until an hour later, at Drathen’s behest; the streets of The City might be marginally safer at night these days, but the riots were a threat that did not sleep. It was getting colder, too - not enough to present a danger, not yet, but enough so that Drathen had insisted upon a hot meal and a spot of coffee for the child before sending them back to *The Brightwater* with a few coins and advice on where to hide them.

Now, finally, in the light of one peaceful candle, Drathen cracked open the letter and read.

*You can stop fretting now. I’m coming home.*

*And I’m bringing a friend.*

*E.*

Chapter End Notes

**PHEW. We're done!**

So many thank yous to every who's come along for this wild, wild ride; y'all are awesome.

A few notes of importance:
You may notice, if you ever go through this as obsessively as I do, that I've removed all mentions of the word *month* from a Cityzen's POV (and just my luck, ALL of them were). This is because I've established a formal calendar for The City and how it intersects with the Imperial Calender - they are different. I'll spare you the excruciating details, but suffice to say that [this bad boy right here](#) should explain at least the basis of the calendars. I'm almost positive I haven't spoiled anything in that particular document.

Aside from, perhaps, the in-lore date of the sequel's beginning, but I was going to tell you that anyway.

Which! The sequel will be called *What Lurks In The Dark* and will take place six months after Harlan's... 'death'. And oh boy oh boy oh boy, I am so, so excited guys, you have no idea.

I'm sure there was something else I was meant to be waffling on about here, but damned if I can remember what it is so, instead, thank you again for joining me in this fic!

See you in the sequel <3

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!