The Court of Five Thrones

by not_poignant

Summary

Gwyn ap Nudd - newly crowned King of the Unseelie Kingdom - is saddled with a broken Court, not knowing who he can trust, while the bright Seelie Court bears down upon them, seeking to depower the Unseelie Kingdom once and for all. His lover and Advisor, waterhorse Augus Each Uisge, is unloved by many, facing multiple assassination attempts. Drifting away from each other as life threatens to completely fracture the tenuous connection they have, they must both find allies and a way to survive in a world of fae fraught with chaos.

Notes

Standard disclaimer: Id Fics do not represent healthy real world relationships of any kind, which I think most of you know, but please don't base relationship (and/or) BDSM practices
on two fae with supernatural healing abilities and extreme kinks.

Well, Augus starts this story off with a bang! He really isn't doing so great in that Unseelie Court.

While officially the sequel to *Game Theory*, this has hopefully been written in a way to allow newcomers entry into the Fae Tales Verse with minimal pre-reading necessary. I highly recommend folks read *The Nightingale and Terho the Mouse-Lad*, at only 3000 words, since it marks the official new back-story (no reference to commercial characters will be made again in the series). *Game Theory* will eventually be given a total overhaul to restructure the novel and make it entirely original, and more accessible as a book as opposed to just a porn character study as it initially starts.

Tags will be added per chapter.

I have a [Tumblr account](https://example.tumblr.com) where you can keep up with the fae!

Feedback is treasured. All kudos, subscriptions, bookmarks, Tumblr messages, likes and comments (especially comments) are cherished.
Massacre

Augus

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The An-Fnwy estate was just as grand and imposing as Augus Each Uisge had imagined when he was an underfae teenager, living in a lake nearby. But things were different now. He was no longer underfae status, but instead representing the Inner Court of King Gwyn ap Nudd’s Unseelie Kingdom. He wasn’t stealing food from the orchards, he was now a consummate predator, able to hunt humans as necessary, grow his own fruit and vegetables in his own holdings.

And, he had to admit, the shine had rather gone off the place, now that he knew that Crielle ferch Fnwy and Lludd Llaw Eraint were not the perfect bastions of Seelie fae conduct.

Augus passed the fence – a cream limestone wall with sharp iron points set into the top. The iron was used especially to deter the lesser statuses of fae who could not generally abide it. He sat in a compartment, in a carriage drawn by horses not nearly as well-trained as they should be. Well, the Unseelie Court couldn’t afford better, and they would have to do. He inspected his clothing from within the privacy of the compartment, flexing the black leather of his gloves, clicking his buckled boots against the floor. He straightened a smart, green shirt and fixed the collar, looking at his appearance briefly in a small round mirror he’d pilfered from prey he’d killed in the human world. He met his own green eyes and raised arched eyebrows at himself, then smirked.

The mirror was a cheap, tacky thing. He dropped it once he was satisfied with his appearance. It clattered and rolled under the seat.

The water that wept from his mane formed droplets that never penetrated the wicking material of his shirt. Waterweed sprouted from his scalp and fell healthily through his black hair. He was in remarkably good condition, given that he was supposed to have been executed, that he was underfae status less than a year ago, that he was still regularly fielding assassination attempts.

No one particularly liked him. He’d made a mockery of the Unseelie Court during his own reign as King. Bankrupted the Kingdom, destroyed land, became not only a villain found in human fairytales, but a villain to the fae.

Can’t be helped, really.

The front of the multi-storeyed An-Fnwy manor was made of the same ketton stone as the fence. It was separated into two distinct wings by an imposing portico and verandah, complete with columns curlicued with vines of rare yellow and gold wisteria. A large fountain at the front depicted a man holding a longbow staring imperially into the distance. His other arm was outstretched, water flowing from an open palm into the musical water below. Augus’ eyes widened when he realised it was the deceased Lludd Llaw Eraint.

‘Please,’ Augus muttered to himself. ‘You didn’t even get to demigod status, no matter what the humans say.’

The huge double stone doors set in the entrance opened easily. Slabs of stone that large shouldn’t open smoothly for anyone, so it was enchanted to respond to an owner’s or staff member’s touch.

The coachman came – a well-kept moth fae with fringed antennae pricking and twirling in new surroundings – and opened the door to his compartment, stood back respectfully. Given that Gwyn
had needed to imprison two of their common fae servants for attempting an attack on Augus’ life, Augus thought anything approximating respectful from their own staff was a step up. Though nothing really compared with the dedicated indifference of the Unseelie trows, whose competence and privacy Augus appreciated more than he could say.

He was surprised when, not a moment after a butler had stood beside one of the open doors, gloved hands folded, Crielle herself came to the landing. She pinned Augus with a sharp gaze, couched behind a warm smile and a fae glamour so strong that Augus could feel it pulsing around him even from such a distance, coaxing him to feel welcomed, safe, comforted.

Augus allowed a more genuine smile to grace his face, but something darker twisted inside of him. He’d seen Crielle attack her own son with that glamour before. He respected her, she would have done well in the Unseelie Kingdom with her hidden cruelties. He even admired her. But he knew he was lucky to be partially immune to the glamour.

His boots crunched across white gravel and he resettled the rapier at his side, his long, calf-length coat fluttering as he strode towards her. He slipped off his gloves and tucked them into his belt, offering her an inclination of the head. As he moved up arched, stone steps, he looked around, surveying his surroundings as a predator might; though he only showed an expression of appreciative curiosity.

He was a higher status than her, he didn’t have to bow before her, regardless of how respected she was in the fae world. But she took his lack of formal bow as a slight. He could see it in her eyes.

‘So!’ Crielle said, with no preamble. ‘It has come to this, has it? My dear son, the King, sending his Advisor to me, instead of visiting himself? Does he have no love for me in his heart?’

Augus smiled graciously.

‘My darling, he doesn’t even know I am here. And shall you entertain me outside, where it is grand and so lovely for this time of year? Or might you invite me inside, so that I may see the splendour of the An-Fnwy estate for myself?’

‘Ah, that’s right, you’re baseborn, aren’t you? Enter, you may as well see if it meets your low-bred expectations,’ Crielle said, laughing. She waved Augus ahead, his skin prickled unpleasantly as he walked.

‘Come, let me have someone serve you some tea,’ Crielle said, signalling to housekeep waiting in impeccable dress nearby as she escorted Augus through a giant, vaulted marble-floored entrance-way, complete with dual marble staircases, underneath a crystal chandelier lit with pale yellow werelight. They walked into a smaller, carpeted room designed for receiving important guests.

No one had offered to take his coat. This wasn’t to be a meeting with standard fae etiquette.

He sat down in an impeccably kept old chair – likely kept clean with magic – and crossed his legs, leaning back and looking at Crielle for any signs of strain. But no, house arrest didn’t seem to be affecting her negatively at all. She was well-coiffed, her golden hair up with not a single hair out of place, pearl beads decorating it. Her face gave her the appearance of a woman in her mid to late thirties, despite the fact that she was tens of thousands of years old. She wore make up, just enough to accentuate her deep blue eyes and the perfect curve of her lips.

She was, Augus marvelled, an exquisitely rendered woman. The kind of beauty that the old King of the Unseelie Court – the Raven Prince – would have much admired.
‘You look marvellous given your lack of freedom,’ Augus said, meaning it.

‘Kind of you,’ Crielle said. ‘But if you must know, I am under terrible strain. But let us not turn to such maudlin contemplations. Is it true, my dear, that you are my son’s lover? Oh, don’t tell me, I know. What he risked for you, when you were a prisoner in the Seelie Court! With everyone wanting you dead! How reprieved you must feel. Not only free, but his right hand man? And he does not know you are here? Fascinating.’

Augus picked up the tea presented, scented it carefully for poisons. He was Inner Court status, couldn’t be killed by any poison, but he’d prefer not to be laid out for a week or two in agony either. He detected none and sipped carefully. He lowered the cup back to its fluted saucer and realised how relentless Crielle’s glamour was. It appeared as though she was doing nothing more than watching him patiently, but he could feel the power of her dra’ocht battering at him. If he didn’t have his own partial immunity, he’d be under her complete thrall by now.

‘No wonder he never killed you,’ Crielle said, leaning forwards conspiratorially. ‘We all could never understand why. When did you start plotting your escape? Before or after he defeated his own Kingdom? It was a nice feather in his cap, wasn’t it? That Unseelie monster, doing oh...so much for the Seelie fae – defeating you and your pathetic reign, putting the Nightingale back in the underworlds where he belongs.’

‘Ah, no pretence of politeness, then?’ Augus said, sighing. ‘You don’t truly believe the rumours everyone else does, do you? That he masterminded his way to the top of the Unseelie Kingdom after three thousand years of being brainwashed by you and his father? A man cannot be expected to live a Seelie life for so long, and be the criminal genius everyone thinks he is.’

‘So it’s true,’ Crielle said, a vindictive streak lighting across her expression. ‘What a rumour machine the Unseelie Court has become. Then, I suppose you all deal in lies and deceit now, don’t you?’

Come join us then, Lady. I think you’ll find you fit right in.

‘Let’s not forget the ones who started this, however. If you hadn’t felt so crushed by birthing an Unseelie beast after your whole family birthed true for as long as the records showed, we’d not be in this situation now, would we? You wouldn’t be under house arrest for lying to the Seelie Court for...what’s that ridiculous Seelie name for it? Ah yes, crimes of lignancy. Gwyn ap Nudd wouldn’t be King of the Unseelie Court. He’d be dead. And now you’ve got yourself a son that’s almost impossible to kill. What were you both thinking, when you didn’t kill him in his crib?’

‘Darling, why are you here?’ Crielle said, and Augus’ spine stiffened.

All fae possessed glamour as a form of communication, but primarily to protect themselves from discovery or capture in the human world; most couldn’t use it as a weapon. Not like this. He had to focus. He’d come here to...

...I doubt it was to have polite conversation and reveal all your secrets to her. You’d better act quick, or that glamour will leave you ripe for the taking.

‘I made a promise,’ Augus said softly. He picked up the cup and sipped again. ‘But more than that, I wanted to meet you. I can’t help but admire what you did to him. How you tormented him. Let’s not prevaricate shall we? You know what I am, you know what my life has been. I appreciate sadism in all its forms.’

That was true.
‘Mm,’ Crielle said, laughing softly. ‘Everyone knows what you are. Taming those that need to be
tamed. How tawdry. You’re nothing more than a horse that breaks in horses more unruly than
you.’

Augus nodded carefully, let the insult simmer where he wouldn’t be distracted by it.

‘And Gwyn?’ Crielle whispered. ‘Did you tame him? Don’t tell me it was any difficulty.’

‘Oh no. My dear, you did a fine job of breaking him yourself. I merely showed him a new direction
to follow.’

Crielle smiled at him, but it didn’t reach her eyes.

He set the cup down, felt his teeth lengthen in his mouth. His blood pulsed in thick currents
beneath his skin. It heated until it was an itchy need to move. She would sense it soon enough, if
she hadn’t already.

‘Oh, my darling, if you think you can—’

He launched, leaping across the coffee table and burying his fingers through her ribs, into her
lungs, staring at her. The wave of glamour that hit him made him choke, terror turning his stomach
so sour he gagged above her, even as her blood turned his skin hot.

‘My dear,’ Augus said, using a massive burst of power to thrust his arm deeper into her body,
reaching for her spine. Her eyes widened, but she still looked in control of the situation, and Augus
snarled. ‘My dear, all this time you’ve been blaming him for Efnisien’s death. That golden nephew
of yours. Quite a resemblance he bore to you as well. I would place bets that you wished he was
yours. And how uncouth of Gwyn to simply kill him and not even let you see a body afterwards.’

Augus hissed as she slashed with manicured fingernails. She couldn’t get through his coat, and he
was grateful then that no one had offered to take it. But she sliced through his shirt, his chest
flaring from the pain of deep, messy cuts.

‘The reason you never got to see a body, is that I didn’t leave enough of one to be presented. All
this time, labouring under false illusions. Gwyn is not the type to kill his own family. You made
sure of that. Torturing him. You think the Unseelie are monsters, but we don’t go for our own.’

Crielle’s eyes had widened.

‘You...’

‘Me. You underhanded bitch. I know you tortured him his whole life. Oh, my darling, don’t
mistake me, I do admire you. I do.’

Augus’ breathing sped up, he curled his fingers around her spine and laughed at the terror she
invoked within. She didn’t understand. None of them understood. No artificially created fear could
transcend the despair or misery the Nightingale had evoked in him, once upon a time.

She looked alarmed at his laughter, then defiant. Her mouth opened, blood poured from it.

‘Don’t speak,’ Augus crooned. ‘Now, where was I?’

He was fast losing his ability to think. The scent of blood in the air, the iron tangle of it reminded
him of Gwyn’s blood spilling over his skin, brought saliva to his mouth. You taste like her,
sweetness, won’t you be pleased to know? His teeth were almost so sharp he couldn’t speak
properly. He felt like he wanted to split the seams of his own skin, shift into waterhorse form and tear her apart properly.

But no, he needed this measure of control.

‘I wanted to take my time with you, pay you back some of what you’ve bestowed upon him, but you’re too dangerous, and I’ve taken too long already.’

He threw power into the twist and snap of his arm, breaking her spine with a sound that made him hungry.

Crielle was Court status, she held on for another minute, two, despite the brutal damage to her ribcage, her lungs, the mortal damage to her spine. He looked into her blue eyes, even now staring a venomous promise of revenge at him, and then – impossibly – she smiled. She looked content, pleased even, as though she weren’t swimming in pain, as though he hadn’t just ended her life.

He snarled at the bloody teeth bared at him, even as the darker animal inside of him twisted and writhed.

It wasn’t a conscious decision to rip into her viscera. He couldn’t feed, she wasn’t human, but he could tear and destroy. His fingers wormed through organs, clawed at them, instinctively leaving the liver alone, even now. He kept going long after the knowing light had disappeared from her eyes and her lungs had stopped trembling for breath. He slashed claws he’d sharpened just for this occasion across her neck, her wrists, and started to tear into the muscle of her thighs when he saw it. The scar.

He hadn’t noticed it before, lost in bloodlust, and he could hardly see it now through the haze of red in his vision and the gouts of blood covering it.

Gwyn’s light, damaging everything in its wake from the moment he’d been born, including Crielle.

‘You should’ve killed him,’ Augus whispered, running a careful thumb over her forehead. ‘You should have killed him. If only your heartsong would have let you. Appearance isn’t everything, darling.’

He looked up at the servant who had been paralysed by the threshold of the door, he’d been about to run.

‘Oh, you fragile, frightened thing,’ Augus said, getting up slowly and stripping off his coat. The slashed material of his water-wicking shirt caused him to shed blood in round droplets. But it was stuck in his perpetually damp mane, to his face, his fingers and forearms, everywhere it could make an impression. ‘Did she torture you too? Tell me.’

‘Y-yes,’ the fae said, helpless to hold back an answer once Augus infused his voice with compulsion. Augus grinned at him. The fae’s eyes sheened over with tears, he shook visibly.

‘Someone should really put you out of your misery then, shouldn’t they?’

The fae’s eyes widened.

Augus struck, claws out, laughing.

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Two hours later and Augus was hardly recognisable in a mirror. Blood had clotted and stuck to his
skin, he needed a shower. The house had been well-populated with staff, and he’d decimated all of them. The cook had put up quite a fight for someone who was only Capital class, and he’d ended up with a nasty gut wound thanks to a meat cleaver. He leaned over a bathroom bench and pressed his fingers to his own bleeding skin.

He needed to *feed*, but he couldn’t eat anyone in the fae world. Their meat was not something his body would recognise, even though the taste of the blood was familiar enough that he had to struggle to stop the beast inside of him growling. He took several deep breaths. It was just a stab wound, it was painful, inconvenient, *disgusting*, but he’d dealt with enough of Gulvi’s violence to know how to weather this out.

He ran the shower, removed his boots and stepped into cold water – unaffected by frigid temperatures. He didn’t bother undressing. His constantly wet hair had gotten him used to a lifetime of clothing feeling damp or having water droplets clinging to it.

Fifteen minutes later he shut off the water and walked bloodied, watery footprints into Crielle’s bedroom – impeccably furnished, of course, in white, cream and gold. He opened pale oak dressers and cabinets. Yanked drawers from their fixtures and rummaged through clothing.

He tore the room apart, growling at the pain flaring in his own gut. There – behind a bedside cabinet, behind perfectly restored wallpaper – he found a slim hole in the wall. He tore into it, yanked out several folders worth of documents.

He flicked water and blood off his fingers, then wiped them off on the brocaded bedspread.

Because he *knew* Crielle had plans for her son.

The first few sheets were simply illicit accounts; crimes that could get Crielle imprisoned simply for not being an honest and true Seelie fae.

He sat heavily when he reached the second folder. Everything laid out clearly, and a plan none of them were aware of. Yet money had exchanged hands, barter had occurred.

This looked like a plan that had been put into place.

Not torturers in the traditional sense, not murderers or assassins or mercenaries; Crielle had brought *shapeshifters*. Put them into training, given them sheets of information on Lludd, Augus, Ash, Gwyn, *Mafydd*.

He rifled through the sheets trying to find a location of the shapeshifters, but found nothing at all. And the actual details – *when* it was supposed to happen, where, *how*...

He jerked up. A rustle nearby. A young woman, dressed neatly in garb that was a step above and apart from what the other housekeep were wearing. He couldn’t pick the species of fae she was, she could pass completely for human, except for an odd violet glint to her eyes. She wrung her hands nervously. He hadn’t sensed her, which meant that whatever she was, she was skilled enough to hide her scent, her presence, from high status predators.

‘Who are you?’ he snapped.

‘I-I’m Lady ferch Fnwy’s personal assistant, All’eth, Sir Each Uisge.’

By the name he thought she might have been a fire elemental, but he couldn’t tell. It hardly mattered.
‘So you know about this?’ He held up the folders, and All’eth nodded, brown ringlets bouncing by her chin.

‘Yes, Sir.’

‘Was this actioned?’ Augus said.

All’eth nodded once, her throat worked on a gag, though she suppressed her fear with an uncommon amount of strength. She probably needed it, he reasoned, spending her time in personal service to Crielle.

‘Where are the shapeshifters?’

‘S-Sir, I don’t know. Crielle did all of this almost completely on her own. When they visited, we were instructed to leave the room or even the wing. They were very secretive. True shapeshifters, Sir. P-please, I have- I have a family. Children.’

‘Appealing to an Unseelie’s sense of mercy?’ Augus said, raising his eyebrows in delight. He licked the taste of blood off his lips and stood up slowly, approaching her and grinning as she backed away. ‘Stop moving.’

She froze.

‘Everyone knows you care about the Traitor King, that he...that he tamed you,’ All’eth risked, a flare of fire entering her eyes and turning them muddy red.

Augus laughed, even as a familiar wrench went through him. He was partly responsible for those rumours, but he hated them. Tamed, indeed. He stood and ignored the pain in his gut from that stab wound. He was healing, and that was all that mattered. He shoved older, panicked, underfae instincts away. He wasn’t underfae anymore.

‘You helped Crielle with this plan, didn’t you?’

‘Y-yes.’ Tears spilled, and he smiled beatifically as he reached her violently trembling form. He trailed a claw across the fine cloth covering her shoulder.

‘Oh, my darling, don’t look so scared. We all get what’s coming to us in the end. Some of us a little more than others. Now, hold still, and try not to think about your children. Do they, by any chance, live on the property?’

She wasn’t through her first sob when the sound claws ripping through skin filled the room.

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Augus felt the unmistakeable shriek of heavy magic against his skin, and knew that someone had alerted the Seelie military. He grabbed two of the folders and sprinted through the Manor until he could look out of one of the windows, peeking through embroidered curtains, the smell of lavender tickling his nose.

The moth coachman lay twisted, dead, on the white gravel; arm askew. The horses toed nervously nearby. There was an eerie silence. A breeze ruffled bluebells, rosebushes, the manes of the horses. He could see no activity.

Augus’ fist closed harder on the folders and he turned around slowly, skin turning to gooseflesh. He wanted to call upon his invisibility, but it had been getting harder and harder to maintain in the
past month.

He had no choice though, when he scented them coming closer. Silent and stealthy, even possibly trained by Gwyn himself – given that he had been the Seelie War General, and King, for centuries before the Seelie Court demoted him. Augus swallowed down curses and called the invisibility to him, looking back out of the window.

_Damn these vaulted ceilings making this building so much higher and this so much harder._

He needed to teleport away. No point taking a carriage now, and he needed water. Fast.

He tried to slide open the window, but it wouldn’t budge in his hands. He tried to smash it with his fist, using the heavy material of the curtains to protect his knuckles. The glass wouldn’t give, and he hissed when he felt a bone fracture. It would heal. _It would_. But it would be slow going, with the stab wound as well.

His heart beat faster, he sunk deeper into the invisibility, masking his scent, the scent of the blood around him.

_Perhaps I should have thought this part through. It was this kind of thing that got you defeated and demoted and thrown in a cell in the first place, remember?_

Augus slunk through the room, peered out and saw soldiers moving carefully down the hall. They should have looked more out of place, given their large frames and armour, but they were well-funded Seelie soldiers, they wore bright armour, new fabrics, and they looked like imposing martial sculptures come to life. Besides, this was a military family; armour, weapons, illustrations of battle scenes were everywhere.

Augus ducked out behind them and crept slowly past blood spatters he couldn’t remember leaving on wooden floorboards. He moved past bloody footprints and viscera that he couldn’t pinpoint to specific victims, at that point he’d become truly consumed with bloodlust.

Even now it pulsed through him, demanded he feed, that he finish with something heavy and satisfying in his belly.

He moved down the marble steps, realised he’d left his boots upstairs, decided it hardly mattered. He flared his nostrils for fresh water and smelled something earthy, almost like lake water but not quite. Too much stone.

_A well._

It would do in a pinch. He only hoped it wasn’t protected by some Seelie guardian wight. That was the last thing he needed.

He moved into the housekeep quarters, along narrower, low-ceilinged corridors designed for people who were meant to be out of sight and out of mind on a regular basis. He moved over bodies that he had left behind, picked his way through pools of blood.

He found the well just off the kitchens and sensed no life within it at all. No guardian wight to worry about. He dropped the invisibility and dove, fully clothed, into the darkness. He gritted his teeth as the knife wound in his side pulled, his hand throbbed. He twisted water around him, spiralled into bubbles and ripples, becoming nothing more than the currents and water around him.

_Time to go home._
The folders were useless. The ink wasn’t water-fast, and he dropped the sodden papers on the chair by the door as he entered the guest-room that he had come to think of as the room that belonged to he and Gwyn.

Gwyn still hadn’t changed the blasted Court design since becoming King. He’d had a month, and he wasn’t responding to discussion, appeals, torment, even threats of torture. Augus was starting to think that Gwyn was intimidated by the whole responsibility of using the sacred magic that welled within the Court to dare change it. But Augus needed it to happen; he was sick of seeing the Court he’d made, sick of the memories that lurked in shadows.

Gwyn, himself, was dozing. He rarely let himself sleep properly, and even seeing him taking a nap during the afternoon was uncommon. But Augus could smell sweat and metal in the room, and as he stripped off his bloodied coat, wincing at the stab wound, he knew he’d been forcing himself to train through the nerve damage and muscle damage in his shoulder; as he’d been doing almost every day and night for weeks.

Augus stalked around the bed, gazing at him. In a short time, he’d put on more muscle definition, gained back weight, his ribs were no longer as visible. A combination of the Unseelie trows leaving food for him to graze on in almost every room he visited, alongside the training, meant that Gwyn was slowly starting to build back his old, formidable strength.

The strength he’d lost when the Seelie Kingdom had discovered Gwyn had been pretending at being a Seelie fae. Though they’d voted him in, though his parents had forced him to maintain the lie, the betrayal of Gwyn pretending to be Seelie was too great. Gwyn had been imprisoned, demoted to underfae, hunted in the forest, injured doing deals with gods.

Less than three months prior, Augus was sure he’d never see him alive again.

Gwyn led the kind of life that Storykeepers dreamed about telling over campfires. But knowing him, living with him, caring for him soured the experience. Besides, Augus had enough of his own stories. He didn’t need more.

Still, he managed to look innocent enough. His pale white-blond lashes resting lightly on strong cheekbones. Curled hair, finally at a decent length and in fine condition, resting cherubic on his forehead and the pillow behind him. He may have been built for war – muscular, tall, astoundingly powerful – but in sleep he looked more like the boy he once was. His lips were in a perpetual pout – uninjured arm flung out to Augus’ side of the bed.

Augus refused to feel anything about that. Only noticed the way his injured shoulder was tucked in close to his body.

He remembered blood in his mouth and nostrils. Gwyn’s, Efnisien’s...now Crielle’s. He smiled and pulled his shirt off with one hand, not caring about the buttons he broke – the shirt was useless anyway. He ran fingers over the nail marks Crielle had given him, they were rapidly healing. He touched claw-tips to the stab wound still oozing blood that held a green, oily sheen to it. He refused to touch the black and phosphorescent blue of the Soulbond etched into his chest. Instead, he unbuckled his belt, slid off his rapier and let it all clatter to the floor.

Gwyn woke with a start.

‘Hush,’ Augus said quietly. ‘And before you panic-’
‘What happened to you?’ Gwyn said, blinking himself awake, pale blue eyes focusing on the wounds at his side. He pushed himself onto his elbows even as Augus crawled up the bed on all fours, staring down at him.

‘Before you panic, there was another assassination attempt. I am fine.’

‘Augus, you-’

‘Sweetness,’ Augus sighed, bending his head and scraping teeth that were back to their human shape over his skin. Gwyn inhaled sharply, shakily. He sounded oddly disoriented for a nap, and Augus wondered if his body had been forcing him into a sleep cycle. Gwyn found it harder to keep proper, healthy sleep at bay, since being underfae.

Augus bit down into Gwyn’s good shoulder, remembered biting into the flesh of Seelie fae not that long ago, and his jaws snapped down. Blood pooled around his teeth and he moaned thickly, even as Gwyn shifted beneath him, grunted a complaint.

‘Was there more than one assailant?’ Gwyn said, his voice deeper. ‘I can smell different- Augus, who? There’s something familiar about-’

Augus grimaced as he let go of Gwyn’s shoulder and painted Gwyn’s mouth with his own blood, licking it across his lips.

‘You think too much,’ Augus said, nosing at his cheek, running hands over his torso. He was covered with far less blood than before, and it disturbed him how quickly Gwyn could pick that there was more than one person present. He hadn’t considered that Gwyn might be able to scent his mother’s blood. He wasn’t quite ready for Gwyn to know what he’d done.

*Timing is everything.*

‘Roll onto your belly for me,’ Augus said, and Gwyn shuddered, hesitated.

‘Now that I’m awake, I really should be getting b-’

Augus had been letting that go for a while. Gwyn really was busy, so was Augus, but if Gwyn tried to leave now, Augus thought he might actually end up drawing a significant amount of blood to get him to stay. Then again, Gwyn might like that.

‘Did it sound like a suggestion?’ Augus said, his voice becoming even quieter. He pressed his thumb to the wound in Gwyn’s good shoulder, smearing blood. ‘Roll over.’

‘Augus, we shouldn’t-’

A flash of poisonous green behind his eyelids, instincts flaring hard and sharp inside of him. He lashed out, struck at Gwyn’s sore shoulder, pulled him into position even as Gwyn stiffened beneath him. His own hand shrieked at him, he must have been shifting the fractured bone. It only made him angrier.

‘Your listening skills have gotten worse. You will listen to me and roll over, or I will send you off to your meetings with so many wounds you won’t heal in time to make a good impression.’

Gwyn’s eyes – the same shade as the blue in icebergs – went frosty for several seconds, and Augus expected serious resistance. But then, whether because of tiredness, or because they both knew that Gwyn needed this and had been avoiding it for far too long, his eyelids hooded and he winced, trying to roll his sore shoulder out of Augus’ grip even as he turned over.
Augus was impatient. A scene that focused Gwyn’s benefit could come later, but right now he needed to burn out his bloodlust or he’d be dazed and unable to function. It wasn’t as though Gwyn wouldn’t respond, regardless, but Augus needed, and he didn’t want to hunt a human and wipe himself out of Court business by needing to digest his food for a week at the bottom of his lake.

He straddled Gwyn’s hips, twisted his wrists up behind his back, riding out his struggles. He sent out waterweed through his wrists and coiled the rubbery stuff around Gwyn’s, a convenient bondage when he didn’t want to move from his position. Looking down at the gnarled, angry scar tissue from that foolish debt Gwyn made with a fire god, he bared his teeth.

He was seething. The mess of his life had grown exponentially since encountering the wreckage of Gwyn’s. He had to work harder than ever at jobs that he didn’t like. He was wedged into a position of responsibility, and caring about the person who had levered him there made it difficult to walk away. There were two people in the world who held privileged positions in his mind, and he was starting to feel that one of them took him for granted.

He was the Each Uisge, he wasn’t taken for granted.

It was hard not to see that he was more of a prisoner here – imprisoned by reputation, obligation – than he was when Gwyn let him have almost free reign of the Seelie palace while he was still, technically, a prisoner.

He didn’t realise he was growling until Gwyn shifted, discomfited, beneath him.

‘Augus, what’s wr-’

‘Stop talking,’ Augus said, throwing compulsion into his voice without thinking. It didn’t matter. Gwyn was resistant to them. But Gwyn said nothing else, even as Augus reached over to the bedside cabinet and drew a vial of lubricant from a drawer.

He pressed his hand into Gwyn’s hair, dragging fingers through it, massaging at his scalp. It was all the reassurance he could offer. He could still taste blood in his mouth, and Gwyn smelled like prey. Augus swallowed down saliva and ran possessive hands down Gwyn’s sides, watching as Gwyn’s arms shifted in the bindings and then stopped.

Gwyn made a sound of pained frustration. Augus knew the restraints at his wrists forced his arms into a position that put undue strain on his bad shoulder. But he wanted Gwyn to be distracted. If Gwyn was thinking too much, he’d start to ask more insightful questions.

‘Good,’ Augus said, as he grabbed a handful of Gwyn’s ass in each hand and squeezed hard enough that Gwyn squirmed beneath him. ‘No more talking. It’s been rather too long, hasn’t it? I actually have two outfitted rooms now, complete with saltire crosses, benches, beds, a whole accoutrement of toys, and I haven’t been able to get you into either one. It’s remiss of both of us, given you need to unwind more.’

Gwyn’s breath hitched like he wanted to respond, then hitched for an entirely different reason when Augus forced his knees between Gwyn’s legs. He slid a hand into that warm space, ran fingertips over his balls. He licked his lips when Gwyn swallowed down a sound as he squeezed them. He scraped claw-tips over the insides of his thighs, reached further between them – Gwyn’s hips lifting helpfully – pulsed his hand over Gwyn’s half-hard cock. He kept up the pressure until Gwyn’s shoulders strained at the waterweed. He choked, tried to twist away from his own struggles. He’d wrung himself.

‘Careful there,’ Augus said, squeezing one more time and dragging a hoarse gasp from Gwyn’s
throat. ‘Wouldn’t want to hurt yourself.’

He covered his fingers with lubricant, warmed it up in his hands before wrapping fingers around his own cock. He arched back, ran his thumb up over his foreskin and then down, stroking the straight, black pelt of his own pubic hair with slick fingers. He shifted between Gwyn’s legs, letting go of himself and pressing his thumb down hard into the base of Gwyn’s spine, turning his wrist and trailing fingers down between the seam of his ass.

Gwyn twisted his upper body, Augus realised he was trying to look over his shoulder.

Not distracted enough, then.

Careful of his claw-tips, he pressed both his index and middle fingers into Gwyn, opening his mouth at the stretch of Gwyn around him. Gwyn hissed, his legs tightened around Augus’ legs.

‘Relax,’ Augus said, then smirked. ‘Or don’t. It’s really all the same to me.’

He took his time, withdrawing and pushing back, rocking fingers forwards until his knuckles were flush with Gwyn’s ass. He curled them and Gwyn made a muffled sound behind closed lips. Augus was moving too fast. He needed to quell a rising wave within him. He bent forwards and roughly scissored his fingers in Gwyn, even as he bit the fleshy part of Gwyn’s exposed palm.

Gwyn’s wrists yanked in the waterweed bonds, and then he shivered to a halt.

‘Mind your shoulder,’ Augus said, and Gwyn growled, pressed his face back into the sheets. ‘Thank the gods for those healing abilities you have now that you’re King, hm?’

‘Augus...’

The threatening, apprehensive tone in Gwyn’s voice sent a thrill through him. He quickly withdrew his fingers, scratched at the tickle on his thigh only to realise it was wet. He looked down and saw blood painted over himself. His own. He gritted his teeth at it. The stab wound had been brutal. That cook had a wicked ability with a cleaver. He didn’t like to be in pain. Not like this.

He moved quickly. Fisting his freshly blooded fingers over his cock and then pushing against Gwyn’s entrance, even as he slid his other arm forwards and slipped his sore hand over Gwyn’s cheek, caressing the line of his jaw.

He bucked forwards, opening his mouth at the sensation of tightness. It was bordering on uncomfortable, and it was just the sort of sensation he needed to distract himself from the pain throbbing through the scratches that Crielle had given him, the stab wound, the fracture, the myriad other bruises that he’d gained on his rampage through the An-Fnwy estate. Gwyn’s back had bowed, then arched in a convex, a cry forced out of him.

‘Hush,’ Augus said.

He slid the hand at Gwyn’s jaw down to his throat, and wrapped his fingers around that broad neck, squeezing as he sank deeper.

Gwyn made a sound close to a shriek and his shoulders jerked so hard at the waterweed that he snapped it. He shouted again from the pain in his shoulder.

‘Stop, stop, stop, stop, stop,’ Gwyn said, panicked.

Augus froze, eyes wide, shocked away from his own discomfort. Gwyn was a masochist, he liked
Augus loosened his hand around Gwyn’s throat, then withdrew it. He shifted, started to pull out of Gwyn, disturbed at the breathless pleas pouring almost silent from Gwyn’s throat. But the motion of removing his hand from Gwyn’s throat changed everything. He slumped back into the bed, shoulders heaving from a fear that was starting to leak through his own dra’ocht. A sign of how distressed he was.

*This isn’t normal.*

But as he pulled his cock free, Gwyn made a faint noise of protest, shifting his hips as though to discourage him.

Augus hesitated.

‘Touching your throat wasn’t a problem before,’ Augus said, speculatively, sliding his hand back towards Gwyn’s face and watching him flinch away. He bucked his hips forwards again and Gwyn moaned in despair. A moment later – in a move that Augus couldn’t tell was stupid or deeply arousing – Gwyn slid his free, reddened wrists into a voluntary cross behind his back.

Augus licked his lips and obliged, wrapping waterweed around them again. It was easy to forget that Gwyn had the strength to break most bondage.

But his throat…it really hadn’t been a problem before. Not like that. Gwyn was still close to hyperventilating.

Augus felt hardly coherent enough to put the puzzle together, but as he withdrew and slid back in – deeper this time – riding Gwyn’s fractious shifts, a sense memory flashed unpleasantly.

Gwyn ap Nudd, then-King of the Seelie Court, standing before him, forcing his defeat. A hand around his own throat as Gwyn announced Augus’ demotion from King of the Unseelie, to the lowest of all fae classes – underfae. The feeling of his power leaving him, the pain of it...

But Augus had been lucky enough, at least, to be born underfae. He knew how far he was falling.

Gwyn had no idea what to expect when his own demotion was visited upon him by Albion, current King of the Seelie fae, the one who had ripped Gwyn’s life – such as it was then – away from him.

A twinge in Augus’ chest, an ache he didn’t want to think about. He shifted his hand away from Gwyn’s face and dragged it through Gwyn’s hair instead. Once, twice, enough that Gwyn finally started settling beneath him. His breathing eased – just enough that Augus thought he might be coming away from the edge of fear. It was still laboured, Augus was still taking him with not nearly enough preparation.

But then, Gwyn was a masochist.

‘I’d ask you to hold onto those sheets of yours, as you usually do, but you’re a little tied up right now.’

Augus smiled at the tension in Gwyn’s hands and then grasped his hips hard, yanking Gwyn back, bottoming out in a single thrust. Before Gwyn finished crying out, Augus withdrew, undulated his hips as he pushed back in, opening his mouth at the warmth of it. The heat in his blood increased, felt as though he circulated sluggish lava.

Gwyn pressed his mouth into the bed, each sound partly muffled, still wonderful to hear. Augus let
his body fill with pleasure, arousal, then consciously dispersed it through his body until it was
more distant, easier to handle. For the first time in a while, not just in the past few hours, he felt
like he could truly focus.

Gwyn kept denying himself, kept overworking, and Augus wasn’t taking on clients anymore. He
belatedly realised with an unwelcome clarity, that he needed more than what Gwyn was offering.

It wasn’t as though Augus needed much, but he certainly needed more than what he was getting.

His lips thinned, he spread Gwyn’s legs with his own and used his weight to thrust harder, to take
what Gwyn had been withholding for weeks. Gwyn’s fingers splayed, shook, clenched, the noises
he made leaned more towards pain than pleasure. Augus closed his eyes and drank it down,
knowing that this wasn’t the way he normally did things, but then...the mass murder of fae that he
couldn’t eat wasn’t really his style either.

He was branching out.

Augus laughed softly, Gwyn sobbed beneath him. Augus made a crooning noise, more
condescension than care, and smirked, grabbing Gwyn’s hair roughly and dragging his head to the
side. Gwyn resisted, but Augus’ grip was unrelenting and Gwyn blinked at nothing for several
seconds, then closed his eyes, pressed his lips together. Augus slowed his pace, concentrated.

‘It’s not enough for you, is it? You need a proper scene, and I need time to break into you. Why do
you keep putting it off?’

Gwyn said nothing. It was telling that he didn’t try to defend himself. All the excuses about being
busy, the Kingdom, commitments, the Unseelie Court – they all sounded perfectly valid, but Augus
knew something else was going on. But now wasn’t the time to get to the bottom of it, he only
wanted Gwyn to know that he knew.

Augus leaned on his hand so that Gwyn’s head was pinned in place, then moved quickly, pistoning
back and forth, letting his own pleasure fall back into his lower spine, throb down in his cock, his
balls. He thought of blood on his hands, the sound of bones breaking, indulged. It was far messier
than his usual thoughts, more than he often allowed himself to have because he valued self-
mastery so much. If he was honest with himself, the days leading up to the execution of his plan
had left him agitated.

Augus’ gut ached, and from more than pleasure. He made a thin, pained sound. He couldn’t afford
to hold his release off for much longer, the clench and release of his abdominal muscles was
aggravating the stab wound. Augus could tolerate pain if he had to, he didn’t want to prolong it
now.

He was surprised Gwyn hadn’t come yet, but then...Augus hadn’t exactly been paying attention to
what he wanted. His brow furrowed, he shook away an agitation that had grown familiar under his
skin, and slowed his movements, concentrated once more.

Gwyn moaned thickly at the change of pace. Augus ran his teeth over his bottom lip.

‘Sweetness,’ Augus said, breathless. He shifted his grip in Gwyn’s hair until he could massage
fingers over his scalp, sticking to the slower rhythm he’d set. Gwyn’s head didn’t tilt back into the
touch, but his neck tensed like he wanted to.

Once, when his heartsong was dominance, he would have been able to predict the exact moment
that Gwyn would come. Now he was taken aback when Gwyn clenched hard around him, head
jerking in Augus’ hand as he tried to turn back into the sheets. Augus tightened his fingers, and Gwyn opened his mouth on a silent cry, hiding so much of himself and able to get away with it because Augus hadn’t been able to take his time, break him down properly.

Damn it.

Augus closed his eyes, found the well of arousal inside of him and focused on it, amplified it with heat and the taste of Gwyn’s blood in his mouth.

His release, when it came, was less satisfying than he’d hoped. It felt good, but it didn’t sate the hunger he’d unleashed. Halfway through he laughed breathlessly at himself. He’d handled six months in a cell in the Seelie Court better than this.

As soon as he was finished, he withdrew, cutting through waterweed with his claws and absently making sure that Gwyn didn’t move his arms too quickly. The nerve damage in his bad shoulder was brutal, and Gwyn had a habit of punishing himself simply for being injured by deliberately wrenching it. Augus eased Gwyn’s arms forwards, noting the spasms in his breathing as his right shoulder was gently guided forward. He left both of his arms crooked, hands curled into loose fists by his head.

He pressed his hand to his belly, then wadded up some of the sheet and held it in place, staunching the bleeding.

Gwyn pushed himself up, holding an arm across his chest, a sign of how much pain his shoulder was in. Later Augus would have to release the nerves again. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d done it. Two, three days ago? Maybe longer? He’d meant to do it every day that he wasn’t hunting but...it just hadn’t worked out that way.

Gwyn pulled on his pants, a shirt. He was so used to being interrupted by staff or Gulvi, that he was in the habit of getting dressed even before he showered. He sniffed the air.

‘You’re bleeding,’ Gwyn said. Augus stared at him.

‘Your powers of observation leave me, as always, spellbound. I did say there had been an assassination attempt. But in truth, I have a surprise for you.’

Gwyn’s brow furrowed. He was losing the sleepy, debauched look already. His facial expressions these days fell too often towards cold, aloof, or some form of unhappy or suspicious.

He was managing to find at least two of them now.

‘A surprise,’ Gwyn said, flat.

‘Mm. Something worth celebrating, perhaps,’ Augus said, sliding off the bed and finding this moment to be far more satisfying than the release he’d just had.

Gwyn’s expression had landed on suspicion, and seemed to be staying there.

No time like the present.

‘Congratulations,’ Augus said. ‘You’re an orphan.’

Gwyn’s eyebrows drew together, then his eyes widened, his mouth went slack. Confusion passed into a stricken expression that took the peak off of Augus’ excitement.
‘Mama?’ Gwyn mouthed, looking down and then to the side.

Augus went cold, something hardening inside of him.

‘I keep my promises,’ Augus said. ‘I did warn you.’

He felt uneasy. That Gwyn would refer to his mother in such a way, after always calling her Crielle or mother.

‘I feel we need to have a meeting to discuss something that you have been trying to avoid discussing for weeks – she has actioned plans against you, I had evidence but teleporting back waterlogged it and it wasn’t written in waterfast ink. I-’

‘It wasn’t an assassination attempt,’ Gwyn said, and Augus rolled his eyes.

‘It was, it was just a successful one, and it was mine.’

Gwyn’s chest rose and fell rapidly. But his expression shuttered into a blank, awful mask. A coldness that Augus was familiar with. He opened his mouth to retort, to remind Gwyn that Crielle had made Gwyn’s life a misery, but there was a sharp knock on the door. A familiar rap.

‘You’re not joking,’ Gwyn said, after his nostrils had flared, picking up the scents in the room. ‘You...’

‘I’ll get the door then, shall I?’ Augus said. Gwyn’s reactions hadn’t been exactly what he’d expected, and he was still too lost in bloodlust to think straight. He walked over, naked, a sheet held to the wound on his abdomen, yanked the door open.

Gulvi, Unseelie swan-maiden, an integral part of Gwyn’s Inner Court. She gave Augus a desultory look, then her black bird eyes moved past him and her wings flared quickly in agitation when she saw Gwyn. She had one hand resting on the hilt of a dagger, shifted her feet.

‘Darlings, you should know that a messenger has come from the Seelie Court at the behest of our dear Seelie King Albion himself, asking that you come immediately to answer charges of matricide of a respected Seelie Court member through the vehicle of your Advisor, as well as the slaughter of twenty two other Seelie fae, and the somewhat lesser charge of trespassing.’

‘They think I ordered this?’ Gwyn said, and Augus raised his own eyebrows. He really hadn’t thought that part through.

Gwyn and Gulvi were right, this side of politics was definitely not his strength. Not that he particularly cared. He mostly just needed Crielle ferch Ffwy to be eliminated for his own peace of mind. He’d known she wasn’t done with Gwyn, and it hadn’t felt fantastic to be proven right.

‘They think I ordered...’

Gwyn’s voice quavered once. Gulvi glared at Augus, and Augus returned the gaze, nonchalant.

‘They can wait while I shower,’ Gwyn snapped, and Augus turned to him, surprised at the change in tone. He was surprised to see that pale blue gaze directed at him, a formidable focused glare.

‘I did you a favour,’ Augus said.

‘Did you?’ Gwyn said, jaw clenching.

He’ll come around. She was, by far, one of the worst influences in his life. And all the other ones
‘I’ll deal with you after I’ve been to the Seelie Court.’

‘You’re going?’ Augus said, and Gwyn barked out a laugh.

‘I have to go, they think I ordered the slaughter of my own mother. If I don’t go, I as good as admit that this was something you and I masterminded. Which is something I’ll likely have to do, regardless, to protect the rumours we’re fostering. And no, Augus, this is not something that works to the credit of the Unseelie Kingdom. She is a respected, powerful individual with so many contacts on both sides of the river that her death will be read as an affront. I-

‘-It’s not worth it,’ Gulvi said abruptly. ‘He’s high on bloodlust.’

Gwyn’s eyes narrowed, he shook his head. The gesture was so resigned, so despairing, that Augus felt teeth lengthening inside his own mouth.

‘Get out,’ Gwyn said quietly. ‘Get out. Do whatever you want, since that’s evidently what you’re going to do anyway.’

Augus’ lips thinned, he dropped the sheet, exposing the worst of his wound. His cock was still slick with lubricant and he didn’t care if Gulvi saw it. He picked up the sodden folders he’d dropped on the chair, shook them at him.

‘You should know she was planning something, and that the plan has been executed. I’m not sure what you can salvage from these, but there’s documentation in here, and there will be more at the An-Fnwy estate.’

He walked out, not caring who saw him. Perhaps he needed some time in the lake. He certainly needed a shower. He’d wanted to ask if Gwyn was asking him to leave, or ordering him as King, and realised he didn’t want to know the answer.

*Change the location, still a prisoner. I believe that is what Ash would call: ‘Same shit, different day.’*
Chapter Notes

No new tags because believe it or not the current list we have is pretty comprehensive.

Time to take a visit to the New! Flash! Better! Seelie Court! But Albion rules it so *cough*BOO*cough*. (Sorry Albion).

*

A reminder that I have a Tumblr where asks are answered and a lot of extras and fanart is posted and things like that. And otherwise, enjoy the chapter! Feedback / comments / kudos / subscriptions / bookmarks are cherished (and fed hot cocoa or frappes).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Gwyn

*  

Gulvi, his Queen-in-Waiting, waited by the bedroom door as he showered thoroughly. After, she briefed him as quickly as possible as they walked side by side to the throne room, where all Seelie messengers were customarily seen. It wasn’t the first time the Seelie Court had sent messengers to ask for one thing or another – the new list of Noble Court fae, an account of current land holdings (which Gwyn had told them was none of their business, because even he didn’t know what land the Unseelie Court currently had), accounts of other matters, information on where Gwyn stood on several peace-treaties between Seelie and Unseelie nations.

Albion, King of the Seelie fae, certainly liked to make trouble.

But this...

Gwyn stood, dressed in far more formal wear than before – clothing Augus had found for him – with a sore ass, a vicious bite mark in his shoulder, and a frightened but game Seelie messenger reeling off a list of his crimes.

His crimes. Because Augus was his primary Advisor, and anything he did was – apparently – something Gwyn could be held accountable for.

They sent the Seelie messenger out to wait for them, and Gwyn paced in a cream doublet with black trim, scratching absently at it even though it fit perfectly well. Gulvi stood nearby, a thoughtful, dark look on her sharp face. She tightened the ponytail at the back of her neck, not that the white-blond hair needed it; Gwyn was noticing a lot more of her nervous habits these days. He’d had a chance to, she wasn’t particularly suited to being tied to the Unseelie Court.

‘So that’s both of us then,’ Gulvi said abruptly.

‘I beg your pardon?’ Gwyn said, looking up, watching as Gulvi lowered her hands to the hilts of both of the blades hanging bare by her hips.
‘Both of us who have lost a mother thanks to Augus.’

Gwyn shook his head. He was trying to divorce himself from the situation. He could almost, beneath his outrage, see where Augus was coming from. Augus had warned him, but that had been months ago, and Gwyn had never thought that Augus might seriously attempt it. Crielle was dangerous. Augus wore the wounds to prove it. Flashes of worry sparked alongside apprehension.

Gulvi’s brow furrowed, she held up a single finger. She teleported away in a rush of wind and two downy feathers fell to the ground. Gwyn was used to Gulvi using her teleportation frequently within the Court, and only seconds later she returned, holding the sodden folders Augus had dropped on the chair, in her hands.

She opened them, made a face at their wet state, then frowned.

‘It’s useless,’ Gulvi said. ‘La! Fucking useless. Even if there was any truth to it, even if he wasn’t lying through his teeth, you can’t go to them with this. Not without more proof. And you can’t go to the An-Fnwy estate now to look, it will be crawling with Albion’s minions.’

Gwyn took the folders from her and turned over water-damaged leaves of parchment. He could make out very few words, and nothing that pertained to a supposed plot against him. Though...he shivered; his mother was more than capable. Had a plan been actioned?

‘What choice do I have?’ Gwyn said, laughing. ‘Apparently, on the list of things they can now hate me for, I’ve killed my own mother.’

‘And they will hate you,’ Gulvi said quietly. ‘The Seelie, some of the Unseelie too. We put our families before honour.’

Gwyn nodded.

‘I need a drink,’ Gulvi said. ‘Would you mind if I stabbed your waterhorse again?’

‘No,’ Gwyn said darkly, and shook his head, held a hand up to indicate that he didn’t mean it. ‘I’ll deal with him.’

‘Will you? It seems to me that if you weren’t so terribly busy, you would have been able to see this coming.’ Gulvi paused, and then laughed. ‘Oh, quoi! What am I saying? That deviant is too unpredictable. But my point stands. You’d better get a move on. This is – as Ash would say, if he were ever here – something of a clusterfuck. But, my sweet thing, return soon, because that place is not good for any of us; least of all you.’

Gwyn smiled grimly.

He consciously rolled his shoulders. The damaged one shrieked at him, and he craved clever fingers pressing into pressure points, finding ley lines of pain and transforming them into nothing more than neutral, pain-free feedback.

‘Gwyn,’ Gulvi said, as Gwyn readied himself to teleport into the world he’d been raised within, the world he didn’t want to return to.

Gwyn turned to her, and Gulvi grimaced.

‘I’m aware that – for all accounts – she treated you heinously. But I am not like the waterhorses. I understand what it is to have a family, no matter what your feelings towards them. I’ll have some kvass with your name on it, if you want to get drunk later.’
Gwyn offered her a bitter half-smile.

‘I’ve tasted kvass, Gulvi – and what you brew isn’t it. But...I- Thank you. Tell the Seelie messenger where I’ve gone.’

He dissolved into light.

*

Every King or Queen of the Seelie and Unseelie Court were given an ability to transform their Court into whatever beacon they needed it to be for their Kingdom. Gwyn – during his reign as King of the Seelie fae – had turned the Oak King’s palace into what Augus had called ‘the world’s fanciest log-cabin.’ It hadn’t been a beacon to the Seelie Kingdom, but he hadn’t cared. In retrospect, he realised he’d ruined the Seelie Court – made it less appealing, less accessible – as a way of showing his displeasure that they’d voted him into power in the first place.

Albion – King of the Atlantic, King of the Seelie, saltwater fae and master of the seas – had transformed it into a palace once more.

Gwyn approached down a giant entryway –a broad, vast road covered in glittering, shining jewels. They were many-coloured and likely mined from the depths of the sea or recovered from the chests and safes of sunken ships.

The path was bordered with fields of flowers. Shrubs and trees twisted heavily bowered floral branches to the sky. The meadows, the path, the plants were bathed in a radiant, golden light, as though the sun was rising or setting nearby, sending warmth through the world.

It grated at Gwyn’s skin. It was supposed to. The Seelie Court was not supposed to welcome Unseelie fae. It was supposed to remind them that this place did not belong to them.

Gwyn stared down at the gauche display of wealth at his feet. Gwyn half-wanted to bend down and lever some of the gems out of the ground to take back to the Unseelie Court, and he was startlingly aware of how much even his own considerable amount of personal wealth was not enough to fund the rebuilding of an entire Court and its military.

He saw tiny woodland underfae shrinking away from him, hiding, disappearing behind branches. He even recognised some. Once, they had been fae he was familiar with. Those that would attend Seelie Court functions. They weren’t friends, exactly, but they never used to avoid him.

Now he was the monstrous traitor.

He felt naked without his armour.

The Seelie Court had taken that too. Gwyn couldn’t afford to get fitted for new armour, and wouldn’t be seen dead wearing poorly fitting medieval plate armour into the Seelie Court. There was no point getting custom armour while the musculature of his body was being built again anyway.

Gwyn’s face remained impassive, but he snarled inside. He and Augus had been in an increasingly tense space since they’d started living in the Unseelie Court. Gwyn didn’t have time for Augus, not in the way that he used to.

He couldn’t remember the last time he’d allowed Augus to take control of him for a day, an evening, in one of their scenes. He hadn’t experienced enough of Augus’ aftercare to remember it clearly, but he ached for it. But it wasn’t in his nature to ask, and he was truly just busy.
Augus could be helpful one moment, malicious the next, his mercurial nature ruling his actions. Gwyn worried for him. The Unseelie Court – though made for Unseelie fae – was a harmful place for Augus. It was a source of flashbacks, of constant tension.

Once, Augus ruled the Unseelie Kingdom, and invited a fae far darker than he, made toxic by the energy of the underworld, to rule with him. The consequences had been catastrophic for everyone.

Gwyn reached the mailed, armoured guards at the huge double gates leading into the Seelie Court. They held giant spears across it and Gwyn waited calmly, standing at attention, using his dra’ocht to transmit determination, fearlessness, masking his discomfort.

‘I have been summoned to meet with King Albion,’ Gwyn said crisply.

The guards did not move their spears. Wary eyes watched him from behind helms. One had giant spines growing from their back in neat red-and-white array, and he realised they were a lionfish-shifter. Gwyn wondered how many of Albion’s underwater retinue he’d moved up into the Seelie Court to bolster it. Too many, and he’d be facing increasing dissent from the land fae.

*Go on, Albion. Move them all up here.*

‘I’m not sure if anyone remembers their courtesy, but I’m quite sure that one of you should now let someone know I am here,’ Gwyn said, his voice turning cold.

The guards shifted their spears, the gates opened, and the glamour hiding the true nature of the Seelie Court faded away. Beyond the gates, beyond the glowing, golden meadows of flowers, was an arched, blue bridge leading to a palace of pristine newness. It gleamed in pale blue and white, a confection of underwater architecture combined with above-ground building materials. Around the palace of towers and turrets, a giant moat that smelled strongly of saltwater.

It was Old Pete who teleported to meet Gwyn, just behind the guards and the Seelie gates. He gestured for Gwyn to come forwards, to cross the threshold, and Gwyn did so. His skin itched.

‘I like what King Albion’s done with the place,’ Gwyn said, and Old Pete laughed.

‘Do you? I find the salt gets in my nose. But it’s pretty enough. Something out of a fairytale.’

Old Pete, Storykeeper to the Crown and only one of two land fae on Albion’s Inner Court, was a classless fae, an ancient one at that. For someone who was the living trove of more stories than could be counted, no one knew where he had come from, or indeed much of anything of his life.

Gwyn was classless too – that odd category of Seelie and Unseelie fae who followed different rules of existence to everyone else. No one knew who might end up being classless and they could be any species, appear in any place; though they were rare. Crisis, change and chaos followed them. They had a status, but often lived far beyond the lifespan the status indicated.

Many died early. The rest ended up living alone.

‘If you would just take me to King Albion,’ Gwyn said. ‘I would like to get this over and done with.’

‘Hm,’ Old Pete said. ‘They’re serious charges.’

‘I’m aware,’ Gwyn said.

‘Would you permit me to teleport you into the palace?’
Gwyn grinned at him, shook his head.

‘No, thank you. Let’s walk there. I’d be delighted to see what Albion – my apologies, King Albion – has done with the place.’

Old Pete raised bushy eyebrows. They turned together, making their way quietly along the splendour of the arched bridge. Beneath their feet, below the steep drop, saltwater fae swam curiously in the depths, looking up, talking to each other and pointing when they realised who had entered the Court.

Old Pete himself was uncharacteristically silent. He was less than half the size of Gwyn, a motley gathering of mismatched layers of clothing, pouches and shoulder bags hanging from his waist, belts, both shoulders. Little bells tied into his hair and the ragged edges of his hems tinkled and chimed as he walked, and his nails were overgrown and hooked into unthreatening claws. His brown, wrinkled eyes shone, and were the most visible part of his face, the rest hidden behind a veritable bush of facial hair. It grew out of his nose, his ears, it sprouted thickly – white and grey – from his jaw and chin. He was one of the few fae who had chosen to age to a physical appearance of about seventy. Gwyn had ceased his own aging at a physical appearance that set him at about mid to early thirties, even if he was three thousand years old.

Old Pete looked harmless. But he wasn’t. He radiated power. Gwyn wasn’t sure how Albion had coaxed him onto his Inner Court.

‘You know, I remember you when you were younger,’ Old Pete said, lightly. ‘During the Oak King’s Court, you were just a young thing. Eager and obedient.’

Gwyn nodded quietly. He remembered. It had been at his presentation to the Court, and he’d only just come out of adulthood and was to formally enter the military, despite having already been active in it for over a century. Old Pete had been kind to him, though distant. Many other fae had been presented that day, and Old Pete had ended up taking on an apprentice Storykeeper.

Gwyn remembered being envious.

‘You’ve seen a few Courts in your time, haven’t you?’ Gwyn said, and Old Pete laughed.

‘A few.’

‘Do all the stories run together, after a while? You must have seen everything at least once.’

‘Oh no,’ Old Pete said, arching his neck to look up at him. ‘Everything? No. Do you think I’ve seen a time when a single fae has ruled over both the Seelie and Unseelie Court? Aside from now! And the world has seen nothing like the Raven Prince and likely never will again. No, King Gwyn, I think you’ll find as you get older, the stories stop running together.’

‘That we could all live to such an age as you.’

Old Pete laughed.

‘You’ll not get my age out of me that way!’

Gwyn smiled, helpless to Old Pete’s charm. His glamour was gentle thing.

As they approached the proper entrance into the Seelie Court, Gwyn remembered that this wasn’t his Kingdom, this wasn’t his Court, these weren’t his people, and Old Pete was not his friend. He’d only spent three thousand years living with them, being their colleague, fighting for them, killing
for them.

He took a slow breath.

_Crielle is dead._

Gwyn struggled, briefly, to keep his face clear of emotion. He wished it was only an hour before, when his biggest concern had been land acquisition and military restoration.

Not Augus murdering his mother in cold blood.

‘How long ago was she killed?’ Gwyn said, and Old Pete looked at him sharply.

His expression seemed to say: _Don’t you know?_

The Seelie energy began to grate more noticeably. His own destructive light seethed beneath his skin, and the Seelie Court bore down upon him. He was grateful that he’d scrubbed Augus’ scent off himself in the shower, that his clothing hid the bite mark.

He was led through double doors that looked as though they had been carved apiece from a single pearl of unimaginable proportions. Within, the paved ground changed to a mosaic of abalone shell, leading to the vaulted grandeur of the throne room. A single throne carved of deep blue coral in the centre, but Albion wasn’t there.

Gwyn’s eyes narrowed, but he also felt a wash of relief. This throne room bore no resemblance to the one he’d ruled from during his own reign in the Seelie Court; and therefore it didn’t remind him, visually, of the place where Albion had demoted him, ripped his power from him, forced him to underfae status before dragging him insensate into a cell.

He was grateful that he no longer had the tracking spell on him that had been placed when he’d been imprisoned. It had mostly dissolved when he’d been made King, but they’d hired a Mage and broken the rest of it.

He was led down a stoa, a broad, rooved path framed with regular, grand columns on both sides. Rooms marked with arches were on their left, sprawling water gardens to their right. He could see many servants – all saltwater fae – but no one else of note.

His lips pressed together when Old Pete led him to a side room that appeared to be of no consequence and waved him inside. He entered a small room that held only a single, grey stone table with some documents on it. Two chairs on either side. There was another closed door behind the chair where Old Pete sat.

Gwyn remained standing. Old Pete was right – even here, the salt of the sea did find its way into his nose.

‘I am King of the Unseelie Court, and I am here to see King Albion,’ Gwyn said.

‘Not entirely, I’m afraid,’ Old Pete said apologetically. ‘You are here to see me.’

‘You are not even Chief Magistrate,’ Gwyn said. ‘If these are such serious matters, why is the King not handling them? Or Alysia?’

A pause, and Old Pete’s expression transformed into one of eloquent pity.

‘Ah,’ Gwyn said. ‘Insult.’
The door behind Old Pete swung open, and Gwyn stiffened when he saw who was behind it, waiting behind it. Mikkel, the Reader fae who had interrogated him when he was briefly held prisoner in the Seelie Court. One of the fae able to pull people’s emotions from their head to such a nuanced degree, they could practically read thoughts. Mikkel was adept, and he’d made Gwyn feel far more stripped bare than many other torturers he’d encountered in his life.

‘You can report to ol’ King Albion that it worked, at least,’ Mikkel said cheerfully, blowing a kiss at Gwyn before leaning against the wall and crossing one leg over the other.

When he’d been in the cell, he’d been too unwell to pay much attention to Mikkel beyond his horrifying ability to Read him. He had the pale brown eyes that were too familiar, Gwyn swallowed to see them. His face was broad, several days into needing a shave, and his hair was short, brown and tightly curled. He was a solidly built man, tending towards roundness. He wore human clothing – brown jeans, brick red boots, a cream shirt with some embroidered word on it that Gwyn couldn’t make out. There was a red leather cord around his neck. He gave Gwyn the same once-over that Gwyn gave him and then shook his head.

‘Don’t know why you’re so stressed out. Can’t read you as well now that you’re King and all. Though I can still read you. Jesus, Petey, you sure you want me here? He’s just gonna get his back up.’

Old Pete said nothing, didn’t even face him, and Mikkel pouted. His face then settled into a smug smile as Old Pete drew out several documents and then gestured for Gwyn to sit.

Gwyn didn’t sit. Insult upon insult. First that Albion wouldn’t see him, then that his King-in-Waiting wouldn’t see him, and not even Alysia – the Chief Magistrate. Now Mikkel was here. He found himself very much wanting to smash his fist into the fae’s face.

Mikkel laughed under his breath and said nothing at all.

‘The charges – you’ve likely heard them already – are as follows: Through the avatar of your Advisor – Augus Each Uisge – you have been found guilty of matricide. A crime, as you know, taken very seriously amongst the Seelie and Unseelie Noble Court families. You are also charged with using Augus to kill twenty two additional Seelie fae without motive. There are charges of trespassing and property damage, but, hm, I’m sure when this becomes a story later, not many people are going to be talking about the property damage.’

‘I’m sure,’ Gwyn said.

‘Hm,’ Old Pete flicked through some papers, and Gwyn glared at Mikkel, trying to hold onto the coldness inside of him. If Mikkel couldn’t read him as well, then perhaps he could bury his terror, his sense of betrayal.

‘You cannot bring any punishment against me,’ Gwyn said, finally. ‘This is not a world where Unseelie account to the Seelie; even if that’s the world that Albion wants.’

‘It’s the world you wanted,’ Old Pete said, his beard moving as he frowned, bells chiming absurdly. ‘You were the one who defeated Augus Each Uiaste, you introduced the precedent of Seelie intervening in Unseelie crimes. This act has always been frowned upon, yet you did it.’

‘I introduced no precedent, I was Unseelie at the time,’ Gwyn said. ‘Again, you cannot bring any punishment against me. None that I’m sure Albion wasn’t already going to visit upon the Unseelie Court. So why am I here?’
‘Cuz we want to know how much control you’ve really got over that Court of yours, duh,’ Mikkel said. He stepped away from the wall. Old Pete shot him an irritated look. Mikkel sauntered over and walked behind Gwyn, trailing a finger over his shoulder. He clapped him on the injured section of his back, and Gwyn couldn’t stop the gust of breath that escaped his lungs. ‘Never fear though. Like, I dunno, Petey...I think he’s guilty.’

Old Pete looked up sharply, and Gwyn masked his surprise.

‘Did you order Augus to do this?’ Old Pete said, looking at Gwyn in disbelief.

‘I did,’ Gwyn said, his voice far stronger than he felt. He took a deep breath, felt like he was marching off a precipice. ‘I ordered her murder. She has been making plots against my life, and one was actioned. We have documentation, and I expect further shall be found upon the combing of the estate. If you like, once I have inherited the An-Fnwy estate, I shall be gracious enough to permit the Seelie fae to go through it themselves; more than they are at this very moment, even.’

Mikkel walked back around the table and leaned over it next to Old Pete, placing both of his hands on the edge of it, looking up at Gwyn.

Old Pete pushed some parchment forward.

‘Gwyn,’ he said, his voice oddly gentle, it set Gwyn’s teeth on edge. ‘You should know that you have been formally disinherited and disowned. There is paperwork, and its veracity has been confirmed.’

Gwyn felt cold, his feet weighted down like lead. He stared at the parchment, but the words blurred. He blinked twice, hard, to make them out, and saw the looping, curling script of the family lawyer.

Common fae were so much like humans, at times, that it disgusted him.

‘Disinherited,’ Gwyn said. ‘Noble Court disinheritance can only occur upon the agreement of the mother and the father, in the cases where there are both; even death does not render this null. Lludd never gave his agreement while living, otherwise-’

Old Pete shook his head. ‘He did. It was a loose but written agreement that, should he die and Crielle decide that she had valid reasons for disinheritance, he would lend his support. It’s been enough to make the document binding. You are welcome to see this agreement. I am afraid you have no right to the An-Fnwy estate. You are no longer permitted the use of the ‘ap Nudd’ surname.’

Gwyn picked up the parchment and read it, read it again. He almost laughed. Orphaned and disinherited in the same day. Within a period of hours.

‘Anything else?’ Gwyn said, setting down the parchment.

‘He’s not happy,’ Mikkel said to Old Pete in a theatrical whisper.

‘Believe it or not, Mikkel, I can tell that for myself, thank you.’

Mikkel smirked up at Gwyn. There was a mischief in his eyes that made him – for a moment – seem all too familiar to a boy he once knew, and Gwyn looked away. He half-expected Mikkel to fill the silence with digs, insults, but time passed and neither of them said anything. He looked back, and Old Pete ran his finger over the paperwork, studying it. Mikkel stared at him, something quiescent in his gaze. His smile had disappeared.
‘Enough of us have no surnames,’ Old Pete said finally, ‘that you’ll manage, I expect. After all, we have an Old Pete, a Raven Prince, an Oak King. And I think you’ll find, Bright One, you have no shortage of monikers.’

‘Indeed,’ Gwyn said.

If all of this was to be believed, Crielle’s last acts in her life were to disinherit him and plan his murder. He knew she hated him, he did know that; but her schemes had never been quite so obvious.

He would need to go back and explain he had no right to that land; it would have been a strategic coup to win it. Geographically, it was close to the Seelie Court, centred in premium land holdings of some of the Seelie noblesse.

He wanted to go to Augus. He wanted an Augus that would offer sympathy for how his parents had treated him. It was a silly thing to want, petty, but he wanted it all the same. And he wanted – for good or ill – to talk to him.

But he couldn’t. Outrage still simmered at everything that had just transpired. Augus had killed his mother. It wasn’t Augus’ fault he was disinherited, it wasn’t, but it was certainly his fault that Gwyn was finding out the way that he was. He was humiliated, King Albion nowhere in sight and a Reader not more than two metres away from him, plumbing his emotions for knowledge.

Old Pete’s unexpected kindnesses were strategy, they had to be. Albion must want Old Pete to maintain something of a tenuous tie to Gwyn’s good will. But Gwyn didn’t trust any of them.

‘Is that all?’ Gwyn said finally.

‘Funeral arrangements will be handled by the Seelie Court, and though you are free to ignore it at your own detriment, King Albion himself has requested that you not attend. I’m sure you understand, of course. He’s also warned you to stay away from the An-Fnwy estate. He will react with military offense if you show up on the land.’

Gwyn resisted the urge to grind his teeth together.

Albion said this. Albion said that. Albion can’t be bothered turning up to a meeting with the Unseelie King as he is obligated, because he is making a point.

He’d trained with Albion, he’d fought side by side with him, they’d shared ale together, clapped each other on the back after difficult tours. Gwyn hung onto the fact that Albion had said – more than once – that Gwyn showed signs of promise as a General. This was more than just strategy, this was personal insult.

He has my armour, my sword, my possessions, my heritage, my name.

‘Hm, however, if it is true that Crielle has executed a plan against your person, we’ll take that very seriously.’

‘I’m sure you will,’ Gwyn said.

You likely all know about it.

Old Pete gazed at him for a long moment. It was hard to tell, but Gwyn thought he saw something of sympathy on his face. But then the openness shuttered away and he gestured to Mikkel.
‘Mikkel will see you out.’

Gwyn couldn’t help but smile at that.

‘I think I’m more than capable of seeing myself out.’

‘Of course you are,’ Old Pete said. ‘But we cannot let the Unseelie King move through the Seelie palace unescorted. You understand.’

Mikkel wasn’t even Inner Court status. He was only a Court fae. Handy to have around, Gwyn was sure, but a sign that the Seelie didn’t find Gwyn remotely significant enough to merit any escort of higher status. Or at least they were pretending at it. Gwyn wasn’t surprised. His last serious encounter with Albion and his Inner Court had involved a lot of grandstanding. After the initial shock of seeing his lightshow, they would have realised exactly how under-resourced Gwyn was.

‘Thank you for your hospitality, Old Pete,’ Gwyn said stiffly. No drinks had been offered. No sharing of glasses. The old cooperation between Seelie and Unseelie; even stiff and forced, was drifting further and further away. ‘I can only hope that when you next visit the Unseelie Court, we can surpass it.’

‘It won’t be hard,’ Old Pete said, and he made a face then, glowering at nothing in particular.

Mikkel walked around the table, attempted to slide his arm through the crook of Gwyn’s elbow. Gwyn shook him off, stalking towards the door and making his way down the stoa, footsteps echoing on dark blue marble with white striations that looked like seafoam.

Mikkel said nothing, though there was an obnoxious spring in his step that made Gwyn wonder how the Seelie would respond if he were to punch him in the face and bodily toss him off the side of the arched bridge into the moat.

They walked through the double gates together, and they slammed shut behind Gwyn with a resounding clang. They made their way on the jewelled pathway – stupid, Gwyn thought – and Mikkel laughed again, under his breath. Mikkel sped up until he could walk backwards to Gwyn’s forward step, facing him. Gwyn increased his own pace until Mikkel was forced to stop, and he moved back to Gwyn’s side, shrugging good-naturedly. Annoyingly.

‘You didn’t order her death though,’ Mikkel whispered, sounding delighted. ‘Do you see what I did in there?’

‘Don’t fuck with me, Mikkel,’ Gwyn bit out.

‘It’s so weird when you curse. You’re all Noble Court manners until you’re pissed, and then all that soldier training comes out doesn’t it? You must’ve heard some filthy shit when you were with them, oh man. And I have to fuck with you a little, don’t I? Can’t help it. It’s boring otherwise.’

Gwyn looked down at him. He’d wondered. There was something about the way Mikkel had kept looking at him that made him wonder why Mikkel was lying about Gwyn’s role in Crielle’s murder. Was he playing his own game? Was he answering directly to Albion and not Old Pete?

‘You’re way more Seelie than you think, y’know,’ Mikkel said, looking up at him and quirking a grin. ‘I mean yeah, you’re Unseelie, and everyone knows it. But ask me, you’re kind of a hybrid.’

‘No one is asking you.’

‘They’re gonna ask me, actually, later. They like to get an emotional read on you. Albion, in
particular, thinks I’m some kind of core part of his Court.’

‘If that were true, perhaps your status might reflect that.’

‘Huh, it’s like I’d never thought of that,’ Mikkel said, laughing sharply. ‘You are super smart.’

He couldn’t teleport back to the Unseelie Court, not yet. But soon. Another two hundred metres, and he could go back to a place where the zahakhar actually made him feel good. Artificial though it may be, Gwyn could do with feeling more settled than he did now.


His mind unhelpfully reminded him that he had also been publically demoted, shamed, imprisoned, nearly executed.

He could hear Augus’ quiet voice in the back of his mind: ‘Melodrama.’

‘You should pay more attention to me,’ Mikkel said quickly, as though he’d realised how quickly Gwyn was speeding towards the threshold so that he might teleport away. ‘Cupcake, you really should. I’m in your corner.’

‘You’re in your own corner, Mikkel.’

‘That too. Though I’m not particularly fussed, you know. I go wherever my interests take me. You’re interesting. Old Pete thinks so too.’

‘He doesn’t seem too fond of you.’

‘That’s because I can – no idea why – actually Read the hell out of him. It drives him nuts. He’s a secretive old coot, but you can only be so secretive when someone can pick your emotional motives straight out of your head. Albion’s not an open book. Alysia only is with her rage. You’re hit and miss. Like bad transmission. It was much better when you were underfae. Then I got to find out like, you were this damaged, abused cupcake with a heart of gold.’

Gwyn had passed the official threshold of the Seelie Court, and was now in the closest thing to neutral land. So the crime wouldn’t count as Court violence. He wasn’t breaking any of the old laws. He grinned, turned, and smashed his fist down into the side of Mikkel’s face, watching in satisfaction as he hit the ground hard. Gwyn’s heart pounded.

‘I lied about that ‘heart of gold’ part,’ Mikkel said, spitting blood onto dirt. ‘Ah, stop worrying. I don’t need to be the one to tell them you lost it at the threshold, god knows there’s enough spies around.’

Mikkel forced himself up onto his palms, then his knees, wobbled. He sat back down with a dazed laugh. His smile was bloodied, but he managed a cocky wink all the same.

‘I’m serious. As much as I can ever be. I’m in your corner.’

‘Mikkel, there are spies everywhere. This is a very ham-handed attempt the Seelie Court is making. I am not going to ally with you, share my secrets with you. Go back and tell them you’ve failed.’

‘Yeah, the spies will do that. But seriously though,’ Mikkel said. His face cleared of mischief again, a sober expression crossing his face despite the split of his lip, the trickle of blood making its way from the corner of his mouth. ‘Seriously. Do you know anything about a Reader’s abilities,
aside from the fact that we can pluck emotions out of the fae? We don’t just Read people. The spies only heard what I wanted them to hear. They don’t know that you didn’t order that murder. They don’t know how unstable your Court is. They just know I’m doing what I was supposed to do. Go research more on Readers, idiot.’

He pushed himself upright and dusted himself off with quick flicks of his fingers.

‘I’m gonna be seeing you sooner than you think, Gwyn ap- Oh. Huh. Not anymore. Just Gwyn, now.’

Gwyn’s last image of Mikkel was the tiny wave he gave with his fingers, before his light finally came to him and whisked him away from the place that had once been – almost – a home.

*

The gloom of the Unseelie throne-room was off-putting. With its four thrones leftover from Augus’ reign and the shadows that clung to it, even the zahakhar couldn’t ameliorate the ugliness of the place.

He’d been putting off transforming the Court. The pressure to create a great Court weighed upon him, especially as everyone knew what he had done to the Seelie Court. He wasn’t a designer of buildings, he wasn’t classically known for his architectural or design aesthetic.

He stared at the walls, the floor, the thrones themselves, because it was more bearable than facing Augus and Ash – brothers related by species, choice, and now Soulbond. Augus had dressed, was wearing his rapier again – which meant that he’d gone back into their room while Gwyn had been away. Gulvi stood near Gwyn, and he realised by the way she was shadowing him, she was feeling protective.

He doubted she was aware she was doing it. Just as he tended to assess an environment based on how easy it would be to secure, she assessed situations based on her own training as a bodyguard and assassin.

‘Look, I get that he did something you guys aren’t happy with,’ Ash said – Gulvi had gone to fetch him from the human world. ‘But he’s hungry, and he’s kind of still high on bloodlust. I don’t know if you’re gonna get anything useful from him at the moment.’

‘Or ever?’ Gulvi said, and Gwyn grimaced as Augus pinned him with a feral, lambent green glare.

‘When was the last time you fed?’ Gwyn said, and Augus shrugged, looking down to the ground for several calculated seconds. The look he directed back at Gwyn was just as hungry as before. Gwyn shook his head, exasperated. ‘You’re supposed to have better control of yourself than this! Instead of some impulsive decision to-‘

‘It wasn’t impulsive,’ Augus said quietly. ‘Is that what you think? That I contracted a coachman, a carriage, that I discovered when she would most likely be home alone, that I did all this on the spur of the moment? I did actually tell you, plainly, that I would kill her.’

‘Augus, come on, man. You put your life in danger,’ Ash said, turning to Augus.

There was a flicker of something in Augus’ eyes that made Gwyn realise just how true that was.

Augus, however, was still swimming in bloodlust, and something feral sparked in his gaze.

‘Does no one actually care that she’s contracted shapeshifters to mindfuck the King of the Unseelie
‘The documentation is unreadable,’ Gwyn said. ‘I wouldn’t put it past you to lie about this, Augus.’

‘Do you know,’ Augus said, walking forwards and invading Gwyn’s personal space, ‘she’s contracted a shapeshifter to look and talk like Mafydd? Pray, tell, what do you think she’ll do with that?’

Gwyn stared at him, stared at the others. That was a name that wasn’t supposed to be said. And it wasn’t supposed to be said in public, in front of others.

‘Who’s Mafydd?’ Ash said, and Gulvi made a sound under her tongue.

‘We’re looking into the plan, Augus. The fact remains that you cannot be a King’s Advisor, and kill the King’s mother without his knowledge.’

‘I can. That’s precisely what I did.’

Gwyn made a short sound of frustration, stepped away from everyone.

‘She did nearly kill you,’ Gwyn said, unable to even look at Augus. ‘You were sporting many wounds when you came to me earlier.’

‘Trifles,’ Augus laughed. ‘The wounds from her were trifles. It was the cook that packed a mean ability with that cleaver.’

Gwyn stood, mind blank. Something spiralled away inside of him, hollowing him out.

*It wasn’t just Crielle.*

*Twenty two other fae...killed without motive.*

‘Gwyn?’ Gulvi said, nearby. He had no idea how much time had passed. He was becoming aware that it had been quite a taxing afternoon.

‘The cook...’ Gwyn said, his voice weathered. ‘I cared for her.’

*How many others? How many others were still working in that Court from my childhood? The stablehands? All’eth? Melchor?*

‘Then go to her funeral,’ Augus said, with a coldness that shocked him. Gwyn turned and couldn’t determine the expression on his face.

‘Go to her funeral, tell her what a wonderful job she did taking care of you. Tell me how she earned your good will in that household.’

This was not a discussion to be had in front of Ash and Gulvi, no matter how curious they looked. Gwyn wanted to defend the servants who had been caught in that household’s web as much as he had growing up, but he couldn’t. Augus looked expectant, but when Gwyn wasn’t forthcoming, his expression shifted, he frowned.

‘I find I am hungry,’ Augus said, sighing. ‘All that blood and yet not a drop to drink! I’m going to hunt.’

He turned on his heel and walked away, Ash hesitating, then following at a gesture from Gulvi.
It left the two of them standing in the shadowed gloom of a throne-room Gwyn had yet to change. He couldn’t help wonder how much the Unseelie Court itself – its appearance – was responsible for this harder-to-predict Augus.

‘He’s a twat,’ Gulvi said quietly. ‘And I’m thirsty. With your permission...’

Gwyn reached out and took her hand and she whisked them both into the air, teleporting them on streams of blue and breeze and wind. They landed in her rooms, and he walked straight to a low, stone bench and sat down.

‘I’ve been disinherited,’ Gwyn said, laughing softly. ‘They’ve taken my last name.’

Gulvi froze where she was setting out two shot-glasses. She turned to him slowly, frowning.

‘And they had a Reader there,’ Gwyn said, stretching his legs out, thinking that this was the stuff he might once have told Augus.

Gulvi said nothing for a long time, then handed Gwyn a glass of what could have been vodka. He knocked it back and held it out, and she scoffed and filled his glass again. Gwyn drank that down quickly and ran a hand through his hair.

‘He didn’t used to be like this,’ Gwyn said quietly, looking at her sidelong. ‘I doubt you’ll believe me. I hardly believe it myself. But he didn’t.’

‘I do, actually,’ Gulvi said after a measured silence. ‘I saw him when he was searching for you.’

They were silent for a long time. About once a week, he and Gulvi shared drinks together. Usually it was a weary but jovial affair. But this wasn’t jovial, and Gwyn tipped his head back until it touched a wall textured like rough, unpleasant rock.

‘La! Gwyn, the orphan, no longer Gwyn ap Nudd. A tough pill to swallow. I used to think that I would be happy to be well shot of my heritage, my connection to Dubna. But now that time has passed, I am attached to my name. Gulvi Dubna Vajat. It is what I am. They are trying to take what you are away from you. Unfortunately, I have no trite bullshit pandering to the idea they cannot. They obviously can.’

‘Yes,’ Gwyn said, eyes closed. ‘Yes, they can. I’m barred from the funeral.’

Another long silence. Gulvi filled his shot glass again, but in that moment Gwyn was too tired to even lift it and drink. He didn’t want to move. He hated that others were seeing him like this, but he preferred that it be Gulvi over anyone else.

He startled when he felt a sharp-clawed hand press firmly to the middle of his sternum. His eyes opened. Gulvi leaned over him, something pensive yet warm on her face.

‘I stand here before you, as the common fae stand before the lay of their lands. I touch you in your grief, as we are all touched by it; the passing of one of us into the lands that we will – all of us – to one day return.’

Gwyn stared at her, shocked, touched. It was a common fae saying, a ritual common upon the death of one of their own. He was surprised she even knew it.

The last time he’d experienced it, his mother had touched the breastplate of his armour and used the weapon of her glamour to hammer him with hatred, even as she said the right words in a teary, sweet voice. And that had been a bizarre moment, as it was over the death of his cousin, Efnisien.
There was no love lost between them.

‘He’s killed two of my family members now,’ Gwyn said, the words vibrating into Gulvi’s hand.

‘Then you should watch your back.’ Gulvi smirked.

Gulvi left her hand on his chest for another minute, then stepped back and flared her wings so that she could sit more easily on her own bed. He closed his eyes again. He could hear her sipping at her drink. He could smell feathers and musk, as well as the oils needed to sharpen and keep blades and leathers in good condition.

There were hollow shapes inside of him.

‘I do not know why I care that she is dead.’

‘She is your family,’ Gulvi said, as though it were the simplest explanation in the world.

‘I hardly cared when Lludd died,’ Gwyn said.

‘It is funny, what death does,’ Gulvi said. ‘I never thought I would miss my mother the way I do. We were never close. La! We foughed. I was far closer to some of my sisters – Galina, Alva, even dear little Maruta – than I ever was to my maiden-mother. And yet...it is not my sisters that leave the largest hurt inside of me, now they are gone. It is her. I cannot quite explain it. And I don’t need to, Gwyn. It doesn’t need explanation. Your grief doesn’t answer to us, or even you.’

‘You’ve done this before,’ Gwyn said. ‘How many people have you counselled in their grief?’

‘My dear, darling cygnet, I worked for families that murdered each other to try and make their point. And I have lived enough of it now to know how it works. It’s painful and tiring, it creeps upon you when you least expect it. Perhaps you are grieving more than just her. Perhaps you might consider the slow disintegration of your connection to a predatory waterhorse, the loss of your name, the constant work to keep a Court alive when it is hanging by a thread and has little meat left to its bones for the hungry to devour – yet still they come, hungrier than ever. Expecting marrow where none is left.’

Gwyn wished for Augus’ hands in that moment. He wished for fingers upon his back, upon his shoulder. Gentle scrapes along his scalp until he was lulled into rest.

‘I think, when Augus returns, I shall change the appearance of the Unseelie Court.’

‘La! Fucking finally! And I suppose this week shall be yet another week of damage control.’

‘I don’t understand it. He’s doing the common work. He’s serving the underfae. He is, from what I can tell, working.’

‘Then you have an answer to a question you don’t want to ask,’ Gulvi said eventually. ‘If someone has changed, you need only look at their circumstances and ask: ‘What, here, is different?’ Are you caring for him? I may loathe the disgusting creature, but he is your creature all the same. After your reunification, you have hardly seen him at all. He did a lot for you, Gwyn, to find you.’

‘And now I will not see him for a week, while he hunts and digests.’

‘And your mother dead,’ Gulvi said. ‘Tell me something of her. Something no one else knew.’

Gwyn rested his hands, loosely, in his lap and shook his head.
‘She was an expert poisoner,’ Gwyn said, half-smiling. ‘She was an enthusiast in the art. She kept abreast of latest developments, ordered books and scrolls. There’s a library in the An-Fnwy basement devoted to it.’

‘Truly?’ Gulvi said, sounding fascinated.

‘I wonder if the Seelie Court will be surprised at what they find at the An-Fnwy estate; or if they knew what she was like all along?’

‘Both, I expect,’ Gulvi said. ‘It will be both.’

Chapter End Notes

In our next chapter, 'Disintegration:'

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‘What is wrong with you?’ Augus said, something concerned in his voice. ‘Is this what you meant when you said you couldn’t be King again? Because-

‘You killed my mother without my knowledge or my consent!’ Gwyn’s voice exploded between them, and birds flushed out of the trees. Augus flinched, his eyes darted automatically – he had a phobia of night birds – but Gwyn couldn’t bring himself, in that moment, to care. ‘Right now, in this moment, Augus, you are directly responsible for a lot of the mess I’m fielding! The Unseelie fae who don’t trust me anymore because apparently I ordered the death of my own mother. The Seelie Kingdom, who used this as a fantastic opportunity to both reacquaint me with Mikkel, and rip my name and my land away. It is bad enough that I am fixing a Court you ruined, a military you disbanded, a Noble Court you tore apart, do you have to keep adding to what I’m dealing with?’
Disintegration

Chapter Notes

No new tags. The above are still pretty comprehensive, woot!

Thank you so much everyone for your feedback and reading the fic and interactions and everything that involves awesomeness. An extra thank you to the commenters. You keep me going. <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Gwyn

* *

The trows, the common fae servants, Julvia in her swan-form, and his Inner Court – Gulvi, Ash and Augus – all waited beyond the bounds of the Unseelie Court in warded land. Sentient creatures that were permitted to live within the Court; owls, foxes, felines, lizards and snakes, a troop of giant, jewel-encrusted lobsters that lived mostly above ground and seemed very peaceful, and many others, were also all waiting beyond the boundaries, Called to patience by Gwyn’s ability to gently compel animals to his will.

No one but the monarch could be in a Court the day its appearance was changed.

Gwyn wandered the dark, shadowed corridors alone. He had no blueprints in his hands despite having drawn many. He drifted in a half-daze, allowing the energy of the Unseelie Court to slowly come to him. It was difficult; it was an energy he’d been rejecting all his life. So it crept towards him in tiny waves.

The Unseelie and Seelie Courts could be completely changed in appearance once per reign. The wellspring of transformative magic was profound, only responded to regnancy, and no one knew where it came from. Only that it could be used to transmogrify a giant section of land, call stone, tile, art, paint and furniture into existence, grow trees and shrubs within hours and even minutes, call water, banish whatever was unnecessary. It was the type of metamorphic energy that some fae Mages trained to have, and even then, by comparison, they only had a drop of it.

It was similar to the magic that allowed each fae to make a home for themselves from a similar wellspring. But those homes were always much smaller in scale, and bound by the energies already living upon the land. What the Unseelie and Seelie rulers could do – by comparison – was transformation on a gargantuan scale.

After the first and most significant transformation, only small, ancillary changes could be made. New furniture had to be purchased and brought in. Trees would have to be grown slowly, unless fae were hired to speed up the process. Afterwards, the only thing Gwyn could change on a semi-frequent basis would be the permissions; the invisible energy that he would lock into the Unseelie Court, making it his own. It would determine who would be allowed to go where.

It was a huge responsibility. He’d not taken the burden so seriously in the Seelie Court; really only constructed a haven for himself, cared nothing at all for the leisure and political requirements of
the fae who would be visiting.

He had to care now.

There was such a rich tradition of verdant, generous, shadowed Unseelie Courts that went before him. Augus had smashed all of that heritage into the ground when he transformed the palace during his reign – but many of the fae remembered the beautiful Courts. Even the Seelie would talk about how lush and lovely the Unseelie Court was. It was described in the vernacular of perfect, cool nights, of luminous stars occasionally hidden by veils of solar auroras, fae talked about the abundance of werelight and the night gardens, of shadowy havens to quieten minds, inspire dark deeds or encourage carnality.

It had been a terrible week. The scrolls, letters and visitors began to pour in. Everyone wanted to know: Why Crielle? Did he really order it? What was the purpose? Was it revenge? Were there any more high profile Seelie targets? And in the background, some Unseelie fae with families began to look at him with increasing suspicion. They may have been predators, but those who had the capacity for care, who had a family, put them before everything else except themselves.

Gwyn was concerned for Augus, but it was swamped underneath his fury at what Augus had done. Gwyn would never have sanctioned such an act, which was likely what drove Augus to doing it without his consent. But it was yet another rebellious act by a waterhorse that simply possessed too much power and was a thorn in the side of everyone.

A month before, they’d found some solidarity. It was everyone versus Albion and the Seelie Court. But weeks passed and the busy work of building an Unseelie Court turned their lives far more mundane, and solidarity was forgotten.

Gwyn became increasingly suspicious of Augus; he was far more unpredictable, and the Unseelie Court took a heavy toll on his psyche. Augus dealt with his own fear and misery by lashing out at others. Yet Gwyn couldn’t simply send Augus away, he needed his assistance. The more that time passed, the more Gwyn wondered how much of the Augus he had fallen in love with was left to him.

Gwyn had changed too, reverting back to the colder self that was better able to withstand the constant chaotic responsibilities of early Kingship. He couldn’t afford to be softer. Feared, in fact, that if he allowed Augus to take him apart, he would realise how much he was unable to handle the burden of what he shouldered.

When Augus returned from hunting, they’d exchanged a long, wary look. Gwyn left the bedroom in order that Augus could sleep – because, frankly, it was hard to be near him and not remember that the first thing that Augus had done after murdering his mother and the staff, was come back and fuck him with Crielle’s blood still in his mouth. Augus watched him with a dark, disapproving expression, and Gwyn hadn’t even made excuses for himself. He had no idea what to say.

Twelve hours later, he’d summoned all the fae into the throne-room and announced that he was ready to change the appearance of the Unseelie Court.

The look of naked relief on Augus’ face was so unlike his usual expression of indifference, it twisted an ache into Gwyn’s chest.

If he and Augus were talking as they’d used to, perhaps...

But they were not talking the way they used to, and Gwyn wasn’t sure how to ask Augus how he was feeling and get an honest answer from him.
Now Augus waited beyond, and Gwyn turned over all the designs in his mind, all the previous Courts and buildings he’d researched, gardens he’d visited. He thought of Augus’ needs and for the first time in weeks started to feel a cleaner affection for him, something untouched by suspicion and paranoia. He doubted that Augus loved him, but in the space he was finding in his mind, he could see that things between them had once been better.

He made his way in slow, concentric circles to the very centre of the Unseelie Court.

The centre of the Court was nothing special – unusually. It was only a space in a corridor. Augus really had tried to destroy every aspect of what made the Unseelie Court special, and had done a marvellous job. Gwyn could only assume that someone who enjoyed aesthetics so much, had a better grasp than others of how to best destroy something that had been beautiful.

For, here, the walls were slick and damp and black. Covered in stone-growing fungi and slime moulds, the floor beneath disguised with a patina of dirt. The only light in the place was that from a candle Gwyn had brought with him. It reeked. Here, in the centre, Gwyn found it easier to fathom the damage the Nightingale had done to Augus’ psyche while he had him captive for a year. For Gwyn knew very few details – only bits and pieces he’d found for himself, and the rare times Augus had shared memories in moments of distress. Here he could imagine it, how Augus’ mind had been infested with underworld creatures: slurchers and memory eaters and the spirits of accident.

It was easy to forget what Augus had experienced. He buried many of the signs of it so far down they were hard to see. He presented himself as a waterhorse of unpredictable, unparalleled strength. Not one that had been broken and destroyed.

But here, in the dark, with fetid smells tickling at his nose and his fingers touching what felt like mucus on the walls, he found himself hoping more than anything that he could make an Unseelie Court that would lift some of the weight resting upon Augus’ soul; his heartsong.

Gwyn pressed his hands and forehead to the wall, let the creeping waves come closer. They knew him. They knew him as Unseelie even as he’d tried to deny it all his life. They knew him as King even though he’d not been King of the Unseelie for very long. The energy of the Unseelie Court was alive and thoughtful, responsive and inquisitive. It trickled into his mind, his body, and the zahakhar – that artificial sense of homecoming and warmth – expanded sharply within.

The energy in his mind became a stream, an upturned well of vast potential. His own heartsong of surrender – how he loathed it – pushed him to give himself up to it. To lose himself in the nature of it.

He had one last moment to fleetingly remember all the designs he’d looked at, before he opened his mind fully to the wellspring of the Unseelie Court and lost himself within.

The transformation of the Court started immediately; spreading from his fingertips, then far, far beyond, radial lines moving from a central point.

Where before, a broken palace loomed tall and ugly over the Gwylwyr Du – the dark, official entranceway into the Unseelie Court – stones broke and reformed around clear panes of glass, coloured panes of stained glass. The masonry took on a charcoal-violet tone, accented with black, gathering in height until finally it rivalled even the splendour of the Seelie palace, then exceeded it.

On the ground floor, a new throne-room, larger than before and partly woven together by the trunks of trees that sprang from the ground just for this purpose. Their spirits talked to Gwyn quietly, made recommendations, and lattices of branches, fretworks of twigs began to knot together
behind the new, marble dais where the thrones would rest.

Canopies stretched into higher levels, found huge spiralling staircases growing stern banisters with the tiny faces of animals and fae carved into the sides. The kitchens were re-centralised so that they were closest to the newly forming places of entertainment – ballrooms, halls, pavilions, the throne room and dining halls. Ancillary outdoor kitchens were added near the spaces that were to be the night gardens, the new training fields, the stables, kennels and mews.

Gwyn lost all sense of time passing. His stomach growled and he couldn’t feel it. His light flickered away inside of him, unpredictable, chaotic, but it was weighed down by the power flooding through him.

He turned his sights to bedrooms and guestrooms. For himself, at least twenty rooms – indulgent, but he needed different spaces. Those for cartography, for making his own longbows – even if he couldn’t draw them properly anymore – for training. He shifted the rest of the training arenas into one localised area; weapons rooms, sparring fields, wrestling grounds, an amphitheatre and more forming a network of connected regions that would flow onto the land where he had been training his military.

He looked to the plumbing, the lighting, providing more wall-sconces, more torches that would eventually be lit with flames that would be self-sustaining, nourished by the constantly regenerating magic of the Court itself. His mind drifted to walls and flooring, bringing in far more floorboards instead of corridors built only from dirt. He brought cornices and polished wood in dark tones of warm grey for the main thoroughfares. In the rooms themselves, he allowed greater personalisation.

But that was harder, and it took more time. Moving from room to room – the hundreds of them that would be preserved and kept whole by the Unseelie Court’s energy – sending energy flowing into furniture, wallpaper, plaster, fixtures, making sure each was appealing.

He didn’t feel it when he slid down to the floor, legs starting to shake.

This wasn’t like most Court transformations where he only had to alter sections and could leave other parts untouched and whole.

Everything needed to be redone.

He recreated stoa and arcades alongside the throne room and ballrooms. Night-blooming vines sprang up along some of them, suckering to the stone, showing crimson blossoms with pale interiors, black and dark green leaves springing shiny from tendrils. He had even researched sculptures, and some part of his mind found that research and pulled from it. Between every column, out of the way of the major walkways, a plinth of marble with a sculpture upon it – representing many of the world’s species of exclusively Unseelie fae. Kudlak, gorgon, waterhorses, fieellyllon, atrif, bogles and countless others. Vines grew upon these as well.

As time flowed away from him, he found his mind wandering down to the basement levels, creeping over a living wetland where he’d once defeated Augus – he altered that only slightly – and then onwards into the dark.

As he moved, mentally, along pitch black staircases and corridors, taking the transforming Unseelie energy with him, he had the strangest feeling he was being watched.

It prickled between his shoulder-blades, his breath caught in his throat.
He hesitated, swimming in energy and magic, hardly aware of himself. There was something here. Something awful.

He was familiar with this quality of energy. He’d felt it in Terho – that sweet, Seelie mouse-lad who had saved everyone, but spent far too much time in the underworlds to ever be accepted again. After all, underworld energy clung, polluted the fae and the fae realm. It turned Augus’ self-mastery into a need for world domination and chaotic malice. It plagued Terho’s mind until he could no longer leave his tiny, one-roomed cottage.

The Nightingale had spent a significant amount of time in the Unseelie Court, and Gwyn could feel it – that underworld signature – a darkness that was alive, sentient.

He’d been sure he’d eliminated all signs of the Nightingale. But here, seething in the dark, a glob of energy that he couldn’t quite grasp. A tumour of pollution on the Unseelie Court itself.

*Oh, Augus. No wonder you hate this place.*

Had it been there the entire time? Of course. Feeding upon those who had been polluted by the underworld before. Turning thoughts into increasing chaos, perhaps being the final catalyst that might drive a predatory waterhorse to go on a murderous rampage and have very little adequate explanation as to why.

He tried to brace himself as he moved towards it. It wasn’t a living being, he couldn’t kill it, but he needed to remove it from the Court. Underworld energy was a sickness that only spread once unleashed into the fae realm. It couldn’t stay.

He felt sick with apprehension as he wrapped invisible fingers around it. A cloying darkness danced and shimmered through his very skin and he had no knowledge of crying out, of curling around himself. He fought with the underworld energy, with its desperate need to stay and infect everything with the darkness. It was not an energy conducive to life, to creatures whose hearts beat, whose blood flowed, who weren’t yet ready to be cast away into new realms.

The struggle was not the sort of battle Gwyn was used to. It was unseen, hidden, happening in Gwyn’s mind. He tried to bring his light to bear against it, but his light was a thing of death, a psychopomp of living energy. He was repelled when the glob of energy only grew in size upon meeting it. He couldn’t touch the thing with it and he shoved his light away.

Which left him only with himself. A middleworld creature fighting underworld energy, trying to bring the energy of his Kingship, of the Unseelie Court against it – after all, even Unseelie energy, dark as it may be, wanted this *gone.*

He wasn’t aware of throwing up, of shaking or pouring sweat. His hair clung to his scalp, his fingers and toes twisted into a rictus. He felt none of it.

Except a niggling sensation. Something on his head. He twitched away from it, but it came back. He wasn’t ready to be brought back to himself. For a moment he panicked, thinking the underworld energy was winning; that whatever the Nightingale had left seeded in the underground of the Unseelie Kingdom was growing in strength.

‘Gwyn, sweetness. Can you hear me?’

He moaned a fragile sound, realised it was fingers in his hair. It was *Augus.* More panic. No one should be here. The Court was shifting and seething with energy, its form so liquid it could easily absorb a stray fae and merge them deep into stone, forcing them to live there until they perished.
His body was being shifted, he paid no attention. Water trickled into his mouth and he choked, pushing away whatever interrupted him.

‘Shouldn’t...be here,’ Gwyn murmured, most of his energy focusing on the underworld energy. He had his fingers underneath it. He was levering it away. But in response it was getting heavier, slippery. It was a chameleon. It disturbed him how much the underworld energy fought to remain. The realms were supposed to stay separate.

‘...Has passed? Gwyn? It’s been twenty four hours. Transformations don’t take this long. You have to stop. What could you possibly need to add?’

‘Underworlds,’ Gwyn gasped. ‘Underworld energy. Removing it.’

‘Leave it!’ Augus shouted at him, a frightened, disembodied voice in the dark. ‘Don’t touch it!’

‘Too...late.’

A shock of movement, the sensation of dropping to the floor once more. Then apologetic fingers on his face, his hair. A murmuring that he couldn’t understand.

Augus’ voice disappeared. Gwyn was so close now. He convulsed as he separated the glob from the wall. And there, behind it, a tiny crack. Something that might once have been a portal. How the Nightingale had found the energy to sully the Court itself he wasn’t sure, but he did know the Unseelie Court could heal it. He felt it clamouring as he forced the glob into a smaller and smaller ball, shoving it back through the crack of the portal.

As soon as it was gone, a dark lightning splintered through him and he screamed as the rest of the portal closed. He was no Mage, he wasn’t trained to open or close portals, and the energy required to seal it scoured at him, lacerated his skin.

Then, nothing at all.

When he woke, he was still in the abstract place, Unseelie energy coiling around him, an ocean of bobbing waves. He dragged himself – mentally – to the night gardens and poured himself out into them. A haven. Vines and flowering shrubs, trees with arcing canopies that were fully grown. Grasses. Night-blooming species that both existed and had never existed before. He called into existence furniture, garlands of lights that could be lit by werelight or by flame. He brought in glass lanterns, fragile paper lanterns, bowers, outdoor pavilions, gazebos, bridges over streams, walkways covered in arches.

He separated them by type. There, a night garden for magical plants and herbs. There, one for entertaining and feasting, redolent of the night-picnics that occurred after the Wild Hunts. Yet another became a maze, and there were more besides, each one with a different theme, all connected, spilling into old-growth forests that looked up to the constellations he was growing to love.

He wrung all he could out of that invisible well until there was nothing left. He shuddered like an overworked horse, the world went black.

* 

‘...Gwyn? Gwyn? Wake up. You can do it. Come on, Gwyn, I fail to believe that you’ve experienced torture and torment and this will be the thing that leaves you unconscious for hours. Wake up.’
Gwyn moaned weakly, his head rolled in someone’s lap. Fingers were tracing careful, smooth patterns over his forehead. A sound of relief. Water trickling between his lips again. He was so thirsty. He gulped at it, spluttered, and then realised he had to take it slowly just as Augus told him to.

‘Where is...everyone?’ Gwyn managed, and Augus sighed.

‘None will enter. They were almost successful at forcing me to stay. For all that Gulvi doesn’t like me, I don’t think she relished the idea of me being crushed and folded into a new Court. Perhaps she just really doesn’t want me to be a part of it. What do you think?’

It was too many words. But Augus was talking in that soft, patient voice that Gwyn hadn’t heard in so long. His eyes squeezed shut, began to burn. He felt terribly fragile. He turned his head towards Augus’ thigh and pressed his lips together, said nothing at all.

‘You did it, I think,’ Augus said quietly. ‘I haven’t had a chance to look around. I came straight to you. But I think you’ve done it.’

‘Underworld energy,’ Gwyn said, hoarse.

Augus shuddered.

‘It’s gone,’ Gwyn added, because he realised Augus might not have known that.

‘Are you quite sure?’

Gwyn nodded, sighed when he felt the backs of Augus’ fingers stroking over his cheek.

‘Did you know?’ Gwyn asked, and then furrowed his brow. ‘Did you know it was there?’

‘No,’ Augus sighed. ‘Though I think...I can tell that it is gone.’

Gwyn felt a wave of relief at that. He didn’t know if it would change Augus’ behaviour, but he was glad to know that it might, at least, ease some of Augus’ troubles.

‘You need to rest,’ Augus said, and Gwyn swallowed, shook his head.

‘I have to present the Court.’

‘Gwyn...’ An impatience in Augus’ tone. ‘You need to rest.’

Gwyn felt wretched. He pushed himself upright slowly, ignoring the pain in his shoulder as best he could, the smell of vomit in his nose. Augus stood as well, disappointment in the slight furrowing of his brow, the frown pulling down his lips.

‘Gwyn...if you don’t start looking after yourself, I will-’

‘Leave it,’ Gwyn said, too tired to put much force into it. Reality was intruding. He wanted what Augus was offering. He did. But he had to present the Court. He needed a shower.

Augus had murdered his mother. Not only that, but the others that he had cared for, the cook. He made a faint sound in his throat, and when Augus stepped towards him, concern rewriting his features, Gwyn shook his head abortively.

He didn’t know what to do about Augus.
But he did know that he had vomit and about a day's worth of sweat to wash off his body.

‘Later,’ Gwyn said, and Augus smiled ruefully.

‘That’s what you always say.’

*

The shower helped. He marveled at the newness of the tiles, the fixtures. He was in his room. He hadn’t yet altered the permissions; but Augus now had his own section of rooms, even a library, and Gwyn had his own rooms too. They had a larger, mutual one, but neither of them were using it as of yet.

He’d even given Ash a personal bar along with his own rooms, and Gulvi an eyrie near the top of the palace.

Everyone’s reactions to the new Unseelie Court had been promising. Gulvi, in particular, said it would be perfect for the Triumphal Entry, when he would finally be able to receive new and old Noble Court families to present their fealty, their gifts.

Ash had seen his own rooms, his bar, exclaimed that the Unseelie energy must have known what he wanted.

Gwyn didn’t have the heart to tell him that it had nothing to do with the Unseelie energy itself; that it was just a malleable tool.

On his way out of the shower, he passed a large mirror and caught a glimpse of the furls and knots of scar tissue on his shoulder. His fist clenched. A glancing impulse to shatter what he saw.

On his bed, a basket of fruit and crusty bread rolls. The Unseelie trows were fast learners, and despite his suspicions that they might somehow try and trick him, harm him – just because of their alignment – they seemed as loyal and true as their Seelie cousins. But though he'd burnt out a lot of energy transforming the Court, he felt nauseous and ill. He bypassed the basket.

He still felt like the energy of the underworlds was clinging to him. He knew, logically, it wasn’t. He’d not taken it into himself, he’d even closed the portal. But it had felt so wrong.

He wondered how Augus dealt with it on a day to day basis. He’d had it inside of him. It was a violation that Gwyn could hardly fathom. Perhaps that was why Augus dealt with so many other things with so much aplomb. After that level of torture, perhaps everything else seemed mundane.

His hair caught and snagged as he dragged fingers through it. Sweating into his hair for so long had caused it to start matting, and he walked through his own Kingdom, bare feet slapping on marble tiles, combing it out carefully, wincing at the tangles. This was something Augus had done for him once, and he wondered if things hadn’t so much fallen apart between them, as never come together in the first place.

Their lives, whatever connection they had, perhaps it was no longer real, or maybe it never had been. Perhaps Augus needed clients again. In his darker moments, he became aware that the Unseelie Court was a toxic place for someone like Augus. He wanted him there. He’d named him Inner Court for selfish reasons. There seemed to be a high price for it now.

Gwyn sighed, made his way down one of the huge spiral staircases, hardly paying attention to his opulent surroundings. He knew this Court inside and out now, he would never be lost here again.
It took a good fifteen minutes to move from his shower to the arcade that would lead to the night gardens. He passed the plinths, the sculptures, his fingers touched the leaves of a vine briefly. He cast his senses out and knew then that the animals had all – mostly – returned.

On his left, one of the battle amphitheatres he’d created loomed in his vision. He wondered how the generals he’d been meeting with, training with, would take it. He suspected that Ifir – a fire fae afrit – would have something to say; likely not something he’d want to hear. They were a difficult lot. He had never been more aware of his Seelie training than when he’d started trying to get a band of Unseelie generals to work together. He’d tried using Unseelie principles, but he was stifled at a most basic level. He wanted them to work for honour, for duty – and that was not only alien to them, but a reprehensible way of doing things.

It was in that moment that he wondered just how Unseelie he was. He might be Unseelie by birth, but three thousand years of his particular upbringing, conditioning, training...

Unfortunately, it had meant he’d started off on the wrong foot with many of them. And as Ifir had so much of their respect in the first place, it was clear that when Ifir called him and his methods into question, the others had questioned him too.

They were the people he needed on his side. Before he could cherry pick his own military, he needed to know and understand how their own, individual militaries functioned.

Thankfully there were some more receptive generals, including Vane, a young but competent elf and representative of the fie ellyllon.

They all struggled with knowing that Gwyn had fought nearly all of them either directly or indirectly in battle, and triumphed over nearly every single one of them, multiple times. In some cases he’d killed their colleagues, their friends, even family members.

Gwyn smiled bitterly as he reached the end of the arcade, passing through into the gloom of the night gardens, lit only by firelight. He passed fragrant black jasmine, its new shoots a pearly cream. The scent of it lifted his spirits.

He made his way slowly to a sturdy, long wooden trestle table, sat on one of the benches and leaned back, looking up at constellations that only existed over the Unseelie Court.

At least he’d made the Court presentable. He found himself wondering what the Raven Prince might think of it. What the old Oak King would have thought.

Unexpectedly, he wondered if Crielle would approve.

He winced.

Of course she wouldn’t. He’d made it.

*  

‘I’m hesitant to tell you that the time you took actually helped, in case you ever want to do something like that again, but I think it did,’ Augus said, appearing through an arbour behind him, under grapevines that held no fruit.

‘It will do,’ Gwyn said. ‘What are you doing here? Do you need anything?’

Augus paused, his hand reached out and stroked down the side of the arbour. His expression was already shuttered, so Gwyn couldn’t read him properly. Not that he ever really could.
‘I’m concerned,’ Augus said. ‘It also seems to be one of the rare nights where you’re not working.’

Gwyn opened his mouth to defend himself, to say that he was tired, but Augus pinned him with a hard gaze and he frowned instead.

‘Do I need anything,’ Augus said, pensive, almost to himself. He walked past Gwyn and sat next to him on the bench, leaning his back against the table as Gwyn was, looking at him as Gwyn looked up at the stars. ‘What do you think?’

‘Do you think it will be well-received by the Noble Court fae? You know them better than I do.’

‘You might consider answering my question,’ Augus said, and Gwyn swallowed.

Silence passed between them, as thick as the night itself, and Augus finally huffed out a breath of laughter.

‘Then, how about we talk about the underworld energy you were playing with earlier? Do you have any idea what you were messing with?’

‘Believe it or not, Augus, I do. Who defeated the Nightingale the last time?’

‘I believe it was that tiny, pathetic little mouse that you used to dote on,’ Augus said, faking a yawn. ‘Don’t, for a second, think that the picture you made earlier – fetal on the floor and lying in your own vomit – was one of competence.’

‘It’s gone,’ Gwyn said, tired. He needed to sleep. A doze. Something. He didn’t want to deal with nightmares, but they would find him no matter what. ‘It’s gone, Augus. The portal is closed, and it’s done.’

‘Don’t mess with it again.’

Gwyn bristled at being lectured, at the tone in his voice. He said nothing, tensed when Augus placed a palm on his arm.

‘When was the last time you’ve fed? Not what the trows bring you, but properly? Did you have any battles you attended last week?’

Gwyn shifted, looked towards the tree line in the distance.

Augus was referring to his light. The light that sparked inside of him and when unleashed, would scour out swathes of land and bring death to everyone it touched. He hadn’t known – almost all his life – that it was the way he was supposed to feed. And now, with three thousand years of not using it to feed, his body didn’t absorb the death taken by his light as a proper food. He had better luck feeling sated in the long-term from hacking people apart with his sword, than he did using his light.

‘I assisted Zudanna, one of the Generals, defending her land from a small local skirmish. She had it well in hand, I only wanted to see how her military worked. I didn’t have an opportunity to use the light, but there was a death count.’

‘Something, I suppose,’ Augus said, fingers curling into his muscle. ‘You’re lying about not having an opportunity to use your light. Are you back to avoiding it?’

‘We can’t afford anymore damaged Unseelie land than we already have. As it is, we have precious little premium land for the Unseelie to live upon.’
‘Ah, yes, and of course I destroyed so much of it,’ Augus said, lips quirking. There was something heavy in his voice, and Gwyn turned to him.

‘How is the common work going?’

Augus shrugged one shoulder. It occurred to Gwyn that he hadn’t asked for almost two weeks. It was an oversight. He knew far more about Gulvi’s work, what she was doing, than he did about Augus. He only knew that as long as the work was going smoothly, and that he wasn’t causing trouble, things were okay.

‘There have been a few assassination attempts, but they’re deflected easily enough. A few underfae are making the pilgrimage here not to salvage land but to air very specific complaints about a very specific fae. Usually they bring weapons. One brought poison.’

Gwyn went still. He had thought Augus would tell him about all the assassination attempts, but it was clear he wasn’t.

‘It’s fine,’ Augus said, his voice quiet. ‘We knew it would happen. I’m Inner Court and strong. They’re underfae. I only need to keep my defences up. Though this Soulbond...’

‘It was necessary,’ Gwyn said automatically.

‘Was it?’ Augus rubbed at it over his shirt. It was an unconscious gesture, and Augus did it increasingly. ‘I find myself wondering why I ever agreed to it. Letting you tie me to Ash like that.’

‘Ash knew exactly what would happen, what the consequences were.’

‘I’m going to start rehabilitating landscapes, soon,’ Augus said. ‘I’ve got a few earmarked. I think I can. It aligns neatly with my abilities.’

Gwyn’s hands tensed. ‘Will that mean you going to those places?’

‘Of course,’ Augus said. ‘Are you going to tell me my life is in danger? I’m already aware. I can’t not be. Every fae and their damned dog seem quite invested in ending me. You must get more calls for my death now than you did while I was in the Seelie Court.’

Gwyn laughed.

‘Believe it or not, that’s not true,’ Gwyn said, offering a tired smile.

It was in the act of starting to relax, smiling at him, that Gwyn found a thread of tension once more. It was so easy to believe Augus’ mien, but this was someone who had planned killing his mother. And though he may not have been the reason that Gwyn had no last name, was disinherited, it certainly felt like he was the reason.

‘Tense again?’ Augus murmured. He leaned forwards, pressing lips to the side of his face, a hint of tongue hot against his cool skin. His hand grasped possessively at Gwyn’s arm, and Augus kissed his way towards his lips.

Gwyn stiffened further, then made a small noise in his throat when Augus took Gwyn’s bottom lip between his own, licking back and forth along it, the touch sensual and disarming. He groaned when his tongue slipped inside his mouth, flicking at the barrier of his teeth.

He felt ill.
Augus shifted, knelt on the bench and in that position was actually taller than Gwyn, face over his face, long black hair falling like a damp curtain on either side of them. Gwyn shuddered, and Augus hummed soothingly at him, rubbing his arm when Gwyn’s mouth opened. He’d thought to protest, to say something, but Augus’ tongue was long and intrusive and sank deep into his mouth, painting a slow line along the roof of it.

The kiss went on for some time, Gwyn feeling paralysed as Augus bit carefully at his lips, licked the corner of his mouth, thrust his tongue back and forth with a slow power that was completely at odds with how he’d last fucked him.

*After he killed Crielle.*

Gwyn turned his mouth away, panting. His face felt hot.

‘I’m tired, Augus,’ Gwyn said, because it was true.

‘Let me help you sleep,’ Augus said, running sharp claws up underneath Gwyn’s shirt and stroking his skin threateningly. The kisses he placed against the side of his face were all sweet, and Gwyn’s eyes closed, he wanted to lean towards Augus, wanted to move away from him.

‘Augus, I mean it.’

‘You keep telling me ‘later,’’ Augus breathed. ‘Later, later, *later.* *When* exactly? You’re not working. I’m not sure how long you think you can keep rebuffing me, but I am losing all patience with you.’

Augus bit at his jaw, and Gwyn grunted, pushed himself sideways.

His eyes flew open when waterweed coiled around his wrist, his ankles. Months ago he might have allowed it. But after everything that had happened, he turned and ripped at it, snarling. He caught Augus’ surprised expression, and then had a handful of waterhorse attempting to pin his arms behind his back while waterweed was slid around his calves.

The fight was intense. Gwyn was slashed several times with claws, and Augus didn’t manage to avoid Gwyn’s habit of using his immense bulk to simply shove him out of the way.

Gwyn ripped through fresh waterweed and stumbled several steps away from the trestle table, even as Augus came at him.

‘Stop!’ Gwyn shouted. ‘What is wrong with you!’

‘What is wrong with *me?*’ Augus said, outraged, panting. His cheeks were flushed dusky, his eyes sparked bright green.

Gwyn paused, thinking over what had just happened, over the events of the past few weeks, and found rage sparking through him so quickly his fists clenched.

‘Yes! What is *wrong* with you! What would possess you to think that it would *ever* be a good idea to go to the place where I was raised and kill my mother?’

Augus shook his head, face twisting in anger. ‘I don’t know, Gwyn. Might it have been the fact that she tortured you all your life? Perhaps the fact that she still wanted to do it?’

‘I’m the King, Augus. You’re the primary Advisor. You can’t go and kill someone like Crielle and *not* tell me about it!’
‘I’m growing quite tired of you telling me what I can and cannot do.’

Gwyn growled, and the playful smirk that Augus offered in exchange was designed to be infuriating. But Gwyn was already finding it difficult to contain his rage, and he had to halt himself as he stalked towards Augus, hands raising to grab at him.

‘Oh,’ Augus laughed, breathless. ‘Remembering the old days, are you? When you used to be able to vent all your frustrations by coming down to a cell and raping me?’

Gwyn felt like he’d been doused with cold water, but the sensation disappeared behind a whirl of confusion, frustration.

‘Why are you being like this?’ Gwyn said. ‘Why? I’m trying to make things better for you, and—’

‘I can make things better for myself!’ Augus snapped. His teeth grit together, a hand came up and raked hard through his hair. ‘I don’t need your assistance, or anyone’s, to improve my circumstances. Don’t labour under any illusions, Gwyn ap Nudd, you—’

‘Gulvi didn’t tell you?’ Gwyn laughed bitterly, and then realised Augus hadn’t been around to find out. ‘I’m disinherited, I have no last name.’

Augus’ face became ugly with shock, and then he laughed in what sounded like pure delight.

‘All these things they do to you, and you still don’t understand why I tore her apart? Why I tore that place apart?’

‘Some of those people were my friends!’ Gwyn roared, not caring how loud his voice was. ‘Cook—Delphine—she made sure, all my life, that I was fed! She was the only one who slipped through their sights for so long, and you just...you killed her?’

‘They were not your friends,’ Augus hissed. ‘They were the people who stood by while you were tormented beyond what most people can comprehend.’

‘You’re not my defender, Augus,’ Gwyn said, voice turning cold as he numbed inside. ‘You’re the Unseelie fae who ruined his own Kingdom, and then proceeded to ruin the Kingdom of another that he supposedly cares for. Given that you also defeated the Raven Prince, one has to wonder exactly who you’re defending, and what your motives are.’

‘Your lack of trust is charming,’ Augus said, something truly sinister moving across his face, turning his eyes brighter.

Gwyn raised fingers to his forehead, pressed them in. He turned away, mind racing. He was too tired for this conversation, and he and Augus rarely talked to each other like this. His wrists had chafe marks on them from Augus’ waterweed. There was a rip in his shirt. Around them, the scents of night-flowers, of the gardens, the wood-smoke and waxy odour of fire and candles.

‘What is wrong with you?’ Augus said, something concerned in his voice. ‘Is this what you meant when you said you couldn’t be King again? Because—’

‘You killed my mother without my knowledge or my consent!’ Gwyn’s voice exploded between them and birds flushed out of the trees. Augus flinched, his eyes darted automatically – he had a phobia of night birds – but Gwyn couldn’t bring himself, in that moment, to care. ‘Right now, in this moment, Augus, you are directly responsible for a lot of the mess I’m fielding! The Unseelie fae who don’t trust me anymore because apparently I ordered the death of my own mother. The Seelie Kingdom, who used this as a fantastic opportunity to both reacquaint me with Mikkel, and
rip my name and my land away. It is bad enough that I am fixing a Court you ruined, a military you disbanded, a Noble Court you tore apart, do you have to keep adding to what I’m dealing with?"

Augus stared at him, and Gwyn returned the gaze, breathing hard. He could hardly believe everything he’d just said, he was horrified at himself.

‘Ah,’ Augus laughed softly, and Gwyn realised he’d made a mistake. What was he doing, putting so much of everything on Augus, when he’d chosen to be King again? Granted, there had been significant pressure to take up the mantle, but it was still his choice. Augus had checked. And it was – Gwyn realised with dismay – obvious that Augus wanted to check on him more.

‘Augus, I’m s-’

‘Oh no,’ Augus said, holding up a hand. ‘No, please, let’s examine this moral high-ground you’re such good friends with, shall we?’

‘Augus, please, I didn’t-’

‘Shut up,’ Augus snapped. ‘Let’s talk trust issues, shall we? Since you seem to want to cling to them. We might as well even the playing field.’

Gwyn opened his mouth to interject and Augus levelled him with a glare.

‘Dismissing how you treated me while I was in the cell, let’s face it – you weren’t in your right mind and what you were doing didn’t affect me as much as it might affect others. Let’s look at the things you have done that have affected me? Let’s look at one thing in particular.’

Silence stretched, Gwyn waited, his heart a sickening thump in his chest. He felt dizzy.

‘Are you so angry that you want to forcefeed me liver again?’ Augus said, his voice falling into the space around them, damning them both. ‘It might not kill me, you know. Not that you cared the first time, when you tried to murder me, to make me atone for the sin of killing your cousin when he threatened my brother’s life.’

Gwyn’s mouth was dry. He remembered holding a shaking body in his arms, the trembling convulsions of agony as Augus came so close to death. Gwyn could still hardly think about it.

‘You tried to make me atone for my sins, but remember whose sins we ended up looking at, Gwyn? Do you really want to look at some of the things that you’ve done?’

He could taste heart’s blood in his mouth. Could hear Cyledr’s cries and screams and pleas as he begged on behalf of his father.

There was a rustling nearby, they both whirled around.

‘Trouble in paradise?’ Ash said, a strange look on his face.

Augus looked irritated, then shrugged.

‘No more than usual, Ash. I think I’ll go for a walk.’

‘Yeah, I’ll come join you, hey,’ Ash said, smiling. ‘Give me a second, I want to ask Gwyn something about the new Court.’

Augus looked between them both, and Gwyn felt something tug hard at his chest as Augus turned
and walked away, disappearing amongst trees into one of the other gardens. He felt shaky, uncertain. They had more to talk about, but he wasn’t sure how they were supposed to go about doing it.

Ash walked a large circle around Gwyn, and Gwyn’s eyes narrowed when he noticed. Ash was shorter than both Augus and Gwyn, a head full of stiff, curly hair in shades of brown, red, auburn; lime green waterweed poking out of it. He was not a typical predatory waterhorse by any means. He wasn’t even supposed to have survived childhood. Augus had adopted him, raised him, they were truer brothers than many Gwyn knew who were actually related by blood.

Ash was a thorn in Gwyn’s side. He’d never forgiven Gwyn for encouraging him to defeat his own brother while Augus had been King. Never forgiven him for taking Augus prisoner within the Seelie Court.

Everyone loved him; Ash loved everyone.

Except that Ash apparently made an exception for Gwyn, and though they’d been under an uneasy truce for a month and a half, it was evident that Ash didn’t like him as a person.

‘What was that you said about feeding Augus liver?’ Ash said, something amused and dark in his voice.

‘It’s a private matter, and it doesn’t concern you.’

‘It just fucking sounded like, I don’t know- I mean stupid Ash right? Always mishearing stuff? But it just kind of sounded like you fed him liver while he was underfae, and a prisoner, and couldn’t really fight back against you anyway? Like, that’s what that sounded like?’

There was a predatory gleam in his hazel eyes when he looked up. His mouth was slanted into a cruel smirk.

‘Cuz, like, you know, it’s funny how the both of you won’t be honest with me about how you really treated him. Augus, I can understand in a way, he’s pretty quiet about all the shit he’s experienced. So I’m finding out these bits and pieces. Like attempted murder, in the most excruciating way we can pretty much die.’

‘It has nothing to do with you,’ Gwyn snarled, not in the mood, exhausted.

‘You’re not even denying it,’ Ash said, all traces of amusement disappearing from his face. ‘Jesus, you fucking asshole. I don’t really care what Gulvi thinks about you, or what Augus does, I have been waiting – waiting – for the other shoe to drop. And I knew it would. You think I’m gonna treat you with respect after finding out you did that to him? I tell you, Gwyn, you’d better fucking demote me. If you think we have a truce now...’

Gwyn stared at him, took a slow breath.

‘You can’t though, hey,’ Ash said, toeing his shoe into the ground like he was the meek one. Ash tilted his head, looked at Gwyn from under thick eyelashes. ‘Can’t fire me without upsetting Augus, and maybe you just like being fucked up the ass so much that you can’t do it.’

‘I am your King, and you will not talk to me like-’

‘Not in public, sure,’ Ash said, nodding vigorously. ‘I can play the game, man. We can keep up a good front. But I’m tired of playing the ‘Gwyn’s so great’ game. You tried to kill my brother.’
‘I raised his status! I saved his life!’ Gwyn said, and realised he’d just as good as admitted it. He winced, and Ash laughed.

‘Good for you, dude. That’s like...so good of you. Try and murder him, realise you fucked up and try and save him. How easy is it for you to do stuff like that? And you’re mad at him now, right? Is he in danger? Are you gonna hurt him?’

Gwyn’s jaw set. His mind rushed over possibilities. If he demoted Ash, perhaps Gulvi might understand, but Augus wouldn’t. Augus already had very few ties to things that were good for him in the Court. He needed Ash. They needed each other. And Ash knew that very well.

‘I just want you to know that I know, and I’m onto you,’ Ash said, shoving his hands into his jeans pockets, thumbs out and tapping several times. ‘I don’t know what he sees in you, honestly. But hey, he’s been conditioned to believe the best in a monster before. I see you for what you really are. I’ll toe the line in public. I’ll say all the right things. But you’d better fucking treat my brother with respect, or I will find a way to come at you. Yeah? Got me?’

Ash gave him a look which Gwyn had seen on the faces of folks in bars before they took it outside and brawléd hard. But the look melted away into an easy, charming smile. A moment later, Ash’s sickeningly friendly glamour rolled over him, made his stomach turn. It reminded him far too much of Crielle.

Once he’d wanted Ash to like him, which was foolish and childish, but Ash liked everyone, didn’t he?

‘I gotta go check on him now, because he seemed upset, wouldn’t you say? Maybe you should keep your distance from him tonight. Just saying. Alright, well, g’night. Thanks for changing the Court and stuff, I guess. You did a good job.’

Ash flipped him a smile that – along with his disarming glamour – seemed genuine. But there was a glitter in his eyes. A reminder that while everyone else loved Ash, adored him, he was a predator. He might not be a very typical one, but he could obviously be as Unseelie as he wanted when he felt like it.

Ash walked away without looking over his shoulder again, following the direction that Augus had taken.

Gwyn teleported straight back to his rooms and placed his hands on the door as he closed it, changing the permissions so that only he might enter. He needed time to think. Time to be alone.

The door was cold where he rested his forehead against it. He looked at the abrasions on his wrists from Augus’s waterweed, felt a heavy, oozing throb of pain in his shoulder.

He wanted to hunt, to train, to slaughter on a battlefield, but they all brought with them an aggravating pain he didn’t want to think about.

In the end, he sat down at a large desk in another room and quietly went over the accounts, wishing they had a treasurer and knowing he wouldn’t trust one enough to deal with their finances anyway.
In our next chapter, 'Suspicions:

‘You are three thousand- Three thousand years of Seelie conditioning in a Seelie environment amongst the Seelie noblesse and the military. And three thousand years of shoving away what you really are. You think...you think a few months, and you’re what, Unseelie? You ever heard of nature versus nurture? I’m not betraying the Seelie by...by helping you. I don’t like Albion. He pays well. He’s a dick. I don’t think he wants what’s best for the Seelie fae. I think he wants what he thinks is best. Guess what? Not the same thing.’
Suspicions

Chapter Notes

Welp this is a long chapter, and a lot of stuff happens, and it's probably the most bluntly 'epic fantasy' style chapter we've had so far: Ensemble cast - don't worry, you don't need to remember everyone's names - they'll be repeated as certain ones become more important, discussion of military strategy, murder, intrigue, some gore, a kind of wibbly Gwyn - all the fun stuff. Despite that - no new tags needed for this chapter. :D

A huge squishy thank you to all the readers, and an extra thank you to the commenters and the folks who reach out on my Tumblr - you help me keep the word counts up and try and deliver the best material that I can. I know I don't always get it right, but you give me the impetus to certainly try. :) 

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Gwyn

‘Get your arm up!’ Zudanna shouted to Vane, who turned and laughed, vivid blue eyes dancing with mischief.

Zudanna shifted, wolf ears twitching, wolf paws curling as she mocked an exasperated snarl at him.

Gwyn watched as Vane – a general of the fielhyllon elves – went back to longbow practice. He ached to be able to do the same thing himself. He couldn’t draw properly anymore. He could force himself through the longsword drills and he was getting better, but whenever he drew an arrow or held a bow, his shoulder quivered. He didn’t know if he’d ever be able to use a longbow again.

Gwyn forced himself to look back at the map in the dirt that Ifir – War General of the marid-djinn afrit; warrior fae of the deserts – was drawing with a stick.

There were sixteen generals and War Generals – not including himself – that he’d picked in order to assess their skills. He hoped to rebuild the Unseelie Court military from the private militaries still active.

They were a strong-willed, uncooperative bunch. Unseelie didn’t work for honour or duty or anything other than themselves and whatever they felt was right in the moment; which changed and shifted like smoke.

They were also fae that Gwyn had fought in battle. They’d all lost soldiers at his hands; colleagues, friends, some had even lost family. They represented those who had survived him and the Seelie Court military. They represented those who would give him the time of day.

Another fifteen had refused to respond to the missives. They tolerated Gwyn as King, but didn’t want anything to do with a formal Unseelie military. Feelings still ran high after Augus’ actions; especially now that Augus was in a position of power once more.

The first meeting with the generals had gone poorly. Gwyn had spent so long training Seelie
military with Seelie techniques, that even after weeks of reading through scrolls on Unseelie strategy, reading the diaries of the best Unseelie War Generals – some of whom, like the highly esteemed Ifir, he was in the company of now – he went and blundered almost immediately.

He’d mistakenly brought up the importance of rebuilding the Unseelie Kingdom in order to restore its reputation and its honour.

Ifir, from the fae side of Iran, had tilted his horned head, scratched at bearded, brown skin, then spat out a derisive laugh.

‘Do we look Seelie to you? Is this what we’re dealing with now? You want us to care about the honour of the Unseelie Kingdom?’

Ifir had stepped in front of the rest of the generals and proceeded to humiliate Gwyn by appealing to the others:

‘My friends, do any of us give two shits about the honour of the Unseelie Kingdom?’

Some had laughed. Vane had shrugged, the only one who seemed to care, but his reasons for caring were Unseelie:

‘If the Unseelie Kingdom had more honour, it would have greater trust, more investors, and the fie ellyllon would have access to greater resources, which means more wealth for me.’

Vane was a prince as well as a general and primary economist for his people. Like all the fie ellyllon, he wore his wealth visibly. Enchanted, jewelled neck-chains, bracelets, torcs, even circlets. He chimed as he walked; even his long, pointed ears held crystals cut to release the sound of bells. Slender and tall, he was competent with the recurve bow and a nasty length of wire, but it was his speed, his ability to blur in and out of sight, combined with his knowledge of magic that made him an effective leader of troops in battle.

He, like the fox fae Mu, were famous for infiltrating enemy lines and sabotaging food stores, poisoning water, introducing flux and other diseases long before battles had formally begun.

Gwyn managed to gain some control back after Ifir drew attention to Gwyn’s flawed wording; but the damage had been done. Now, in their twice-weekly meetings, he could sense the majority distrusted him. Yet they were all he had available. The Unseelie Court military didn’t exist and he had to start from scratch, trying to see what he could build with the limited resources he had.

Things were slowly improving. He had a long background of interacting successfully with people who knew how to kill others professionally. They appreciated a straightforwardness when speaking even if they were plotting all the while. Dealing with the machinations and politics of military leaders – convoluted though it could be – was still far easier than the Court posturing more common amongst Courtiers.

It was a cool morning. He’d shown them the outer circle of the new Unseelie Court – they could see the new palace, but not enter it. They moved through night gardens and training fields, many of them impressed. They were all going to be invited as Noble Court, and they were aware they were seeing something no one else had seen yet. Offering them the privilege of early access went a long way to securing a better mood between them all.

They now sat in an unprotected field – Gwyn believed that if seventeen generals couldn’t protect themselves from an attack, they didn’t deserve to be generals – discussing different strategies, while the others practiced skills, talked amongst themselves. Vane was learning longbow, Euryale
– one of the gorgon-nagas – watched him closely; the longbow her preferred weapon. But it was Zudanna who shouted the most criticism. She was a Croatian kudlak – a werewolf whose military had eluded Gwyn’s nous for over a thousand years.

‘The problem we have,’ Ifir said, voice rough, pointing to several squares representing the most recent Seelie acquisition of Unseelie lands, ‘is that this is a major food corridor for us. They have the numbers. We’ve gone up against big numbers before and succeeded, but if we don’t succeed this time we run the risk of losing too many while they keep taking over the rest of this corridor. I know you want to secure the Courtlands first, but-

‘No, there is wisdom in what you’re saying,’ Gwyn said, grimacing. ‘They’re using one of my strategies.’

‘Since you came up with it, you’re aware of its flaws then?’ Ifir said, glaring.

Ifir took Gwyn’s Seelie background and having served in the Seelie Court military as a personal slight. But his wisdom was vast. Even though Gwyn was wary of sabotage, he found himself listening to what Ifir said. After all, Ifir could have relied on his true-form – a huge, fire-generating demon – to win battles, but instead he chose intelligence and strategy over brute force.

‘Yes,’ Gwyn said. He took the stick from Ifir, extending the dirt map. ‘If you follow this corridor backwards, there are several passes here, and here, which the Seelie must negotiate in order to restock on fresh water and food. The plan was always to secure the stronghold and the passes – but you say they’re not secured yet? They’re only vulnerable to attack from three directions – West, East and aerial. The stronghold is susceptible to a full-scale attack. But the passes might be-

‘With what numbers? Even if we occupied it they’d retaliate. And we could not sustain defense against a prolonged attack from the Seelie. Our numbers would be diminished. Eventually we’d have to cede the taken land after more deaths that we cannot afford,’ Ifir said.

Gwyn smiled grimly.

‘The deaths are necessary, but I was thinking of using the element of cooperation here; something the Unseelie are not particularly known for, which may give us an advantage. You want to take in your afrit and other fire demons, but this is a mountainous region. Appeal to the rock-speakers, offer them exchange, and look at other Unseelie in the region who are most directly impacted. You need a three tier barrier here,’ Gwyn said, pointing at the Eastern end of the pass. ‘You’d only need two tiers facing the stronghold. They won’t risk too many of the soldiers holding the land they’ve already taken for the passes.’

‘Because it would deplete their people with little way of getting more in. Except aerial of course. But they’re useless. No offence, Ocypete.’

Ocypete, a highly respected harpy, took the comment on board with a sharp-toothed snarl. She shifted her bat wings and stared at the dirt map, while tickling the hilt of her makhaira.

‘This is far inland,’ Ocypete said, pointing at the stronghold. ‘Uselessness of bird shifters aside, have you not considered the weather shifting abilities of the seabird shifters? Drown the food corridor with rain. Put mould in the granaries. Destroy the last few years of stock. It can always be grown again. Would you rather have land to rehabilitate? Or no land at all?’

‘Mm, and do you think the seabird shifters will work with the afrit? Fire and water, not a good mix,’ Ifir laughed, and Ocypete laughed back, the sound cutting.
'That’s your problem, Ifir. You’re a traditionalist. You can’t rely on the same techniques you’ve been using for thousands of years. The Unseelie are too decimated. You’ll have to grow some bigger balls and change the way you’re looking at this.’

Gwyn nodded, kept quiet. He’d been subtly suggesting that for weeks, knowing it would rub off on some of the other fae who would take it up as their own idea. They were more likely to believe each other than him, so he seeded ideas and waited.

‘Does this mean that the Courtlands are no longer a priority?’ Mu said, kneeling by the map and smoothing their silk pants. They looked at Gwyn, fox ears twitching, then pointed a clawed finger at the stronghold itself. ‘You are telling me that you would rather destroy a food corridor to regain it, than the far easier task of defending the Courtlands?’

Gwyn shook his head.

‘I want to do both,’ Gwyn said, and Mu shrugged gracefully, their body reflecting the grace of a sword-master.

‘Can you do both? We have, after all, assessed just what trained military we have available for employ to the Unseelie Court. And there are those of us whose militaries are not suited to grand-scale work of this nature. You cannot send hu-hsien to do this work. Nor can you send Burralga, Hai-Hong or Baw. Our militaries are of a very precise nature.’

‘My militaries aren’t tasked yet,’ Zudanna called out, turning back and leaving Vane to his longbow practice. ‘But Mu, honestly, the Courtlands are better suited to specialist militaries.’

Baw nodded from where he’d been listening quietly. He was a wokulo from the fae side of Sikasso, Africa. He was three feet tall, but his crushingly strong glamour broadcast might and power. He held up a hand to get the attention of the others.

‘I can help defend the Courtlands. I know we’re usually fighting each other, but it’d be nice to get some Seelie blood on our hands and I know I’m not just speaking for myself here. Those fuckers have been picking us off one by one – army by army, military by military, and now we’re letting ourselves be talked around by one of them. You showed us a very pretty palace, Gwyn, but let’s face it, you’ve made a mockery of us over the years.’

‘No,’ Gwyn said, firmly. ‘It is Seelie advantage over the Unseelie. It is simple. Seelie come together for the sake of honour and duty. Unseelie struggle to do this. So Seelie have always had the advantage of powerful, cooperative broad-scale attack, and the Unseelie have always had their strength in smaller, specialist militaries.’

He’d stumbled halfway through what he was saying. He’d almost said ‘We have always had the advantage of cooperative broad-scale attack,’ and he wasn’t Seelie, he’d never been Seelie, and if the Unseelie ever, ever heard him slip up in that manner...

He broke out into a faint sweat, remembering that he had to monitor himself more closely, not fall into the trap of easy conversation.

‘Don’t lecture us on what we already know,’ Ifir reprimanded. ‘The fact remains – you took land for the sake of taking land because you could. Not because the Seelie needed it.’

‘And of course,’ Gwyn said, lips quirking, ‘Unseelie would never stoop to something so underhanded.’

Ifir said nothing. Zudanna smiled sharp canines at him.
'If you don’t like it,' Gwyn continued, ‘we’re working on a way to change it. I want a good battle as much as the rest of you. Complete with blood on my hands. I grow tired of plotting. I want this finalised today. I think, Ifir, you would do well to work with Ocypete, for all that aerial attacks have fallen out of fashion, they used to be very popular once, particularly with those who could work the weather. Albion is taking sea fae far inland; we’re going to have to get used to doing the same.’

‘Baw,’ Mu said, rising to their feet and extending a fox-furred hand. ‘Would you like to discuss how best to protect the Courtlands?’

‘I have some ideas,’ Baw said, taking Mu’s slender hand in a fierce grip that made them wince. They both walked a short distance from the main circle and struck up conversation. Gwyn resisted the urge to eavesdrop.

Gwyn smoothed his hand over the dirt map, destroying it.

‘Now that you’re disinherited, are you going by King Gwyn now?’ Ifir said boldly.

None of the others had brought it up, even though the news had spread quickly.

Gwyn shrugged a shoulder. ‘It seems likely.’

‘And the land? It’s not ours anymore, is it?’

Gwyn kept his face impassive, though he bristled at Ifir calling the An-Fnwy estate ‘ours.’

‘Not unless I contest the disinheritance,’ Gwyn said.

He looked up as Kerri, Luma and Magisakuna came over. They’d been nearby, discussing their own strategies. They sat in a semi-circle on a spare, low wooden bench. Gwyn noticed the way Magisakuna and Luma sat close to one another, but Kerri was off to the side. She wasn’t well liked. She was Gulvi’s right-hand assassin – a blind, cannibalistic Maori fae who was excellent at creating small, precision militaries from scratch, and a fantastic mercenary. But he’d learned quickly that even though the others respected Gulvi, they thought that assassins should keep separate to militaries, and some resented Gwyn inviting her into the circle at Gulvi’s recommendation.

Still, they were beginning to work together, which was something.

‘You should contest it,’ Luma said. Her brown, weathered skin crinkled as she smiled at him. It was a friendly, sympathetic expression. For someone who was angittay and often considered the female counterpart of Tigbalan, she was surprisingly empathetic. Then again, Tigbalan could be too. Or so Gwyn had been told; he’d never encountered that side of the horse fae himself.

‘I may,’ Gwyn said, though he had no intention of doing so. His feelings about it were complicated. He wanted his last name. He wondered how poorly Augus would react if he publically asserted that he had every right to the ‘ap Nudd’ surname. He grimaced.

‘That land, that estate is too well-located to dismiss,’ Luma pointed out.

Gwyn knew that very well. It was why he predicted a difficult fight on his hands if he contested the disinheritance.

Hai-Hong returned with Burralga and they both sat around the rough circle, laughing together. Gwyn held his silence and observed as they all talked amongst each other. Vane and Euryale
returned, along with the two other kudlak werewolves and Dogwill, a common fae who was a surprisingly effective commander for someone so young. Vane offered Gwyn a quick, nervous smile, but that was nothing to the ingratiating one that Dogwill offered. He’d been trying to baldly get closer to him since they started their meetings. It put Gwyn on edge.

He didn’t need people to ingratiate themselves to him, he needed effective leaders.

An hour passed discussing the sea fae and their holdings. Gwyn knew admittedly little, and let Hai-Hong and Burralga – a brolga-footed dhinnabarrada from the fae side of Australia – lead the conversation. Conversations moved from discussions of underwater civil wars, to treaties that were beginning to come into effect.

‘The treaties assist them in uniting against a common enemy,’ Mu said, folding their hands together and waiting for Burralga to nod in agreement. ‘Albion is loathed.’

Albion had been very well-respected under the water by most of the saltwater fae, had even achieved unprecedented levels of Seelie and Unseelie cooperation. Both alignments lived side by side in his giant, underwater palace. But since becoming Seelie King, rumours were that many of the saltwater fae thought he had betrayed them by going aboveground to work with the land fae.

‘I’ll send some messengers to check the state of the treaties, see whether there’s anything there we can use. Thank you for the information, Burralga.’

‘Yeah,’ Burralga said. ‘Maybe the treaties aren’t the real thing, but if they are you have a massive amount of allies to pull from. Maybe even some Seelie.’

‘It’s not as polarised in the sea,’ Hai-Hong agreed.

‘It didn’t used to be as polarised up here, either,’ Mu said, raising eyebrows. ‘The Seelie kitsune and Unseelie kitsune used to live together.’

‘The ambaros and the marid-djinn and afshin afrit still do,’ Ifir said quietly. ‘My wife is ambaros and my children are ambaros and afrit between us. We all have a family clan on the volcano of Oroboros.’

‘There are exceptions everywhere,’ Baw said, scratching at tightly curled hair, leaning forwards. ‘Still doesn’t stop the fact that the majority of them are killing us off like vermin. Being Unseelie used to mean something more than hiding like rats in the rafters.’

Gwyn opened his mouth, ready to head them away from reminiscing about better times, better Courts. It wouldn’t benefit anyone.

Zudanna’s nostrils flared, her wolf ears pricked. Gwyn scented it a moment later – he didn’t have the heightened senses of a kudlak, but his senses were sharper than most due to his status as King and his training.

He could smell the watery greenness of a freshwater fae. An interloper?

He turned as Augus appeared through the trees, walking towards them, smartly dressed and his hair tied back neatly. Gwyn hadn’t seen Augus wear his hair like that for some time. It suited him.

‘Excuse me,’ Gwyn said, standing.

‘If he’s been eavesdropping on us...’ Ifir said, threat in his voice. Gwyn raised his eyebrows at him even as he walked towards Augus.
‘He’s my Advisor, Ifir.’

Ifir and several of the others stood, though only Ifir followed – and even then, at a distance that was safe enough that Gwyn decided to ignore it.

‘What are you doing here, Augus?’ Gwyn said. Augus surveyed the scene with a faux curiosity.

‘Perhaps I just wanted to see what it is you do with your days.’

Gwyn inhaled deeply, frowned. His scent wasn’t quite right. Freshwater, yes, but something too...something sour? He couldn’t pick it.

‘Are you well?’

‘Paranoid as always?’ Augus offered the tiniest quirk of his lips, and Gwyn saw something of affection in the gesture. It made his chest ache. He realised it had been a long time since he’d seen an expression like that on Augus’ face. Lately, every smile that Augus offered was one of cruelty, bitterness or mocking. ‘But I was hoping you might come with me, for only ten minutes, if the generals can spare you. I have something urgent to speak to you about.’

‘It can wait, Augus,’ Gwyn said.

Words he was coming to hate every time he spoke them.

‘I assure you, it cannot,’ Augus said.

Gwyn nodded, turned to offer apologies to the other generals when Ifir drew level with him. Gwyn glared at him.

‘Ifir,’ he said, voice cold.

Ifir stared at Augus, eyes narrowed. Augus flicked his gaze over and gave a disdainful stare in return.

‘Ifir, you’re pushing your luck,’ Gwyn said. Ifir shook his head, didn’t look away from Augus. His nostrils flared once, twice.

‘Everyone knows you don’t believe in luck, Gwyn,’ he said.

‘You let them call you by so familiar a name? Not your titles?’ Augus said, sounding surprised, and Gwyn felt a drift of unease move through him.

Augus knew that. Gwyn had told him he was allowing the generals to call him by his first name instead of-

A blur of movement. A spray of blood as Ifir took his dagger to Augus’ throat and slashed it open, skin peeling apart. Ifir rounded up the action with a crushing blow from his golden, fluted mace. Augus flew fifteen feet backwards, landing with a hard thud. Cries from some of the others, enough to mask the cry ripped from Gwyn’s throat before he was aware of making any sound at all.

Augus, staring at him, gouts of blood pulsing from his throat.

Gwyn’s light crackled along his forearm, tore his skin in lightning-like furrows. Ifir snarled at him, fire appearing in his eyes, flames licking along his own forearms as his own power activated in defence.
Your Majesty, that is a shapeshifter.

Ifir ran towards Augus’ body, Gwyn following. He couldn’t think. He could hardly keep his light down. It leaped in flashes along his spine. Ifir watched him warily, anger in his eyes. He kept his hands red with heat, ready to retaliate. But Gwyn only stared down at Augus.

Ifir took a dagger from his belt and cut Augus’ torso open, and Augus twitched, still alive – though not conscious – and Gwyn stared, a hollow emptiness opening inside of him and roaring like a waterfall.

‘Wait,’ Gwyn said, his voice hoarse.

‘I can prove it,’ Ifir said. ‘There’s only one way to prove it. When they commit to a new form, they can’t...change back until the job is done. Or until I- Damn it, where is it!’

A plan...Augus said there was a plan.

Augus, lying there on the floor, covered in blood, streaks of it across his face, his clothing. Seeping into fabric; blooms of red-black against green.

Gwyn squinted. Augus wasn’t wearing as much water-wicking clothing as usual.

The tear and squelch of Ifir ripping apart Augus’ skin and digging a hand into viscera. Ifir’s flesh was so hot that smoke steamed. The smell of burning flesh moved sweet-savoury into the air. He clenched his fists, reminded himself to keep it together.

‘Ifir,’ Gwyn said again, his voice grinding out of his throat. ‘If you have killed my Advisor...’

‘I am a dead man walking,’ Ifir said, his voice faintly breathless. ‘I know. I’m not an idiot.’

He made a sound of triumph in the back of his throat and tore something free. A bright yellow organ, dripping blood. Gwyn’s thoughts cleared as he realised what he was seeing.

An orbus, the loci of the shapeshifter’s ability to change appearance at a fundamental level. And now that it was gone, the body – now dead – shifted back to its original form. A bland looking, slender fae wearing Augus’ clothing, wearing his rapier.

‘Have you seen Augus today?’ Ifir said, something flickering in his gaze. ‘This is very accurate physical mimicry. Even I know that rapier is one of a kind.’

‘I will check on him and chase this matter up,’ Gwyn said, and Ifir dropped the organ, flicking charred blood off his fingers.

‘You should’ve been on this,’ Ifir said. ‘Not me. You think I like the fact that it looks like I’ve attempted a murder on your Advisor? You’re so lovesick over the waterhorse that ruined us, you don’t know how to defend yourself anymore. And if you can’t do that, what use are you?’

‘You overstep your bounds, Ifir,’ Vane said. Gwyn stared at him in surprise. But he couldn’t focus. His mind raced, thoughts tumbling over one another, only one clear thought left to him.

He had to see Augus.

A whole, living Augus – no throat or torso ripped open, no viscera displaying wetly in brilliant daylight. He refused to allow his body to shake, but the pressing nausea rising in the back of his throat wouldn’t release its grip.
'Everyone knows the true shapeshifters are difficult to spot,' Vane continued. ‘None of us read his scent as alien.’

‘I did,’ Ifir spat.

‘I did. Though I wasn’t sure,’ Zudanna added, frowning. ‘I think I would have preferred to capture him for questioning, Ifir.’

_Crielle’s last plan_, Gwyn looked down at the body that had been Augus’ body. He shuddered. _Hats off to you, mother._

Augus had said there would be more than one.

‘I need to call a meeting with my Inner Court,’ Gwyn said, his voice crisp. A lifetime of hiding how he truly felt coming to rescue him at a time when he was struggling to keep his light under control. A _large_ part of him wanted to take Ifir’s face between his hands and blast what he held with light until nothing remained.

Ifir watched him like he knew what Gwyn was thinking. Eventually he spat to the side in disgust, resettling his mace at his side and cleaning his small blade on a handkerchief.

‘Do you know how many have been contracted?’

‘Augus does,’ Gwyn said, staring at the shapeshifter. He couldn’t get the image of Augus flying backwards through the air, staring at him in betrayal, in horror. He’d seen it before, after all – the times Gwyn had attacked him, hunted him, forced him to accept a Soulbond.

_By the gods..._

He took a deep breath and gave orders. Plans to be drawn up. Messengers to be sent. It didn’t take longer than ten minutes and he hoped what he was asking them to do made sense. No one argued with him.

‘We’ll meet at our usual time in three days.’

Gwyn walked back towards the palace, the rest began to teleport away.

He was surprised when Vane ran alongside him. A jingling mess of jewellery.

‘You have to do something about Ifir,’ Vane said, and Gwyn grimaced.

‘I appreciate your advice, Vane, but-’

‘He undermines you. He works behind your back.’

‘Many of them do,’ Gwyn said. ‘I haven’t yet proved myself by their standards. I cannot expect them to be anything other than they are.’

‘You have proved yourself,’ Vane laughed drily. ‘You’ve defeated some of their militaries. You’ve killed enough of us. I still think- Look I know it’s not my place, but I still think you might be coming off a little Seelie.’

Gwyn stared at him, and Vane nodded, didn’t look abashed at all.

‘I think we’re lucky to have you,’ Vane said. ‘You’re skilled. We’re working more cooperatively now than we did during the Raven Prince’s reign. We need that. You know what you’re doing. I
just caution you-

‘Vane,’ Gwyn said, stopping and facing him. ‘I appreciate your advice, truly. But I need to chase up the matter of the shapeshifters. I will see you in three days.’

Vane sighed, nodded, in that moment reminding Gwyn of a disappointed teenager or child, and not the general he was at all. But then he flashed Gwyn a quick smile and ran back to where he’d left his longbow, curled red hair catching the sunlight, making him – with his pointed ears – seem the kind of fae that humans would tell stories about.

Gwyn’s forearms ached, still oozing blood where his light had split along them. There was blood on his clothing, his face. Augus’ blood.

A shapeshifter’s blood.

His heart pounded fiercely as he teleported into the palace.

He had to find Augus.

*

Gwyn walked down the arched corridor towards the rooms where Augus did his common work – receiving underfae, hearing their concerns and trying to meet their needs. His hands shook.

It was a shapeshifter. It didn’t smell like him. Things weren’t right – it wasn’t Augus. You know that.

His hands clenched into fists and some of the scores along arms opened. Fresh blood welled in fissures in his forearms.

He stood before the wooden door leading to Augus’ workspace. All Courts had a section reserved for underfae that were seeking asylum, assistance and status raises. Augus spent a surprising amount of time within; but then the Unseelie Court had a higher than average number of underfae who required help since his reign.

He raised a shaking hand to the door, bracing himself. It left a mottled, bloodied handprint when he took it away again.

His heart wouldn’t stop pounding.

Stop being ridiculous. Stop. It was a shapeshifter. Augus is behind that door. You shouldn’t even need to be doing this. You could have just called a meeting. You need to reprimand Ifir for his conduct. Vane is right, for all that you can’t be seen to be playing favourites, he is right.

But his mind kept showing him a different reality. One where he opened the door and Augus hadn’t turned up to work. One where he searched through all the rooms, the entire palace, until he’d have to acknowledge that Augus was lying dead outdoors. A still-warm, bloodied body killed by Ifir.

His thoughts jumbled together. In flashes he saw what it might be like to try and manage the Unseelie Court without Augus, trying to deal with Albion and the hidden menaces of his family and everything else. He was panicking, trying to mask that panic.

The door swung inward and Augus stood before him, perturbed. He looked quickly down at his forearms.
‘I thought I smelled your blood. You’ve used your light?’ Augus said. He smirked. ‘Did the generals require a demonstration?’

Gwyn stared at him. The shapeshifter had looked exactly like him and the rapier that he was wearing had been a precise replica and it was too close for comfort, he couldn’t stop seeing Augus flying backwards through the air, throat cut open, viscera torn apart, an organ ripped out of him, the wet, sticky sound it made.

‘Gwyn?’ Augus said carefully, expression shifting, a furrow appearing between his eyebrows.

Gwyn nodded. Forced himself to do something. He was just standing there.

‘I’m terribly sorry for interrupting you.’

‘You’re the King. You’re rarely sorry for interrupting me,’ Augus said, squinting at him, lips turning downwards. ‘Damn it, Gwyn, what happened? Give me a minute and I can- Just let me tell this fae that you’ve requested my audience and you’ll have my time.’

Augus turned to leave, and Gwyn realised how ridiculous this must look.

‘No, no, it’s fine,’ Gwyn said, clearing his throat. ‘You’re seeing someone, and I have...I have nothing urgent.’

Augus was alive. Everything was all right.

Augus turned back and Gwyn gazed at him, noticing things he rarely had to notice. The way his pulse could be seen beating slowly at his neck. The rise and fall of his chest. The brightness of his eyes.

‘Gwyn, what’s wrong?’ Augus said, his voice gentling.

But the gentleness disarmed him, left him off kilter. If Augus was alive and everything was all right, then he was in the same situation as before. Augus had buried his hands in Crielle’s body, had destroyed the remaining people from his childhood. After Mafydd, Lludd, Efnisien-

He didn’t understand why it mattered so much.

‘I’m glad you’re okay,’ Gwyn said, dumbly.

‘What are you talking about?’ A hand on his chest. Augus’ eyebrows shot up. Gwyn stepped backwards and Augus followed, pressing his hand forward, curling his fingers into his sternum. ‘Gwyn, if you don’t start talking to me, I will make you start talking to me.’

‘You have a client,’ Gwyn said, and Augus bared his teeth briefly.

‘I’ve been letting you slip from my grasp,’ Augus whispered. ‘Too far, it seems. I will reel you back, Gwyn. With force, if I have to.’

Gwyn wanted to sway forwards into Augus’ touch. He wanted to say, ‘Please.’ He said nothing, but there must have been something in his eyes because Augus tilted his head, a frown marring his face.

‘All right,’ Augus said, rubbing at Gwyn’s chest before digging claws in through the fabric. ‘If you’ve lost your way, I can help you find it again.’

Gwyn looked away. The pinpricks of pain were an anchor, and if it wasn’t for the panic racing
through him, if it wasn’t for his fear that Augus would find him out, discover his secret thoughts of loss and hopelessness...he would take Augus back to his rooms, their room, any room.

‘I have to go,’ Gwyn said, voice thin.

‘If I told you that I was initiating aftercare, now, for whatever you’ve just experienced, you couldn’t leave without breaking a blood oath.’

Gwyn stared at him, saw flintiness in Augus’ eyes.

‘Just something for you to keep in mind,’ Augus said.

‘Don’t,’ Gwyn said. ‘There’s been no- There’s no cause for it. I overreacted to something. I just wanted to see- I needed you to be-’

-Okay.

Gwyn laughed. The sound bitter, soft. He was supposed to be the one who had Augus under his control, the one who held Augus’ leash and made him cowed enough to be safe in a Court environment again. If anyone outside of his Inner Court truly knew the situation he’d be a laughing stock.

‘I shall see you at the next meeting,’ Gwyn forced himself to say.

He stepped back, teleported away, avoiding Augus’ concerned, disapproving gaze as he left.

* 

‘Ifir’s a problem,’ Gulvi said, after Gwyn had informed her of what had occurred. ‘But oui, I can think of several I trust to send out to investigate the true shapeshifters. Though it will be difficult. Closed communities like theirs are difficult to locate. I shall see what I can do! But oh, they are bold; sending an Each Uisge to the borders of the palace.’

‘Their scents aren’t entirely right. Or at least Augus’ wasn’t. Also, Lludd is dead. Mafydd. Crielle. I’m not sure how effective the rest of the shapeshifters will be, knowing-’

‘Gwyn,’ Gulvi said, her voice hardening, ‘he was trying to draw you away from the main crowd. You said so yourself. And if Ifir hadn’t intervened, you would have gone with him. They aren’t sending these shapeshifters to accost you one by one. This isn’t some ‘ghosts of Christmas past’ situation.’

‘What?’ Gwyn said, confused.

‘La! Never mind. Ash and his fixation on children’s movies. Darling, what I’m trying to say is that the plan seems self-evident, don’t you think?’

Gwyn pursed his lips and turned it over in his mind. He raised a hand to rub his forehead when he realised what she meant.

‘Lure me away and capture me.’

‘Slip you hallucinogens, poisons, beat you until you’re half-conscious and then trot out all those memories. Yes? You see?’

Gwyn sighed. ‘It would have been effective.’
‘It still might,’ Gulvi said. ‘Just because you know it is coming, doesn’t mean it won’t work when you’re insensate. After all, a psychological mind-fuck can be less effective than planned, and still destroy who you are. Mm, I used to enjoy them – the mind games you could play on people. I find they bore me now. Perhaps I just like stabbing people more.’

‘I know you do,’ Gwyn said, lips quirking up.

He sat down on the edge of the wooden table, exhaled slowly.

‘I’ll get my people on this,’ Gulvi said. ‘In the meantime you must be vigilant, trust your nose. Ifir’s quick thinking could be the difference between you being here now, and you beaten and staring at what you think is your father from a very disadvantageous position.’

‘Ifir was aware,’ Gwyn said, ‘that he’d done something that – if a miscalculation – was grounds for his execution. I smelled his fear, the others would have as well. He was certain of his action and it was only afterwards that he considered he may have been wrong. Likely from my reaction. Unfortunately, it makes him seem the more competent.’

Gwyn shook his head, stared at slate flooring. ‘He is, Gulvi. At this moment, he is the more competent.’

‘Self-pity? Gwyn! You are different since your demotion, my sweet. You do know that, don’t you? But no, Gwyn, he is not. He is very competent, yes, but he is not prone to innovation and he is unimaginative as a general. Darling, right now you are exhausted and running on fumes. He is not! The shapeshifter should have been retained for questioning.’

Gwyn rolled his shoulder and caught a sound in his throat. It was a dirty kind of pain, a sickening fire. He could almost smell the burn of it. Nausea flipped in his stomach. He knew he was different since his demotion. Fear found him now in ways it never used to; it found new cracks in his psyche and trickled through everywhere, a brackish water.

‘Can you get someone on him?’ Gwyn said.

‘Not easily,’ Gulvi said. ‘You think he’s in on it?’

‘I think it might be wise to be sure.’

‘It may be easier to get someone on his Lieutenants,’ Gulvi said, scratching idly at the tattoos wrapped around her upper arms – the marks given to her by the Council of Lammergeiers who trained her. ‘I’ll see what I can do, ma douceur.’

An hour later he left, talk of military strategies and possible upcoming plots and other issues moving through his head. It had been easier back in the Seelie Court, when he’d had a fully populated military to answer any threat, working against an alignment that famously fractured in large scale war.

He felt the paradox of being fae and King acutely. Supposedly he would live forever. He constantly felt as though he might not survive the week.

Hanging over him was the recent memory of being underfae. At death’s door, saved only by a god who deigned to visit him.

He’d discovered he didn’t have the skills to survive as he’d once arrogantly assumed.

Gwyn walked to the training rooms. His shoulder shrieked a protest, he was hungry and nauseous,
he didn’t care. Control spun away from him. He needed to know that he could control something, even if it was forcing his body to remember what he was made for.

*

The trow woke him from the first doze he’d entered in days. He was groggy, his body trying to enter a sleep cycle. Fae could sleep or doze – the former lasted consecutive days in Gwyn’s case and came with nightmares. But it was the only thing that properly recharged him. Dozing only forced him to borrow time against himself. The confusion he felt as he stared at the trow signing to him took some time to clear.

They need you downstairs, the trow signed again, slower than before. The three foot, gnome-like creature of grey, wrinkled skin and dark, beady eyes, watched him with that impartial stare that showed an almost perpetual lack of interest in Court affairs. All the trows had a similar attitude. It made them unlikely to gossip, while remaining attentive housekeep.

They? Gwyn signed back, pulling on a shirt and pants, gritting his teeth through the pain in his shoulder and not bothering with shoes.

The waterhorse and the swan.

Gwyn walked into the bathroom and ran the tap, splashing ice cold water over his face, blinking himself to alertness. His hair was kinked up one side and he raked his fingers through it roughly. He walked back to the trow and knelt down.

Where?

The common work rooms.

Gwyn felt unease creep down his spine; something he was becoming more and more used to. What was Augus doing working so late? Why was Gulvi there?

I’ll teleport down. Thank you for alerting me.

The trow bowed briefly, trotted away on small spindly legs.

Gwyn teleported directly into the common work rooms. The first was empty, but Gwyn could sense them nearby and walked quickly through halls into the room where Augus commonly received underfae.

There, he found Augus leaning against a wall and Gulvi sitting on a table, wings tucked to one side. A third fae – a mouse-maiden – stood formally, hands folded together before her. She looked to be middle-aged, a round brown face that was composed but stern. Her straight, black hair was pulled back in a knot behind her head, hair resting behind small mouse ears. Her white sari was high quality, though it was not clean and bore signs of distress. Into an extra band of gilt fabric around her waist, a sorcerer’s staff was hooked. He squinted at her. He recognised her.

’King Gwyn ap Nudd,’ the woman said, and Augus’ lips twitched behind her. Not everyone knew about the disinheritance then. ’I’ve come to beg you for asylum.’

’You’re...Fluri’s granddaughter,’ Gwyn said, holding out a hand immediately. He was in the presence of important company, and it was a shock to see her here. As underfae. She came from one of the long-standing Noble Court families of the Unseelie.
'You met my grandmother?' the woman said, her expression softening. 'She mentioned it, I think. But I did not know you would remember. I am Fenwrel, granddaughter of Fluri. I am a sorcerer and master Mage.'

'Following in your grandmother’s footsteps,’ Gwyn smiled. Gulvi’s wings flared nearby and Gwyn forced himself to focus. It had been unexpectedly pleasant to see a familiar face. He remembered Fluri fondly. ‘Why are you begging for asylum?’

‘My life is in danger.’

‘May I ask why? Your family is esteemed. You also. I’m not aware of much civil unrest in Kerala.’

‘There is little, Your Majesty,’ Fenwrel said, smiling wryly. ‘Only that my grandmother publically advocated for the Each Uisge, and I do also. Before his defeat, my family home was destroyed and I was forced to flee. Since becoming underfae I have not been able to teleport, and sorcerers are not well-liked. I could not find someone to teleport me here. It has taken me this long to make my pilgrimage. Please, Your Majesty, grant me asylum.’

‘Yes, of course,’ Gwyn said, frowning. ‘Why did you advocate for the Each Uisge? Why did Fluri?’

He remembered hearing something about it some time ago – that Fluri had spoken out in support of Augus, during the worst of his atrocities. She’d been murdered shortly afterwards; it had been a great loss amongst the Mages and the Unseelie.

‘My grandmother and I share a common interest – that of magic and the energy flow in people’s bodies. Meridian magic. We talked about his meridians when I asked her to account for her support of him. She explained that his meridians were – to put it bluntly – blocked like a sump from the beginning.’

Augus’ brow furrowed and he stepped away from the wall.

‘She never said that to me.’

‘Well, Each Uisge,’ Fenwrel said, without turning around, ‘my grandmother also said that you take offense at every little thing.’

Augus’ eyes narrowed.

‘Listen, mouse, you-’

Fenwrel spun, staff out and in her right hand with a surprising amount of speed. Gulvi already had one of her knives out, but Gwyn didn’t scent fear in the air from either Augus or Fenwrel, and suspected this was more of the Unseelie posturing that he’d grown somewhat used to.

‘Yes! That’s what I am! And there’s a lot of us! We could take you down. So don’t you mouse me. You need allies, Each Uisge. Don’t lose the ones you have.’

Augus faked a yawn, stepped back to the wall, the closest he would come to accepting what she’d said. Fenwrel smiled, turned, looked up at Gwyn once more. She was significantly shorter than all of them, but she held herself with quiet power. She looked like she had the same fortitude as her grandmother.

‘I am here to beg a boon of you, Majesty,’ Fenwrel said. ‘During the reign of the Each Uisge, my family had their Court status ripped from them. My grandmother, her surviving children and
my...my sons and daughters too. We are all underfae now, and some of us have been killed already. The family of sorcerers are valuable for ransom, as you know.’

She directed a quick, dark look to Gulvi. But Gulvi shrugged and sheathed her knife.

‘I haven’t killed your family,’ Gulvi said, and Fenwrel smiled stiffly.

‘But your kind have.’

‘Swans?’ Gulvi said sweetly.

‘Swans? Try assassins.’

Fenwrel tucked her staff away once more and clasped her hands together.

‘Your Majesty, I ask for entry into the outer circles of the palace or warded land. There have been many attempts upon my life on the way. I ask you to consider the long-standing tradition my family has of serving the Unseelie Court, employed since before the reign of the Raven Prince. My grandmother served loyally on the Raven Prince’s Inner Court and was a trusted advisor and Mage. Let me prove myself to you in exchange for the status raise of myself and my children, and – should you deem it wise, and I think you should – see to the restoration of the recognition of my family as Noble Court status.’

‘Gulvi, Augus,’ Gwyn said, ‘can you give me a moment alone with Fenwrel, please?’

Augus’s eyes flickered towards Gwyn as he left. But there was nothing significant in the look. Gwyn suspected Augus didn’t yet know about the shapeshifter. If Gulvi hadn’t told him, he wasn’t likely to have found out otherwise. Not many of the fae gossiped or shared knowledge with him and he was cut off from many streams of information. Augus looked how Gwyn felt – tired.

Gulvi teleported away and Fenwrel’s shoulders relaxed. She moved around the table and sat where Augus normally sat. She rested her round arms on the wood, her ears drooped. Gwyn realised she was exhausted.

‘You have travelled a long way, not to be served any refreshments,’ Gwyn said, moving out of the room briefly and ringing a bell.

The trows appeared within less than a minute, and he requested drinks and food, a room to be prepared. They disappeared and Fenwrel watched them go, a quiet calculation in her black eyes.

‘I’m sorry to hear of the passing of your grandmother.’

‘It is my children I worry for now,’ Fenwrel said. ‘Fae die, but my children are still young. And none of us are reacting to underfae status well. We’ve had time to adjust, but not enough time. My youngest perished from contagious illness. I was arrogant enough to assume we’d all handle it perfectly well, but it is not so easy when you have lived at Court status for thousands of years.’

‘It isn’t,’ Gwyn agreed.

The trows reappeared with tea and fresh fruit juice, along with freshly baked pastries and sandwiches made from a rich, crusty seed bread. Fenwrel took a sandwich as soon as the plate touched the table, and started taking moderate mouthfuls. The rapidness with which she chewed and swallowed betrayed her hunger.

‘Fenwrel, granddaughter of Fluri, I – Gwyn – with the authority of the Unseelie Kingdom behind
me, do remove your status of underfae and raise you up to Court. Where, I might add, you
rightfully belong.’

Fenwrel smiled with gratitude as power swelled in the room. She closed her eyes blissfully as her
power and health increased. Gwyn found his own abrupt movement from underfae to Inner Court
status a painful affair, but she was a Mage and knew how to handle power. Seconds later she
continued eating and didn’t stop to speak for a long time.

‘What are your skills in the School of the Staff?’ Gwyn said and Fenwrel continued to eat until
she’d finished one of the salad rolls before moving onto the next.

‘Like my grandmother before me, I am a master Mage at meridian manipulation – which includes
pressure point combat and healing, along with the blocking and release of powers and abilities by
manipulating those pressure points. I am a well-versed illusionist and experienced in charms and
counter-charms and spells of increase and decrease. I can work the magelight. That is all. I’m afraid
I never trained with the elements, preferring to focus on meridians.’

‘You must know we do not currently have a Mage in our employ,’ Gwyn said.

‘We’re not idiots, any of us, are we?’ Fenwrel said, picking up a glass of strawberry juice with
delicate fingers and gulping at the thick liquid. On the flagstones around them an olive green,
orange, red and white energy swirled and pooled around them, finding its way into Fenwrel’s
body. The room glowed. ‘I do not know if I am what you need in your employ. I am not a combat
Mage by trade. But I can certainly earn my place here. I have noticed many empty wall sconces
with no magelight. I will provide it freely in exchange for the status raise.’

‘Generous of you,’ Gwyn said. ‘And your children? You will bring them here?’

‘It will be difficult,’ Fenwrel admitted. ‘Zrimat lives a very habituated life in the human world, and
he will not want to come back. But he may for the status. Yukti is a trickster. She disappeared
when the hostilities fell upon us. I may have to scry her out, and that is not one of my strengths. I
do not have that many strengths. But what I do have, I do well.’

She pushed the generous plate of pastries towards him and Gwyn accepted one. He wasn’t hungry
– vague nausea had become part of his days and he knew he wasn’t eating enough – but there were
old laws of etiquette amongst the fae and sharing food was one of them.

‘Your mother,’ Fenwrel said, wiping crumbs absently off the table. ‘I have been thinking about
this. Of her death.’

‘News of it reached you?’

‘Woodland creatures are gossips,’ Fenwrel smiled. ‘I wonder what Fluri might have said about
your family? She was always an astute, perceptive woman. She saw something in the Each Uisge
that I’m still not sure I do, but I have faith in her judgement. And I think she may have seen
something more than the rumours that fly with you. You do not have my trust, Gwyn ap Nudd, but
you have my willingness to try.’

‘Thank you,’ Gwyn said, licking sugar off his fingers. ‘You should know I’m not ‘Gwyn ap Nudd’
anymore. And I’m happy to install you in a room in the Outer Court provided it meets with your
approval. Until the Court has been properly presented, I cannot show you anymore than that
unescorted, I am afraid. Though you are welcome to make use of the night gardens.’

‘Oh, you brought them back,’ Fenwrel said warmly. ‘As to your name? You are what you are. I
could disinherit my children but they will still be ‘Zrimat, son of Fenwrel; Uday, son of Fenwrel,’ and so on.’

Her ears twitched, she reached for a damask napkin and dabbed at the corners of her mouth – perfect Court manners, despite how long she’d spent in the status of underfae. Gwyn felt chastised. He’d not spent nearly so long at such a low status and he’d handled it with no grace at all. Was it just him? Did he lack something? Some ability to survive?

Fenwrel reached into a pouch at her side and drew out a single gemstone. It was roughly cut, a crude, weakly blue thing. He took it, unsure what it was. He felt magic moving through his fingers immediately, almost fumbled it; but the magic didn’t feel hostile and he looked at her curiously.

‘You feel that?’ Fenwrel said with interest. ‘You have the capacity to feel passive magic?’

‘Some,’ Gwyn admitted reluctantly. ‘Untrained. I can make simple charms. Nothing important.’

‘Nothing important? That is not for you to decide, is it? This is a charm of increase. Place it in your treasury and your wealth will increase. Slowly at first, but with speed afterwards. If you do not believe me, you are welcome not to use it, but I recommend you do.’

Gwyn turned the gem in his fingers. ‘This is a great gift.’

‘It is,’ Fenwrel said. ‘But then you are going to restore my family to Noble Court status, and at your Triumphal Entry I would owe you a great gift. This is it. Take it, Gwyn ap Nudd. The power of the Mages are behind you – or, perhaps, the power of this Mage.’

Gwyn’s fingers closed around the gem and he nodded to Fenwrel. He didn’t know if he could trust her, but she came from a highly regarded background and her family had been well-respected by both Seelie and Unseelie fae alike.

‘Now,’ Fenwrel said, standing, taking two more rolls up in her hand and drinking down another glass of strawberry juice. ‘I need to sleep for several days. I wish to see this guest room, and am grateful for the hospitality of the Unseelie Court. I honestly wasn’t sure what sort of welcome I would receive.’

‘There are those of us who still care for the old ways,’ Gwyn said, and Fenwrel placed a hand on Gwyn’s forearm, looked up at him.

‘There are,’ she echoed, as he teleported them away.

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Despite Gulvi’s warning that he take someone with him for his own safety, he went ranging out on his own into unprotected lands. He took a crossbow, since using a longbow was out of the question, and he wasn’t confident enough with the recurve bow. He was managing many on-target shots in the training arena, but that didn’t guarantee a clean kill while hunting.

It was a warm summer’s morning. He could see faint signs that the wheel of the year turned towards autumn, and he looked forward to the cooler months. But for now the air hung heavy around him, bringing with it scents of deer and a large ocelli lynx. He could smell the spoor of many animals, the richness of pine and cedar. Canopies exhaled the green scent of oxygen and chlorophyll and he found himself feeling more grounded as he moved quietly in one of the forests near the Unseelie Court.

After two hours of not finding any satisfactory sights on the deer he was loosely tracking – he
didn’t really need to bring one back – guilt began to needle at him. He was taking too much time away from his responsibilities and he would need to head back to the Court.

He stopped, braced himself on the scaly bark of a pine. He let his thoughts drift, breathing in the forest air, thinking he might need to see the King of the Forest soon and apologise for shirking his duties as leader of the Wild Hunt.

A twigged snapped loudly in the distance. It might have been nothing, but his senses flooded towards the sound, alert.

He stilled, then crept towards it, his own footfalls silent.

He was near one of the more important roads through the forest when he saw a glimpse of a fae through the bush he was using as a screen. He had the crossbow up, stared down, frowned when he realised who it was.

Mikkel was walking on the forest road, eating an apple, looking as jaunty as he had the last time Gwyn had seen him.

It looked like he was heading towards the Unseelie Court.

Gwyn hesitated for only a few seconds, then ranged ahead silently and found a rise of land. He climbed it carefully, needing his good arm to hold the crossbow. But even going slow, he had plenty of time given how Mikkel was ambling along. Gwyn stood upon a granite rock, the crossbow loaded and the bolt facing Mikkel as he walked unknowingly towards him. Gwyn’s mouth twisted in a sneer. Mikkel hadn’t even realised he’d been spotted.

Gwyn cast his senses out, couldn’t sense any other fae nearby aside from the usual occupants of the forest.

He weighed his options, decided to simply wait and see if Mikkel would even notice him. What did he want? Was Albion sending him to gather more information?

Gwyn didn’t trust him, his finger strayed near the trigger. A single crossbow bolt wouldn’t kill a Court fae easily, but it could do some damage.

A stray wash of something sickening swooped through him.

*You’ve held a weapon pointed at a Reader before. You’ve-*

Gwyn clamped down on that part of himself so mercilessly that he felt dizzy.

It was only at the last moment that Mikkel looked up and stumbled, eyes widening comically. Gwyn’s eyebrows rose. Mikkel dropped what remained of his apple. The scent of acrid fear rose in the air around him.

‘What do you want, Mikkel?’

‘Holy fucking shit,’ Mikkel gasped. ‘I should’ve been able to Read you were there. What the hell?’

Mikkel’s eyes narrowed, he tilted his head, his gaze went far away. Gwyn thought he was still too bold for a fae facing a King holding a crossbow pointed right at him. But that was also a quirk of Readers. They were cavalier, reckless.

‘There you are,’ Mikkel said, eyes refocusing, shaking his head. ‘Huh. That’s...interesting. Some
fae can’t do that, you know. How do you mask yourself like that?’

‘I will ask you one more time what you’re doing on Unseelie land, Mikkel. Don’t test me. I’m not afraid to send you back to the Seelie Court with a bolt in your leg.’

‘Seriously,’ Mikkel said, running his fingers along the leather cord at his neck. ‘How are you doing it? I suppose it doesn’t really matter? It doesn’t feel like you can really control it. Probably easier to-’

It was easy to find the cold locus of power inside of himself. It was easy to find that part of him that was detached and cunning. The part of him that had done terrible things to other fae for the sake of power and glory. He liked how competent he felt when he let the coldness seep into him.

Gwyn counted down from three as he listened to Mikkel talk, then let the bolt loose.

Mikkel went down, shouting, the bolt tearing through the muscle of his thigh. Gwyn had missed major arteries, bone, but Mikkel still writhed on the ground as Gwyn jogged down towards him, bloodlust slowly rising in his veins.

‘Mikkel,’ Gwyn said, reloading the crossbow, ‘I’ll ask you again. You seem to have problems concentrating. What do you want?’

‘Because I can concentrate now!’ Mikkel shouted.

It was satisfying to hear something other than cockiness in his voice.

Both of Mikkel’s hands wrapped around the bolt, and then one of his bloodied hands reached for something under his shirt. Gwyn readied himself to dodge a knife-throw, and registered the gun – a human weapon, so rare in the fae world – too late.

The bullet went straight through his calf.

Gwyn stumbled, remained standing. He was King status now, and the bullet had gone straight through. His body would already be repairing itself. He took several deep breaths at the pain, at the sensation of blood streaming down his leg, then limped towards Mikkel, keeping the crossbow up.

Guns were considered taboo; rude. They were a lazy weapon, and Gwyn shook his head at Mikkel.

‘I know, I know how you feel about Readers,’ Mikkel gasped. ‘Me. Readers. It’s- Fuck.’

He broke off, whined. Gwyn thought he looked pathetic. When he reached his side, he stared down, blood warming his calf. He cocked the crossbow again.

Mikkel stared up at him, pupils expanding; pain and fear and something else. Gwyn pushed his own pain away. It was getting easier to ignore. He’d dealt with far worse on a battlefield.

‘I wanted to see you,’ Mikkel rasped. ‘Okay? Dick. Fucking shot me.’

‘You’re Court status,’ Gwyn said. ‘Three days and you’ll be fine. And I made my point. Don’t fuck with me, Mikkel.’

‘I suppose...I suppose you did warn me. Jesus. We’re not all soldiers you know. This hurts. Oh my god.’

Gwyn rolled his eyes, watched as Mikkel dropped his gun and went back to clutching his thigh.
‘I could take the arrow out,’ Gwyn offered, smirking.

‘Ha ha. No thank you. I’ll teleport and get that done myself. Fine, you got my attention. Fine.’

Gwyn could tell he wasn’t accustomed to this sort of treatment. For someone who had been hired for interrogation, Gwyn doubted he’d last minutes on a battlefield. He was weak. Unfit, untrained, a life of leisure likely bought by the riches of those who needed his empathy in their employ.

‘Good.’ Gwyn crouched beside him and Mikkel flinched back, staring up at him. Mikkel laughed then, a mess of emotions crossing his face. Gwyn didn’t let him speak. ‘I don’t know what Albion has told you about me. I don’t know what you gathered while I was underfae. But I am not underfae anymore, I am the King of the Unseelie fae, and I am not going to let you run me around because of some plan that you or Albion or-’

‘One of your generals is a traitor to the Unseelie Court,’ Mikkel said, squeezing his eyes shut. ‘Borough. He started selling information to certain members of the Seelie like, ages ago. Before you were King. But he’s still...disloyal.’

Gwyn lowered his hand to the crossbow bolt in Mikkel’s thigh and slowly wrapped his fingers around it. Mikkel froze. Gwyn could smell the sour acid of fear in his sweat, thought this was just as good as actually hunting.

‘Dogwill Borough,’ Gwyn said. ‘Are you sure?’

‘Get your horse to interrogate him,’ Mikkel said.

‘Augus interrogated Dogwill,’ Gwyn said quietly, grip tightening on the bolt.

‘Albion gave Dogwill the means to beat the compulsions,’ Mikkel said, his voice coming fast, laced with pain, hitched breathing. ‘It’s a weed from underwater; expensive and secret and worth it for just one...just one guy in your group betraying you. Just...interrogate him again. Dogwill won’t expect it. I’m on your side.’

‘Do you think I don’t know how this works?’ Gwyn said. ‘Perhaps Dogwill is a traitor. Perhaps he was planted so that you might tell me he was betraying me, I discover him, and then you gain my trust. I speak to you of my thoughts, you report back to Albion. The King of the Atlantic plays a long game, Mikkel. I’ve not forgotten. These plays are clumsy.’

‘Are you serious? You think I’m...you think I’m telling you this, with a fucking arrow in my leg, knowing how you feel about arrows and Readers, you think.-’

Mikkel chuckled.

‘Oh, cupcake. You think I don’t know what to say to you, to get you off my back? You want to know what I plucked from your head in that cell?’

Gwyn’s fingers tightened on the crossbow bolt and then he let go. He didn’t want to know. He didn’t want to be reminded of Mafydd.

‘All I know, is that this isn’t the worst thing you’ve done to a Rea-’

‘Stop,’ Gwyn ordered, and Mikkel quietened.

For ten seconds.
'Do it. Interrogate him. And then...I’ll find you. I want to help you.'

‘Why?’ Gwyn said, voice flat. ‘You’re Seelie. You are betraying your Court. *Yourself*. You could be put to death if this is more than a clumsy rouse of Albion’s.’

‘Because,’ Mikkel laughed. ‘Because I don’t think it is betrayal. I don’t think it’s betrayal if you’re still part Seelie. And you are, man. You’re a hybrid. You’re not-’

‘I am Unseelie.’

‘You are three thousand- Three *thousand* years of Seelie conditioning in a Seelie environment amongst the Seelie noblesse and the military. And three thousand years of shoving away what you really are. You think...you think a few months and you’re what, Unseelie? You ever heard of nature versus nurture? I’m not betraying the Seelie by...by helping you. I don’t like Albion. He pays well. He’s a dick. I don’t think he wants what’s best for the Seelie fae. I think he wants what *he* thinks is best. Guess what? Not the same thing.’

Gwyn stood, stumbled a little on his injured leg. Mikkel rolled onto his back and groaned, raising one of his hands and looking at the blood on it.

‘You shot me. We’re off to a great start. Punching me. Shooting me. I guess this is just like, some form of family bonding for you, I mean after how your father-’

Mikkel’s eyes widened and he stared in fear as Gwyn raised the crossbow again. Gwyn realised, with a lurch of horror, that Mikkel had Read his intent through his emotions before he’d even acted. Mikkel quirked a weak smile.

‘I forget, with you, there’s so much stuff I’m not supposed to talk about. You’re so *sensitive*. All right. All right. You go interrogate your...yep. And I’m, I’m gonna come back. I’m bored. You’re interesting. You know how we are.’

‘Is Albion using you because he knows that I’ve held a connection to a Reader before? Did you tell him that? Because you are aware that you are *nothing* like-’

‘Oh, yeah, like I told Albion about *that*,’ Mikkel groaned. ‘You don’t get it, do you? He’s got *enough* on you. On your whole...thing. Whatever the Unseelie are right now. I can Read him too, remember? He doesn’t need *more*. He’s...man, you’re like a meal to him. One he wants to savour. He’s going to take his time, and he’s going to enjoy making you pay for like, personally betraying him. Deep down, you know that this is like, David and Goliath. And you might wonder why I’d bother with that but I tell you, boredom takes someone a long way.’

Mikkel looked down at the bolt in his leg and grinned at it.

‘A real long way.’

‘And what will you tell them about the crossbow bolt?’

‘Here’s the thing,’ Mikkel smiled. ‘I suggested to them I might try buddying up to you; as an informant. For them. You know. They don’t think I can do it. But they do know I’m stupid enough to try. They see me with a bolt in the leg, they’ll tell me to give it up. But Albion might commend me for trying. It’d never occur to him that someone might do this, you know. Double cross. Especially someone *Seelie*. Even after you betrayed him. He’s not suspicious enough. I think that’s why he did feel so betrayed with you? It feels like, under the sea, loyalty goes a long way down there. Betrayal and double-crossing is rare.’
‘It is,’ Gwyn said.

Albion had always thought many of Lludd’s – and subsequently Gwyn’s – methods of deception in battle were underhanded and unwarranted.

‘You’re not as Unseelie as you think you are, which is like- You don’t even think you’re that Unseelie. So that’s saying something. Oh god.’

Mikkel gasped again and Gwyn knew the cramps would be starting. Lactic acid building up in his body as constant stress took its toll.

‘I hate teleporting.’ Mikkel gasped. ‘Usually- Like- I need strong emotion to do it, and I don’t really feel many strong emotions that are...that I want to feel but at least now it’s going to be easy. I need help for this. Painkillers. Thanks for not hitting bone, I guess? I’ll see you soon.’

Mikkel screwed his face up, teleported halfway through an escalating cry.

The forest was quiet once more. Gwyn looked down at the blood saturating his buckskin boot, his pants leg, sighed.

The shaking came minutes later and it surprised him. At first he dumbly assumed it was shock because of blood-loss, even though the wound was closing and he hadn’t – truly – lost that much blood.

Memories flashed into his mind. Mafydd. He remembered the sound of an arrow cutting through the air, the thock! as it hit-

Gwyn grunted, took a deep breath through his nose.

He was tired of manipulations. Those of his family. Of Mikkel and Albion. Of his own Court and who he could trust in it. It might be time to interrogate some of the generals again, including Ifir. Whether or not Mikkel was telling the truth, it disturbed him to learn of an underwater compulsion block. The fact he hadn’t heard of it before meant Albion had been keeping that secret for a long time.

_and for just one traitor in my military...he would use it. He would think it poetic justice._

Gwyn moved off the path and back into the forest, leaning against a granite stone and forcing himself to take slow, deep breaths.

He didn’t know who to trust. And after being underfae, he no longer trusted himself either.

He needed to find a grounding point, soon. It was becoming too easy to surrender to fear, and that was the last thing he needed to be dealing with amongst predatory fae who sniffed it out far too quickly.

Chapter End Notes

_In our next chapter, 'Unsolicited:'_
‘I do not want to hear your base justifications. But you might consider that you have a lover who is grieving, and that you are the cause of that grief. I know you lack heart in almost all that you do. But I also know how you feel for Ash, and I suspect it is the same for Gwyn. You have harmed yourself, in this. Have you realised yet?’

Augus’ eyes twitched. He looked around the night gardens. Their gentle beauty. Night-blooming plants everywhere. Vines and trees and shrubs and herbs. Cobble-stoned pathways weaving throughout, moss growing upon them. It was a place constructed by one of the colder people he’d met; it betrayed the tenderness that lurked within.

‘Why, precisely, do you care?’ Augus said finally.
Augus

*  

He hadn’t told anyone, but he’d killed a nightingale he’d found in the night gardens of the Unseelie Court. It was the wrong species. It didn’t matter. Augus couldn’t abide them. When he saw it, he’d turned cold. The creature was dead from a strong hit of coiled waterweed before he was aware of reacting, and he stared at the small corpse on the ground, feeling ill.

He picked up his healer’s kit and forced himself to take a deep breath, mastered the worst of his fear. It came over him so quickly that a lot of the time, these days, he was only able to take control of it once he’d reacted.

Deeper into the night garden made for healers; picking his way over healthy herbs, shrubs, pushing aside branches – careful of those that wept poison – until he found his way to black-blooming jonquils. He knelt beside them, opened his healer’s kit and drew out a square of red silk just for this purpose. He touched his fingers to the flowers, felt the life in them. He took a deep breath, looked around. Gwyn really did have a knack for landscaping. The palace itself was stunning, given what he’d reduced the Seelie palace to; but the night gardens...they felt almost as welcoming as his old lake.

They both loved outdoor refuges, and Augus had felt something ease in his being when he’d seen the night gardens.

He was still communing with the jonquils, ten minutes later, when he smelled the distinct scent of swan musk and raised his eyebrows.

‘What are you doing here?’

‘Getting some golden allium for Julvia, if you must know.’

Augus set the red square of silk beneath the jonquils and drew a sharp, small blade from his healer’s kit. He looked up, eyebrows pulling together.

‘Is that at Aleutia’s request?’

‘Oui,’ Gulvi said, dispassionately, twisting the flowers off the plant with an absence that was as good as cruelty. Augus pursed his lips. Gulvi didn’t connect with plants or trees, she was not aware of the damage she was doing, and in all likelihood wouldn’t care. He couldn’t bring it up without
drawing attention to the fact that he’d as good as killed her family. He turned back to the jonquils
and cut several blossoms off a plant that had more to spare.

‘It’s an interesting choice,’ Augus said, as the black-blooming jonquil wept sap.

‘What do you know of it? Are you a healer?’

‘No,’ Augus admitted freely. He placed his hand carefully over the flowers on the square of red
silk, then swallowed nausea before consciously drawing water out of them, drying them in an
instant. Damp clung to the base of his palm. He took two deep breaths; it was an act that was
simple enough, he’d been doing it all his life.

But he’d turned it to such destruction.

Still, he was going to start rehabilitating the Blighted lands soon. The whole situation left him
unaccountably nervous. He missed the days when his heartsong was dominance, when he cared so
much for self-mastery that he didn’t have to feel such a broad, nuanced range of inconvenient
emotion.

Gulvi made a sound of frustration.

‘Why is it an interesting choice? How would you know?’

‘I am no healer,’ Augus said, looking up as he bundled the jonquils in the silk and tucked them
into a small compartment in the kit, snapping it shut. ‘But I do know what works for freshwater
fae, particularly Unseelie. And I suspect that Aleutia is more of a generalist healer. I don’t believe
the golden allium will do any harm, but I don’t believe it will do any good, either.’

Gulvi came and stood over him and Augus rolled his eyes, finding himself unaffected by her
posturing. If she was going to stab him, he would likely know it by now. He placed his hand
carefully by the jonquils and offered a warm burst of glamour in the hopes they might grow
stronger after his encounter with them. It wasn’t the same as cultivating the ecosystem of a lake,
but it was only polite after he’d taken some of their blossoms for his work.

‘Why did you cut them onto red silk? Does the red matter?’

‘Yes,’ Augus said, tilting his head up at her. ‘Observe.’

He sent extra glamour over the jonquils to lull them, and then snapped open his kit once more,
taking out the knife and looking for one of the blossoms that was on its way out and fading. He
snicked it from the plant cleanly and as soon as it hit the ground, it dissolved into ash.

‘They are, you see, only preserved when caught upon red silk.’

‘My mother used to know a lot of these sorts of things,’ Gulvi sighed.

‘And then I killed her,’ Augus muttered, finishing the sentence for her. He saw how close her
hands were to the hilts of her kris blades. But she stood relaxed, looking down upon him, an arch in
one of her brows.

‘You shouldn’t have killed his mother,’ Gulvi said, and Augus sneered, shut the kit again and
stood fluidly.

‘I do not think you could stand by and witness what she has done to him and not want her dead.’
‘La! I don’t say it because she shouldn’t be dead, I say it because you do harm to him.’

Augus’ face remained impassive, but her words weighed on him. Gwyn had been odd, colder, since the death of Crielle. He hadn’t expected it. He’d expected Gwyn to be shocked and then...relieved. But instead, he found himself pushed further away as time went on.

Gulvi sighed, cradling golden flowers in one hand like she didn’t know what to do with them.

‘I should at least inform you that we’ve located two more of the shapeshifters. We’ve not been able to bring them in, since they have-’

Confusion flooded him.

‘We? So you believe me now? You’ve accepted that the plan was not a lie?’

Gulvi’s eyes widened, and then she made a harsh sound in the back of her throat, feathers on her wings ruffling and settling again.

‘La! Do you both never talk?’

Augus waited. Gulvi shook her head, her fingers began to clench around the flowers she was holding. She loosened her hand.

‘A shapeshifter in your exact form approached Gwyn during one of his regular meetings with the Generals. Ifir slaughtered him.’

His heart-rate picked up. He remembered the piquant, rusty smell of Gwyn’s fear. The underfae he’d been meeting with – a lichen-deer, far more reasonable than many of the others he saw – had smelled it too. It all made sense now. The way Gwyn had looked at him, the way he’d shivered, all of it.

‘The shapeshifter attempted to lure Gwyn away from the generals,’ Gulvi added, smirking. ‘Clever, don’t you think?’

Augus sighed. It was as he’d suspected. Crielle had no reason to have shapeshifters of the dead unless she was planning a particularly direct, concerted attack which would have required his capture.

‘You’ve located two more, you said?’

‘Oui.’

It was almost as though they were friends, though Gulvi held him in contempt, and Augus cared little for her. She was one of the few who endeavoured to keep him updated on what was happening. He didn’t think it was a coincidence that she seemed to know where he was at all times. He was sure that it was that she wanted to keep an eye on him; she didn’t trust him, after all. But their conversations had become less hostile over time.

He didn’t like it. The world was easier when it wasn’t complicated.

‘You do that increasingly,’ Gulvi said, pointing to his chest. Augus realised he’d been rubbing at the mark of the Soulbond upon his flesh, over his shirt. His hand stilled, then dropped. ‘You really don’t like it, do you?’

‘There are many things I would do to others for my own gain,’ Augus said. ‘But forcing my
brother into a magical contract where he dies if I die is not one of them.’

‘Ash doesn’t mind,’ Gulvi said, and Augus smirked.

‘Ash is an idiot and a fool for love.’

‘La! He is that,’ Gulvi said, rolling her eyes.

Ash had behaved strangely after he’d interrupted Augus’ argument with Gwyn in the night gardens. Augus couldn’t tell if it was jealousy, if he just disliked Gwyn’s general cold, stick-in-the-mud nature, or if it was something else. But Ash had acted as though he thought Augus was fragile, about to fall apart. Augus felt nothing of the sort. He was furious. Angry at Gwyn, angry at himself. The situation he was in trickled through his fingers like water, and he couldn’t keep his hand cupped well enough to hold what was left of Gwyn and himself.

He needed to do something. He would. He was only looking for an opening. Gwyn could not avoid him forever, and Augus would not tolerate continued rejections. He was not a pet, nor a slave. He was Gwyn’s equal – at the least – and if Gwyn had forgotten that, Augus would take pleasure in reminding him.

‘You have killed people he cares for,’ Gulvi said, her voice a rich, patronising purr. ‘Do you think he will forgive you easily?’

‘I don’t need to justify myself to you,’ Augus said.

‘I do not want to hear your base justifications. But you might consider that you have a lover who is grieving, and that you are the cause of that grief. I know you lack heart in almost all that you do. But I also know how you feel for Ash, and I suspect it is the same for Gwyn. You have harmed yourself in this. Have you realised yet?’

Augus’ eyes twitched. He looked around the night gardens. Their gentle beauty. Night-blooming plants everywhere. Vines and trees and shrubs and herbs. Cobble-stoned pathways weaving throughout, moss growing upon them. It was a place constructed by one of the colder people he’d met; it betrayed the tenderness that lurked within.

‘Why, precisely, do you care?’ Augus said finally.

‘I care for Gwyn,’ Gulvi said, a small smile touching her lips, so unlike the wicked smile so often wore. ‘You are a callow creature that manipulates too easily. I don’t believe that the Raven Prince disappeared for his own purposes. Not for a second. You loved him too in your own way. You can betray anyone if your need is great enough. But this one, this battle-bred fool – he’s helped you, hasn’t he? There is less of the madness in you. La! I cannot believe I am saying it, but-’

Augus pushed past her. He wasn’t interested in what she had to say.

She let him pass, laughed as he went.

‘If you lose his trust, you’ll lose his support,’ Gulvi called after him. ‘And if you lose that, you’ll become the monster that ruined the Unseelie Kingdom and put us in this position in the first place. And if you do that, Augus, I know I cannot kill you because of that Soulbond; but trust me, I can make your life very uncomfortable.’

Augus laughed.

Threats meant so little, these days. He’d heard them from countless fae. He’d fended off
assassination attempts. Gulvi herself had stabbed him multiple times.

None of it mattered. None of them were the Nightingale.

He said nothing else and walked away from her, herbal kit swinging in his hand.

*

When Gwyn had formally asked him to become his primary Advisor, he hadn’t realised how token that status would be. He knew he didn’t have as much political or strategic nous as Gulvi and Gwyn, but he thought he would at least be able to advise Gwyn as to how to take better personal care of himself at least.

Now, he listened to Gwyn talking at the round table meeting between the members of his Inner Court – Ash, Gulvi, Augus – and Augus realised that he was mostly redundant. He looked at his nails, looked over at the stack of papers and parchments before Gwyn, stared past him to the window beyond.

*Today. I will start breaking through to him today.*

Ash looked through some of Gwyn’s parchments, but he didn’t seem to be following the discussions too closely. Augus only perked up when he heard Gulvi mention the shapeshifters. He looked at Gwyn.

Gwyn refused to look at him.

He listened to Gulvi sum up what had happened with the generals, even though she hadn’t been there to witness it. Ash looked at Augus in alarm, then settled back in his chair as Augus betrayed no expression at all.

Gwyn didn’t look at him once. When he did speak, he looked at the parchments, wrote some notes that seemed very important. If Augus hadn’t seen him immediately after the event itself, hadn’t tasted and smelled his fear, he might have thought Gwyn was entirely nonplussed about what had occurred.

*Are you ashamed that you turned up at my door? Traumatised? Guilty that you didn’t tell me what happened? Something else?*

Augus leaned back in his chair.

‘They evidently thought they were starting with their strongest shapeshifter,’ Augus said. ‘It bodes well that Gwyn and Ifir, at least, were able to pick up scent differences. Though, like everyone else, the shapeshifter should have been retained for questioning. They may have taken my form, but they do not have my resistance to compulsions.’

The plan disturbed him. He wondered how often Crielle had daydreamed getting Gwyn alone with a group of shapeshifters. He suspected that if she was able to think that extensively about one plan, she likely had others that he didn’t know about.

Gwyn began talking about an encounter with Mikkel, and Augus kept his ears pricked. He frowned when Gwyn mentioned Dogwill.

‘We interrogated him,’ Augus said.

‘Apparently they are using a block of some kind. Are you aware of them?’
‘Mm,’ Augus said, sighing. ‘Rumours of an underwater herb that blocks siren song. But I’ve never experienced its use and I’ve heard it’s rare. A herbal block that can be made from perhaps only three or four plants in the entire ocean, and a lot of sirens very interested in destroying them? I’m surprised it still exists. Am I interrogating everyone once more then?’

‘It’s what I intended,’ Gwyn said, and then shook his head. ‘But the timing is poor. If we remove Dogwill a week or two after Mikkel returns to the Unseelie Court with an injury, I believe Albion will – provided Mikkel isn’t actually working for him – suspect what has happened. We must be careful about interrogation and removing Dogwill from the generals. I have some other ideas to prove Mikkel’s claims.’

‘Do tell,’ Gulvi said, yawning behind her hand. She had never done well in the meetings, petering out about halfway through.

‘Even if it is true, Dogwill might be planted,’ Augus said, interrupting Gwyn before he could start. But he saw from Gwyn’s expression that he was already aware. ‘Who to trust is becoming a problem.’

‘It was always a problem,’ Gwyn said, shaking his head. ‘If Dogwill is an informant to the Seelie Court, we’ll see some increasing defences around some of the Seelie Courtlands. We’ll also see a critical food corridor that’s been seized, be further fortified by the Seelie. I think the best play will be to drop hints around Dogwill that we are leading a small military to do manoeuvres on neutral land – and see if he tells Albion. If he does, Albion will almost certainly respond by bringing a larger military force to defeat them. Albion’s had a rather firm grasp on our movements, and Dogwill is particularly ingratiating.’

‘Who calls their kid Dogwill?’ Ash said, putting his feet on the table and ignoring the look Gwyn gave him. ‘Dude’s got issues.’

‘If the latter plan works,’ Gwyn continued, ‘we’ll locate a larger military force nearby as back-up, leaving Dogwill uninformed. Ideally, we may get a chance to knock out one of Albion’s smaller militaries. It could work in our favour.’

Gwyn kept talking, pointing at a roughly drawn diagram that Gulvi perked up for – she did better with visual knowledge than written. Ash gave Augus a look that expressed deep, ongoing boredom.

Augus’ thoughts drifted again and came back when he heard the An-Fnwy estate mentioned. Gwyn was staring at Gulvi as though she’d said something awful.

‘I’m not contesting my right to that land. Albion has rights to it. I have no legal standing to-’

‘We need that land,’ Gulvi said, and then shook her head. ‘La! It is not only this! You were their son. They did not foster you out as they should have, they chose to keep you – which means they chose to acknowledge an Unseelie creature as their son, even only amongst themselves. You have a right to that land! It is prime Courtland! Imagine what we could do with-’

‘Gulvi,’ Gwyn said, his voice forbidding. ‘I would need to reinstate my surname, I am not-’

‘-They are Seelie,’ she hissed. ‘They have to follow the rules. They will try and weasel out of them, yes, but you have grounds to contest this.’

Augus frowned. He would prefer Gwyn have nothing to do with that estate ever again.

‘I shall be rehabilitating Unseelie land that was Blighted very soon. Within weeks,’ Augus said quietly, drawing their attention. ‘We’ll be gaining landscapes with fresh water back if I’m
successful.’

‘No one will want to live there,’ Gulvi said, sighing. ‘Everyone thinks the land is cursed.’

‘They may think differently once they see it whole again and under the protection of the Unseelie Court. I have it on the authority of at least three displaced underfae families – they are willing to try their luck.’

Gwyn’s face twisted on the mention of the word luck, but Augus raised a hand in a one-armed shrug.

‘We need that estate. It has strategic importance,’ Gulvi said, her voice hardening. ‘It is a fight worth fighting.’

‘One thing at a time,’ Gwyn said, and Augus resisted smirking. Turned out Gwyn was good at dismissing everyone, then. Gulvi glared at him, then shook her head in exasperation, wings flaring.

‘I’d like to interrogate Mikkel, too,’ Augus said. ‘How convenient that he just turned up to give you this information.’

‘There is nothing convenient about Mikkel,’ Gwyn grumbled. ‘But I agree.’

‘How is he justifying this?’ Augus said.

‘He believes I am a hybrid,’ Gwyn muttered, disgusted. ‘He has stated that he does not believe it to be a betrayal of the Seelie if I am still – somewhat – Seelie.’

Augus said nothing. He thought there might be some truth to that. Gwyn wasn’t biologically a hybrid – that wasn’t possible – but he’d been exposed to enough Seelie notions and philosophies that he had strange ideas of the world. He still believed in honour to one’s Kingdom. He put others first unceasingly. He did almost nothing for himself. His parents had managed to shatter the things about him that would have given his true identity away to others, and in the process, Gwyn struggled to discover what lay beneath what he had been taught.

He watched Gwyn. The fae who had removed the last of the underworld energy from the Unseelie Court. Augus hadn’t even been aware it was there, but he felt the difference now that it was gone. Not a weight off his shoulders so much as the smoothing of a jagged edge he didn’t know needed soothing. Gwyn who had looked close to death while transforming the palace; even though he was nigh invincible. Who rejected him with excuses.

*You should never have let a waterhorse claim you if you didn’t want my persistence. I will have you.*

Hands clasped together under the table and he waited, letting something predatory swirl in his body.

He hungered to see Gwyn on his knees.

*  

He resisted the urge to pace as he waited in the corridor that Gwyn typically took on his way out of the meeting room. When he’d had regular clients, he’d not only been meeting the needs of others, but meeting a predatory need in himself. Not having more frequent access to Gwyn left him fraught with frustration; he needed Gwyn’s responses, the sweetness of his submission.
Augus slipped into an alcove and pressed fingertips to smooth masonry. He had expected something pleasing when Gwyn transformed the Court; but Gwyn had created something exquisite. He knew it would be the sort of Court that fae would talk about for centuries to come. Longer, if the Court could survive that long. Augus even thought that some sections surpassed that of the Raven Prince’s Court. But then, Gwyn’s Court was a homage to so many others that had gone before him, it united many themes that represented the Unseelie. It allowed for darkness and malice alongside beauty and fierce, devoted love.

Augus scented when Gwyn came nearer; heard his footsteps, heard him turn the corner into the corridor. He stepped out from behind the alcove.

He licked his lips, waited for Gwyn to realise he was there, then pointed to a section of wall nearby. His eyebrow arched.

‘I want you to kneel here, your back facing this wall. Now.’

Gwyn’s eyes widened. His fingers clenched around the parchments he was holding.

‘I have to—’

‘It wasn’t a request. Put the parchments down.’

Gwyn looked around, wincing as the motion pulled at his shoulder. Augus’ brow furrowed. He hadn’t worked the nerves in it for some time. Perhaps he could do that later.

‘Do you want to imagine what I will do to you if you don’t listen to me?’ Augus said.

‘People will come, Augus,’ Gwyn said, his voice hushed.

‘Ash and Gulvi do not come this way. The trows are private. The common fae servants, well, the longer you stall, the longer they are more likely to stumble across you, aren’t they? Don’t pretend you don’t need this. I can tell, Gwyn. You have become colder over time, and—’

‘You slaughtered people I cared for,’ Gwyn said, turning back to him, something flinty entering his gaze.

‘You know what I am,’ Augus said. ‘I have never hidden the truth of my bloodlust from you.’

Gwyn’s hands clenched harder around the parchments until they crumpled. He looked down in shock. He stepped to a nearby bench and placed them down. His fingertips rested on the paper, he didn’t move.

Augus thought the fact that he hadn’t teleported away was progress. Hunger threaded through him in stops and starts. He pointed to the wall again, and Gwyn looked at it, something frightened and wanting in his gaze. His chest heaved faintly as he inhaled.

*Oh, how you want this. My scared, callous brute.*

‘Can it not be somewhere private?’ Gwyn said again, something pleading in his voice.

‘No,’ Augus said, voice cold, ‘it can’t. Now, before I start to get angry with your recalcitrance; *kneel* by the wall. Back against it.’

Gwyn looked at Augus as though answers or encouragement were there, and Augus remained indifferent in expression. He wanted a Gwyn that thrummed with fear, at least for now. He ached to
pull up the threads of what Gwyn was dealing with, what he attempted to constantly suppress with coldness, numbness. He could master that fear, given the opportunity. Turn it into something else. He needed to for the both of them.

Gwyn took a hesitant step towards the wall and then stopped, looking over his shoulder again.

‘Gwyn,’ Augus said, the word a snapping force between them.

Gwyn startled, turned back, blue eyes flickering once to Augus’. He moved to the wall where Augus had pointed and pressed his back against it, touching his palms to stone. He looked down both directions of the corridor and closed his eyes, nostrils flaring. He sank down slowly, a surprising amount of grace in the movement. Gwyn could be clumsy – very clumsy – but there were times when his training showed, and Augus was surprised to see it now.

Augus walked up to him and looked down at a tangle of pale curls. He resisted the urge to touch them. Instead, he nudged a boot between Gwyn’s knees where they pressed together and kicked – not too hard – until Gwyn spread them reluctantly. Augus kept nudging until they were much further apart, until the fabric of Gwyn’s pants would chafe against his cock as it got hard.

It never took much to assert dominance over Gwyn. Just constant, small reminders of where he belonged, who he belonged to.

Once, Augus had planned on using Gwyn’s submission against him. He’d planned on breaking him until Gwyn would be conditioned, brainwashed, dependent. Until Gwyn would release him from the Seelie Court. There were some fae – a minority – who still suspected that’s what had happened.

The reality was far more confusing, even for Augus. He’d developed feelings for a warrior that slaughtered his way through the world, and that was before he’d realised Gwyn was also Unseelie. He’d broken him and discovered a flickering light in his being that was appealing, addictive.

Augus undid his belt buckle and Gwyn looked away, eyes facing the corridor.

‘Face me,’ Augus said, voice gentle. Gwyn hesitated, then turned and looked at Augus’ thighs. It wasn’t what Augus was aiming for, but it was better than before. ‘Concentrate on this. Not on the others. You’ll need to concentrate. I’m going to choke you with my cock, and I doubt your underfae instincts have faded enough to allow it to be comfortable. Not that it ever truly was.’

Gwyn made a hitched, faint sound in the back of his throat. Augus licked at his teeth, pressed his tongue to one of his canines. The sounds Gwyn made were delicious. He planned to get more before the morning was over.

He undid the zipper of his pants and pulled out his cock – not yet hard, foreskin not retracted – and ran fingers over it. The sensation was light, almost irritating, but Gwyn’s eyes flicked up and watched, hypnotised, his lips opening slightly. His legs shifted where he knelt, his back pressed harder to the wall.

Augus let go of his cock and reached forwards, rubbing his thumb along the fullness of Gwyn’s bottom lip. At that, Gwyn blinked and then looked up, finally making eye contact.

Augus slipped the tip of his thumb in between Gwyn’s lip and teeth, feeling heat and saliva, and his lips quirked up.

‘Do you know that sometimes, when I look at you, I find myself drawn to these full lips of yours, and distract myself far too often imagining your mouth stuffed. You were, after all, made to
swallow cock, weren’t you?’

A flush diffused through Gwyn’s cheeks, his neck. His eyes slid away, and Augus smirked.

‘Open wider. I want you to take me like this.’

Truthfully, Augus wanted to feel Gwyn’s tension and struggle to relax, as Augus’ cock grew in his mouth, lengthening down the back of his throat, forcing his mouth wider. He wanted to see how close to the surface Gwyn’s underfae instincts still were. How much his body feared choking. Gwyn loved deep-throating, but they’d not done much of it. A limited amount in the Seelie Court, and nothing since.

Gwyn had handled his demotion atrociously. He refused to talk about it – the demotion itself, the time he spent on the run afterwards. Any information that was revealed was either pulled painfully from him, relayed second-hand, or dropped into conversation accidentally; and that almost never happened.

Augus suspected that despite having undergone years of military campaigns, torture, even near death experiences – nothing had prepared him for the reality of his mortality in the way that being underfae did; especially with its timing. It had traumatised him at a time when he was already so fragile. Augus had begun stripping him down, exposing vulnerable tangles in his psyche. They were making progress. Gwyn had finally gotten to a point where he’d even managed to ask for what he wanted, in a manner of speaking.

*One step forward, two steps back. Or thirty.*

Gwyn’s mouth still hadn’t opened wider. His stared down the corridor.

*Right.*

Augus removed his thumb from Gwyn’s mouth, a thin thread of saliva connecting them until it snapped. He grit his teeth as he backhanded him across the cheek. He was Inner Court now, and the blow hit with force. Gwyn’s head rocked, his whole body jerked sideways. Augus stayed calm as he forced him back into position by his hair.

‘I asked you to listen to me.’

Gwyn gasped shakily, his legs shifted like he was moving around a growing hardness between his legs.

‘Oh,’ Augus said, smiling. ‘You do like the rough treatment, don’t you? Open your mouth.’

He shook the hand in Gwyn’s hair for emphasis, and Gwyn’s eyes slid sideways once, quickly, and then his mouth opened wider. Augus trailed his hand down Gwyn’s cheek, let fingers trace across his open mouth, dipping inside, pressing onto his tongue. He tapped the tip of it, feeling the gust of breath over his fingers, and stepped closer. Gwyn’s breathing was uneven as Augus reached for his cock and slid the tip of it into that wet furnace.

Augus’ eyes became hooded at the sensation even as he focused on Gwyn’s reactions. He rocked deeper carefully, more to adjust to the heat than to ease the way for Gwyn. But it wasn’t long before he was buried, the head of his cock brushing against the back of Gwyn’s throat so that a minor spasm pressed pleasantly against him. He tilted Gwyn’s head with a hand underneath his chin, made sure the angle was right. He suspected Gwyn might fight this, and a moment later rested his other hand by the pressure point between Gwyn’s upper and lower jaw, ready to activate it if necessary. He’d had to keep Gwyn’s jaw open before.
Gwyn couldn’t deep-throat easily. He had a gag reflex and had to consciously fight it. Gwyn loved the act so much that he was willing to put himself through that; the discomfort, the pain, the involuntary throat spasms that would eventually be caressing Augus’ cock.

‘Perfect,’ Augus said softly, watching as Gwyn shivered at the praise. Like this, Gwyn couldn’t look up and meet his eyes. His nose was pressed into the pelt of Augus’ pubic hair, his hands were braced on Augus’ thighs. Augus leaned forwards until Gwyn’s head was resting firmly against the stone wall, and he felt the shift of Gwyn’s mouth around him, felt breath sucked down around his cock while Gwyn could still manage it. The sensation was cold, strange. He liked it.

Augus rubbed his hand over Gwyn’s scalp, doling out a level of affection that Gwyn never let himself receive, and even now – not yet fucked out and too tired to accept what he craved – Gwyn tensed to feel it.

Augus made a hushing noise, and then leaned forwards even more as his cock started to lengthen, pinning Gwyn between the wall and his cock.

His other hand activated the pressure point carefully, keeping Gwyn’s mouth open.

‘Make it good,’ Augus ordered, and Gwyn’s tongue curled around his cock. His mouth shifted, and suction started a moment later, turning Augus’ focus to that brilliant heat, the wonder of it. He would never get tired of seeing Gwyn on his knees, looking down at a mop of white-blond hair. Never get tired of knowing how much Gwyn enjoyed it, and how humiliated he was by his desire to submit, to give himself over to these overwhelming experiences.

‘I’ve noticed how cold you’ve been lately. How could I not? Have you noticed? You do know it’s a symptom of your being overwhelmed, don’t you?’

Gwyn made a noise of protest, then gagged hard when Augus’ cock started to squeeze down the back of his throat. He tried to jerk backwards but the wall at his back wouldn’t let him go anywhere. Augus watched him struggle with himself for several seconds, and then drew back just enough that Gwyn could gasp two shaky, deep breaths.

He rocked forwards, and dug his index finger into the pressure point at Gwyn’s jaw, forcing his mouth to stay wide as he shoved the head of himself into that tight space, sighing happily. He wasn’t fully hard yet. This was lovely. Gwyn’s throat massaging him, his tongue shifting underneath him.

‘When you’re like this, you do things that are destructive and needless. You do remember hunting me, don’t you?’

Gwyn moaned a low, pained sound and Augus’ cock twitched to hear it.

He was a vengeful fae, and though he understood why Gwyn had done all that he did, he still delighted in finding moments to call Gwyn back to those behaviours. Augus had begun to fear what Gwyn might once more be capable of.

‘Do you remember the time you left the gag on me, supposedly by accident?’

Gwyn’s head thumped against stone in protest. Augus laughed, undulated his hips, felt Gwyn’s chin pressing into the space beneath his cock and sighed.

Gwyn gagged again, several times, and Augus knew he would be finding it frustrating, not being able to go at his own pace. Gwyn was – strangely, wonderfully – proud of his ability to swallow a cock. But Augus knew from the first time he’d done this to him that Gwyn could get unreasonably
upset when not given time to prove how skilled he was.

‘Careful,’ Augus murmured, as Gwyn struggled. Choked sounds were humming through Augus’ cock. ‘This can’t hurt you. You can’t die from oxygen deprivation, remember?’

But Gwyn continued to struggle until Augus sighed and pulled back long enough for Gwyn to catch his breath once more; great heaving things that scoured his throat and made Augus’ chest ache to hear them. Gwyn’s remnant underfae instincts were still strong. Augus frowned, tilted Gwyn’s head up even as the tip of his cock was still in Gwyn’s mouth.

Gwyn made reluctant, tearful eye contact, and Augus smoothed away the wetness with his thumb.

Augus shifted so that his weight rested on one leg, and with the other, slid his boot between Gwyn’s legs and felt the ridge of his cock pressing against the seam of his pants. Even through the sole of his boot, he could feel how hard he was. Gwyn closed his eyes as though shamed, and Augus smiled warmly.

‘You’re doing wonderfully,’ Augus said, shifting his weight onto both feet again. Gwyn’s eyes opened, he stared up at Augus in disbelief. ‘It’s been some time, and this is exactly what I want from you. Fair warning, Gwyn; if you cannot come from this alone, you’ll be waiting some time before the opportunity comes up again.’

Gwyn shook his head faintly, eyebrows pulling together, and Augus smirked.

‘You can do it, I’m sure. You come so fast most of the time anyway, and I’m sure with me down the back of your throat...’ Augus shrugged. ‘Let’s try it, shall we?’

Augus pressed harder onto the pressure point, keeping Gwyn’s mouth open, rocking forwards and sliding over the wet texture of his tongue. He continued into the tight space of his throat, and then shifted the angle again and rocked down, fully hard now, wedging himself into a space that spasmed around him.

Gwyn panicked very easily these days.

‘Calm,’ Augus soothed. ‘Calm down. You can take it. You’ve taken it before, and will take it now. Relax your throat.’

Gwyn’s throat was still hitching, jumping, and Augus withdrew and shoved back roughly. Sometimes being soothing wasn’t the right road with Gwyn. Augus closed his eyes in faint relief when it worked somewhat. The spasms increased in force briefly, then died away. He rocked his hips back and forth, staying in the hot grip of his mouth and throat, sighing out in pleasure.

He shifted his left foot forwards slowly, pressed the sole of his boot very carefully to Gwyn’s cock, and Gwyn went rigid, then his fingers dug so hard into his thighs that Augus knew he’d be sporting bruises.

‘You look good like this,’ Augus said, his voice rougher than usual. He could feel increasing heat on Gwyn’s cheeks – a blush from the lack of oxygen, from the boot pressed in between his legs. He shifted it over the fabric and Gwyn squeaked. It was the only sound he could properly make, Augus’ cock so far down his throat.

‘Steady,’ Augus said. ‘I’m letting you breathe again.’

This was far better than when he’d come back from the An-Fnwy estate and simply taken what was his to take. Here he could pay attention to the minutiae of Gwyn’s responses. The way his hair
sometimes trembled as a wave of shivering moved through him. How he choked as Augus withdrew and then immediately started heaving for air, each breath so powerful that Augus could feel it against his cock and shivered himself. He slid his hand down Gwyn’s neck, the side this time – not the front – and watched as Gwyn tensed and relaxed.

Clearly Gwyn’s phobia of having his neck touched was connected to the demotion. As long as it wasn’t a hand wrapped around his throat, he appeared to be fine. He felt Gwyn’s thundering pulse point, stroked fingers over the carotid artery, and trailed fingers back up and stroked his thumb firmly over Gwyn’s eyebrow, his forehead, his hairline.

He rubbed his foot over Gwyn’s cock and Gwyn made a sound that was almost a sob.

‘Painful,’ Gwyn rasped, lips brushing over the slick head of Augus’ cock.

‘You’re all trapped in there, aren’t you? Those pants aren’t very forgiving. The seam must have been cutting in even before I started doing this.’

Augus pressed down and Gwyn moaned, head thumping back into the wall. Augus chuckled.

‘You’ll come for me though, won’t you? Just like this?’

Gwyn’s face screwed up, and then he nodded once.

‘You might come, sweetness, but you need more than this, don’t you?’ Augus said, risking it. ‘You need more than hasty blowjobs in a corridor. You need time.’

Gwyn’s eyes slid sideways, filmed over with tears from the oxygen deprivation and maybe something more. Augus couldn’t be certain. His cock was getting cold. He wanted to fuck Gwyn’s mouth, wanted to take, had to answer to more than just the physical needs of his body.

‘I think...so,’ Gwyn said, not looking at Augus. ‘I don’t know anymore.’

‘Hush,’ Augus said. ‘There must be a lot you don’t know, now that you’re ‘just Gwyn.’

Gwyn’s eyes flew to his, a look of betrayal in them that Augus would even bring it up, and Augus felt a sharp ache in his chest.

‘So much taken from you, sweetness,’ Augus said and then his lips slid into a slanted smile. ‘I want to give you something back, but it’ll hurt a little.’

‘Please,’ Gwyn said, closing his eyes, turning back. He licked his reddened lips.

His mouth opened and Augus’ lips went slack in satisfaction. It wasn’t enough, but it was a placeholder, a reminder of how things would be. He would find more time for this. He would make time. He could push his own anxieties away. It wasn’t as though venting about his stress regarding rehabilitating the land, seeing all those underfae, dealing with assassination attempts would help anyone.

For a moment he felt the oddest sensation that he was being sucked down into a vicious whirlpool. He saw the faces of underfae reaming him out for his actions, his own resistance to their attempts to start arguments, knowing that his job was not about mindlessly defending himself. He saw older responsibilities – more than one King he’d practically worshipped at the foot of; and he knew he wasn’t done with that either. He saw hours of rapier drills, staring longingly at some of the more vicious weapons, cultivating other poisons aside from his own in his spare time, concerned at how skilled some of the assassination attempts had been.
He looked down at Gwyn’s face and felt him there like an anchor. He grasped Gwyn’s hair with cruel fingers, sneered at him.

‘It’s a good thing you heal quickly. Your throat will be sore.’

Gwyn’s eyes drifted closed, his mouth opened even wider, and Augus snarled as he sunk roughly into that space, ignoring the spasms of Gwyn’s throat as he thrust shallowly, quickly. He occasionally twitched his foot over Gwyn’s cock, noting the way he jerked every time he did it. It was a pleasure-pain level of stimulus and it left him increasingly warm with hunger.

Augus let his own pleasure move through him, hot and heady, so much that he almost missed the sound of footsteps walking towards them.

He paused, cock pressed so far down Gwyn’s throat that he could feel the flare of Gwyn’s nostrils against his skin.

‘Gulvi,’ Augus said, voice smooth, turning to see Gulvi walking past the corridor entrance. Gwyn froze. His entire body locked up and went still, and there, he could smell it, *fear.*

His hand gentled in Gwyn’s hair immediately. He scratched clawtips soothingly, rubbed behind his ears with his thumbs.

‘What can I do for you?’

Gulvi stared at them both, eyes wide, and then her mouth opened on a laugh. Augus shook his head once, curtly, and she noticed, closing her mouth, frowning in confusion. She looked at Gwyn. He was not moving, seemed to be pretending he was invisible.

‘I was looking for Gwyn, but I can see he’s indisposed right now, *oui?* He can come find me later. It is not terribly urgent.’

‘Wonderful,’ Augus said, fingers stroking over Gwyn’s scalp. He was aware of Gwyn’s chest beginning to hitch. He couldn’t breathe. He was suppressing his choking response.

Humiliation – something that had always been a delightful sore point for Gwyn, but now...something else entirely. Augus truly hadn’t expected that they would be interrupted.

*You should have been more realistic if you didn’t want to be stuck doing damage control.*

‘Mm, enjoy yourselves,’ she said airily, walking back the way she’d come.

Gwyn started pushing against Augus’ thighs immediately, his cock softer in his pants.

‘No,’ Augus said quietly. ‘Wait.’

A hum of protest around Augus’ cock.

‘Wait, sweetness,’ Augus said, gentling his voice and drinking in the full body shudder that followed. ‘A few more seconds. Nothing bad has happened. We’re fae, remember? Fae fuck. In public, in private, wherever they *want.* And Gulvi *doesn’t care.*’

Gwyn tensed again, and Augus closed his eyes, counted down from ten. Gwyn’s hands on his thighs became frantic. Slowly he eased his cock back from Gwyn’s mouth, saliva painting him slick. Gwyn coughed, gasped, looked towards the corridor entrance and then resisted Augus’ hand when Augus tried to turn his face back again. He seemed completely unaware of the spit making
his lips wet, the picture he made as he turned fearful eyes to the space where Gulvi had been.

Augus growled and Gwyn’s eyes flickered up to his. When Augus placed his hand at Gwyn’s jaw, he was surprised Gwyn let him manoeuvre his head into position again.

‘Breathe,’ Augus said, ‘because the next time I’m not stopping no matter who turns up.’

Gwyn drew breath in to protest and Augus slid fingers into his mouth, pinching his tongue.

Gwyn’s eyes were pleading. Augus knew if he stopped now, he’d feed Gwyn’s insecurities, feed his belief that submission was humiliating and wrong. And it wasn’t. Fae were carnal. Dominance and submission amongst many was normal. Public sex was common.

‘She doesn’t care,’ Augus said again, voice firm. Gwyn’s eyes narrowed like he wanted to disagree, and Augus was acutely grateful that he’d managed to head off Gulvi’s laughter – which wasn’t likely to have been malicious, but certainly would have been interpreted as such. ‘She. Does. Not. Care.’

Gwyn shook his head, pressing back into the wall as though he could escape the entire situation.

Augus’ fingers tightened around his tongue, he pressed his claws in slightly, leaned forwards.

‘Your family disapproved of your submission because you were supposed to be a perfectly aggressive soldier of the kind that would go get himself killed after fucking himself silly the night before.’ His voice was a whisper, but he could see each word hitting Gwyn and was frustrated because he was still hard and he was close to coming and he knew Gwyn was scared of what had just occurred. He hadn’t wanted to deal with this issue until later, but he was the one who chose the hallway, he had to own the consequences.

‘Your submission is not a sign of weakness. It is not a flaw in your being. Gulvi will not think less of you. You remember what I told you once about the Raven Prince. Do you think less of him? And be careful, before you answer that question.’

Gwyn stared at him. Augus could almost hear the litany of denials in Gwyn’s head, the words of disagreement waiting in his mouth. He wasn’t ready to have this confronted.

‘This, what we do, is between us. It belongs to no one else,’ Augus said, sliding his fingers deeper into Gwyn’s mouth.

The broken noise that came from Gwyn’s mouth was so pained that Augus felt a corresponding twinge in himself. He couldn’t talk Gwyn through this. Action would be better.

He withdrew his fingers at once and shifted, pushing his cock forwards, Gwyn’s mouth now erring towards lukewarm because it had been held open for so long. For a single moment he thought Gwyn would put up serious protest, but the moment passed and Gwyn’s eyes closed, tears clinging to his lashes.

He’d been shaken. But Augus decided that was possibly a good thing. A reminder that his cold, supposedly ironclad control would not get him through this – or indeed much else – intact. Augus licked his lips as he waited for Gwyn to relax his throat and then pushed hard, starting a steadier rhythm than he’d used earlier. Gwyn would need time to get hard again.

He nudged his boot forwards once more and started a soft massage that pressed the seam of his pants into Gwyn’s cock. Gwyn managed a moan when Augus withdrew to let him breathe, and Augus laughed softly, pressing back, winding Gwyn up as his hips rocked.
It was when he picked up a far rougher rhythm, taking Gwyn’s throat, making it his, that Gwyn suddenly leaned into Augus’ hand where it rested against his jaw. Augus thrust forward hard in response, ground his hips deep while tenderly caressing Gwyn’s cheek and feeling fine, constant shivers.

‘There,’ Augus said, thrusting back and forth and enjoying the fact that Gwyn was drooling now, couldn’t help himself. ‘There, that’s good, Gwyn.’

Gwyn whined, and then his hips bucked up, grinding his cock into Augus’ boot. Gwyn was past humiliation now. He was need and fire and light, and Augus was happy to guide him through it.

His own arousal – held back for some minutes – was allowed to move back through him again, and he felt it pooling at the base of his spine, drawing up in his balls. He felt it in the momentary urge to chomp hard on flesh, bit into his tongue instead.

Gwyn tried to inhale deeply when he came and choked instead. The sensation of it, the way Gwyn shifted and jerked against the wall, how his hands came up – one trying to push Augus away and the other actually wrapping around the back of his thigh and drawing him forwards – it was enough. Augus came with a long sigh, a faint groan. He spilled into the back of Gwyn’s throat, drawing up in his balls, and Gwyn kept up with a greed that was admirable.

Gwyn’s own orgasm was prolonged, and Augus was surprised that Gwyn was still experiencing aftershocks even after Augus had finished coming in his mouth. It was a sign of how little Gwyn’s needs were being met. After all, Augus could touch himself, bring himself off, slide fingers into his ass. Gwyn didn’t touch himself unless he was wrecked with bloodlust after a battle; and he hadn’t been in enough to sate himself in that way either.

He didn’t miss the way Gwyn tilted his head into Augus’ hand again, even as Augus slid out of his mouth. Gwyn’s lips puckered like he wanted to keep Augus’ cock in place.

It made him smile faintly, made it all – for a moment – seem worthwhile again.

His thumb moved up and stroked the bruise where he’d backhanded him earlier.

He tucked himself back into his pants, did them up and then knelt between Gwyn’s spread knees. Gwyn watched him in surprise, mouth still open, even as he wiped at the spit that made a shiny mess of his jaw and lips with the back of his hand.

Gwyn still didn’t expect anything like aftercare. Though what Augus had to offer was a poor substitute for what he truly wanted to give.

He moved his hands over Gwyn’s left shoulder, one hand curving behind it, the other bracing him at the front.

Gwyn hissed, still catching his breath. They both knew what was coming. Augus held back a cringe. He’d left it too long. It was going to hurt more than usual.

Just before closing his eyes he saw a pearl of white at the corner of Gwyn’s mouth, a green sheen turning it nacreous. He offered a faint smile of what he hoped was reassurance and then closed his eyes, took a deep breath. He opened his energy to Gwyn’s, felt the subtlety of his glamour still hiding his fear, even now. Behind that, the ley lines of his body, meridians of power flashing like small stars. His shoulder was a mess. Worse than last time.

‘Bear with me,’ Augus said in apology.
Gwyn tensed, but didn’t move away. Augus dug his fingers into the pressure points and winced as he rode out Gwyn’s full body flinch. Gwyn’s teeth clicked together, and Augus looked up when Gwyn slammed his head back into the stone wall, the motion sharp and rough. It jarred through Augus’ fingers.

‘You have paid too steeply for this debt,’ Augus said, tired. He’d never met Kabiri before; was no match for him, but he wouldn’t mind saying a thing or two to him about what he’d done to Gwyn’s shoulder.

At least the musculature was stronger. Gwyn was building strength within it again; but it was a mess of tangled energy connections, nerves not transmitting signals with any sort of efficiency. Communicating pain constantly, reminding Gwyn of what he’d lost even as his life was returned to him.

Augus pressed his lips to Gwyn’s forehead, kept the pressure up until his own fingers started to hurt.

He took a deep breath, shifted his fingers quickly, slammed them into points of energy that weren’t in the right places, and watched hungrily as the lines disappeared from Gwyn’s forehead. He slumped against the wall, mouth going slack, lips red. His breathing stopped being caught up in his lungs and became deep, hungry things, before settling into a far easier rhythm.

‘There,’ Augus whispered again. ‘It’s been too long. You should come to me for this every day.’

He was reluctant to ease his fingers away from the pressure points, but he had to. Would that he could keep pressure on them all the time, but bodies didn’t work that way, and he looked at Gwyn’s face closely as he eased the pressure off. For now, the pain was staying away. But Augus wasn’t treating him nearly enough to get the maximum benefit out of it. Chances were that Gwyn would start feeling pain again in ten, maybe twenty minutes.

Augus smoothed his fingers through Gwyn’s hair, frowned when he realised Gwyn’s chest was stuttering, his breath hitching again in his throat. At first he thought the pain had come back within seconds, then his eyes narrowed.

‘Gwyn?’ Augus said, pressing closer, caging him against the wall. ‘Talk to me.’

Gwyn cleared his throat. Shook his head.

‘I know- I know I shouldn’t care for her. When you- When Efnisien and Lludd didn’t- I don’t understand why…’

His eyes widened as he realised what Gwyn was talking about. A subject they’d both been avoiding beyond the occasional snipe. Something twisted in his chest. If Gwyn were a client, Augus would...

Augus was shocked to realise that if Gwyn were a client – a stranger – he would tell Gwyn that something unfair had occurred. Something unjust. For a moment he couldn’t move, and Gulvi’s words scored him.

‘Perhaps I shouldn’t have...’

Augus’ forehead furrowed, he shook his head sharply.

Crielle was a monster. He would not be made to feel guilty by the person who she had been
attempting to murder, and the swan that didn’t understand anyway. He snarled, furious, unwilling to indulge the caged feeling in his chest. He stood up and backed away, Gwyn staring at him in confusion, eyes brighter than usual.

‘No,’ Augus snapped. ‘She tortured you, your whole life. She used your care for her against you. Do you think I don’t know what impact she’s had? You’ll talk about Lludd beating you more frequently than you’ll talk about anything she’s done.’

Gwyn looked down and away, his breathing shaky.

‘What were you going to say, Augus?’ he said, his voice a bruised rasp. ‘What shouldn’t you have done?’

Augus growled, watched Gwyn push himself upright, a damp stain on his pants, debauched, dishevelled, annoyed that once again he couldn’t enjoy the aftermath of being with Gwyn. This kept happening. It was intolerable.

‘What were you going to say?’ Gwyn said, looking at him, something disarmed in his gaze.

‘You knew what I was from the beginning,’ Augus snapped. ‘Don’t pretend that my behaviour comes as a shock to you. Not with all that I’ve done. I warned you, and I follow through on my promises. The world is a better place without Crielle in it. As to the other fae I harmed...’

But there were no apologies waiting inside of him. Just a strange, unpleasant nausea.

‘Augus?’ Gwyn said, and Augus wanted to lash out, hated hearing that tone of voice from him. The one that was raw, open, that reminded him of times when they once – unbelievably – talked as though they were friends in the Seelie Court.

Gwyn would be like this now, and in thirty minutes he’d go back to work, and it would be like none of this had happened.

His skin itched.

‘Augus, I’m just trying to understand why-’

‘I will speak to you soon,’ Augus said, picking up his belt, walking away. Gwyn didn’t follow. They were no longer sleeping in the same room. Augus knew he should stay. He knew he should make sure that Gwyn was all right after Gulvi had witnessed them both.

He was tired of obligation. Tired of ‘following through’ when it felt as though he was the only one doing it.

And more than that. He’d been remiss in another duty – this one to himself and only himself. Perhaps it would help to at least get that obligation out of the way. There was someone else he needed to see, hadn’t followed up on for over a year now because of the distractions of the Nightingale, a ruined Court, captivity, Gwyn. Someone else he’d betrayed a long time ago. He couldn’t keep putting it off. He wasn’t even sure how to find him again; but it was important, and he had to try.

He needed to find the Raven Prince.

Chapter End Notes
In our next chapter, 'Predicament:'

‘You see, Augus,’ Gwyn said, looking down at what he held in his hand, ‘there is question in the Unseelie Court, at the moment. A great deal more rides upon the reputation – now, more than ever – that you come across as a tame, controlled creature. An Advisor who isn’t about to betray me as he speculatively did the Raven Prince. For that is what many suspect, now that Crielle is dead. There are some Unseelie who think that if I were to kill Crielle – as I have publically stated – I would have done it already, or done it myself. There is doubt.’

He shifted his hand and exposed more of the chain. Augus felt colder than normal, a thick, sluggish current of nausea turned his gut as he looked at the links of silver holding it together.

‘You, yourself, told me the importance of maintaining reputation.’

‘Don’t you dare,’ Augus breathed, a dark, vicious outrage stirring amongst fear and horror. ‘You wouldn’t dare.’
No new tags that aren't already somehow covered in the tags we have (I'm trying not to let this fic get too tag-congested). Also wow I really struggled to come up with a teaser for the next chapter. I had about 10 things to choose from.

For all those who need a break from the angst, morbidlizard drew Gwyn with a bunch of kittens. You can see more fae tales fanart here.

Hope everyone enjoys this installment! Thanks to all those who are leaving kudos, bookmarking, subscribing, leaving likes and asks and so on over at my Tumblr. And thank you to commenters, you folks help keep me inspired. <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Augus
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His cock was still sticky from Gwyn’s saliva when he’d backtracked through the castle – turning invisible within a marble alcove and following the scent of Gulvi. She’d requested Gwyn’s company, and Augus needed to know how she’d respond to he and Gwyn fucking in public. The problem wasn’t that it had been in public; she really wouldn’t have cared about that. The problem was that Gwyn was so uptight at the best of times she might not be able to resist seeding further discord in him about the subject.

The invisibility ached, felt like a boot pressing upon his chest. He breathed through it slowly and slipped into the room where Gulvi was looking at the RSVPs for the Triumphal Entry. It wasn’t far away now. Augus had the role of finalising Gwyn’s clothing – since Gwyn took zero interest in his appearance beyond making sure his hair wasn’t knotted and his skin was clean.

He leaned in a corner, folded his arms, ground his teeth together. It grated on him to not provide better aftercare and he was furious with himself for caring. Gwyn wasn’t his client, and the neglect went both ways. If he was keeping a scorecard between who was doing a better job of neglecting the other, it turned out Gwyn applied that old heartsong of triumph to a lot of things.

It was another hour before Gwyn showed up, freshly showered. His skin scrubbed pink and smelling of rosemary oil.

Gulvi looked up as he entered, wings flaring, and Gwyn flushed pinker. His ears were red, lips still faintly bruised.

She smirked and Augus stilled, watched cautiously. His fingers curled into fists. He hoped she had taken note of what it meant when he’d motioned her away from laughing at Gwyn.

‘What I want to know,’ Gulvi purred, ‘is whether it makes you more relaxed? It didn’t look particularly relaxing.’

Gwyn looked away, cleared his throat.
Come on, Gwyn, Augus thought in disgust. Where is that cold, confident King you’ve been showing everyone for weeks now?

‘I- I hadn’t intended for you to- I didn’t know you’d be-’

Gulvi raised her eyebrows at him and then grinned a perfect row of white teeth.

‘You? Flustered? This is enjoyable.’

She leaned back, spread her arms as though she wanted Gwyn to continue, and he dragged a hand through his damp hair. He was definitely on the back foot. Augus scowled.

‘La! Think nothing of it,’ Gulvi said. ‘Why are you so uncomfortable? Everyone knows you can be a jackhammer on the field. That little ‘arrangement’ of yours with some of your soldiers, oui?’

Gwyn nodded, his expression flickered before turning towards business. He seemed to be fine after that and Augus slipped out of the room, wandered some distance down the corridor before reappearing.

Gwyn had very little issue with people knowing that he was a brutal, dominating warrior, but as soon as he was on his knees, it was a different story. Augus licked his lips speculatively. He wanted to see Gwyn on a battlefield. He never really had, even when they had directly opposed each other as Unseelie and Seelie King. Even when they’d been on the same battlefield, Augus had been in one area and Gwyn in another, and Augus had missed much of Gwyn’s competence and only heard second-hand reports.

Once, Augus had gotten Gwyn to show him his light and had ended up impaled on Gwyn’s cock and holding back screams in the middle of a barren wasteland. That was – Augus knew – the bloodlust that took Gwyn over in war; the killing edge.

He wanted to be near it again. Dangerous though it was.

On his way to the common rooms, he ducked by Ash’s rooms. He wasn’t there – as usual – but Augus sat on his bed for five minutes, closing his eyes, fingers curled lightly into the bedspread. The room smelled faintly of whiskey and rum; they were poisons that prickled unpleasantly in his nose. There was a scent of silt and freshwater and fruit – berries.

He missed his brother. He wished he could talk to him about the situation with Gwyn, which was a strange position to find himself in. He wasn’t someone who had ever needed a confidante before.

Perhaps that means the giant oaf is more trouble than he’s worth.

Augus smirked. He’d been trying to convince himself of that for a little while, and he knew that wasn’t the answer.

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Common work was exhausting. He’d nominated himself for it and at the end of each day he wondered what – exactly – he’d been trying to prove. Surely he didn’t care about underfae that much?

He flicked the sleeve of his wrist as he stood over the body of a bobcat fae that had attempted to kill him. Blood was splattered around him and he couldn’t yet sheathe his rapier. It was mostly clean – but ‘mostly’ wasn’t clean.
He lay it carefully on the table and before summoning the trows to clean up, he sat wearily in the hastily pushed back chair the bobcat fae – Yathi – had vacated. He leaned his arm over the back of it and then rested his head on that, looking down into sightless eyes, blown pupils.

‘It wasn’t even a fair fight,’ Augus said, licking blood off his lips and wincing. It tasted musky, unpleasant. ‘Can’t get me with claws alone, Yathi.’

He stared down at Yathi for some minutes longer, composing his thoughts. He felt out of sorts. Common work was about serving the underfae; murdering them was not supposed to be a common outcome. But he had to defend himself.

The creature hadn’t even waited to see if Augus could assist him. Had only seen the riches and fame he might have secured if he had killed the ‘terrible waterhorse.’

Augus sneered and stood, picking up his rapier and ringing the bell for the trows. He walked out before they arrived. They would know what to do, it wasn’t like they hadn’t done it before.

*What a terribly uncouth world we live in these days.*

It was early morning when he went wandering through the palace. He avoided the basement levels – the risk of intrusive memories wasn’t worth it. But otherwise he meandered up and down stairs, through corridors, down the aisles of libraries that were populated with books that Augus thought he had destroyed when he’d taken over the Court himself. The palace was a warren of rooms, much like Gwyn’s mind.

The outer circles were stunning, a Court that would be remembered well by everyone – Augus was sure – but in the deepest sections of the palace, the highest levels, the hardest to reach regions, there were oddities. There were corridors with doorways that opened on marble walls. Augus had found a corridor terminating in a single door on the right, that had opened to another corridor with a door – eventually – on the right, and so on, until finally Augus realised he had walked a neat, well-lit square. He’d shuddered and left it, wondered if Gwyn even knew that these sections of the palace existed.

Augus wandered the convolutions more than he wandered the perfect places. He often found something new and it was rarely uninteresting.

He’d just passed through a vaulted room filled with framed maps of the same location – but for the life of him, Augus couldn’t tell where the location was, or if it was even in the fae world. He couldn’t identify any of the languages on the maps and the regions were unknown to him. A place Gwyn was fond of? A place that didn’t exist? Where had the maps come from? None of them were penned in Gwyn’s hand.

Augus was passing through a stoa when dawn gave its twilight to the Court and Augus’ blood pricked in response to the eldritch hour.

He found Gwyn not long after, carrying a large, heavy bag of what looked like loot. It certainly sounded like gold coins clanking around in the canvas sack.

‘Robin Hood, I presume?’ Augus said, and Gwyn didn’t even flinch. He would have been able to sense Augus’ presence before Augus had sensed Gwyn’s.

‘An experiment,’ Gwyn said, his voice hushed.
Augus followed him and Gwyn didn’t tell him to go away. Augus stayed several steps behind.

‘Does it hurt your shoulder?’ Augus said lightly.

Gwyn made a huffing sound under his breath, didn’t answer. Augus raised his eyebrows. Of course it hurt his shoulder. Even though the sack was braced over his good shoulder, it had to be straining the other. Gwyn still didn’t seek him out for treatments.

They ended up at a room that was locked not with any visible lock, but with energy. Gwyn heaved the bag to the ground. It landed with a musical clinking *thud!* He pressed his palm to the door and Augus felt energy swirl and shift around them. The door swung open into a void of darkness.

Augus couldn’t move for several seconds, staring into that palpable black. There was movement, Gwyn disappearing into the gloom, and Augus forced his face to nonchalance through the nauseating thump of his heart.

‘As fascinating as this is, I have other matters to-’

A small, warm glow – a candle lit by Gwyn’s hand – revealed the room to be small. No monsters hid within its depths. No creeping creatures dripping black mucous and changing their forms at will while-

‘I’ve altered the permissions so that you may enter,’ Gwyn said.

Augus hesitated, tensed when he noticed the way Gwyn was watching him.

‘Don’t,’ Augus said, cautioning.

‘Don’t what?’ Gwyn said, turning back to the sack and carefully untying the knot. Gwyn’s hands could be surprisingly clever and Augus watched calloused fingers work at complicated ties as he stepped cautiously in the room, looking over his shoulder to make sure the corridor waited behind him.

*Of course it does. Don’t start indulging those fears of yours now.*

Gwyn took the sack and upended it. Coins and gems streamed out, a river of wealth that made Augus ache to get his hands on it. There were times he truly missed the endless resources at Gwyn’s disposal when he’d been King of the Seelie Court.

Once the sack was empty, Gwyn threw it into the corner. Finally he took a small, insignificant looking gem out of his pocket and placed it down by the gold, pursing his lips at it.

‘I’m afraid I’m not aware of your hypothesis,’ Augus said. Gwyn’s lips quirked.

‘Fenwrel has gifted the Unseelie Court with a charm of increase, but I do not wish to use it with the Treasury in its total. I’ve partitioned some of it off and we’ll see what happens.’

‘She is Fenwrel, granddaughter of Fluri – you don’t trust *her*?’ Augus said, surprised.

‘She’s Unseelie,’ Gwyn said absently, then stilled. Augus made a clucking sound under his tongue.

‘As are you. But then, I suppose you’re not predisposed to trusting *us* after the upbringing you’ve had. It wasn’t as though you could trust the people who were supposed to be trustworthy.’

Augus stepped out of the room first. Gwyn extinguished the candle, leaving the holder just inside the door. He closed it, placed his palm against it and changed the permissions again.
‘I can just see it now,’ Augus mused. ‘You out there with your generals feeling like a wolf amongst the sheep. Or is it a sheep amongst the wolves? Are you out there, time after time, feeling like a spy? How hard must you fight yourself to remember that you’re one of them?’

Gwyn offered a grim smile, didn’t rise to the bait. There were circles under his eyes.

‘You need to sleep before the Triumphal Entry.’

Gwyn shook his head. ‘I don’t have time.’

‘When was the last time you slept? Not dozed. Slept. Abusing that status of yours again, aren’t you?’

‘Augus,’ Gwyn said, helpless. ‘There’s four days before the Entry. There’s catering, the generals, I need to make sure that Fenwrel is-’

‘You are King. Delegate.’

Gwyn’s face closed off and Augus almost laughed. If Albion – once a member of Gwyn’s Inner Court – couldn’t get Gwyn to delegate in all the years he’d been King, he didn’t like his own chances. But he did appreciate a challenge.

‘At the very least I need to finish fitting your clothing. You won’t see a tailor, but I’ll not have you out there before the new Court with poorly fitted-’

‘Augus, you have my measurements,’ Gwyn grumbled.

‘You are training on a regular basis and your measurements are constantly changing. See me at ten this morning. My rooms. Yes?’

Gwyn hesitated, then nodded curtly. With that, the conversation was over. Gwyn walked down the corridor briskly, and Augus wondered how hard it would be to dig beneath all those layers of business and coldness and find the Gwyn that would gasp in his arms and cling. He frowned as he walked in the opposite direction.

Likely very hard, given Gwyn wouldn’t give him the time he needed in the first place.

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Augus held a small black stone in his hands. His Prince had made it for him. It was a locating charm, and the Raven Prince hadn’t known what he was making it for when Augus had once begged it off him for the sake of ‘knowing where my liege is, in case of an emergency.’

Augus turned it – cool and smooth – his doors barred and pacing, forcing his breathing to slowness. He hadn’t used it for so long and he wasn’t even sure it would still work. But the Raven Prince had potent magic, and there was still, hopefully, a kernel of it remaining.

He closed his eyes and kept pacing, having measured out the steps he needed to make sure he wouldn’t bump into anything. His breathing turned slower, slower again, and he sank within the depths of his mind, looking for a still black lake in the core of himself.

But before he could even sink into the well of himself – the preliminary step of the whole ritual – he was snagged in other currents. He whirled amongst thoughts, feelings, adrift on an eddy that wouldn’t release him. He snarled in frustration, kept walking, attempted to extricate himself and sink back down again.
Once more he was picked up and thrust into a tangle of energy and thought.

Quietening his mind hadn’t even been so difficult when he’d been in a cell for months.

He opened his eyes two hours later, his breathing faster, the stone clenched in his fist and his hand damp and warm.

It shouldn’t be so hard. He wanted to blame it on the faded magic of the stone, but he knew better. It was something in himself. When his heartsong had been dominance, he’d been able to master himself more easily. Now that it was balance…

*destabilised*, Augus realised with a shock, eyes widening. *My core is destabilised.*

He placed the stone in a decorative bowl of black river stones and then swirled his hand through it to make sure the charmed one was at the bottom, so Gwyn wouldn’t suspect it was there. He brushed away a faint thread of nausea and decided he’d try again later.

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Gwyn shifted uncomfortably when Augus asked him to strip off his clothing, and Augus rolled his eyes while looking over the stitching on the vest. It was far more formal than what Gwyn was used to comfortably wearing, but it was a formal occasion, and Augus knew very well that Gwyn knew how to comport himself in fine clothing thanks to his upbringing.

Gwyn undressed slowly, dropping his clothing unceremoniously instead of folding it. It was a small act of rebellion and Augus ignored it, turning over the flap of the coat and wondering where he’d need to alter it. He looked over at Gwyn, scrutinised his form. He hadn’t put on too much musculature since Augus had measured him. Augus had deliberately left it as late as possible to make sure that Gwyn’s body wouldn’t change too much.

He still lacked bulk. He no longer stood as proudly as he used to. Augus’ eyes skated over the nasty scar at the front of his shoulder. It rippled all the way over to mar him even more extensively at his back. He couldn’t let his eyes linger on it, because Gwyn noticed and closed up even more. But Augus didn’t like pretending it wasn’t there. He missed the days when Gwyn would stand naked, unselfconscious, as if to say: *Yes, I’m glorious, no matter how mentally unstable I am.*

‘Put these on,’ Augus said, handing him the pants. Gwyn took them hesitantly, something wary in his gaze. Augus watched him long after Gwyn looked away and started dressing.

There’d been a hint of this when taking his measurements, but it was worse today. Much worse. His nostrils flared and he picked up no fear, but that didn’t necessarily mean anything with Gwyn.

‘Do you want me to do your shoulder after this, or before?’ Augus said, and Gwyn looked up. His chest heaved on a single, silent breath. He never asked for it. Even before training – the activity that hurt it the most – he never asked.

‘After?’ Gwyn said, and Augus nodded and went back to examining the coat.

He’d gone with darker shades than Gwyn was used to wearing, though he kept to the older style of clothing he seemed to prefer. Augus would have modernised the suit for himself, but he decided that a more ornate, complex suit was a better fit. A navy coat and pants, so dark they were almost black, and a pale blue collared shirt that matched the colour of his eyes. The vest was embroidered, pale blue patterns over the navy. Gwyn had protested the entire thing, saying it would be too uncomfortable to wear.
It was a strange thing to protest, given the armour he trained in had to be excruciating at the best of times.

‘Step onto the block while I fix the hems,’ Augus said, and Gwyn took a breath and then did so.

Augus knelt by his feet with a container of pins, needles, thread, and Gwyn tensed. As Augus began making sure the hems were even, would fit well over the shoes he’d chosen, he paused, his eyes widened.

‘You must have many memories of being fitted for clothing,’ Augus said.

‘It’s tedious. Will this take much longer?’

Augus’ eyes narrowed and he ‘accidentally’ trailed the point of the pin over Gwyn’s skin. It was too light to cause any pain, even much of a scratching sensation. Gwyn flinched like he’d just been stabbed with it.

_Damn it._

‘Sorry,’ Gwyn said, though he’d not actually moved his feet off the block. His voice was stiff.

‘Who used to fit you for your clothing? Did you have a manservant who did those things for you?’

‘No.’

Augus placed a palm over the bridge of Gwyn’s foot, closed his eyes briefly. He looked up and Gwyn was looking ahead, face a blank mask. Augus could almost hear him telling himself to just get through it.

His jaw tensed as he took up another pin, not looking away from Gwyn’s face. He kept his other hand on the bridge of Gwyn’s foot. Then, never looking away, he slid the pin into the skin above Gwyn’s ankle.

No flinch. No sharp intake of breath. He didn’t _move._

‘Pray tell, Gwyn. Why aren’t you reacting? I just slid a pin into your ankle.’

‘It’s a fitting,’ Gwyn said simply, and then he blinked to awareness and looked down at Augus in surprise. ‘What’s wrong?’

Augus slid the pin free and threw it down into the container.

‘Fittings aren’t supposed to _hurt._ That mother of yours… And after all this time, how do you not know that fittings aren’t supposed to hurt? Surely you had to be fitted away from her; for armour, for… _everything_ since your childhood.’

Gwyn took a slow breath and shifted uncomfortably on the block.

‘I don’t get fitted like this, Augus,’ Gwyn said. ‘I get my measurements taken and then wear clothing based on that. It only needs to be comfortable.’

Augus opened his mouth to argue and realised now wasn’t the best time to have this conversation. Gwyn was resistant, Augus was too frustrated. He picked up the shirt and handed it to Gwyn, satisfied with the fit of the pants. They wouldn’t need much work.

Gwyn was silent for the rest of the fitting, up until Augus attached a silver stag brooch where
others might have a breast pocket.

‘A stag?’ Gwyn said, looking down.

‘For the Wild Hunts we’ll have again,’ Augus said, lips quirking. ‘And it seems rather fitting I think. Also the silver will match the crown.’

‘Augus…’

‘You’re wearing it,’ Augus said. ‘This is the first time the new and old noblesse will see the Court, will see you. And you don’t have centuries of having already endeared yourself to them as you did with the Seelie. Impressions will count a great deal. Besides, you will cut a striking figure.’

‘It should be armour,’ Gwyn said. Augus turned him towards the mirror when Gwyn wouldn’t look at himself.

‘We don’t have a properly fitting set of armour for you and I suspect this is a far better alternative.’

Gwyn looked at himself, eyes moving over the ensemble with an expression that Augus couldn’t read. But then Gwyn took a breath and seemed to relax, and Augus realised, pleased, that he liked it.

Augus’ eyes met Gwyn’s in the mirror, gaze sharp. If Gwyn was mostly accustomed to wearing clothing that Crielle was tailoring for him…

‘She was clever, wasn’t she?’ Augus said, keeping his voice even, keeping a careful hand on Gwyn’s waist. ‘Did you ever realise that she was making your clothing fit you poorly so that you would never feel comfortable? Especially in situations where she could watch you squirm in the clothing she had made for you; knowing that she could reprimand you at any moment? What was it? Seams too tight? Irritating fabrics brushing up against sensitive areas? She would have you looking well fitted on the outside and you’d receive oh-so-many compliments, and secretly you’d be dying to just get free of whatever new torture she’d thought up for you.’

Gwyn stared at him in the mirror.

‘Is this clothing uncomfortable for you?’ Augus asked. ‘Think about it, and don’t contemplate lying to me.’

‘No,’ Gwyn said faintly, sounding surprised, carefully tracing the antlers on the stag brooch.

‘No,’ Augus said. ‘It shouldn’t be. Of course it constrains more than the clothing you use for hiking or ranging or hunting, but it should be comfortable for what you intend it for. Not irritating, not painful.’

Gwyn’s eyes met Augus’ again in the mirror, vulnerable expression transforming into something harder, colder.

 Didn’t like finding that out, did you, sweetness?

Gwyn stepped off the block, hands coming up to the hems of the coat and pulling it down, neating the creases automatically. Augus allowed himself a moment of satisfaction. He’d made Gwyn look very good. So much so, that he had to remind himself it would be inappropriate to rip the suit off him or force Gwyn down to his knees while he was in it. Wouldn’t do to have something that had cost a fair amount – even with Augus making careful choices with the fabrics – require laundering only days before the Triumphal Entry.
He watched Gwyn out of the corner of his eye as he undressed. The way he moved around the nerve damage in his shoulder. The bunching and shifting of his muscles, building under the frequent training Gwyn inflicted on himself.

Gwyn caught him staring. But Augus said nothing, watched him quietly as Gwyn laid all the clothing back out on the bed. Augus’ bed.

They’d not spent time together in the rooms Gwyn had created for them both. Augus had only seen them once during his times wandering the palace when he couldn’t settle his thoughts. They were sensitively crafted. Augus didn’t know at this point if they’d ever be used.

‘You can survive almost everything else,’ Augus said, and Gwyn paused, naked, stared at him. Augus’ eyes were drawn to the vulnerable, limp cock between his legs, the complete lack of body hair. His gaze drifted up and met Gwyn’s.

‘You would not have survived her,’ Augus finished, and Gwyn stiffened. ‘And, given the plan – plans – she may have in effect; you still may not.’

Gwyn turned and reached for his shirt. Augus watched the expanse of Gwyn’s back and imagined running his claws down it until blood trickled down along ridges of muscle.

‘You never give me your time,’ Augus said. He turned and smoothed his hand down the clothing for the Triumphal Entry. ‘Are you waiting for me to claw it from you?’

‘I am, actually, busy.’

Gwyn didn’t look up as he pulled on his pants, and just like that he was done – he was in the habit of not wearing shoes around the palace. Barefooted, hair mussed from pulling on and taking off shirts, he looked younger and more fragile than he had any right to.

He took a step towards the door, then hesitated. He looked back.

Augus smirked. ‘Do you dream of me emptying you of blood and making you ache, as much as I do?’

Gwyn’s cheeks flushed, he ran a hand through his hair.

‘We have a Kingdom to run,’ Gwyn said, and Augus had his answer.

‘Keep slighting me,’ Augus whispered as Gwyn walked towards the door. ‘You’ll see what I’m capable of.’

‘I know what you’re capable of,’ Gwyn said heavily, hand on the doorknob. He looked over his shoulder. ‘I’ve already had to defeat you once.’

It was only once Gwyn had left that Augus realised that Gwyn expected to have to defeat him again. He ran his thumb over the stag brooch and felt tired.

*

Two days before the Triumphal Entry, Augus was overwhelmed. He supervised the servants, brought his full knowledge of formal functions to bear, oversaw decorations in the throne room. He caught glimpses of Fenwrel talking with Gulvi, of Gwyn going about his business with training and the generals.
Ash returned from hunting just in time to bring the knowledge of fae and human liquor and alcohol with him, and then shocked Augus with his adept management of outdoor decorations, catering, and other aspects of entertaining that had slipped Augus’ mind.

‘You look fucking beat,’ Ash said. Augus smiled thinly, refusing to touch and settle his hair as he wanted to. Ash would know the gesture for what it was and become even more concerned. ‘You ever just want to get the hell out of dodge? You know, leave him to it and-’

‘Ash,’ Augus said.

‘Come on,’ Ash said, frowning, ‘you must think about it sometimes.’

‘And go to what, exactly? Risk my life and yours in the same instant?’

Ash’s forehead creased.

‘You…can’t force yourself into something that’s bad for you, for my sake. Okay? You can’t.’

‘Ash, I chose this,’ Augus said, scrutinising the table positions before nodding to himself. Most of the tables wouldn’t be used anyway. Fae liked to explore, meander, find their own secret hideaways. Thankfully the night gardens provided more than enough by the way of havens.

‘S’just, you look tired, you look…”

Ash walked up to him and Augus tried to swing away, knowing what was coming. He growled softly when Ash grasped his wrist and pulled him back.

‘You spent a long time rejecting me,’ Ash said, reaching up and touching Augus’ hair, running his fingers down it in the way that Augus had wanted to for hours. He shivered, closed his eyes, wanted to spend entire days curled in a pile of limbs with Ash on his bed, resting. ‘But you look like shit, brother. I know you’re not looking after yourself.’

‘Perhaps if you were here shouldering some of the load, I’d have more time to take care of myself.’

Ash shrugged. He wasn’t very apologetic about the fact that he wasn’t often there.

‘Go lie down,’ Ash said. ‘I’ve got this. Get something to eat. Okay? Stop doing this to yourself. It reminds me a little too much of how you were in the old Court, y’know?’

Augus shook his head in irritation, stepped away from Ash, refused to fold his arms. He thought of excuses, but none of them would be well received if they all came at the expense of looking after himself.

‘A nap, you say?’ Augus said. There wasn’t much left to be done now, and he knew Ash could handle himself.

‘And a hug,’ Ash said, spreading his arms hugely.

Augus made sure none of the common fae servants were watching. He didn’t mind the trows or Gwyn seeing his affections, but he preferred not to have to deal with others coming to conclusions about the softer aspects of his personality. There was hardly anyone around and he stepped quickly into Ash’s arms, resting his forehead on his shoulder.

Ash’s arms were strong around him, warmer than his own body temperature. He pressed his cheek
alongside Augus’, and for several breaths, Augus closed his eyes and pretended that he was back in their childhood lake.

‘Now get off me,’ Augus said, shrugging out of Ash’s grasp, a smile gracing his lips briefly.

‘Go get some sleep,’ Ash said, shoving him for good measure.

*

He came out of his doze with a start, pushing himself up onto his palms even as he realised Gwyn was in his room, sitting on the chair by his desk. He wore more clothing than usual; a sign he’d been with his generals, perhaps. Augus blinked away confusion, wondered what he needed to do. What he’d missed.

For a brief, aching moment he thought Gwyn might be there to seek his company.

As he should. My company is very fine. Being brought low by his insecurities is unbecoming.

Augus draped his legs over the side of his bed, folded his arms in his lap.

‘Your Highness,’ Augus said smoothly.

Gwyn flinched like he’d been struck.

‘Don’t do that.’

‘Do what? Treat you the way you wish to be treated?’

Gwyn looked away, and at the same moment he reached into his pocket and drew something out. A thin, silver chain clinked musically, coiled into Gwyn’s palm. He closed his fingers around it, though a foot trailed down in the direction of the floor. Augus looked at it in confusion.

‘You see, Augus,’ Gwyn said, looking down at what he held in his hand, ‘there is question in the Unseelie Court, at the moment. A great deal more rides upon the reputation – now, more than ever – that you come across as a tame, controlled creature. An Advisor who isn’t about to betray me as he did the Raven Prince. For that is what many suspect now that Crielle is dead. There are some Unseelie who think that if I were to kill Crielle – as I have publically stated – I would have done it already, or done it myself. There is doubt.’

He shifted his hand and exposed more of the chain. Augus felt colder than normal, a thick, sluggish current of nausea turned his gut as he looked at the links of silver holding it together.

‘You, yourself, told me the importance of maintaining reputation.’

‘Don’t you dare,’ Augus breathed, a dark, vicious outrage stirring amongst fear and horror. ‘You wouldn’t dare.’

‘So much of our success rides upon reputation. It would only be a token display of your-’

‘You want me to wear a chain, a leash, at the Entry? In front of all those fae? I’m your primary Advisor, Gwyn. This isn’t a Display! I’m not your captive.’

‘The words you used yourself, Augus-’

‘-You would put me through this again, after-’
'It is a token, a symbol. The chain is not spelled. It is thin. Everyone will understand that it is a symbolic gesture.'

'Everyone will understand that I am your slave. Who wears a collar and a leash – a metal chain – by the King’s side otherwise, Gwyn? Tell me? Is it the Advisor?'

Gwyn’s hand closed around the chain, and Augus wanted to wrap it around Gwyn’s neck. His heart beat heavily in his chest. He felt trapped, wanted to shake Gwyn until all the coldness fell out of him. He stood, and Gwyn tipped his head back, watched him warily. But he didn’t move.

He looked unhappy.

_Not unhappy enough, the brute._

‘You cannot make me do this,’ Augus breathed. ‘I would like to see you try.’

‘You’re right,’ Gwyn said. ‘I can’t make you. You’re not truly a prisoner. You are not a slave. But—’

‘Is this some petty revenge?’ Augus said, laughing. ‘Can I expect more of this?’

‘Augus,’ Gwyn said, closing his eyes. ‘You very recently reminded everyone of the kind of brutality that you indirectly committed when you, yourself, were ruler. These are all people you’ve harmed directly or indirectly. People you’ve hurt. And you, yourself, told me that they will not trust me – will not trust us – unless they perceive you to be under my control. What better way of showing that, at this time, than showing the Each Uisge – such a creature of independence – voluntarily wearing a chain?’

Augus reached out quickly, snatched the chain out of Gwyn’s grasp before Gwyn’s reflexes kicked in. As Gwyn watched in shock, Augus brought his strength to bear and snapped the chain in several pieces before dropping them all to the ground.

He stood over Gwyn, staring down at him, fingers clenching into fists. Gwyn’s eyes flickered from Augus’ face, to his hands, but he didn’t move.

‘Hold still,’ Augus snarled, backhanding him across the cheekbone, splitting his skin. Gwyn exhaled sharply, but his eyes came back, met Augus’ even as they watered from the force of the blow. The gaze was steady, implacable, and Augus’ mouth turned dry, his skin crawled.

Everything Gwyn said was right.

‘You had best believe that I will make you pay for this,’ Augus said, his voice turning smooth, even though it was deeper with his distress.

‘Of that I have no doubt,’ Gwyn said, raising his fingers tentatively to his cheek and touching the split there. _Now_ he looked like he cared what Augus felt. Now he had the audacity to look at him like he cared.

‘Down,’ Augus said, stepping back and pointing at a space of floor in front of his feet. ‘Go on, King. I grow less and less inclined to stay in this Court of yours. Remind me why I’m here.’

Augus watched in disgust as Gwyn stared at the patch of floor, and then – after a quick, hesitant glance up at Augus – slid to his knees from the chair itself. He knelt, and Augus wished for ropes and chains that _weren’t_ symbolic and took a handful of Gwyn’s soft hair in his hand and twisted hard enough that strands came free. Gwyn made a small sound in the back of his throat, resisted
instinctively as Augus pushed his face towards the ground.

‘I said down,’ Augus said, and Gwyn shook as he fought back. Augus pushed harder, and Gwyn’s arms bent voluntarily. He went – faintly resistant – the rest of the way. Chest on the tiles, forehead pressing in where Augus held his head down. ‘I want to know more about this idea of yours.’

‘It would only be once,’ Gwyn said, muted. ‘During the Triumphal Entry. It would be enough. Once would be enough to stay in everyone’s minds.’

‘They respect me little enough as it is!’

‘I thought you took pride in taking responsibility for yourself, your actions,’ Gwyn said, and Augus let go of his hair abruptly, then lowered the ball of his foot to the back of Gwyn’s head, pushing down. He controlled his breathing, made it even.

‘Asking me to submit to a chain is not about pride and it is not about responsibility. You know that very well.’

Augus could hear his own breathing, knew Gwyn could hear it too.

‘You are neglectful, cruel, and cold,’ Augus said, his voice turning soothing, feeling Gwyn shudder and shift through the sole of his foot. ‘Someone should teach you some manners, shouldn’t they, your Highness?’

‘Augus,’ Gwyn said, voice faint. ‘Don’t call me that.’

‘Majesty,’ Augus purred. ‘I fail to see, my liege, why you have such a problem with it when you keep lording it over me.’

‘I’m trying to make this work.’

Augus crouched, resting more of his weight on the foot upon Gwyn’s head, and Gwyn’s good arm came up, his fingers braced into tile. His torso curled like he wanted to roll away. Augus reached out and traced claw tips over Gwyn’s back, delicate patterns that irritated more than soothed.

‘Tell me when you’ll let me have you,’ Augus said. ‘Promise me some of your time.’

‘Augus, I can’t do-’

‘I can work for you, I can be Inner Court, but I don’t have to be your lover. It becomes increasingly clear that you don’t know what it is to be with someone else. I would never have turned away clientele if I’d known it was going to be like this.’

Augus realised with a shock, that it was true.

Gwyn held his breath. Augus waited to see how long he would hold it for. A full minute passed before Gwyn exhaled slowly, silently. Augus watched him hold his breath again and knew Gwyn was distressed, savoured it.

‘Your time, Gwyn,’ Augus prompted. ‘Tell me when I may have some.’

‘It has to be after the Entry,’ Gwyn said.

‘Tell me when. Pretend I am almost as important as everything else that you do.’

‘Take on clients again,’ Gwyn said, though each of the words sounded torn from his chest. In
response, Augus slid his hand down and underneath Gwyn’s shirt, then dug a single claw into a pressure point over his hip. Gwyn tried to jerk away, made a sound in the back of his throat.

‘You’re mistaking me for someone who enjoys being ordered around by you. I will ask you one more time; and if you don’t answer me, I am going to walk away. I will not play nice at your Triumphal Entry, and I will foil my own plan to present myself as cowed in order to spite you. I am that petty. That has been established, hasn’t it?’

‘There’s a battle coming up,’ Gwyn said quickly, words falling out of him in a rush. ‘A battle. After the Entry we’re laying a trap for Dogwill; but it will mean a battle and I will have to be there. After that. As soon as I return. Gods, now if you like, Augus.’

‘Oh, Your Majesty, you are so accommodating.’

Gwyn’s fingers scraped roughly across tile, hard enough that Augus scented the faintest hint of blood. He slid his claw away from the pressure point, but knew that Gwyn was tense enough it would still hurt him.

‘I’ll wear the chain,’ Augus said quietly. ‘A chain of my choosing, and I will affix it myself. And if you – at any point during the Entry – treat me with blatant disrespect, I will show you the difference between my cooperation and my lack of it.’

He stood up, lifted his foot away from Gwyn’s head, expected Gwyn to push himself upright straight away.

Gwyn stayed on the ground, forehead touching the tile, body pressed long against it. Augus waited another minute, another, and Gwyn still wouldn’t move, though his breathing came faster.

Augus closed his eyes. Even with everything being so difficult, Gwyn wanted to submit and Augus wanted to claim him. It was one of the few anchors they had. Gwyn lay face down waiting for orders, and Augus – despite the disorientation of being woken up to Gwyn wanting to chain him – wanted to command him until Gwyn felt secure in the boundaries of verbal restraint. Until he could relax. It would be good for the both of them. It had to be.

‘How long do you have?’ Augus asked, and Gwyn’s breathing hitched.

‘Not long. I have a meeting with-’

‘I didn’t ask who you had a meeting with,’ Augus said coldly, ‘I asked how long you had. Learn to listen.’

‘Thirty minutes,’ Gwyn said. ‘At most.’

‘Strip everything above the waist. Then return to this position and do not move,’ Augus said, walking from the room.

He thought of and discarded several different ideas before landing on what he wanted to do; something that would give him a measure of satisfaction after the way Gwyn had treated him.

It bothered him that Gwyn found it so difficult to think of when he could give him some of his time. It meant that he wasn’t thinking of it in general, and that meant that Augus had become an afterthought.

*I am no one’s afterthought.*
In one of the adjoining rooms he bypassed the saltire cross and moved straight towards one of the heavier drawers in a cabinet, pulling it out and smirking at the assortment of chains in front of him. He drew out spelled leather cuffs, a collar, thick, heavy chains and knew that Gwyn would hear them clinking from the other room. He jostled them more than necessary on the way back, then dropped them before Gwyn's head. Gwyn's head was, amazingly, still pushed down onto the floor. His clothing was shoved underneath the chair he’d been sitting in, his shoulders and back tense.

Augus worked quickly, attaching a heavy leather cuff to Gwyn’s ankle, two cuffs to his upper left arm – careful of his bad shoulder, a collar to his neck, and then organised the chains carefully.

‘I have a meeting,’ Gwyn said tentatively. ‘The collar-’

‘-Won’t bruise,’ Augus said as he worked. ‘You are not the only high profile client I’ve ever worked with. It’s spelled to heal bruises.’

Gwyn subsided into silence after that, and Augus grinned. He didn’t think that would last long.

He grasped Gwyn’s left arm, twisted it up and back behind him, wrenching his shoulder. Gwyn shouted, his body lurched, and in that moment Augus grasped the chain attached to the back of the collar and hooked it to one of the cuffs high up on Gwyn’s arm, keeping his head and shoulder locked in place. Gwyn gasped, forced to look up, unable to drop his head back to the floor without wrenching his shoulder further. His hand trembled, flexed spasmodically, and Augus patted it falsely before grasping the cuff at his ankle and bending his leg back.

He chained that to the other cuff encircling Gwyn’s left arm, and there, now he couldn’t lower his leg without wrenching his shoulder and his neck.

Augus tested the chains quickly, then stepped away, watching the rise and fall of laboured breathing.

‘You always did look good caught up in a predicament like this.’

Gwyn tried to look away, turned his head to the side, then jerked and inhaled sharply when even that much jolted his shoulder. He moved back immediately, back pulled into an arch, forced to hold the position.

‘Now, let’s have a chat,’ Augus said, smiling brightly, taking a cushion off his bed and dropping it before Gwyn. He sat cross-legged, watching the changes and shifts in Gwyn’s expression. He was straining at the collar as much as he dared without hurting his shoulder further or constricting his breathing. Augus should have done this a long time ago. Gwyn’s habit of constantly looking away – regardless of his reasons – was infuriating.

‘Not that long ago, you saw someone murder me,’ Augus said.

Gwyn’s reaction was instantaneous. His head dropped to the floor, he cried out in pain, his left leg jerking back to the floor in the process. He made a broken sound as he caught his shoulder in both directions and froze, breathing hoarsely, something high at the end of his inhales. Panic, most likely.

‘Careful,’ Augus breathed, licking his lips hungrily.

Gwyn’s eyes met his, a plea in them. But Augus watched him and let Gwyn see just how much he was enjoying this. Gwyn closed his eyes and his lips thinned.

‘It’s flattering, really, that you can’t speak of it. Because if it wasn’t for things like that I would
have no way of knowing that you held me in any sort of esteem.’

Gwyn’s lips tightened further, his body twitched.

Augus waited quietly. He slowed his breathing, let his body find the quality of relaxation he’d had while resting. Minutes drifted. He counted off each one. At the five minute mark – so soon – Gwyn’s forehead creased. The position was very hard on his shoulder, even when he was staying still. Augus watched him shift minutely, trying to find positions that were more comfortable. He found none.

After another two minutes, Gwyn stilled once more. His eyes opened and he met Augus’ gaze.

‘You look frustrated,’ Augus said. ‘Imagine how I feel.’

‘What do you want from me?’ Gwyn said, voice hoarse from the collar, the position of his throat. ‘You killed my family.’

‘Did I? I’d forgotten. It’s not as though you keep reminding me. But let’s take a moment, Gwyn, to appreciate the fact that you’d been neglectful for some time before I did anything to Crielle or your precious housekeep. You’ve been a mess since you were demoted to underfae.’

Gwyn tried to shake his head and bit off a sound in the back of his throat.

‘I’m getting tired of you telling me what we all know – I did kill your family. What is it that you want from me, every time you say it? Is it simply to restate, over and over, that your lack of trust in me has grown? It isn’t as though you especially trusted me before, you know.’

Augus was surprised when Gwyn tried to hide his face once more, dropping his head and choking on the collar, the pain. Breathing quickly, he forced himself back into position. The reflex to hide was stronger than Augus thought.

‘Do you know what I think?’ Augus said, crawling closer and touching his fingertips to a tense jaw. Pale blue eyes watched him, eyebrows drawn together. ‘I think you trust me more than you know, and you don’t want to. No one who truly didn’t trust me would let me truss them up, allow me to do things like this. I think you’re angry that even after what I’ve done, even after all the rumours that you’ve heard about how I am a monster, how I will betray you…’

Something flickered in Gwyn’s eyes and his head didn’t move, but his eyes slid away.

Augus’ eyes narrowed as he trailed his thumb down the line of Gwyn’s jaw.

‘Or,’ Augus said, frowning, ‘you don’t trust me, and you let yourself get tied up like this because you think you deserve it.’

A twitch in Gwyn’s expression, and Augus held back a snarl. He wanted to dig his fingers into Gwyn’s skin, but instead he shifted his palm carefully, cupped Gwyn’s cheek.

Gwyn began to shiver.

‘This is disappointing,’ Augus said, and Gwyn’s eyes closed. ‘All the things you won’t talk about keep piling up, don’t they? The demotion. Being underfae. The debt with Kabiri. Being King of the Unseelie. Seeing me get killed only to realise later that it was a shapeshifter. Your lover killing the remainder of your childhood. And then everything else on top of that, yes? All the responsibilities, the tasks, the Generals, the knowledge that this is a sinking ship and you might be the captain watching it go down around you. Are there too many balls in the air for you to handle, sweetness?’
Augus traced his eyebrow, his forehead with careful fingers as Gwyn’s shaking became more pronounced.

‘What are we going to do with you?’ Augus sighed. ‘It was too much for you when you were the King of the Seelie. I can’t imagine what it’s like now.’

‘It was my choice,’ Gwyn said. ‘I should never have…blamed you for that.’

Augus squinted, then remembered their argument from the other night.

‘I know it feels as though everything is beyond your control,’ Augus said, ‘but you are holding more together than you realise. You don’t see your competence.’

Gwyn shifted, hissed. His face screwed up at the pain. But a few seconds later his expression went cold and he jerked his head down and wrenched his own shoulder deliberately, violently; mouth open, exhaling hard. He shifted back into position slowly as Augus’ hand paused on his face.

*You’ll do nearly anything to escape praise, won’t you, sweetness?*

‘I don’t want that from you,’ Augus said sternly.

‘You can’t fix it. You can’t fix any of it. I could give you all of my time and it wouldn’t change anything and I would only have *more* to do. There are responsibilities I cannot even *meet*. They ask me for maps and I cannot find the time to do them. I’m meant to be exploring possible alliances, getting fae into strategic positions in the oceans, following up…a great deal more than I am. You can’t do *anything*.’

‘Projection,’ Augus said quietly. ‘You’re the one who feels as though you can’t do anything.’

At least he was talking, volunteering information. Augus tugged at one of Gwyn’s curls, and Gwyn twisted his head away, growled in anger when he wrenched his shoulder again.

‘Let me go,’ Gwyn snapped.

‘If you want me to wear that chain, you had best ‘suck it up,’ as they say. Though I have to wonder how much it reminds you of Albion’s hand around your neck, leeching away your mortality. You behave more like an underfae than you ever did, even now that you’re King. Did you know? You—’

‘I did it for you!’

Augus hesitated, then cupped Gwyn’s face in his hands and waited for their eyes to meet.

‘At some point, you are going to have to acknowledge that you did it for yourself, also. You needed to be free of that place and I was a very flimsy excuse for you to set the stage needed to get you released or executed. You did *not* care, at that point, which one occurred. You can tell me that you changed the Unseelie Court for me, that it took so long because of me, that you have no time because of me, but at some point you must accept that the world is not just something that happens to you, Gwyn. You happen to the world. And you must see your part in that.’

Gwyn blinked at him, Augus’ fingers curled.

‘I don’t think you want to drive me away,’ Augus said, quietly. ‘Even with the trust broken, you want this. But if you don’t admit it to yourself, and don’t try and fight for it…well, I don’t particularly want to stay here. Do you understand?’
Gwyn’s eyes closed, and Augus slid his hands away. He stood up, aware of the time.

‘You betrayed him,’ Gwyn said, and Augus turned quickly. Gwyn’s eyes were still closed, he looked pained. ‘There was a fae whom you cared for, and then you betrayed him and no one knows what happened to him. I don’t know what happened to him. How you managed to disable – kill – the Raven Prince… You told me that he enjoyed flogging. You revealed to me you even had a similar relationship with him as you do with me.’

‘Don’t you dare compare the two,’ Augus said and Gwyn smiled stiffly.

‘Even so, Augus. Even so, you harmed him, you harmed the Court. In…less than six months, you have orphaned me, removed those people from my childhood I did care for.’

‘I cannot spend the rest of my life proving myself to you, nor do I wish to,’ Augus said. ‘I am Unseelie and a predator. As are you. You know what it is to be taken over by the bloodlust.’

*I only intended to kill one person, that day.*

Silence stretched away from them, and Augus realised that this was – since their argument – one of the most meaningful conversations they’d had. Yet he could only get anything out of Gwyn by manipulating his guilt, binding him.

Augus sighed and bent down to unhook the chains. Gwyn’s breath caught in his throat and he deliberately thrust his head forwards, wrenching his shoulder brutally, punishing himself where Augus saw no need for punishment.

He gave a tortured cry. Augus hurriedly unclipped the cuffs, grasping Gwyn’s shaking wrist and encircling his fingers around it, holding him still. Gwyn whined and Augus wanted to flay the world, he was so frustrated. Half an hour wasn’t long enough. Gwyn would punish himself, others, if he wasn’t given a chance to experience a safe, controlled environment.

‘Don’t do that, sweetness. I don’t want that from you,’ Augus said. ‘I need your time.’

Augus straddled his back and slid his other hand over Gwyn’s shoulder, running fingertips over scar tissue. He could release the nerves, but when he saw the small pieces of fine silver chain on the floor, he hesitated. As though Gwyn could tell what he was thinking, he said:

‘Don’t. Not until…not until after the Triumphal Entry.’

He’d been thinking something similar, but when he heard the heaviness in Gwyn’s voice, he realised that Gwyn took no pleasure in asking him to wear the chain. He was also right, a symbolic gesture would go a very long way indeed. Augus shook his head slowly, angry. It wasn’t supposed to be like this.

Augus shifted and pressed his fingers carefully into Gwyn’s shoulder, mentally feeling out for meridians. Perhaps he could talk to Fenwrel about other pressure points he might consider.

‘Everyone talks about what I am, what I’ve done,’ Augus said, digging his fingers hard into Gwyn’s shoulder and feeling his muscles tense and quiver under his thighs. He pushed harder into overworked nerves and Gwyn’s head thudded into tile. ‘Everyone has an opinion. And I suppose you are now constantly hearing from others about me: That I cannot be trusted. That I should not have been freed. That I cannot be an Advisor. That I only work with the underfae to assuage some guilt, or that it is a clever guise before I enact my next plan.’

Augus bit his lip and then shifted his fingers quickly, slamming them into pressure points that
would release tension, block pain. Gwyn’s head rolled to the side. His eyes opened, unseeing.

‘You have seen more of me than most,’ Augus said, unsure if Gwyn could hear him. ‘And yet you treat me with the same disrespect as any stranger. Do you conveniently forget some of the things we have shared? We have blood-oathed for each other.’

He got up, began to offer a hand to Gwyn to help him up, even as Gwyn pushed himself up off the floor, grasping for his clothing with his other hand. His breathing was fast, shallow. He looked unhappy.

‘You are living in the surface of your mind because you are terrified of what lurks beneath,’ Augus said. ‘But if you don’t learn how to swim in the depths of yourself, we will never move beyond this paltry, weak connection. And you will fail your Court. So. After this Triumphal Entry and this battle, you will give me your time.’

Gwyn ran a hand through his hair, nodded. He turned to leave and Augus placed his hand on the door just as Gwyn opened it. He still felt ill.

‘I may not, after all this, wear that chain. I’ll know on the night.’

‘I know, Augus,’ Gwyn said. He sighed. ‘I was never going to make you.’

‘Gwyn,’ Augus said, smiling through a hard twinge in his gut, ‘I can tell when you’re lying. Can you?’

Gwyn looked at Augus, reached up and rubbed at his unbruised neck. He opened his mouth to say something, twice, but each time the words never came out. He watched Augus with something like longing on his face, and Augus opened the door for him in the end, unable to bear the expression.

Gwyn left without another word and Augus closed the door behind him, eyes alighting on a bowl of black stones, then drifting down to pieces of silver chain on the floor.

Eventually he sat on his bed and refused to think about anything other than deep, still lakes for a very long time.

Chapter End Notes

In our next chapter, 'Debut:'

‘Are you sure, Gwyn?’

And there it was, Fenwrel had lapsed back into informal speak. It was interesting to watch her do it – those moments when she thought it was appropriate to defer to him, versus the moments when he could tell she wanted to pull rank. But he was sure.

‘Yes.’

‘It is a magic that doesn’t go a long way to fostering trust.’

‘Would you trust him?’

‘I’m not sure if he will trust you, after this.’
Gwyn sighed. They’d talked about all of this.

‘It’s for his own protection,’ Gwyn said. ‘It’s not unheard of between monarchs and their Inner Court to—’

‘That is something that is consented to. You have asked me to place this magic without his consent.’
As of this update - *The Court of Five Thrones* is now coming to you weekly! :)

No new tags for this chapter, and I hope you enjoy it! Feedback is love. <3 Thank you so much to those who're reading and enjoying themselves. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

*Gwyn*

Gwyn kept resettling the coat he was wearing, for no other reason than he liked the way it felt against his fingers. It could have been a case of nerves as well. Beyond the hall, behind the doors leading into the throne room, hundreds of fae awaited his presentation. He took a slow, deep breath. He’d commanded legions. This was nothing.

Still, he waited in the hall, looking down at the suit, the crown heavy upon his head.

There were few safe subjects he could think about these days. Even bringing Augus to mind reminded him of their last significant encounter. He remembered the betrayal on Augus’ face when he’d seen the chain. Even now, he didn’t know if Augus would cooperate.

Gwyn sighed and leaned his head back against the wall, closed his eyes. There were hundreds of fae out there. Some of the biggest players in the Unseelie Kingdom. Some of them had more wealth than the entire Unseelie Court.

In the past, he’d always tried to be nothing more than the soldier the military had made of him. But tonight he’d need to pull on skills he’d learned from Crielle. That knowledge was a caustic weight inside of him. He had been marshalling his glamour together all day, knowing it made him appear like a glowing, golden god. It wasn’t an endearing light, but it had presence. It was a light that said: *Fight alongside me, or be my enemy.*

He heard a door open and close nearby, a great sigh of relief, and realised it was Fenwrel. She had a distinct scent. He couldn’t place the wood, exactly, but he hadn’t ever smelled it on anyone else. He wondered if it was her Mage staff that he was scenting.

He stepped away from the wall, smiled to see her so well turned out. She wore a white sari with gold embroidery picked all the way over the edges. Her straight black hair was back in a chignon, gold earrings in her mouse ears and rings on her fingers. Her staff was tucked into the white belt that complimented her sari and she wore no shoes, but her mouse tail was gilt in rings. She seemed to be giving him the same up and down that he was giving her.

‘You look dashing,’ she said, eyebrows lifting, a quirk in her mouth. She noticed him step towards her and waved him back to the wall. ‘Don’t fuss yourself on my account. I need a breather.’

‘What’s it like out there?’ Gwyn said. He wasn’t supposed to make his entrance for about two
hours after the event started. Things would be well and truly underway.

‘What’s it like? I certainly feel like I’ve been surrounded by a mishmash of jarring energy. A lot of fae were surprised to see me. I hope you don’t mind, but I’ve been smoothing over some jagged edges – explaining that I am not against Augus as your Advisor, despite the fact that he demoted me.’

‘Fenwrel, you don’t need to—’

‘You seem to feel as though you are the only one that wants this Court to succeed. Or perhaps you feel that it’s you and your Inner Court and no one else. It’s simply not true. Yes, there are suspicions out there, but there are many of us who just want a chance to rest. We cannot do that until we have a functioning Court.’

‘I confess I haven’t seen you around often, since your arrival. I would have liked to converse with you more, outside of that other meeting we had the other day.’

‘I’ve been teleporting in and out,’ Fenwrel said, inclining her head in a graceful acknowledgement. ‘I have been trying to organise my children together so that we might all be present when you make us Noble Court once more. Yukti evades me.’

‘Is there anything I can do?’

‘Your Majesty?’ Fenwrel said, black eyes shining in shock. ‘Anything you can do? I believe you have enough to be worrying about. You are King.’

‘I have a knack for finding the lost,’ Gwyn said, feeling chided for offering help. It was a strange thing to feel, and he drew himself upright, squared his shoulders. Fenwrel noticed, clasped her hands together in front of her.

‘Your Majesty, that is very kind of you, but I am not without resources as yet. It is a strange thing to be both so proud and frustrated. It is a matter of pride you see that she is underfae and can still make herself so hidden – from a Master Mage like me, no less! Her mother. But that child was always so. I hope you get to meet her. I hope she has not met…another fate.’

‘From all you have said, I’m sure that’s not the case,’ he said, offering a reassuring smile.

He straightened his coat again and looked in the direction of the throne room, something else occurring to him. He’d seen Fenwrel once since her arrival, and it was to ask a favour.

‘Have you placed the spell?’

Fenwrel grimaced. She had tried to talk him out of it, a bold move, given she seemed to have an idea that people were supposed to obey their Kings and Queens.

‘Are you sure, Gwyn?’

And there it was, she’d lapsed back into informal speak. It was interesting to watch her do it – those moments when she thought it was appropriate to defer to him, versus the moments when he could tell she wanted to pull rank.

‘Yes.’

‘It is a magic that doesn’t go a long way to fostering trust.’
‘Would you trust him?’
‘I’m not sure if he will trust you, after this.’

Gwyn sighed. They’d talked about all of this.

‘It’s for his own protection,’ Gwyn said. ‘It’s not unheard of between monarchs and their Inner Court to—’

‘That is something that is consented to. You have asked me to place this magic without his consent.’

‘So you won’t do it?’ Gwyn said, staring at her.

‘I’ve done it,’ Fenwrel said, her lip curling, briefly. ‘It’s placed. Done. But I hope you speak with him about it.’

‘He doesn’t know?’

‘No,’ Fenwrel shook her head. ‘It’s not an intrusive magic, and he didn’t even need to be there for me to place it. He is not sensitive to magic, he would have no idea of its presence.’

Gwyn breathed a sigh of relief, even as he shoved away concerns for all Fenwrel had said about issues with trust. It didn’t seem like this would complicate things much further. He even had the hope that Augus would understand, but his greater hope was that Augus would never know.

‘I think it’s time for me to get out there,’ Gwyn said, pulling his dra’ocht towards himself and settling it through his body, feeling the shimmer of it. She blinked at him slowly, a smile stretched upon her face.

‘I’ll be there in five minutes. Luck to you, Majesty.’

Gwyn nodded in thanks, even as he winced when he walked past her. Luck was for fools.

*

Gwyn’s breath caught in his throat when he saw Augus in the small, private antechamber. He was already standing, waiting, facing the doors that would lead to the throne room. Beyond, they could hear nothing – the soundproofing was perfect. Though Gwyn could sense the great weight of their presence, he could only stare at Augus.

He wore a form-fitting suit with no jacket, no tie, a waistcoat of copper, green and black. His hair was pulled back neatly, highlighting the sharp press of his cheekbones against his skin, the angularity of his jaw, often softened by the fall of his hair. Gwyn’s mind flashed to the shapeshifter, then snapped back to the present again when he saw the collar around Augus’ neck, the chain he swung lazily in his fingers.

Gwyn’s mouth opened.

Augus had fashioned something of copper, stained with verdigris. Ivy leaves twining symmetrically around his neck, joined in the middle by a stag brooch that was the copper mirror of the one Gwyn had pinned to his breast. His fingers reached up and touched the one he wore, absently, and he didn’t miss the way Augus’ lips quirked into a smirk. The chain itself was copper, set off pleasantly against the green shirt he wore, the black pants, the rapier at his belt.
His blood quickened in his body and he stared at Augus hungrily, huffing a breath of air out of his nostrils. He looked good.

Augus laughed.

‘Oh, Gwyn. I don’t know whether to be flattered or furious.’

He stepped forwards, still swinging the end of the chain where it terminated in a small loop like it really was a leash. He looked Gwyn up and down and then met his gaze, something dangerous flickering in the green. Gwyn turned as Augus walked a circle around him.

‘I think I’m going to choose furious,’ Augus breathed, his gaze turning sharp.

Gwyn’s hand fell away from the brooch. For a moment he’d thought…

He felt like an idiot. He felt like Augus hadn’t minded. His heart thumped heavily in his chest. Of course he minded. This was too close to the Display that had ruined Augus. It was a terrible thing to ask of anyone, even if Gwyn couldn’t see another way out of the situation they were in.

‘How-how much did it cost us?’ Gwyn said finally, clearing his throat and trying to master the tremble in his voice.

Augus’ lips curled up in a threatening smile and he leaned into Gwyn’s side, resting his chin on Gwyn’s shoulder.

‘Enough.’

Augus’ manicured claw-tips danced over Gwyn’s neck.

‘I had an extension made so that it would fit around that thick neck of yours. Would you like to wear it, Gwyn? Be collared and leashed by me? Led around on a pretty chain?’

Gwyn’s eyes closed and he forgot about the Triumphal Entry. He forgot about the rest of the fae, despite their energies wrapping around the both of them. He had a clear image of it suddenly, and his neck ached for the kiss of metal wrapped around it, placed there by Augus’ hands. He blinked himself back to awareness and stared at Augus, mute.

Augus hummed, a sound of indulgence.

‘It is about the only thing that makes this bearable,’ he said, under his breath.

Gwyn looked away, took a breath, another breath. He thought he was nervous, but he was the one asking Augus to go out there and face so many enemies, chained up like- Gwyn went to rake a hand through his hair and had his wrist snatched in a rough grip.

‘No. You’ll unsettle it,’ Augus said.

‘I’ll never ask it of you again,’ Gwyn said, and Augus stared at him, plain disbelief on his face. Gwyn was quite certain that what was happening now, between them, was more difficult than anything he’d face out there.

‘Augus, it’s once, I swear. I’ll- I will blood-oath it. Here, now, if you like.’

Augus’ eyes widened and he tilted his head, scrutinised him. Gwyn was glad when a hint of relief passed over Augus’ face, the way his eyebrows lifted slightly, his lips relaxed.
Gwyn faced the double doors and took a deep breath, then looked down when he felt the chain being placed in the palm of his hand. He curled fingers around it. Augus looked indifferent, but Gwyn knew that he masked tumult.

‘Thank you,’ Gwyn said, and Augus barked a single syllable of laughter.

‘Don’t thank me yet. Believe me when I say that being subservient isn’t a character strength I have in abundance.’

Gwyn nodded and gathered his thoughts together. He’d spent his entire life trying to reject the formalities of the Court, but the fact was that he’d been raised in a formal Court environment and he knew far more about this sort of thing than anyone else realised. He ran over speeches, dialogue, words in his mind, felt himself become the golden ‘Bright One’ that others called him.

‘Your dra’ocht is different,’ Augus said quietly, perturbed.

‘You’ve not seen me like this before,’ Gwyn said, turning to him. He squeezed the chain as though in reassurance and realised how useless a gesture it was. It wasn’t Augus’ hand.

‘Let’s get this over and done with.’

‘Please,’ Augus said, voice flat.

They walked towards the doors at the same time, but Gwyn could sense the tension throughout Augus’ body, smelled the faintest scent of fear. His fingers tightened around the chain like he could somehow convey his support. But how could he, when he was the one who had asked this of him?

He felt himself beginning to be wrenched by guilt, and slammed that part of himself with coldness.

He was King of the Unseelie. That was all that mattered.

* 

There was a collective hush when the fae – the grotesque, the glorious – milling in their fantastic, mesmerising or elegant clothing saw Augus connected to Gwyn by the chain in his hand. Several pointed at the collar, turning to each other and whispering. Ash – who had been there already, circulating, and known nothing about it – fumbled his tumbler of whiskey and spilled some onto the floor. Gulvi stared at Gwyn in horror. But the rest – the rest of the fae were taking it in, looking between the two of them. Augus – ramrod straight at his side, and Gwyn standing taller; a regal, ruthless glamour moving out over them all.

He didn’t plan on leading Augus around with him all night, so he waved Augus to one of the four thrones against the far wall. Augus walked over, looking only at his destination and not appearing to notice the gazes and whispers around him.

Gwyn’s chest gave a tiny flutter, a twinge that he dismissed. Years – decades – of training returned to him. The Unseelie might brag about how they didn’t care about honour or duty to anyone but themselves, but without someone uniting them at the helm, they would be destroyed.

He walked straight to Iliak – King of the marid-djinn afrit and brother to Ifir. Iliak was not a military man and he held both of his hands out in greeting. Gwyn clasped them, met the tiny flames flickering in his irises and waited.

Iliak nodded a greeting; an acceptance.
‘Well met,’ he said, his voice a natural growl. His huge horns twisted up in spirals above his head, decorated with gold and brass. His hands dwarfed Gwyn’s, easy to do when Iliak stood at over eight feet tall even in his hybrid form.

‘A pleasure to see you and so many others were able to respond to my invitation. Tell me, how are the lands of the marid-djinn and afshin afrit?’

Gwyn offered an interested smile, let his face settle into its usual coldness, and Iliak began talking with him, even as the other Unseelie began to mingle once more amongst themselves. There was a pattern to it – the way the night would progress. The gifts would come later. The speeches came later. Right now, they were all Unseelie in the same room, and it would have been rude for Gwyn to take the throne, even though the crown announced his status to all.

He caught whispers around him:

‘The Each Uisge would never have done that, even for the Prince.’

‘I didn’t think it was true, but look at the way he just sits there. Do you think that…?’

‘After all those centuries knowing he tamed so many others; it turned out he just needed to be broken in by the King. Or his cock…’

Gwyn knew that some of the words were said near enough to him that he was meant to hear them; even if they were whispered. But even more drifted to him in casual conversation. He glanced a few times at Augus as he mingled, saw fae nearby, knew that Augus was hearing the same thing. There was a stony, dead set to his face.

Gwyn hoped fervently that Augus wouldn’t become catatonic; not like last time.

He went from fae family to fae family, clasping hands, enquiring after their lands and their families, offering the polite questions that were appropriate, researched, well-considered. He knew he was coming across as composed, powerful, his glamour a strident thing; a bold brass note.

He held out his index finger for the tiny hands of the diminutive fairies – those diaphanous winged creatures in their spider silks and leaf shoes – smiling upon brown, black and white faces alike; noting the many different families that had responded to his invitation. Those with the wings of monarch butterflies, dragonflies, huge lunar moths. They smiled sharp teeth at him, unfurled proboscis. They – more than many – needed havens and the protection of a Court. They were too small, too fragile. Even more peaceable species of Unseelie fae – like swan-maidens – would eat the tiny fairies if they could grasp them beyond the bounds of the Court.

He spent some time with Princess Braith of the fie ellyllon, Prince Vane nearby, a foot shorter than she and none of his weapons visible. She, on the other hand, dripped jewels – displaying her people’s wealth. She wore so many pearls in her hair that Gwyn spotted several other Unseelie picking up ones that had fallen – supposedly unnoticed – to the floor. Braith, boasting heavy freckles upon pink skin, had blue eyes that shone like the seas around her homeland. She watched everything with a shrewd gaze.

The fie ellyllon had been well-favoured by many Unseelie Courts in the past, only to be subtly snubbed by the Raven Prince. They were ready to step back into the limelight. The ways of Princess Braith – even the heaviness of her glamour – reminded Gwyn powerfully of Crielle. He took her hands and noticed the way her nails dug an insult into his palms.

They carried too much wealth for him to neglect them.
He moved to Amaley Manytrees afterwards – the mothertree of the Aur Forest – and one of the few true pacifists. She was only Unseelie because she fed upon the sap of her trees. She clasped his hands and beamed at him, oak leaves growing from either side of her head and arranged to neatly fall alongside her brown hair. Her golden eyes glowed.

‘And so you are here now, and not over there on the other side of the river,’ she said, her voice holding hints of forests in it. Her boots were made of leather cut leaves, pointed and shining in bright, grass green. He could see bark growing along the back of her hands and squeezed her hands lightly before letting go.

‘I believe the Aur dryads are not quite as polarised as some of the other fae,’ Gwyn said quietly, and she tilted her head.

‘We work in concert with the Seelie to keep our forest in accord. The world’s forest. There are some of us who cared very much about your speeches regarding inter-alignment cooperation, no matter what your motives. All these war folk.’ She looked around, then stepped back into the shadows. ‘And you, a War General who talked so often of peace. Does it cut you, to be this way? You are like a grafted tree. You may have been taught to bear the fruits of our cousins across the river; but the rootstock always wins out.’

Gwyn offered a detached smile and asked after her children. Expressed an interest in meeting her seventh son – a magical number, especially as he was a seventh son of a seventh son. He moved away from her with regret into the crowds, keeping an eye on Augus, the appearance of perfect composure on his face a farce.

It’s working. That’s all that matters. It’s only once.

But ‘once’ would do damage, and his chest locked up when Ash’s glamour slammed into him right as a strong hand grasped his wrist.

‘King Gwyn!’ Ash said cheerfully, whiskey on his breath, a dangerous spark in his eyes. ‘Can I have a word? Lord? Yeah? That sounds good, doesn’t it?’

Gwyn walked calmly by Ash’s side, despite the grip that Ash had on his wrist. He sighed silently when he noticed where Ash was headed.

Before the door of the antechamber closed behind them, Ash called to the others:

‘Just stealing him for a few minutes, folks! I’ll give him back whole!’

A scatter of laughter from those who heard him.

They were thrust into silence as the doors closed. Ash pointed in the direction that Augus sat, even though he was no longer visible beyond the walls of the antechamber.

‘What did you do to him to make him submit to that? Huh? What the fuck did you do to him?’

Gwyn took a deep breath, offered Ash a lazy smirk.

‘You might wish to consider that your brother does nothing that he does not wish to do h-’

‘Bullshit. He thinks he’s fucking Fort Knox but he’s not. You get him out of that chain and that collar, and get him out of there. You don’t know what the fae standing near him are saying. Just because they aren’t touching him, doesn’t mean they aren’t hurting him.’
'It’s part of the rouse, Ash,’ Gwyn said. ‘Augus engineered the chain and the collar himself. After the murder of Crielle, we have to be sure that the majority of the Unseelie know where Augus and I stand.’

‘You mean like, him as your slave, right?’ Ash shook his head, ran a hand over his face. ‘Do you want me help or not, yeah? Because I feel like you don’t realise how easy it would be to turn them all against you. Just a little fucking push, and you’re not King anymore and I get my brother back and wow, like how tempting is that? You seem to forget that the whole reason you engineered that Soulbond in the first place – between Augus and I – is because I’m so fucking beloved by these guys that a lot of them don’t want to touch Augus anymore simply because my life is now connected to his.’

Ash laughed.

‘Take those two tiny brain cells you have and knock them together for a bit and think about it.’

Gwyn opened his mouth to retaliate, Ash’s words digging underneath his glamour, sitting abrasively like sawdust in the back of his throat.

‘Wait, wait,’ Ash said, holding up a hand. ‘Wait a sec, though. He’s not your slave, right? What kind of sick relationship do you both have? You spreading your legs for that cock, while he goes out there with that collar and chain? You know what it’s doing to him, right? Did you spin a good game about how we really need it right now and how like, it’s the only way? Because it’s not.’

Ash pulled on the cuffs of his shirt, though they were rolled up too high to hide the Soulbond – glittering turquoise and black – on the inside of his forearm. He had an absent, edgy energy. It riled Gwyn, made him want to fight, to grapple at something with his hands, and he realised that was what Ash was feeling, his inner predator chafing at the seams. Here he stood in flashy, contemporary human clothing – a collared dress shirt with decorated cuffs, dress pants, shoes that shone a bright red to match the pattern across the weave of his shirt. His glamour was powerful. For all he looked like he didn’t belong, he could play many of them without thinking about it.

‘You were demoted, man. You know what public humiliation is. And he- God help me, he actually cares for you? Proving Augus’ long-term shitty taste in men. I could fucking go you right now, so help me.’

‘Best not,’ Gwyn said, voice crisp.

Ash’s face twisted in anger.

‘Fuck with me some more, buddy,’ Ash snapped. ‘Go on. Because—’

Gwyn stepped back when Ash hunched down and powered forwards. He’d been expecting something, but he thought Ash would have more of a tell. The fist clipped his gut and Gwyn growled, grabbing Ash by the arm and shoving him into the wall-

Except that glamour powered into him and a fist followed it up, cutting up into his navel. Gwyn snarled at the dull burst of pain.

They both backed away from each other, Ash pulling his wrist close to his body. Gwyn couldn’t remember grasping it that hard.

‘Don’t even try,’ Ash breathed. ‘Not me, man. You can do it to everyone else, but don’t even try. You don’t know how close I am to going out there and telling everyone the truth. That their dear King is submissive down to his core and likes taking it up the ass by the guy he defeated, that
they’re all threatened by. How good’s that gonna look? Guess what, man, I know what your heartsong is. Augus let it slip. You think any of those guys are gonna follow you when they find out your heartsong isn’t triumph, but fucking surrender?’

Gwyn’s spine felt like ice water was pouring down it. Ash beamed.

‘Got you, princess. Now, I’m gonna go out there and ask Augus if he wants to take the chain and collar off. Because if the point of this was to humiliate him to prove a point, you’ve done that.’

Gwyn’s belly hurt. He straightened his suit. The words of demotion rested on his tongue. It would be so easy to make Ash underfae and eject him from the Court.

Except Ash could be killed then, and he would take Augus down with him.

_That damned Soulbond._

It hardly mattered. The Unseelie Court would question him if he removed Ash from his Court. Augus would leave with him anyway…

‘Don’t you forget that I’ve got you by the balls, sunshine,’ Ash crooned, every inch of his predatory nature lighting up in his hazel eyes, turning them bright, glowing. ‘Now, I love shindigs like this and I helped organise it, so I’m gonna go back out there and schmooze. Because that’s what you want. Aren’t I great? Say, ‘thank you, Ash.’’ Gwyn glared at him, and Ash’s teeth showed in every inch of his smile. ‘Oh, oh man, your expression- You should see your face right now.’

Ash laughed, the sound full-throated.

‘You can thank me later.’

With that, he stepped forwards, reaching out and straightening Gwyn’s coat, even as Gwyn raised his hands to deflect for a blow that never came.

He wasn’t like this with anyone else. He was never this defensive. He looked down at Ash, wanted to smash the impish grin right off his face.

‘You look flash,’ Ash said, his glamour dialling down and becoming more tolerable. ‘Anyway, back into the breach and all that, right?’

He tipped an invisible cap and opened the double doors.

‘Hey guys!’ he shouted, and Gwyn felt the moment he powered up his glamour, like warming up a giant spotlight.

Gwyn walked back out into the crowds, face still, composed. Ash was talking to Augus under his breath, kneeling beside the throne. Augus was staring ahead. After a minute, he turned to Ash and shook his head. He said something, but the angle was wrong for Gwyn to be able to read his lips.

Ash looked over at Gwyn, brow furrowing; and Augus didn’t move.

Gwyn felt a moment of relief. But the crowds were moving towards him again, and he had no time to dwell.
In our next chapter, 'Court:"

‘Lord Gwyn, you should have told me this. I would never have bequeathed this gift to someone as sick as he.’

‘I’m not sick,’ Augus said quietly, looking alarmed.

‘He’s- He’s shown no signs of-’

‘I tell you, he is sick.’ Tigbalan turned back to Augus. ‘The invisibility should have eased into your power seamlessly. This is my gift also. That it hasn’t, that it is being rejected…truly I apologise. I did not know. I should have been told.’
No new tags in this chapter. This was one of my favourite chapters to write so far (perhaps because it was also challenging, and has a lot of different components going on - but also because I know that there are better times a-coming). Tigbalan returns (as well as a special impish guest), and it's always satisfying to write Gwyn being competent at something. Especially something he's supposed to be competent at, heh.

Enjoy! :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Gwyn

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When Tigbalan arrived – later than many of the others – Gwyn tensed. He remembered a wet, cloying heat. The taste of blood in the back of his throat. Ribs grinding together. The pain of teleportation followed by fussing hands, the combination of care and outrage from Augus. He met the horse shifter’s eyes across a sea of milling fae. Tigbalan didn’t smile as he stepped forward through the crowd.

A movement in the corner of his eye, and Gwyn realised that Augus had stood, much to the surprise of people around him.

Whispers nearby.

‘He’s territorial.’

‘Another horse shifter, this should be interesting.’

Gwyn wondered if that was truly the issue, and he signalled to get Augus’ attention. Augus dragged his eyes away from Tigbalan only reluctantly, meeting Gwyn’s.

Tigbalan reached Gwyn’s side. Gwyn felt like Tigbalan towered over him, remembered being a meal in exchange for the invisibility he had given to Augus to help with his freedom. His skin crawled. He’d been tortured many times, but he’d never been made a meal of, beaten so that Tigbalan could feed. He no longer flinched or cowered on matters relating to the subject, he had no more nightmares about it, but there was a textural scent to Tigbalan – swamps and wetlands, trees with twisting branches and thick, astringent saps that clawed through his nervous system.

‘Your waterhorse wants us both,’ Tigbalan said, holding out hands with hard, hooved fingernails. Gwyn grasped them, and Tigbalan squeezed back.

Those hands had broken his spine.

Gwyn met his gaze coldly, and Tigbalan smiled jagged, wretched teeth.

‘You are lucky I have not come here hungry tonight, Lord. Shall we go to the young Each Uisge? I
must insist on your presence. I do not trust his instincts.’

‘Would it not be best to keep you separated?’ Gwyn said, and Tigbalan shook his head.

‘No. He wants my attention. He wishes to speak. And I cannot deny one who carries a part of me within him.’ His voice, deep and profound, was still very quiet, and no one else seemed to hear what he was saying. He wondered if this – along with Tigbalan’s invisibility – was part of his magic.

Tigbalan let go of Gwyn’s hands and strode towards Augus, Gwyn following. Augus watched them both, mouth set in a thin line, hands too still by his side – the chain dangling. Augus swallowed when Tigbalan came closer, the collar rose and fell on the bob of his throat.

‘I did not think you would invite me, young Lord,’ Tigbalan said to Gwyn.

‘You are Tigbalan, and I work with Luma. I observe the etiquette of old.’

‘You are still filth,’ Tigbalan said, his voice rippling through Gwyn while not touching anyone else.

Except Augus. His eyes widened and his face twisted in anger. His fists clenched. But he remained composed, watching Gwyn as though assessing him, before turning his focus to Tigbalan. He seemed to need several seconds to focus before he could even ask a question. His eyes were far brighter than usual, he stared at Tigbalan with an avid hunger.

‘This is difficult for you,’ Tigbalan said, and Augus’ expression didn’t shift, exactly, but Gwyn thought he caught something of a wince in his features.

‘May I talk to you about this invisibility?’

Tigbalan’s horse eyes crinkled in something of bemusement.

‘Yes, colt. You may. Though I require Lord Gwyn to stay here. Your territorial instincts are too strong.’

Augus looked to Gwyn. Gwyn could tell this was a conversation that he didn’t want Gwyn to witness. Gwyn averted his eyes, gave what privacy he could.

‘The invisibility is becoming harder to use,’ Augus said finally. Gwyn’s eyebrows twisted up. He hadn’t known that. ‘It affects my breathing. It leaves me drained. I thought it would become easier with time, but instead-

‘Easier with time? Are you saying that you were afflicted with this tiredness from the beginning?’

‘Yes,’ Augus said, and Tigbalan stepped closer.

A deep growl sounded around them, and other fae nearby – excluded from the conversation by Tigbalan – turned at that, eyes widening in alarm. Augus cut the growl off immediately, cleared his throat.

‘I don’t have what you might call exact control, over that,’ Augus allowed.

‘Do not rile yourself. I am not going to hurt you.’

‘Because you have such a great reputation of not hurting people,’ Augus said, looking to Gwyn.
‘That was a transaction. This is not.’ Tigbalan reached out and placed a palm on Augus’ upper arm. It was a light, brief touch, but even so, Augus bared his teeth and the whites of his eyes showed. Tigbalan stepped back immediately, something troubled on his face. His horse ears flickered. ‘You are sick.’

He turned to Gwyn, ears flattening.

‘Lord Gwyn, you should have told me this. I would never have bequeathed this gift to someone as sick as he.’

‘I’m not sick,’ Augus said, looking alarmed.

‘He’s shown no signs of-’

‘I tell you, he is sick.’ He turned back to Augus. ‘The invisibility should have eased into your power seamlessly. This is my gift also. That it hasn’t, that it is being rejected…truly I apologise. I did not know. I should have been told.’

Augus looked confused, and then his eyes met Gwyn’s before he looked somewhere past Tigbalan.

‘Is it because my heartsong is destabilised?’

‘I beg your pardon?’ Gwyn said, staring at him in horror. How long had Augus known that for?

‘No. This is an old sickness. It clings to you. A miasma. You should go to that one over there.’

He turned and pointed at a crowd of people, and Gwyn could just make out mouse-ears, a chignon, a white sari. Fenwrel.

‘I have been taught how to use pressure points and meridians,’ Augus said slowly. ‘I think I’d know if I was ill. Perhaps your power is just-’

‘Ask the Master Mage to check. I am not wrong. I am not sure if you can preserve the invisibility. But it will take some time to wane completely. Perhaps in that period you may become healthy enough to help it integrate.’

Tigbalan turned and walked away, and Gwyn had no choice but to follow, indicating that Augus should sit once more. Augus looked shaken as he sat back on the throne. Gwyn’s head swum.

Augus’ heartsong was destabilised? When had that happened? He’d not even had it that long. He was ill?

When they were a distance from Augus, Tigbalan turned and rolled his horse eyes down to Gwyn, the horizontal pupils expanding and contracting at him.

‘Should you ever need anything from me again, you need only find me. I have to confess, I dream of feeding from you once more. It’s not every day a King offers himself up as a meal. Just looking at you whets my appetite.’

‘I think you’ll find I won’t have need of your services again,’ Gwyn said, remaining calm as possible despite the memories that Tigbalan’s words were evoking.

Tigbalan gave him a long, measuring look. Horse lips curling up into something like a sneer. He drifted away into the crowd and Gwyn breathed a quiet sigh of relief. He wanted nothing to do with Tigbalan again. He’d only invited him to prove to the Court that he had no issue with Tigbalan and show his respect to some of the oldest members of the Unseelie alignment.
Still, his spine ached with phantom pain, and it took some time before he was able to fall back into the façade he’d so carefully cultivated.

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Many of the fae that had drifted into the night gardens, vocally praising the Court’s appearance, drifted back for the Presentation of Fealty. Gwyn found the fancy name laughable; it was simply the period of time where different fae noble families would try and buy their way into Gwyn’s graces.

Gwyn and his Inner Court sat down in the four thrones. Augus sat to the far right, hands folded in his lap, staring straight ahead – elevated enough that he could stare over almost everyone’s faces. Ash, next to him, rolled out a calming glamour. Gwyn wondered if that was because he felt nervous. Gulvi, at the far left, looked into the crowd with calculating eyes. Enemies and allies of hers were all present, and she’d been socialising carefully. He’d tried to get her attention several times, but she always seemed to be off in the shadows with someone, behind a pillar, in an alcove – the people she spoke to taking a risk in showing that they knew her publically; not that it seemed to matter, Gulvi had many friends in high places.

Common fae servants and trows waited nearby to assist with the careful removal of gifts to prepare for the next presentation, and had already amassed a fortune in chests, coffers, magical orbs and more.

Gwyn, thus far, had been surprised at the pledges. He’d expected less, and more veiled insult.

Perhaps Fenwrel was right. Perhaps they did want him to succeed – some of them, anyway. Ifir still watched the proceedings with suspicion on his face, and some of the other War Generals maintained expressions of indifference. But as Gwyn generally did the same, he wasn’t sure what their thoughts were.

Princess Braith and Prince Vane stood before him now, on the dais, kneeling before six coffers of uncut, high grade gems, and a seventh of pearls from Trearddur Bay, harvested from the rare singing oysters. Ash had whistled low under his breath when he’d seen it all, and even Gulvi had leaned forwards, eyes widening.

They’d expected the fie ellyllon to want to buy their way back in – but this amount of wealth almost matched half of what was in the entire Court treasury.

Gwyn opened his mouth to offer thanks, when the shadows in the throne room darkened, spread cloying around the cavernous space. Gwyn looked up, eyes shrewd, nostrils flaring. Augus made a small, terrified sound beside him, and Gwyn placed a hand out without thinking, to keep Augus still. The Nightingale wasn’t the only fae who could manipulate shadows, though to manipulate them to this degree meant there weren’t many others who it could be.

Except…

Exclamations of shock, and fae parted around a small creature. Gwyn caught the scent of rotting animal flesh and bone, of fur badly treated, and then saw a mop of tangled hair matted into locks in some places. A pale face and opaque dark red eyes the colour of dried blood.

‘I heard there was a thing going on,’ the Nain Rouge said in the impish, hard voice of what looked to be an eight or nine year old girl. But everyone there felt the ancientness of her. She’d sat in one of these thrones during Augus’ reign. She was old enough that she’d occupied Inner Court positions so long ago that many of them had not been born.
She was one of the classless, and Gwyn shivered to see her again. Last he’d seen her – they’d been on opposite sides of a war.

‘I always think uncut gems look a little like oversized poprocks, yeah? Shove ‘em in your mouth, listen to the little bombs going off.’ Her small legs, covered in bloodied furs, feet in dirty red leather boots, complete with buckles, took huge steps to make it up the dais. She was uninvited, but no one stopped her. No one would.

‘Hey, grandma,’ Ash said, and the Nain Rouge’s eyes shot to him, her lips split apart in a grin that revealed broken teeth.

‘Don’t you call me that, fuckin’ ingrate, I might be old as balls but I’m no one’s grandma.’

‘S’good to see you too,’ he said, and Gwyn wondered when it was that Ash and the Nain Rouge had apparently forged a connection. Was it that they both cared for living in the human world over the fae? Was the Nain Rouge one of the few allies Ash had when he was Inner Court during Augus’ reign? It seemed hard to believe. Most fae wanted to stay as far away from the Nain Rouge as possible.

‘Your glamour tastes like hard liquor,’ the Nain Rouge said to him.

‘Yours is like pixie sticks,’ he said, giving her a mischievous smile.

‘I swear to fucking god, I leave the Court for all of five seconds, and come back to a pair of tweaking queens running the show. This world is going to shit. Can’t say I mind. Bitches fucking shit up is like my favourite.’

She reached into the coffers and drew out a handful of gems on sticky fingers. She then let them all fall back into the container. She had to shake an emerald off – a clot of blood sticking to it – and Princess Braith raised a dark red brow, but otherwise said nothing at all.

Gwyn watched, tense, as she walked past the jewelled boxes until she was between Gwyn and the fie elyllon. She stared impishly up at him, and then looked over at Augus.

‘Hiya, Princess!’ the Nain Rouge said. ‘Remember demoting me? Cuz I sure do. S’pose you think I’m all weak as piss now, but actually–’

He hadn’t seen it coming with Ash, but he saw it coming now.

The Nain Rouge leapt for Augus amidst gasps and cries from the Unseelie, but Gwyn was already out of his throne, springing in front of Augus. Shadows gutted and flared around the throne room. Outrage made his body to turn hot and then icy cold. He got his hand around the Nain Rouge’s neck while she shrieked with laughter, but it was her hands that were the danger. He was sure she wasn’t strong enough to suck people’s life force from their necks as she once used to, but he didn’t need to find out the hard way.

He secured one of her hands as she laughed and alternatively cried out: ‘Ow! Ow! Uncle! Time out!’ His shoulder flared its nasty pain at him and he ignored it, lifting her clear off the floor and moving her bodily away from Augus, despite the fact that she was far heavier than she looked. He stepped to a clear section of the dais and twisted her body as he went down to one knee, pinning one of her arms beneath her and bringing his weight to bear, his other hand broad enough to have her wrist by the thumb and the rest of his fingers wrapped around the flesh of her neck.

She stopped laughing when he squeezed, though laughter lines still crinkled around the dead blood colour of her eyes.
He looked up into the crowd of Unseelie faces, furious.

‘This is the throne room of the Unseelie Court! We follow the old laws.’ He looked down at the Nain Rouge and glared at her. ‘We do not go after our own within these walls!’

His voice rang out, the only sounds that of fae shifting, the Nain Rouge wriggling half-heartedly beneath him.

‘I do not care what grievances you hold with him,’ he said to her, then looked up. ‘And that goes for all of you. I do not care what grievances you hold for each other! I know of the civil unrest amongst many of the Unseelie and I am not blind to the tensions in this room. I understand that you have no reason to think of the Unseelie Court as a haven, even though that is what it has been for tens of thousands of years more than it has ever been anything else. But that is what it is.’

He looked down at the Nain Rouge again.

‘Lady, I know your penchant for mischief, but I do not wish to hold you bound for the rest of the evening.’

‘Like you could, dickface,’ the Nain Rouge said as he released the heavy grip he had on her throat. ‘But whatever, capisce, I got it. Lookin’ pretty good with that crown, I gotta say.’

Gwyn moved his hands away from her slowly, then held out a hand to her. She took it, and he was sure she deliberately gripped hard enough to smear his hand with the blood of her kills. He could hear the coffers being moved off the dais by the common fae servants. Princess Braith and Vane retreated after Ash murmured something to them. Gwyn was too busy meeting wondering at the attack, at the timing of it.

Was it a test?

For though she played at mischief and chaos, the Nain Rouge was one of the oldest advocates of the old ways. She paid her debts. Though she called the Nightingale a younger brother, she’d distanced herself from him when he’d become close to the spirits and gods and demons of the underworlds. She was dangerous – but even the Nain Rouge didn’t attack other fae within the walls of the Court.

She held her hands out to him in supplication, palms up, and he grasped them and squeezed.

‘So you’re a King again,’ she said. ‘Righty. I can’t, with you. It’s not Pokemon, you don’t gotta collect all the statuses.’

Gwyn had no idea what she was talking about, but Ash snorted behind her. Her eyes slid past Gwyn’s torso and she winked at him.

‘I didn’t bring you any presents,’ the Nain Rouge said, shrugging. ‘I mean aside from me. Being here. That counts, doesn’t it?’

‘You bet, grandma,’ Ash said from behind Gwyn.

The Nain Rouge mock gasped.

‘And in front of all these ‘who’s who’ of the dark!’ she reprimanded. ‘You’re such a shit-stirrer.’

She looked towards Augus, then grinned wickedly.
‘Tell that pony of yours that he looks damned fine chained up like that. Missed his calling. There’s a whole porn industry waiting for-’

‘Do not insult my Inner Court,’ Gwyn said coldly.

He let go of her hands and she winked at him, quickly waved at Ash, then scurried off into the crowd. The fae parted like water for her, and a small chuckle aired in one of the darker alcoves when she reached it. The dais was clear once more and there were no more gifts to receive.

Gwyn drew himself tall on the dais, looked out into the crowd, deciding that now was the best time for it.

He groaned inwardly.

_Speeches._

‘It is time to re-establish the old laws of this Court. The ones that hold us all bound while you are within this throne room, while you walk the night gardens and the outer circles.’

Seeing the way they all met his eyes – the different expressions – was familiar. It was like trying to reach a group of unruly soldiers.

‘We do not go after our own within the outer circles of the Unseelie Court. We do not feed our _true_ appetites at these gatherings. Moderate theft is permitted, but we do not steal the breath and livelihood of another while we stand here. We are _all_ bound to these laws, made the same beneath them.’

He wasn’t sure that was entirely true; it wasn’t like there was an abundance of underfae represented here in the throne room. And those that ‘advocated’ for their species, often advocated for their wealth or their militaries instead.

Still, it was a start.

He spread his arms, offered the triumphant smile that had caused soldiers to rally around him at a time when all might look lost.

‘By the gods, but it is _good_ to finally make it home.’

There was something close to a collective exhale when he spoke those words. He saw scepticism on Ifir’s face and couldn’t fault him for it. He had been practicing these words for so long they hardly felt real. He couldn’t say whether the Unseelie Court was home even if the zahakhar told him that it was. He couldn’t tell whether these were his people, even though his alignment and his status made it true.

All that mattered was that he be a person they could rally behind. He would lose a few, certainly, but…

The Unseelie Court _had_ to survive. He believed that even in the days when he wished he was Seelie down to his marrow and the Oak King was trying to find ways to not-so-subtly destroy the Unseelie completely.

‘I know there have been whispers since my securing the position of Seelie War General. Whispers in the dark. Always, since the beginning, fae under their breaths have wondered: ‘How does he use Unseelie strategies so well?’ ‘Where does he get it from?’ Some of my methods, unsurprisingly Unseelie. Now you know.’
He turned a slow circle, indicating his Inner Court with a slow sweep of his arms, noting the slightly stunned expression on Augus’ face. He resisted smiling.

_You didn’t know I could be good at this, did you?_

‘My Inner Court is still growing, consisting of some of the most beloved, infamous, and _powerful_ fae in our current times. We have forged allies across land and sea, our military is _growing._’

He was grateful they had seen that for themselves. Some of the War Generals that very evening – notably Ocypete, Anggitay, Ifir, Vane, Mu, Baw and – _of course_ – Dogwill, had pledged quantities of soldiers towards the Unseelie Court military. The one that would officially be designated to protect all those who pledged their alliance and fealty directly to Gwyn and the Unseelie Court.

‘There has been far too much war,’ Gwyn said, allowing his voice to go quiet, even hushing his glamour. ‘To that end, I have seen the wisdom in re-opening the Winter Court when the season is right.’

Low, excited whispers. Tiny whoops of excitement from the fairies clustered around several of the vines curling around pillars. Fae turned and whispered to each other, eyes widening or narrowing, smiles lighting up on several faces. Amaley Manytrees beamed at him from her corner, where she sat with several other gentler natured Unseelie fae.

‘We shall be holding a Masquerade like those the Raven Prince himself used to hold, in the coming months,’ Gwyn said. ‘And for those who like the _chase_, the Wild Hunt has not been forgotten.’

He had them. Even the War Generals hadn’t known _that_, and some of the more doubtful gazes had perked up with reluctant interest.

‘Hard times have befallen us,’ Gwyn said, his voice rising in volume. ‘And I have been responsible for some of them, so it is that I owe you a debt to _undo_ what has been done to the Unseelie. But take heart, for we are the shadows and darknesses upon the land. We grow _stronger_ when the light fades. We only gather as one when there is true need. We grow rich from the misfortunes of others. And we will remind the Seelie that this is a world that needs _balance_. And we will remind the _world_ of our true natures, as our hearts crow hungrily, as we feed upon the lifeblood of others.’

A small scattering of cheers, he felt the energy locked in now, focused on him, and his dra’ocht blazed, turning him shimmering. He couldn’t see it himself, but he knew that those who could – saw him as the Bright One. The one that the trows called ‘Gwyn of the Stars.’

‘I need not remind you of our code, but I will speak it anyway. A reminder of what we are, what we fight for:’

He took a breath, remembering doing this for the Seelie when he became King the first time, not so long ago that he couldn’t recall the whole thing in terrible clarity.

‘Honour is a lie!’

_Uphold honour and all things virtuous._

‘Duty _only_ to one’s self and one’s loved ones!’

_Duty to one’s family and Kingdom._

Cheers now, growls and roars and the satisfaction of knowing he’d won them. Knowing that _this_ feeling was the sort of thing that Crielle had lived for all her life, to the point where he couldn’t _not_
look for it himself, in any crowd he found himself within.

‘Beauty and ugliness are the glamours we use to feed!’

*Beauty is truth.*

‘Fervour, frenzy, agony, ecstasy and chaos are our birthright!’

*Change only when necessary, stay your hand when it is right.*

Hands, paws, clawed fingers were raising in the air, and the Unseelie pushed forth their glamour together, the giant room shining with a stir of energy, twinkling in the air like motes of dust. It was a fretwork of jarring, abrasive, passionate, hungry energy, lacked the containment of the Seelie, but there was a rawness there that Gwyn appreciated.

‘The night gardens are yours to enjoy for the evening,’ Gwyn said, indicating the direction they should go. ‘All tastes have been catered to and our beloved Glashtyn has provided the drink, which I know will please many of you.’

‘He probably stole it from us!’ someone shouted.

‘Not this time, Arinaud!’ Ash shouted back.

Laughter, a release of the worst of the tension, and Gwyn knew it was time to wind things up. He’d planned to say more, but a shorter speech was best. He would see many of them at the opening of the temporary Winter Court, at the Masquerades; there would be many more chances to speak.

‘Gramercie,’ Gwyn said, inclining the head. ‘The gift of your presence is great.’

Old words, and the speech was closed. Excited talking buzzed immediately, some fae running off to the night gardens – the fairies zooming fastest of all towards the night-blooming flowers and werelights that awaited.

Gwyn continued to mingle, conversation turning to more relaxed matters. The atmosphere of the throne room had changed markedly, though Gwyn could still pick how often they tried to manipulate him, how many of them wanted higher status, wanted recognition, wanted the chance to get in on the ‘ground floor’ in a poor, fractured Court.

Hours drifted by; fae caroused into the early morning hours. The entire time Augus sat on the throne and Gwyn made sure he talked to as many as possible, never letting his time be monopolised by one person for too long.

The revels would continue. A large portion of the night gardens were now open to all Court fae, at any time. Along with the throne room now being accessible to all except during Court meetings, the Unseelie Court was officially open for business.

Gwyn turned and saw Augus – alone on the dais now, as he had been for some time – standing and stretching subtly. He searched the room and met Gwyn’s eyes, looked fatigued.

Just like that, Gwyn remembered that there was a cost to this evening. That he, too, was sleep deprived.

He made his farewells to the fae closest to him – not expected to stay up with the rest of them – and walked towards the antechamber doors, knowing that Augus would follow.
As soon as the double doors were closed, Gwyn removed the crown and held it in his hand. He expected Augus to stop, to say something, to express surprise at Gwyn’s competence, or to at least acknowledge him. But Augus walked ahead, didn’t even turn his head and meet his gaze. He walked crisply, though there was a heaviness to his booted steps. Gwyn remembered Tigbalan saying, ‘He is sick.’ Was it true? He could have Aleutia there in a heartbeat, if he thought Augus would submit to it. But Tigbalan had suggested Fenwrel, hadn’t he?

Augus reached behind his head and carefully removed the tie from his hair, dropping it to the floor as he went, running his fingers in long lines through his mane, settling it over his shoulders.

Gwyn’s hands ached as he watched.

They were already deeper into the palace when Gwyn realised that Augus possibly had no intention of acknowledging him at all. After a night of being sought after by some of the most powerful fae in the Unseelie alignment, following after Augus like a wayward hound was disconcerting.

‘Augus?’

Augus slowed to a stop. He didn’t turn and face him.

He said nothing as he undid the collar at his neck and let it and the chain fall to the ground with an ugly clatter. Despite how beautifully they had been wrought, the sole of Augus’ boot found them – with an air of absentness – and pressed down, crushing the finely worked ivy leaves and part of the stag’s copper-verdigris antlers into the ground.

Only then did Augus meet his eyes, something considering in his gaze, despite the fact that the rest of his face was a mask.

‘You did well,’ Augus said. ‘It went well.’

*It did.*

Gwyn didn’t care about that.

He opened his mouth to ask if Augus was well, but Augus spoke first.

‘I’ll bid you good evening, Your Majesty.’

The words – how he *hated* hearing them from Augus’ mouth – were like glass in his chest. He watched, unable to move, as Augus turned and walked away again, a half-crushed collar behind him. Gwyn stared down at it in dismay. He…wanted that collar. Not for Augus – never again – but for *himself*.

His hand was cut as it clenched around the indestructible Unseelie crown.

Minutes passed before Gwyn propelled himself into action, running after Augus, turning a corner only to-

Augus was backed up against the stone wall and staring at Gwyn in horror, the whites of his eyes showing and silent gasps sounding in his throat, his chest heaving, his hand hovering near his heart.

‘I thought you were someone else,’ Augus managed, his normally smooth voice breaking.
Gwyn was shocked. Surely- But surely Augus must have known it was Gwyn? There was no one else who-

Gwyn closed his eyes, pained, realising what Augus must have thought when he heard the footsteps pounding towards him.

‘But- But I changed it. The whole Court. There’s nothing there that should remind you of him.’

Augus forced himself to straighten, his breathing still shallow and uneven. He placed a tired hand against the stone, claws scraping against it. He offered a weak, wry smile.

‘The Court remembers. Shadows speak – ineloquent, clumsy things that they are. And, Gwyn, forgive me…but tonight has been rather trying. Filled with unpleasant discoveries and memories both.’

‘What can I do?’ Gwyn said. ‘Is there anything you need? Do you need-’

‘You can’t know how long I’ve wanted to hear-’ Augus shook his head. ‘I need many things from you. But right now, I only wish for space. And you…you should get some sleep, Gwyn. I can see how tired you are.’

He left Gwyn standing alone in the corridor, a crown cutting his hands and a cold sweat clinging to his body.

Chapter End Notes

In our next chapter, ‘Amends:’

‘Are you ill?’ Gwyn said, and Augus kissed him again to see if he could wipe away the tone of his voice.

‘No,’ Augus said after a minute, Gwyn breathing harder against him. ‘I’m not sure. I don’t feel ill.’

‘You said your core was…it’s destabilised? So soon? I thought it fit you well.’

So did I.

Augus pressed his forehead to Gwyn’s. He hadn’t expected his heartsong to falter so soon. He’d thought – upon being free of the Seelie Court – balance would be something he’d have more of; not less.
Amends

Chapter Notes

I'm so happy to be posting this chapter, because finally like - some genuine gentleness for Augus and Gwyn. They need it. A lot. A LOT. O.O Hope you enjoy! No new tags to worry about. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Augus

* *

Augus slept for almost two whole days. He woke in the midst of nightmares, clawing at the Soulbond on Ash’s forearm without realising, blood trickling onto blankets. It wasn’t Ash who swore at the injury, but Augus who lost his temper.

‘Get out!’ Augus shouted.

‘Augus,’ Ash said, holding up his hands. ‘Augus, just wait a sec. Okay? I just…’

When had it become more permissible for Gwyn to witness this over his own brother? Augus’ nostrils flared at the scent of blood in the air and he blinked dizzily. He was hungry. When Ash’s blood triggered off his appetite, he needed to feed. Soon. Did they have time? He’d missed two days of his common work. He raised a palm to his forehead.

Why do I even care?

The events of the Triumphal Entry came cascading around him. The insults, the threats, fae standing by him and explicitly describing what they’d like to do to him while he had to sit there and take it because damn him, damn Gwyn, damn them both, but it was true – the chain and the collar had shifted the opinions of so many. Between that, Gwyn inviting Tigbalan to the event and not telling him, seeing the Nain Rouge again, the shadows guttering and Augus swearing that the Nightingale had decided to return for a flashy entry and-

‘Easy, easy, easy,’ Ash said, and Augus ripped the blankets back and got out of bed, growling.

‘Get out,’ Augus snarled. ‘I need only a moment to compose myself. You can’t ambush someone while-’

‘Okay, not an ambush? Just a brother checking in on his brother after he had a tough time, okay? You get that there’s a difference right?’

Augus slowed his breathing with difficulty, pushing out longer exhales, imagining the pollutants inside of him exiting his body. Even as his breathing evened, he closed his eyes and remembered Tigbalan saying he was sick, that it had nothing to do with his heartsong. The worst part was that he believed him. He didn’t want to, but Tigbalan had used his true voice; and fae of their nature couldn’t lie when they used that voice.

Ash’s hand reached out and cupped the back of his head, and Augus bared his teeth in a snarl, even
as his shoulders dropped automatically.

‘How is the Court?’ Augus asked, distracting himself from warring instincts.

‘Gulvi’s dealing with shit, not in a bad way though. I’ve been helping a little. You and Gwyn have been dead to the world. I think he’s still sleeping. I don’t know, I’m not checking on him. I can’t believe he did that to you. That monster. He—’

‘Ash,’ Augus said, leaning his head back into Ash’s hand. ‘It was effective. I won’t have to do it again. He’s sworn to blood-oath it. I’ve collected…quite a few blood-oaths from him.’

Like the one to make him accept aftercare. Which I haven’t been providing lately.

Augus’ fingers curled into fists and he forced his hands to relax again. Ash’s hand tightened minutely on the back of his head and Augus didn’t know whether to growl or calm.

‘How was the feedback after the Triumphal Entry?’

‘Ha, yeah, some of them are still out there partying,’ Ash laughed. ‘I’ve been keeping everyone stocked with liquor. I forget how fae party sometimes. Most folks like the Court. I dunno, it seems to be going well?’

‘I’m surprised you stayed.’

‘This is the kind of thing I can handle. And I seem to miss these huge gaping things when I’m gone. Like you and Gwyn apparently deciding that you look good in like, servitude. What, it’s the new black now, or something?’

Augus just looked at him, expression indifferent. He didn’t have the heart for this conversation. Ash rubbed at the back of his head, and Augus knocked his arm away, lips thinning.

‘You should clean that,’ Augus said, pointing to his forearm, trying not to sneer at the Soulbond itself. He looked away from it as soon as he could. Pressed a palm absently to his chest and rubbed at his own mirrored marks. ‘I’m going to feed today. I won’t be back for a week.’

‘And then what?’

‘Whatever do you mean?’ Augus said, walking into his wardrobe and pulling out the clothing he preferred to wear in the human world. It was still water-wicking fabric, but not quite as carefully made. It gave an illusion of class, but the clothing was worn with the knowledge that it would be torn, scratched, bitten. He often had to discard whatever he wore on his hunts. He liked the moment when humans realised they were going to die and they fought. It was worth the ruined clothing.

His mouth filled with saliva. He hadn’t eaten in far too long. Everything else could wait. He could calm himself by spending time in waterhorse form. There, none of those tiny, trickling thoughts found him. Perhaps he would ground himself enough to be able to successfully locate the Raven Prince with the tracking stone when he returned.

‘I mean, what then? I thought you were gonna spend more time in your home. You know, I worked to find a good replacement lake for you. I know it’s not the same, but I did like…I did try. You’re never there!’

‘I’m going to be there. I’m going hunting,’ Augus said.
'You know what I mean. Don’t play that ‘dancing around the subject’ shit with me. It doesn’t fly anymore.'

'Why are you so angry?’ Augus looked up at him, frowning. ‘I’m not in a cell in the Seelie Court. I’m not ruling a Kingdom and doing a poor job of it. I’m amongst allies – though you may not believe it, and I’m at a high enough status that I can protect myself and therefore you.’

He pulled on his pants and then walked over to Ash, placing a careful hand on his chest and listening to the anxious thump of his brother’s heart.

‘Ash – brother – what’s wrong?’

Ash stared at him as though Augus was getting it wrong, disappointing him. Well, if Ash wanted him to fall apart in his arms, to demand comfort, he was sorely misinterpreting the whole situation. Then again, maybe it was something else. They had been misreading each other for some time. It wasn’t as though Augus ever saw the method of his defeat coming, he never knew that Ash was capable of-

Augus carefully shied away from those thoughts, even as he took his hand away from Ash’s chest and walked back to his shirt, shuttering his mind and focusing on his breathing.

_He was trapped. He had no choice. And you told him to._

‘I’m not going to let this situation get as bad as it did last time,’ Ash said. ‘Never again. Just because Gwyn doesn’t gloat about what he does to you like the Nightingale did, doesn’t mean–’

‘Don’t,’ Augus said, turning. ‘They aren’t the same. There is nothing to gloat about.’

His breath was cold in his chest. He could just imagine the charming, casual way the Nightingale would bring it up. Augus closed his eyes and grasped at the memories and fears like they were wayward leaves. He dragged them down into the depths of himself, forced them to stay dormant in the silty dark. Everything became calmer. He buttoned his shirt and met Ash’s eyes.

‘Stop comparing the two,’ Augus said quietly. ‘Gwyn defeated me because he had to, because he actually cares about the Kingdoms. The Nightingale…cared for nothing but his own power. He was – if you’ll recall – all about making a third Kingdom to rule over all.’

‘Very Sauron of him,’ Ash muttered, and Augus shrugged like he knew what Ash was talking about. ‘There’s different kinds of monsters.’

‘That I know very well, being that we are two of them ourselves.’

‘Augus, you–’

‘No, Ash,’ Augus said, settling his hair over his shoulders and sitting on the bed as he pulled water-wicking socks on. He reached not for the boots he wore in the Court, but the ones he could afford to lose in the human world. They pinched somewhat, but they would do.

‘I need you to be okay,’ Ash said.

‘And here I am, dressed and about to feed and free and Inner Court. What more do you want?’

‘You’re a facetious little shit, Augus,’ Ash grumbled. ‘Whatever. Okay. Fine. But don’t think this is the last you’ve heard of it.’
Augus watched as he walked out, buckling his boots absently, shifting his feet in their tight confines. As he found a more comfortable position for his feet, he remembered, abruptly, fitting Gwyn – the discovery of his history with clothing.

He closed his eyes.

He’d been too exhausted to deal with the fractious, yearning energy of Gwyn’s the other night. Had needed to drown himself in sleep far too desperately. Was afraid of what he might do if he stayed and talked to him. His claws had itched for pressure points, and Gwyn was…

Gwyn was fragile. There was only so much violence Augus could inflict on him, and Augus was quite sure he’d reached his quota.

He walked out into the corridor and headed towards Gwyn’s rooms, shaking off the last of the nightmare.

Gwyn had invited Tigbalan. The fact that Augus hadn’t known until the last minute – despite sitting in on almost all of those awful Court meetings – meant that Gwyn had hidden it. Augus was at once glad of the opportunity to speak to the source of his invisibility, and horrified that Gwyn was standing before the one who had destroyed him.

Gwyn was so proud of his ability to handle that level of torture, but it was only a damning sign of what he was accustomed to. Gwyn’s expression had hardly altered when Tigbalan had called him filth. He didn’t even defend himself. He was King of the Court. The Raven Prince would have had the creature imprisoned at the least for such an insult.

It was several minutes before he reached Gwyn’s rooms. The double doors were closed, and he tested the handle carefully. It clicked open, and he pulled the doors closed behind him.

His chest ached when he saw Gwyn.

He hadn’t even gotten undressed. By his side was the crumpled collar and the fine copper chain – close enough to his fingers that he’d obviously been holding it as he fell asleep. He wasn’t under the blankets, the bed was hardly rumpled. For two days he’d been sleeping like that, and the trows wouldn’t have interrupted him to undress him. Gwyn slept little enough as it was.

Augus sighed and sat on the side of Gwyn’s bed, drawing his legs up and leaning on one arm, the other reaching out and fluttering through soft, mussed hair.

Gwyn’s face was cleared of all discomfort when he slept. There was no faint furrow between his brows, no downturn in his lips. He looked like a boy in a deep, peaceful place. His cheeks were faintly flushed, his chest moved in the slower breaths of rest. Augus grimaced and stared at the collar again.

He’d broken it. He loathed it. He possibly shouldn’t have told Gwyn he had the extensions for it locked away. He hadn’t expected Gwyn to look at the collar with so much yearning. He rubbed at his neck, tore his eyes away from the collar.

He rubbed at Gwyn’s scalp carefully, then increased pressure when it didn’t wake him. Gwyn’s sleep cycles were deep.

Gwyn tilted his head unconsciously into the touch, and there, his eyebrows twisted together and he murmured something uncertain under his breath that never resolved into words.

Augus didn’t quite understand it, how Gwyn could be like this, and then go and be King for
everyone else. Oh, he’d seen glimpses of it in moments, but never like that. He’d played the crowd with his speech. His glamour was a golden, inviting thing. It wasn’t soothing, it roused. It encouraged response, reaction, engagement. Augus had wanted to serve him, had felt compelled to do something for the good of the Court, and the sensation of it bewildered him even now.

He hadn’t missed the way Gwyn moved from person to person; asking relevant questions, listening attentively, politely excusing himself every time. He’d still somehow been himself the entire time. Slightly awkward, earnest, and yet reverberating with a power and sureness that inspired confidence. His speech had been commanding; even for Augus, and he – at that point – was so close to blanking and disappearing from the room entirely, that he was surprised to remember it.

He was determined, more than ever, to see Gwyn on a battlefield.

It was hours later – Augus quietening his thoughts and wanting to wait until Gwyn woke – that Gwyn’s nightmare snapped into the room with violence. Gwyn breathed in on a strangled note, choking. One of his hands came up and tore at his coat.

Augus shifted, straddled him, tried to pull his hands away.

Gwyn shredded the coat, the waistcoat, the shirt, gasped sounds so hoarse that every exhale sounded like a dry retch.

Gwyn’s fingers burrowed under ripped fabric and pressed hard against his scarred shoulder. His back arched and Augus’ legs tightened around him, riding the force of it, eyes wide as Gwyn let off a sound that was unearthly with pain.

‘Gwyn,’ Augus breathed, grasping the hand that was clawing into the place where – where what? Was he dreaming of the arrow that shot him? Or when he ripped it out? The pain of the infection? Kabiri? ‘Gwyn, wake up!’

Gwyn wouldn’t wake, and Augus quickly reached underneath his arched neck, digging in hard, gritting his teeth as he activated painful pressure points.

Gwyn shouted, his eyes snapped open, and Augus let go immediately. Gwyn’s gaze went unseeing to the ceiling.

Augus moved off him – the last time he’d woken Gwyn from a nightmare, he’d had to dodge a blast of light that had scarred the room. But Gwyn didn’t move. One hand clutched his shoulder, the other grasped the blankets, his legs bent in odd positions – frozen in the middle of his writhing.

After many short, tortured breaths, Gwyn turned and faced Augus, blinking into awareness.

‘Augus?’ Gwyn pushed himself upright, wincing. ‘Is everything okay? What’s happened? How long have I-’

‘Careful,’ Augus said. ‘Careful. Give yourself more time than that.’

‘Why are you being like this?’ Gwyn said, confused, as Augus took him by the wrist and eased him back down.

‘Like what?’ Augus said.

‘We…left on poor terms,’ Gwyn said, looking away.

Why are you being nice to me? That’s what Augus heard behind the uncertainty in his voice.
‘That’s why I’m here,’ Augus said. ‘I’m leaving to hunt. I wanted to see you before I left. And instead I find you, asleep – as I expected – with a collar and chain by your side. Did you want to remember me in chains? Is that it?’

He knew very well that it wasn’t. Gwyn flushed, his eyes found the chain and his hand twitched like he wanted to hide the evidence.

‘You liked it, didn’t you?’ Augus said, leaning closer, looking at Gwyn closely. ‘An entire night spent showing people how powerful you are, and instead, you—’

‘I didn’t like you in chains,’ Gwyn said, and Augus reached out to touch Gwyn’s eyebrow, run a thumb across it. Gwyn jerked back before he made contact.

‘Then why keep them?’

‘You…’ Gwyn rubbed at his face absently. Dragged uncaring fingers through his hair, shaking strands off his fingers.

‘Mm?’

‘You said you could— That is…’

The awkwardness was endearing, and Augus took entirely too much satisfaction watching Gwyn squirm. Always so dazed when he woke up from nightmares. It was delicious. Augus didn’t like that he had the nightmares themselves, but he did like a Gwyn far more receptive to conversation than usual. One that hadn’t teleported away, one that didn’t say ‘leave it’ or ‘later.’

‘I said I had extensions, didn’t I?’ Augus said, and Gwyn made a small sound in the back of his throat. He pushed himself up until he was sitting against the headboard, his knees bent.

‘You destroyed it.’

‘I can make another,’ Augus said. ‘I can have another made. For you.’

His eyes narrowed. This was an interesting conversation. Did Gwyn require some token from him? Some sign of his regard? It seemed entirely too human. But then, Gwyn held sentiment in places where others didn’t. He disregarded some of the things fae cared deeply about – luck, fate, curses. But why this? Did Gwyn want to be collared simply to experience it? Or because it was Augus who would be doing it?

‘I liked this one,’ Gwyn said quietly. ‘The stag. The ivy. I don’t— It doesn’t matter.’

And just like that, Gwyn summoned coldness, he shut himself away. But Augus knew better, especially while Gwyn was so close to the pain of his dreams.

He reached out quietly and his fingers found the pressure points on Gwyn’s bad shoulder, and Gwyn resisted, tried to push him away. He made that horrible, strangled sound again, when Augus pushed his fingers in. Augus closed his eyes and looked for the twisted meridians that would provide some peace.

When he pressed his fingers into those, Gwyn slumped back against the headboard, and Augus had no choice but to lean in with the movement.

‘You were dreaming of Kabiri, weren’t you?’ Augus said against Gwyn’s cheek, and Gwyn said nothing, though his breathing hitched. Augus opened his mouth against Gwyn’s jaw and bit down
hard as he released his fingers from Gwyn’s shoulder. He shouldn’t be doing this. He’d be too neglectful if he did anything now. He was too hungry.

He moved away, didn’t miss the way Gwyn’s eyelashes had fluttered shut against his cheeks. He paused.

‘Kiss me,’ Augus said, voice rough. ‘Your way.’

Gwyn stared at him. His eyebrows twitched together, breaking the impassive coldness on his face. He shifted in his sheets, and Augus moved closer still, wanting to offer something, a small bandage to cover the wounds they’d inflicted on each other. It would take time to make anything like real progress. Neither of them could really use what they’d developed in the Seelie Court as the foundation for what they were creating now.

*Captivity does not a healthy relationship make.*

Augus’ lips quirked upwards at his own thoughts, but Gwyn must have found it encouraging. His eyes closed and he leaned forwards, pressing soft lips against Augus’ and sighing gently through his nose.

Augus rubbed his lips against Gwyn’s, closing his own eyes, listening to their breathing. His fingers came up and traced the indentations where he’d bitten into his jaw, then up further, finding the crest of his cheekbone and rubbing it with his thumb.

Gwyn’s lips parted, he captured Augus’ top lip in his own and held it, and Augus felt something quieten in his chest. A vicious, prowling thing settled.

‘You didn’t tell me about Tigbalan,’ Augus whispered against his lips, as Gwyn shifted to kiss him again. Gwyn stilled, and Augus opened his eyes to see Gwyn staring at him. Augus kept his fingers soft against Gwyn’s face. Gwyn’s skin was firm and soft because his fae healing kept it unscarred and unblemished. Underneath his fingers it yielded as he pressed and stroked at it. He reached up and pressed his thumb to the corner of his eye, then leaned and licked a stripe over Gwyn’s lips.

‘We used his power to ensure your safe release, it was only fair that he be issued an invite,’ Gwyn managed, and Augus slipped his fingers back through Gwyn’s hairline, over his scalp, and pulled on his hair – not enough to hurt, but enough that Gwyn’s breath caught. Augus was surprised when he felt a hesitant touch on his other arm where he braced himself on the bed. Gwyn’s touches were rare, and like this, *always* welcome.

‘Are you ill?’ Gwyn said, and Augus kissed him again to see if he could wipe away the tone of his voice.

‘No,’ Augus said after a minute, Gwyn breathing harder against him. ‘I’m not sure. I don’t feel ill.’

‘You said your core was…it’s destabilised? So soon? I thought it fit you well.’

*So did I.*

Augus pressed his forehead to Gwyn’s. He hadn’t expected his heartsong to falter so soon. He’d thought – upon being free of the Seelie Court – balance would be something he’d have more of; not less.

‘I know you work…quite hard.’

‘Do you?’ Augus said, and then dragged his fingers through Gwyn’s hair, tugging on a ringlet that
bounced satisfyingly back into place.

‘I’m worried about you.’

‘And I, you,’ Augus said.

In that moment, Augus couldn’t understand why they weren’t sleeping in the same room. Why they weren’t spending more time together. They both had their commitments, certainly, but why was it so hard to find moments like this?

‘You need to feed, also,’ Augus murmured, and Gwyn brushed his lips against Augus’.

‘A battle in two weeks,’ Gwyn said. ‘I’ll feed.’

‘Did you ever end up speaking to Aleutia about your issues with absorbing the energy of the dead?’

‘No. There’s time, I’m in no immediate danger.’

Gwyn’s fingers curled around Augus’ arm as Augus kept stroking fingers through his hair. Waterhorses loved having their hair petted and stroked, it was part of their biology; a human placing their hand on the back of his head while he was still in human-form, could stop a hunt in its tracks. They were the only victims who had ever gotten away.

Gwyn was no waterhorse, but it didn’t seem to matter. He became increasingly lax as Augus continued to touch him. All his resistance, his coldness, had disappeared. The nightmare had left him with his guards down, and Augus wasn’t giving him a chance to put the walls back up again.

*Here you are, my gentle, soft creature.*

Lips touched his, then a careful tongue licked across his bottom lip, following its curve from one side to the other. It was rare for Gwyn to be so exploratory, and Augus responded by opening his mouth, slanting his lips across Gwyn’s and pressing his tongue against his, tasting a faint bitterness and something like burning carbon.

But all too soon, Augus realised he had to feed. He’d left it far too long again, and he sighed as he withdrew, carefully settling Gwyn’s hair before sliding off the bed.

Gwyn watched him and Augus lifted his chin.

‘Remember, you promised me your time after that battle.’

‘Yes, Augus,’ Gwyn said.

It wasn’t until he walked away that he realised that Gwyn wasn’t the only one who had his guard down just after a nightmare.

* 

A satisfying hunt. Augus had been so famished he’d ended up taking two humans at once; not his usual style, and he had a moment to be disturbed at how ravenous he’d let himself become before his instincts took over and he cared for nothing else by the chase, the feeling of marrow and flesh caught in sharp, jagged teeth.

A week at the bottom of his lake, long legs curled beneath him and his waterhorse head resting in a bed of waterweed. The waterweed in his own mane floated above him, sensitive to the currents and
movements of the waters around him.

It was an alien lake, it still didn’t feel quite right, but even so there were small turtles using him for shelter. An eel nestled in the dark space between his forelegs. Tiny fish nipped and nibbled at the inside of his slowly twitching, black ears.

His belly full, he digested his food, warm in the knowledge that he was sated. Power flooded him once more.

*

He returned, dazed and still faintly hungry. He emerged naked from the lake within the Unseelie Court and walked towards his rooms, leaving wet footprints as he went, his scalp shedding far more water than usual.

Clothing felt awkward and wrong. He left his feet bare, not liking the feel of the boots against his ankles and toes.

Though it hurt his chest to use it, he slipped into invisibility as he stalked the corridors, knowing it would be some time before he came back to himself fully. Walking in human form helped, but nothing stopped this clumsy transition, where his mind clung to instincts and his higher thought processes struggled to assert themselves. He watched everything with a warier gaze. His fingers stayed curled, in case he had to claw at something. He wished for water and darkness, and he avoided great, airy spaces. He was not meant for a huge bowl of endless sky, but the limited bowels of a lake.

It pained him to breathe deeply through the invisibility, but he managed. He clung to it and remembered what Tigbalan had said. He had to speak to Fenwrel.

Augus wandered for hours, until the strong smell of swan musk pulled him up a flight of stairs, and another, towards the corridor that led towards Gulvi’s rooms.

Up here, the corridor was wood-panelled. Werelight flickered warmly in sconces up against the wall. Augus trailed his fingers along ridges of polished wood.

A door was slightly ajar and he slipped into it, walking through an empty, tiled room and following the sound of a cultured voice. He heard the bleating of a swan and tilted his head.

‘La! Julvia! It’s the same medicine you’ve had every day for months now. Will you not just take it?’

He moved, unseen, into another room. This one small. Gulvi crouched on the ground before a giant white swan, holding crushed herbs in her outstretched palm, as the swan – Julvia? – hissed at her. Augus smirked in amusement. His nose could pick the herbs, and he wondered at Aleutia’s treatment plan. It was none of his business, but why wasn’t Gulvi using red elodea, at the very least?

The room itself was high ceilinged, and one wall was marked with floor to ceiling arched windows. An odd design, and Augus wondered if Gwyn had designed it for Julvia, to allow her to look out into the world even while she was trapped in swan form and not allowed to leave. Augus couldn’t decide if that was cruel or caring.

A bed of straw and blankets in one corner of the room – newly clean. Did Gulvi muck out Julvia’s waste? Or the trows?
A single wooden shelf screwed into the wall, and upon it many glass jars of herbs, vials of liquid, bandages – which seemed unnecessary. There was also a shallow earthenware vase, filled with swan feathers. Gulvi must be keeping everything that Julvia shed, knowing that in the wrong hands, Julvia would be compelled to fulfil wishes that she had no power to fulfil.

Gulvi’s body language spoke of defeat. Her wings splayed out and hanging, as though she no longer had the energy to keep them tight and neat against her back.

Julvia continued to hiss.

‘Julvia, sister, I know you can’t really understand me, but – as I have said many times before now – this medicine is designed to help you.’

Augus’ nose wrinkled. If he was a swan, he wouldn’t eat it either. It smelled bad. He didn’t think it had spoiled, but he found it repellent.

Finally Gulvi knelt down on her shins and sighed, reaching into a small pouch and offering up a curling snail instead. Julvia snapped that down in an instant, hissed again. She waddled forwards, her long swan neck nosing into the pouch.

‘Darling, no! Only once you’ve had the medicine.’

But Julvia didn’t understand. She wasn’t a sentient swan-maiden, she was a swan. She could learn basic commands, she could discern that Gulvi provided food and water and therefore was tolerable. But Augus could see that Julvia didn’t recognise her sister as a sister, and she certainly didn’t understand the sentences being spoken to her. If anything, the frustration in Gulvi’s voice put Julvia on edge.

Augus had never met Julvia before. Not as a swan-maiden, anyway.

When he destroyed the Dubna and its surrounding tributaries, he hadn’t catalogued the fae he’d be killing first. He went with the purpose of destroying the waterway.

Julvia wasn’t even supposed to be alive. All of her sisters had died.

Augus raised his eyebrows at the swan.

**Strong thing.**

Augus could think of at least three herbs and the sap of a tree that might help. After all, the herbs that Aleutia was choosing were simply designed to bolster Julvia’s immune system. The gnarled flax helped to call back one’s true energy, but…Augus wasn’t sure that would be of any use here. After all, Julvia was truly a swan – would the herb call her back to herself? Or did it simply make it more comfortable for her to stay in swan-form? It also tasted repulsive to freshwater fae.

He thought about what he had in his herbal kit, and slipped out of invisibility easily.

The swan squawked to see him there, but showed no recognition otherwise. She didn’t react like he was the one to have done this to her.

Gulvi turned around and her face turned hard. She drew a knife out of her hilt and stood, herbs shaken out of her hand.

‘I could help her,’ Augus said from where he leaned against the wall. Slipping out of the invisibility felt like freeing his heart from a vice, and he breathed more freely, his thoughts more
‘Are you here to humiliate me?’ Gulvi snapped. ‘Wet, disgusting thing? Are you here to watch as I try and heal the sister you almost took from me? Might as well have taken from me?’

‘Actually, no,’ Augus said, looking at the curved edges of the dagger. He became aware that he could have chosen a better way to go about this. ‘It has come to my attention that my life is perhaps not what I thought it was going to be, when I was freed from captivity. It…would be useful for me, to stretch some of my older skills. Surely Ash has told you that I used to sometimes offer tinctures and herbs to sick freshwater fae?’

‘You would come here, spy on me, while I tended to my sister – who, might I add-’

‘She doesn’t recognise me,’ Augus said, lifting an eyebrow. ‘She’s lost. If you want her back, you might consider a different treatment regime.’

‘And I should trust you over Aleutia, mm? Is that it?’

‘You can run everything I suggest by her, if you wish. But I can see that you’re desperate. This is a static situation. You can have a swan, or perhaps your sister; I don’t know. But I can help. Well.’ He waved a hand towards Julvia and shrugged. ‘As much as she can be helped.’

Gulvi flew at him, great wings propelling her forward. Julvia made a soft noise of alarm in the background, cowering against the wall, even as Augus tried to duck out of the way.

He was clumsy on his feet, thinking to use his hands like hooves, but his fencing reflexes kicked in. She cornered him against the wall, white feathers and tattooed skin and black, glinting eyes that promised another knife in the gut – at least one – from the looks of things.

He snatched at her forearm, twisting it, but wasn’t fast enough to get to her other hand.

Gulvi was fast.

He twisted his hips out of the way, felt the stinging pain of his skin parting for a sharp blade, the fall of blood down his flank into his pants. A wound far shallower than usual, but she was already withdrawing the knife, spinning it handily and getting a better grip. He twisted her wrist hard and she slammed him back against the wall.

He brought his waterhorse strength to bear, snarling, and waterweed shot from both of his wrists. He coiled it around the grip he had on her, lashed at her pinion feathers, and she shrieked outrage at him.

‘You dare, darling!?’

Black eyes moving towards him and the promise of more pain and Augus felt a strange sensation – a bubble bursting – and he wasn’t even in the room anymore.

‘Darling, are you even listening to me? Oh, Augus, you filthy pony, you’ve made me most upset.'
Tch. I know, I know, survival instincts. You can’t help it, can you, down here? Everyone I’ve taken
down here has fought so hard to go home. Of course, they all died. Look at you, so resilient.’

A sob, his own. He was supposed to be limp. He was furious with himself.

The Nightingale always knew exactly what to say. Augus could just imagine him, mouth open,
those red eyes hidden behind pale eyelids, drinking down Augus’ misery.

A slurcher touched his neck, bare because his mane had been shorn, and he twitched. How could
he still have room for terror. How?

‘Nightingale, I beseech you, I didn’t mean-’

He hated being brought so low.

He was filled with it. Acid and poison and wretched hate. His fingers curled, even as they hurt, his
joints swollen. If he could get his claws in the Nightingale’s eyes, if he could rip out his tongue,
sink teeth into his larynx and crunch into gristle and-

The touch to his neck came again, now sliding over his skin. First deceptively gentle, texture and
temperature like a large frog’s foot. Creeping towards his ear.

He couldn’t do it again. Not again. He held onto his name, he held onto Ash, he didn’t know what
he’d remember when he returned to himself this time. He was going to be soundly punished.

The tendrils of the slurcher pushed into his ear, caressed cartilage and then slid in.

His shattered laugh tapered off into a weak scream as he was lost.

Pressed against a wall and the floor, one arm high in the air, caught up in his own waterweed. He
stared ahead blankly. There was a white, fuzzy form several metres away. A swan. There were no
swans in the underworld. He squinted. Was it an illusion?

‘Julvia,’ he said, realising. His voice didn’t sound…quite like his own.

He looked up, knew there was someone standing over him. Gulvi stared down at him, eyes so wide
he could see the whites of them. Her wrist still bound to him with waterweed. She held a knife in
her hands but it didn’t look like she was going to use it.

‘You’re no Nightingale,’ Augus said, feeling stupid; grateful that he managed to make it sound
almost like an insult.

Gulvi blinked at him, then reached up and for a moment he thought she was going to try and cut
his hand off at the wrist. Instead she sliced through the waterweed, and his arm fell with a jolt to
his side.

He pushed himself upright and tried to shake the fogginess out of his head. It felt like wisps of
cotton sticking to the ends of his thoughts. He appreciated sharpness, wit, but everything was
softened and muted.

He hadn’t ever wanted Gulvi to see that. He didn’t want any of them to see it.

He shoved the memory as far down as he could. Closed it up in a bubble once more, hoped he’d
never see it again.

‘Does Gwyn know?’ Gulvi asked, stepping away from him.
‘He’s…aware,’ Augus said cautiously. Aware of what? That he regularly encountered things he really would rather not, while he lived in the Unseelie Court? His chest heaved. He hated it here, he hated it…

…He couldn’t afford to hate it. He had responsibilities. It was nothing more than a combination of the remnants of waterhorse brain alongside the unfortunate words Gulvi had used. She was used to saying ‘darling,’ using Court-speak. It was a fluke, and not likely to be repeated. He resisted the urge to press his hand to his forehead, to settle his hair, to walk to Ash’s room and lie face down on his bed. Ash was still in the Court, and he didn’t want his brother to see him like this.

‘Do you really think you can help her?’ Gulvi said, looking over at her cowering sister. She walked over and Julvia gave a fluting call and backed away. She’d voided her bowels in alarm, and the whole room smelled of a mixture of half-digested herbs and snails and other wastes.

‘Don’t pity me just because you saw…what you saw,’ Augus said, staring at her. ‘If you think my offering to help was such an insult, it’s still an insult now, isn’t it?’

‘I do not appreciate people seeking to humiliate me,’ Gulvi said, her voice hard.

‘Nor I,’ Augus said, licking his lips, glad that she hadn’t – yet – mocked him for what she’d witnessed.

She will though. Now that she’s seen what you can be reduced to.

‘I didn’t intend it as an insult,’ Augus said. ‘It will honestly not take a great deal of time from my schedule, and working with herbs and other wortcunning is something I- Didn’t you want me to become more grounded? Use my time with more salience?’

Gulvi sighed as Julvia stretched her neck out and quested towards her fingers with a nibbling beak.

‘There, darling. Nothing to fear. The frightening, ugly waterhorse isn’t going to hurt you. Not anymore.’

Augus laughed softly, ruefully.

‘I will tell you everything I use. Aleutia has the tools to check and double-check all that I suggest and offer. And I will find you ways to better administer whatever you are told to give her, because believe me, swans do not like gnarled flax. Nor any freshwater creature. Try it yourself and tell me what you think it tastes like. That’s an herb for grain-shifters like Aleutia.’

‘Augus,’ Gulvi said, sternly.

For a moment, he thought she was reprimanding him for something he’d said – which was ridiculous, she knew nothing about gnarled flax. But she wasn’t meeting his eyes. He looked down to where she stared and his hand halted. He’d been rubbing at the Soulbond on his chest again. He dropped his arm and stared at her, dared her to say anything more.

‘You killed my family,’ Gulvi said.

‘I’ve been hearing that from a few people lately,’ Augus offered something close to a smile. ‘And yes, I did.’

‘And now you’re offering to help the survivor.’

‘I’m capricious,’ Augus drawled.
‘Is it guilt?’

‘You don’t have to say yes,’ Augus exclaimed, losing his patience. ‘I wish to test my skills at healing, Julvia is convenient as she lives here, and none of the rest of you are sick.’

Except perhaps me. Apparently.

‘I don’t know why you’re all so quick to assume that guilt is the only motivator that exists amongst the Unseelie. We are self-serving, remember? Or had you forgotten? Has Gwyn’s brainwashing gotten the better of everyone who lives here now?’

Gulvi quirked an eyebrow in amusement, and Augus couldn’t exactly recall why he’d thought this was a good idea in the first place.

He inclined his head in farewell and walked from the room. He was closing the door behind him when he heard:

‘I’ll consider it, Augus. If you think you can help.’

He turned back and looked over his shoulder.

‘I don’t know if I can help. But I do know there are plants that Aleutia could be using, that she’s not. And I know how to find and prepare them. It is a simple thing.’

As he walked away, he hoped she’d say yes, even as he tried not to care either way. It was calming to work with herbs. He needed more of that in his life. It was one of the few things that he and that great beast that lurked within him could agree on.

Chapter End Notes

In our next chapter, 'Battlefields:'

‘It is long-term exposure to underworld energy. I am not…an expert. No one in the fae world is an expert in these sicknesses. But your meridians are a mess. When Fluri said you were blocked like a sump, I think there may have been more going on than even she was willing to say. She would have known you were sick. It is not normal for Mages to teach anyone their skills without…taking them on as an apprentice. But Fluri taught you. Perhaps she wished to give you the skills to help you heal yourself, or at the least, to arrest the damage. You are deteriorating.’

Fenwrel’s face softened as she said the last sentence, and she raised her hands towards him, as though to measure something else – but he took a step back.

‘Can you fix it?’ he said.
Augus
*

Augus found Fenwrel in one of the smaller libraries a few hours after seeing Gulvi. The knife wound had closed, though it ached. She was stacking books by category, and not all of them were focused on Magecraft and meridians. He noticed a surprising amount of scrolls on the politics of the Unseelie Court and he picked one of them up, unfurling it and looking towards her.

She reminded him very much of Fluri. She had a quiet grace about the way she moved. Even today when she wore near black jeans and a red choli. Her bare feet with mouse toes always placed just so on the ground. Her hands and wrists were elegant. She was a sturdily built woman, thickened with muscle and fat, despite the taper of her neck and the aristocratic bearing of her features. He thought – in another lifetime – he would have liked her as a client; not that he thought she would have needed his services.

‘Politics? Should we fear a coup?’ Augus said, and Fenwrel laughed, nose wrinkling.

‘Should we? No, I think not. Not from me, anyway. I want to be useful. My grandmother did amazing things while she was here. I want to achieve amazing things.’

‘You’re already a Master Mage, a mother – how ambitious are you, exactly?’

‘Quite,’ Fenwrel smiled, her black mouse eyes glittering. She looked healthier than the last time he’d seen her, brown skin more vibrant. ‘Not to rule; only to leave a legacy for my children. I’m not sure you’d understand.’

‘I’m sure I don’t,’ Augus said. He couldn’t reproduce, and his only parent was a lake. Beyond the bond he had with Ash, he found the concept of family quite abstract.

‘You’ve sought me out. Why?’

Augus slid onto the table and crossed one leg over the other, swinging them slowly; a pretence of casual interest.

‘I wanted to ask you two questions.’

‘Two? Then ask,’ Fenwrel said. ‘Questions are free.’
'Fluri taught me the basics of meridians and pressure points. I’m out of practice, and out of touch with the art. I understand you’re busy, and I have no idea when I might find the time myself, but I wish to brush up on my skills and understand more of what I am doing.'

'You want to apprentice?' Fenwrel said, looking at him shrewdly, ears twitching in what could have been annoyance.

'No,' Augus said. 'I wish to learn.'

She nodded and didn’t answer.

'Your next question?'

Augus winced. The bluntness also reminded him of Fluri. He wasn’t able to get much past her, and he suspected the same went for her granddaughter.

'Are you- I have an odd question, I think. Tigbalan said he thought I was unwell, at the Entry. I’ve had no sense of being ill, no symptoms. I have a destabilised core, but with one such as mine – it’s easy enough to destabilise. Are you able to…check? He suggested I come to you.'

'Then he thinks it’s a matter of meridians,' Fenwrel said, ears flicking forwards in interest. ‘Could you stand for me?'

Augus slid off the table and stood straight, watching as she approached. She took the book she’d slipped from the row and placed it calmly in a stack. Then she lifted her hands up and spread her fingers. Her technique was slightly different to Fluri’s, but he recognised it all the same. She closed her eyes to better focus on the lines of energy that lay within his skin, running along his nervous system, his spine, the arteries of his blood – rivers inside of him; the waterways of the body.

Her expression didn’t shift once as she traced the primary meridian from the centre of his forehead down to the bowl of his pelvis. Only her ears twitched. Sometimes flattening, sometimes pricking forwards. He expected her to move to other meridians, but she stepped back and opened her eyes slowly.

‘You’re poisoned. Tigbalan was correct. You are suffering illness, Augus. You say you have not noticed? That doesn’t seem possible. But then it is quite incredible what we can learn to live with.’

‘I’m Inner Court status,’ Augus said, shaking his head. ‘What possible illness could I have that would-’

‘It is long-term exposure to underworld energy. I am not…an expert. No one in the fae world is an expert in these sicknesses. But your meridians are a mess. When Fluri said you were blocked like a sump, I think there may have been more going on than even she was willing to say. She would have known you were sick. It is not normal for Mages to teach anyone their skills without…taking them on as an apprentice. But Fluri taught you. Perhaps she wished to give you the skills to help you heal yourself, or arrest the damage. You are deteriorating.’

Fenwrel’s face softened as she said the last sentence, and she raised her hands towards him, as though to measure something else. He took a step back.

‘Can you fix it?’ he said.

Underworld energy. He wanted it gone. Gwyn had removed it from the Court, so he knew it was possible to destroy it. His fingers curled and he – in a flash – imagined clawing it all out of himself, the black sliminess of it. He imagined blood on his hands and his claws, along black globes of
clinging dark.

‘I can unblock your blocked meridian points, but Augus…this is not a thing I would attempt lightly. And nor should you. It will likely make you worse before you get better. Lakes and rivers hide their poisons in the deep silts. Dredge them, and you know not what you risk bringing to the surface. I suspect that is why you have remained functional for so long. Freshwater fae are exceptional at sinking deep what they do not wish to see.’

Fenwrel sighed.

‘It explains a lot,’ she said.

‘Excuse me?’

‘To be this…polluted – it explains your erratic behaviour. What river that breaks its banks doesn’t become chaos for a time?’

‘My behaviour is my own,’ Augus snarled. ‘Do you seek to take that from me too?’

‘Take-? Do I seek to take that from you? Listen to yourself, Each Uisge. Have I tried to take anything from you? You have come to me to ask me two favours, and I have granted one.’

He stared at her, feeling like he could now tell all the places in himself that were wrong. Every slimy, slick place of sticky awfulness. He’d claw them out if he could.

‘I could compel you to heal me,’ Augus said, dangerous.

Fenwrel’s eyes narrowed.

In a flash she had her Mage staff out and waved it once at him. He leapt backwards, expecting an attack, but felt nothing except a weird fluttering in his body.

She kept her staff out and her gaze was uncompromising. Threatening.

‘Sit down in that chair. Now.’

Augus choked as the compulsion found him. It slunk into his mind and he resisted automatically, nausea powering through him and turning his stomach. His limbs ached to obey even as his mind rebelled. He stared at her in horror – he hadn’t known she could do that. He hadn’t known anyone could. He knew Mages of the meridians were rare, that they could block or enhance powers, but-

Pressure built in his mind. He was distantly aware of walking to the chair in stultified steps. He thrummed out a deep, bass growl and couldn’t even count the amount of fae who would have liked to see this happen to him.

He sat on the chair and the pressure in his mind ceased. His throat ached on the rasping breaths he was taking.

‘You’ve never been compelled before, have you?’ she said. Compulsions again. He was answering the question even as he summoned his will to fight it off.

‘No.’

‘It’s not a pleasant experience, is it?’

‘It is not.’
Fenwrel waved her staff and the fluttering – like a zip being pulled up inside of him – returned.

‘Next time, it would serve you well to think twice about threatening it to Master Mages.’

‘Duly noted,’ Augus said, muted. Dull horror thrummed through him. He felt cold all the way through, like he’d just been visited by the Nightingale. He remained very still, unable to process what had just occurred. He stared at her Mage staff – now tucked back into her belt – with something close to loathing.

‘I’ve upset you,’ Fenwrel said, a detached sympathy on her face. ‘But I need to make things clear; I am trained as a Mage and I do respond to threats against my person. Also, compel me to heal you, and what should I do? Remove all your darkness at once so that all the toxins rise to the surface? Do you have any idea how sick you would truly become? You would not be able to function. You would likely not survive it. I have seen good lakes – flourishing lakes – turn the land around them to dust once their inner poisons had been stirred. And you understand that, deep down. As it is, I don’t know what removing even the smallest amount of this darkness will do.’

Augus watched her, unable to think of much to say. She pulled up a chair, sat facing him. She rested her hands in her lap and leaned forwards, as though he was the only being that mattered most in that instance. Fluri had a way of doing it too. A particular kind of undivided attention that was at once both welcome and frightening.

He refused to shift or squirm on his chair, but it was a close thing.

‘You are scared,’ Fenwrel said, and smiled when Augus sneered automatically. ‘I would be scared. Very. Fluri said you had experienced terrible things that you never spoke of. That you had nightmares. And that was back when the Raven Prince was our ruler and you had not yet invited the Nightingale into this Court to join by your side.’

‘The past doesn’t rule me,’ Augus said, smoothly.

‘The past rules anyone who doesn’t master it or understand it. You don’t understand your past. You’ve not mastered it. Augus, believe it or not, but being deft at shoving away what you don’t want to see, is not true self-mastery.’

‘It’s not that simple, I also-’

‘I know,’ Fenwrel said, her voice softening. ‘I know. I understand that you are not idle. I also know that a waterhorse like yourself would feel…drawn to slowly cleaning out any internal pollution. That is how you work. But you are a master of avoidance, are you not? I don’t think it’s a coincidence that you ended up in a vocation where you felt the need to show other people’s avoidance to them, to shove the truth of their past and their pains in their faces through tactile touch and sensuality. We all role model what we need the most.’

No one had talked to him like this since Fluri and the Raven Prince, who both felt entirely too comfortable saying what they thought at any moment. Gwyn talked in stops and starts, so his brutal honesty often hid behind his own fears. Ash was blunt – certainly – but he didn’t have all the pieces to the story, and he didn’t have the will to disturb Augus to the point of upsetting him, unless he thought it was necessary.

‘I will make you one offer, and it is my only offer,’ Fenwrel said, sighing. ‘I will teach you about pressure points and meridians once more, like my grandmother, in exchange for allowing me to heal you at my own pace, which – Augus – will be closer to what you truly need, than you suspect. The urge to remove it all will be unbearable – but what if I tell you that I might not be able to truly
remove any of it? Your entire energy is changed. There are some things that aren’t just scooped out, like a leaf on the surface of a lake. Some things stay with you forever. Best to know what they are, instead of hiding from them.

‘When I was younger, one of my children – my youngest, Suvidh – went through something terrible. It is not my business to say what he experienced, but he reminds me of you in some ways. He worked so hard to remove it all, because the knowledge that he would have to live with it horrified him. There is horror and helplessness in knowing that we cannot simply scrape away what feels wrong and disgusts us.’

‘I’m not your son,’ Augus said, standing. ‘This isn’t a bonding experience. And you don’t actually know any of what I’ve experienced. So—’

‘Do you accept my offer, Augus?’

He had been ready to leave, to think of other things, to forget that he’d even asked about any of this. And Gwyn would ask later, ‘are you ill?’ And what would he say? There was no easy way to answer that question.

‘I…need to think about it.’

‘Good. That’s the healthiest thing I think you’ve said since you’ve come to see me. As for price, do not fret. Only offer what you think it is worth and what you can truly afford without harm to yourself, your quality of life, or others.’

Augus smiled, bemused. It was the same ‘price’ he offered to all of his clients. It was strange to hear it in return.

‘You said something earlier I find interesting,’ Fenwrel said, ears flicking forwards. ‘You said, ‘Do you seek to take that from me too?’ As though your acts of evil are the last bastion of yourself that you have to hang onto. As though everything else has already been lost to you. I don’t know if that’s true, this is only speculation, but…you might want to consider how many evil acts you were doing – outside of hunting and feeding – before you met the Nightingale. For all reports say that you were a calm, quiet, introverted thing who cared for healing and his brother.’

‘I’ll not have your pity,’ Augus said, and Fenwrel’s lips tightened into a small smile.

‘I think you need to learn the distinction between compassion and pity. And do not mistake me, young man; your actions are still your own. But there are some of us who must spill our poisons out where the world can see them, because they cannot contain them all within. It’s not healthy, but it is understandable. I wonder…if you are clinging to- Well, we have time to discuss it later, should you choose to accept me as a healer.’

Augus stood, smoothing his shirt, looking towards the entrance of the library. Fenwrel stood also, her gaze sombre.

‘You can come to me at any time,’ she said quietly. ‘Even if you do not wish my help in cleansing your meridians. You can come to speak, or listen, or simply be. I am used to having younger fae around me, and I know you’re not my son, but you do remind me of Suvidh.’

He inclined his head in gratitude, even as he thought it wasn’t likely. The discomfort of experiencing something that he wasn’t ever supposed to experience – compulsions – left him out of sorts. He was biologically resistant to Ash, to other waterhorses, to all other forms of it. Knowing that she could take his power from him, use it against him so easily…
But she could also help him. Theoretically it might restabilise his heartsong, it might allow him to find his inner calm and seek out the Raven Prince.

‘When Gwyn returns from battle, I suggest you-’

Augus’ eyes widened.

‘What? *Returns* from battle?’

‘He didn’t tell you?’ Fenwrel said. ‘I suppose you are hard to reach when you are on the hunt. There had to be a change of plans. He left not more than a few hours ago, I believe.’

He couldn’t explain it. He knew he’d get other opportunities to see Gwyn in battle. But after seeing him at the Triumphal Entry, Augus itched to see Gwyn in armour again, swinging a sword. He wanted to know the things about Gwyn that other people knew and took for granted, like Gulvi. Not that long ago, Gulvi had said Augus only really understood one side of him; and it was true. He needed to see Gwyn the soldier, Gwyn the warrior.

‘Thank you for your time,’ he said, turning to leave, wondering if he could teleport straight to the location he remembered Gwyn picking in a strategy meeting. He could feel out the lakes of the world once he was immersed in a water source. He could find something nearby, perhaps. Use his invisibility…

‘Augus,’ Fenwrel said, and he turned smoothly. Her eyebrows were pulled together. ‘Do think it over. I want to help you.’

‘Because you don’t want to see me become evil and terrible again and *etcetera*? I’ve heard it before.’

‘No,’ Fenwrel looked confused, and then her expression sobered. ‘No, Augus. It’s just quite evident that you are not well.’ She gestured towards his meridians. ‘You’re suffering.’

Augus didn’t even dignify that with a response. He held her gaze for several seconds longer, then left.

*

Two hours later, Augus crouched at the bole of a giant tree, the blood and bone and skin and guts of many assailing his nose, the clang of metal on metal ringing in his ears, the zinging of air before the *thock!* of arrows impacting the air around him. The ground beneath his feet vibrated under pounding feet, the screams and wails and cries and shouts and roars were a patina upon which flares of magic echoed.

He breathed shallowly, the invisibility so much a strain that he was sweating from it. Perhaps talking with Fenwrel made him more aware of how much it jarred him, it taxed him more than ever.

Even so, he couldn’t drag himself away.

Gwyn was *splendid*.

His splendid, exquisite, mad *beast*.

Augus hadn’t been able to close his mouth properly from the moment he’d first seen him. At first fear had crawled through him. Why wasn’t he wearing a helm? He was covered in blood. Augus
had seen at least two strikes from others hit the plating of his bad shoulder.

Gwyn didn’t seem to feel any of it. What he did feel, he responded to with a blistering outrage that always ended in the murder of others.

He fought like a creature possessed. He crushed faces with his bare hand, while swinging a sword that should not have been wielded one-handed, occasionally bringing both his hands to the hilt and cleaving fae almost in two. Soldiers – Seelie and Unseelie – scattered around him. His own kin to give him space, to avoid becoming collateral damage, and the Seelie because they knew him, they knew of his ferocity.

Gwyn sought them out, roaring and bolting after them. Taking leaps off dead bodies and bringing his sword down, crying out in raw delight at the death he wrought.

He looked joyful.

As a result, Augus was nursing an erection that had started around the time he realised that Gwyn wasn’t at risk of imminent death. He ached with arousal. He was reminded abruptly of a time when he’d been running for his life in the Seelie Court, and had ended up being fucked against a wall by a beast of a King who had licked blood off his own arm, yet still managed to find gentleness in all of it.

Augus’ fingers occasionally trailed over the bump of the lubricant in his pocket. He’d felt ridiculous at the time when he’d fetched it, he didn’t anymore.

The Unseelie military was winning. Their army was primarily composed of the ground-fighting kudlaks led by Zudanna, and a contingent of archers and mages led by Vane. The Seelie military was holding its own well, a high death count coming between them and bodies getting in the way of the fighting now. It was evident that Dogwill Borough really had been betraying the Unseelie Court to the Seelie; Alysia – War General of the Seelie – hadn’t sent a large enough military to deal with a situation like this. Gwyn’s play had worked.

Hours passed, the invisibility feeling more and more like a heel digging into his sternum. His inhaled wheezed at their peaks, and he pressed knuckles into his chest as though he could soothe it.

Gwyn didn’t tire. Didn’t flag. His normally pale hair plastered to his head with blood, sweat and viscera. At one point he’d cleaved into a fae in a way that caused blood and more to plaster across his face. He’d wiped it away and stabbed the dead body for good measure. And then, when the arrow had thocked between plates of armour, digging into his ribs, he’d torn it out and light flickered along his bare forearm – that light – and it seemed like the whole battlefield took notice – except they didn’t, not really. Too busy fighting for their lives.

But Augus leaned forwards as Gwyn shoved the sword into the ground and turned on the Seelie archers, running towards them, light crackling along his bare forearms, splintering and blistering from his hands. A silent orb of stuff, an almost hollow boom, and there were roars of triumph from some of the Unseelie – those who weren’t staring on in horror.

None of you tamed him. But I did.

Augus smirked. He was aware that bragging to himself while feeling like his chest was being crushed was possibly not the best use of his time.

Augus didn’t lose interest in the battle, his inner predator twitching to life. Even once the battle died down, even when he could only vaguely make out Gwyn shouting to the Unseelie to begin
looting the dead – half to the Unseelie Court and half to the kudlaks and the fie elyllon for assisting – he couldn’t stop watching. He assumed Dogwill had already been teleported away for questioning, imprisonment, torture.

Augus licked his lips. Gwyn had bestowed upon him the position of interrogator. Something he was quite looking forward to.

He grit out a pained sound as he clung to the invisibility. He watched Gwyn pacing the outskirts of the bodies like a wild thing, holding his sword like he still wanted something to fight. Gwyn eyed his own soldiers now.

*He’s looking to sate himself. How do I get over there? Get his attention?*

The invisibility was too taxing. He’d have to drop it to walk the distance.

He growled in frustration, and then the pain sharply built in his sternum and heart and in an instant, the invisibility was gone.

Augus struggled for it. Pushed himself upright to stagger behind the tree, even though he was such a distance away and no one had suspected him and-

Augus’ eyes widened when Gwyn stopped his prowling, stilled, then turned and stared right at him.

‘Oh damn,’ Augus breathed.

*How did he do that? King’s instincts? Battle instincts? What?*

Augus backed behind the tree quickly, and then saw the flare of light in front of him. He only had a bare few seconds to remember that the last time Gwyn had seen Augus around other warring folk, it had been a shapeshifter and-

A sword swung at him. Augus laughed weakly as he wondered if he should start fighting for his life.

Chapter End Notes

In our next chapter, 'Surrender:'

‘Beast,’ Augus hissed, breaking some of the waterweed with his bare hands. ‘I saw the way you paced the outskirts, wanting to fuck. I find myself wondering if you could find just as much satisfaction in this.’

Gwyn said nothing. Conflict warred within. He wanted to dominate, to control – not to be controlled, not for Augus’ words to winnow their way into his mind and leave him panting and wanting and hardly aware of himself. He struggled weakly as fingers slipped into his thin pants and pulled them down, baring his ass to the sky, the forest. He tried to get his knees under himself, but Augus dug claws into the outside of his knee and Gwyn made a low, lost sound.
‘I don’t care either way,’ Augus purred. ‘I want you like this. Battle ready and still hungry for blood. You are, sweetness. Aren’t you? So hungry. Turn your head to the side and open your mouth.’
No official new tags, but you can expect a sex marathon, and a reference to past suicidal ideation.

I feel like Augus and Gwyn are starting to really find each other again, slowly but surely, after a few hiccups. *rolls around happily.* A huge shout-out to the folks who leave kudos, bookmark, subscribe and comment! And those who interact with the Tumblr as well! You're all so awesome.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Gwyn

*  

Gwyn held his bloody, slippery long-sword to Augus’ throat. If it is him. Augus had fallen to the ground, both hands underneath him, still laughing.

He could hardly think. Post battle and not yet ready to calm, pulses of energy and light moved through him, one after the other, an engine of energy. He lowered the sword slowly to skin and watched it paint a line of other people’s blood over Augus’ neck.

‘You are thrilling like this,’ Augus breathed. ‘Are you going to kill me?’

‘Why are you here?’ Gwyn commanded. He was far enough away from the battleground now that no one would hear him.

He blinked dumbly down at Augus.

The moment the invisibility had dropped, Gwyn had known.

Then…this can’t be a shapeshifter.

He licked at his teeth, tasted blood. At one point he’d savaged someone’s throat open. His whole face felt sticky and wet. He leaned down and picked up Augus one-handed, a fist in his shirt, dragging him unresisting, upright. He pressed his nose to Augus’ neck, breathing deeply, mouth opening.

Fresh water, the faintest hint of silt, nothing sour at all. Not a shapeshifter. He breathed in again and Augus chuckled. Gwn felt a flash of rage.

Did Augus not understand how dangerous it was to visit a battlefield? The position he was in? What if he’d been captured by the enemy? He could have compromised the entire outcome of the battle. As it was, the first two hours had been close, and he was beyond grateful for the kudlaks. No wonder they’d evaded him for so long, they were such fighters.

But here, Augus in his grip and amused and Gwyn unsatisfied, lust burning through him, turning his thoughts to haze…
Someone needs to teach him a lesson.

He opened his mouth and licked over Augus’ pulse point. Augus tensed.

Gwyn crooned a low, rumbling sound at him. He held the sword with his other hand, dimly aware of a heavy throb pounding through his shoulder, shooting into the rest of his body. The armour weighed a fair amount and didn’t fit properly. He’d worn parts of his body raw.

‘You’re a marvellous fighter,’ Augus said, faintly breathless.

‘Yes,’ Gwyn said. ‘And you’re a thorn in my side. If they had seen you, you could have been killed. If they-’

But it was too many words, and he wanted more than talking. He nosed into Augus’ hair, dropping the sword. It thudded to the ground and he paid no attention. Gusts of his breath hit the space behind Augus’ ear, and Augus shivered in his grip.

Like prey.

His next sound wasn’t a croon, but a growl. Gwyn dragged him further away from the battle, and Augus didn’t struggle. Minutes later, Gwyn’s head was clearing, though sounds of battle still rung in his ears and his hands thrummed like they were absorbing blow after blow. He pushed Augus face first against a thick tree and leaned his body into him. Augus grunted, uncomfortable.

‘Take your armour off, at least,’ Augus snapped, and Gwyn blinked at himself, forgetting that he was still covered in metal. He took several steps back and mechanically worked at removing the armour. He would leave it here. He didn’t want it. It wasn’t his armour.

He snarled at it as he threw it to the floor. He should care more. Armour was valuable.

They’d loot more from the dead.

Gwyn looked up as he removed the last of the armour, stilled at the calculating expression he saw in Augus’ eyes.

He side-stepped just as Augus shot waterweed out of his wrists. With nothing but his hands to tear through it – and Augus being so much stronger than he used to be – Gwyn couldn’t get through the stuff fast enough. Not with how strong it was. He tore one coil snaking around his torso, but others followed too quickly and Augus advanced upon him.

With his instincts too close to the surface and his animal nature at the forefront of his mind, lust turned into fear and his heartbeat skyrocketed. He gasped, struggled, becoming aware of the aches in his body. He was bleeding from several places, nicks and an inch deep divot where an arrow had hit – at least one – and lacerations that had snuck beneath the plates. His shoulder screamed as he tried to twist out of the ropes.

‘Careful. Careful now,’ Augus soothed, something dark and amused in his voice. ‘I’ve always wanted to have you like this, you know. Wild, vicious animal. I can smell your fear for once. It is sharp, isn’t it?’

Gwyn’s mouth was open as he struggled to get a full breath around the ropes of waterweed that were crushing his chest. He tore with a weakening grip and then went to his knees when a strong hand pushed him down.

He cried out in outrage, and Augus laughed, reaching out and taking a handful of his bloodied hair
and twisting it up. Gwyn’s head was forced back and he stared up at Augus, throat working, still trying to rip away twists and knots of waterweed. Augus was Inner Court, and Gwyn was beginning to feel the effects of battle. They were evenly matched. Gwyn could use his light, but—

Not here. Not with Augus.

When he couldn’t get a proper grasp on the rubbery waterweed, he roared and struck at Augus’ torso. Augus stepped nimbly out of the way and then jerked the wrist holding his head, a full-body jolt that commanded Gwyn’s attention and left him still and panting on grassy ground.

Augus shoved him down to the ground. Gwyn braced his forehead on the grass, tried to flip over, then stilled when Augus straddled him. He blinked when Augus ground hips down into him, his hands went limp.

‘Beast,’ Augus hissed, breaking some of the waterweed with his bare hands, claws finding purchase in the rubbery, green stuff far quicker than his own blunt nails did. ‘I saw the way you paced the outskirts, wanting to fuck. I wonder if you could find just as much satisfaction in this.’

Gwyn said nothing. Conflict warred within. He wanted to dominate, to control – not to be controlled, not for Augus’ words to winnow their way into his mind and leave him panting and wanting and hardly aware of himself. He struggled weakly as fingers slipped into his thin pants and pulled them down, baring his ass to the sky. He tried to get his knees under himself, but Augus dug claws into his leg and Gwyn made a low, lost sound.

‘I don’t care either way,’ Augus purred. ‘I want you like this. Battle ready and still hungry for blood. You are, sweetness. Aren’t you? So hungry. Turn your head to the side and open your mouth.’

Gwyn opened his mouth and forgot to turn his head to the side, fighting his own instincts to throw Augus off, to take. A rough hand in his hair and another around his wrist. His arm was wrenched up even as his head was turned to the side. His own fingers – covered in blood and gore – were forced into his mouth. He made a sound of shock, and then a heavy bolt of something else turned him lax against the ground as he absently, then enthusiastically sucked at the drying, sticky stuff covering his skin. The blood of Seelie and Unseelie both flavouring his mouth. Augus panted briefly above him. Gwyn closed his eyes, his fingers a thick weight on his tongue.

‘Gwyn,’ Augus said. ‘Is it good?’

Gwyn made an unthinking noise of agreement, licking between his own fingers with a slick tongue, and the edge in his heartbeat easing.

The hand around his wrist forced his fingers deeper and Gwyn choked slightly, his own fingers as long as Augus’, thicker. He moved away, and a hand at the back of his head stopped him.

‘Deeper,’ Augus ordered, and Gwyn bristled at the order. His eyes slid sideways, and he caught a hard, unforgiving gaze on Augus’ face. He opened his mouth, tried to jerk backwards, and Augus brought his own strength to bear.

‘I said deeper.’

His own fingers scraped his spasming throat and his teeth accidentally shut on the base of his knuckles. He cried out, tried to growl, couldn’t manage. He could taste blood throughout his mouth, swallowed down a tiny piece of flesh and knew that he should be loathing this, that any
good Seelie fae would-

Not Seelie.

He looked at Augus again, holding very still.

‘The battle is won and I want some of your time. Will you give it to me?’

Gwyn’s throat hurt, his wrist was twisted into a strange position, his body was a mess of feedback. The weight of Augus where he straddled his lower back was...

Threatening. Calming.

He moaned softly, the sound muffled around his fingers.

‘That’s it,’ Augus murmured, approval thick in his voice. Genuine approval, like he hadn’t heard for such a long time. Gwyn’s eyes drifted shut again, he shifted on the ground. He was aware he should be struggling more. They were in public, anyone could stumble across them. But those thoughts were distant, muted. He sucked harder on his fingers, his own throat relaxing for himself, and he moaned again. Did Augus know that he’d done this before, after battle? When no one could see?

The hand at the back of his hair eased and settled on his cheek, thumb moving over his skin, petting him. He huffed out a breath and shifted his hips impatiently.

Augus quickly ripped away the waterweed binding Gwyn’s lower legs. He dug fingers into Gwyn’s pants and dragged them down, and Gwyn made a sound of alarm when the fabric caught on his cock. Augus paused and encouraged his hips up. He unhooked the material, sliding the pants all the way off, tugging them off his ankles, baring him from the waist down.

‘Keep your fingers in your mouth,’ Augus said, voice crisp.

He felt hands on his ass cheeks. His fingers slipped free of his lips and he shouted in outrage, because he’d been tricked, it was a trick. He’d just won a battle. He didn’t submit to anyone! He flipped half over and tried to scream, and a mouth slanted over his. Augus’ tongue slid between his lips and Gwyn’s cry rippled out between them, vibrating hard, strong enough to force their lips apart for a second, before Augus pressed back with a firmness as unavoidable as a tide.

The kiss was overwhelming. Augus’ hand in his hair dragging his head back to an uncomfortable angle. His tongue sliding back and forth, wet and hot as Gwyn weakly tried to get into a better position. If anyone was going to be on top, if anyone was going to be fucked, it wasn’t going to be-

But the kiss went on and on, and Augus wouldn’t draw back to give Gwyn room to catch his breath properly. He felt like a pane of glass misting at the edges. Clarity faded, his struggles eased into something hungrier. He pawed at Augus’ clothing. His tongue curled around Augus as he moaned, over and over. Augus made a soft, encouraging sound in response, and Gwyn opened his mouth wider, sucked on Augus’ tongue, scraped teeth over it. He needed more than this. He tried to arch his body into Augus’, but the position wasn’t right. He made a long, high noise, and Augus laughed against his mouth.

He withdrew with a wet sound, and Gwyn stilled again when he felt fingers at his ass cheeks. A fingertip dragged dry over his hole, then pressed. His back arched, fingers dug into dirt and grass, and his mouth opened on a dull cry as Augus’ fingertip slid in, just a little.

‘I could take you like this,’ Augus said. ‘You’ve done it to others, haven’t you? Forced them to the
healer’s tents? I know how some of you want it so much *rougher* once you’re Court status or higher, and know it can’t *truly* hurt you. A little pain in the moment, and you’ll feel fine in a week, isn’t that so?’

His finger winnowed deeper, forcing its way in, and Gwyn rubbed his forehead into the ground and then arched his hips back into Augus’ hand.

‘Augus,’ Gwyn said, all thoughts of the Court, the battle, disappearing. ‘Augus, you-’

Augus’ finger wriggled, moving even deeper, and Gwyn felt the burn of it, could hear his panting harsh in his ears and hardly cared.

‘What do you want, sweetness?’ Augus said, every word a balm, even as they challenged him.

But Gwyn’s inhibitions were far away. He tore up sods of grass as his hips rolled.

‘*Fuck* me.’

‘Are you always so demanding after a battle?’ Augus said, but he sounded so pleased, and Gwyn groaned low as Augus’ finger thrust back and forth. There was so much friction that his finger *dragged*, caught on the rim of his hole, and Gwyn bit into his lower lip. He brought one leg up, as much as he could, surprised that Augus was allowing him. But it made the position better, made everything easier.

‘That answers that question, doesn’t it?’ Augus said, hooking his finger into Gwyn’s entrance and pulling, chuckling at the wretched sound that Gwyn made in response. There were a myriad of aches inside of him, but Augus was causing him to focus on a particular one, and he didn’t know whether to push back or pull away. ‘Luckily for you, we won’t need a healer’s tent. I thought ahead.’

Augus’ other hand slipped underneath Gwyn’s body and found his cock with a familiar grip, before squeezing the head so tightly that Gwyn jolted in pain. Augus didn’t stop, didn’t respond to Gwyn’s tension. Gwyn whined after several seconds, not sure what he was supposed to do. There were no orders, he wasn’t aware of disobeying anything.

‘Careful,’ Augus whispered, increasing the pressure. Gwyn cried out and tried to shift away, and Augus moved with the bucking of his body. A lance of pain slid down his cock into his balls, flooded into his belly. The grip was terrible. ‘I just want to see how tame you are right now. Why, you’ll let me do *anything*, won’t you?’

A dry sob, because he didn’t want that to be true, not now, not after battle, but he felt paralysed beneath the slighter form of Augus, that crushing grip.

Augus let up after another minute, Gwyn shaking beneath him, and there was a moment of relief before a pulsing of pain as blood flooded back into the tip of his cock. He whimpered, shifted, feeling bruised and sore.

‘Shh,’ Augus said, rubbing at his flank. The pop of a cork, and then fingers spreading his ass cheeks and cold slick pouring between them. Gwyn’s eyes widened as Augus’ fingers stemmed the flow of lubricant and two fingers pushed it into him. It wasn’t his usual method, and Gwyn turned his head, tried to look over his shoulder, then forgot what he was meant to be doing as he was stretched on a hard thrust of Augus’ fingers.

‘There’s blood everywhere – yours, others,’ Augus said, a smile in his voice, lazily thrusting his fingers in slow but powerful strokes. ‘You’re practically humming with energy. I think we need to
tire you out, don’t we?’

Gwyn closed his eyes and growled. Augus was in a mood.

Augus laughed again and withdrew his fingers. He arched over Gwyn, grasped his wrists and pinned them down, and Gwyn half-heartedly tried to tug free, then jerked his arms with more force, crying out when his shoulder blazed with pain at the same time as a cock pressed down between his ass cheeks. He tugged his good arm over and over, and Augus did nothing more than slide between, not even trying to penetrate him.

‘Please,’ Gwyn said, the word breaking out of his throat. ‘Please, just-’

‘All right,’ Augus said, though he kept holding Gwyn’s wrists down, kept up that frustrating back and forth slide. Almost fucking, but not quite. Augus was shushing him again, and Gwyn vaguely realised that he was making low, fractious sounds.

Energy roared through him and he bucked forwards. If Augus was going to leave him like this, he would find someone else and fuck them, Augus be damned. He couldn’t stand it. He began to get free and dragged a foot forward, and waterweed tripped him up, a hand slid around one of his wrists and he was brought back to the ground again. He heard Augus say something, sounding delighted, but couldn’t think for the pounding drums in his head. He needed a sword. Surely, out there, there was someone he could run through and slake his bloodlust with a good kill. Surely, he could-

He’d hardly been paying attention in his struggles, but gasped the moment the head of Augus’ cock pressed against his entrance. He reached around to shove Augus off him, but Augus rocked forwards, forcing his way in, past tension and friction and still deeper. Not as much lubricant or stretching as usual, and the roughness of it made Gwyn aware that he was being taken the way he used to take others. He made a vague sound of dissent, and then moaned low when Augus used his body weight to bear down, forcing him into the dirt.

Every thrust after that was slow, deliberate, Augus inching inside of him and Gwyn’s eyes wide, breathing harsh, his cock throbbing painfully in response even as aborted rage flowed through him in hot flashes of light.

Augus had his chest pressed to Gwyn’s back, sticking to the remnants of blood and sweat, penetrated him with undulations that knocked the breath out of his lungs. It was always easy to forget just how long Augus’ cock was, until he began to reach places that Gwyn associated with dull aches and feeling pinned to the ground.

The cry he gave was raw, he didn’t have the presence of mind to hold it back. He shivered when Augus grunted an approving sound in response.

Gwyn shifted, unable to contain the energy in his body, writhed beneath Augus and was held back with grasping hands that were strong; waterweed coiling around him – not tying him to anything, just wrapping around his arms, cold and rubbery. He gasped, fought the reflex to retaliate.

Augus’ pelvis pressed against his skin, and Gwyn made a deep noise of discomfort, lust, pleasure. There was an aching pain that wasn’t helped by the steady throb in the head of his cock where Augus had squeezed too tightly.

He thought Augus might say something, but Augus was silent. Even his breathing quietened. But a hand stroked over his face, dragged over his lips, then pushed his face down into the dirt. It could have been an entirely rough gesture, but fingertips were still stroking carefully, even while the heel
of Augus’ palm was uncompromising.

Gwyn moaned in response. Augus always knew what to do, and Gwyn’s thoughts of fighting back disappeared behind being so surrounded, the need to come.

Augus’ movements after that were firm, though not demanding or rough. It was still enough to make Gwyn feel pleasure race up and down the back of his spine, sparking into his hands and fingers. It flowed down his legs until his toes were curling, pushing absently back into Augus.

‘That’s it,’ Augus encouraged. ‘That’s it, move back into me. Just like that. That’s wonderful, sweetness.’

Gwyn moaned and rocked back, meeting Augus’ thrusts. His own cock pressed up against his belly and the faint friction was enough. He whimpered, head pressed into the dirt. He was going to come.

Augus kept his hand on Gwyn’s head, the other braced beside him. He didn’t stop moving as Gwyn’s body locked up, as muscles screeched. His breathing stuttered, became uneven, and his cock hurt as it stiffened further. Augus had bruised him. Something feral moved through him – sensation and light and pleasure, abrasive and brittle.

He came silently, come hot against his own feverish skin, shuddering violently. He moaned once towards the end and Augus hushed him, voice soft.

His hips slowed, he stopped meeting Augus’ thrusts; but Augus didn’t stop. He continued despite the aches and pains making themselves known in the wake of the worst of the lust leaving. He continued despite Gwyn being tighter, despite his cock beginning to soften underneath them.

Gwyn moaned again, and Augus shifted the hand holding his head down and attempted to stroke his hair. He only shifted strands matted together with blood.

‘We’re not done,’ Augus said, voice low, full of promise. ‘When was the last time I saw to you properly? Tired you out the way you should be?’

Gwyn opened his mouth to protest, but couldn’t manage it. He blinked his eyes open and winced at the broad daylight, stared at dense trees around them. A shaft of sunlight was on them both, but the forest here was thick and shadows loomed. Gwyn couldn’t hear the sounds of looting, couldn’t sense any fae nearby except for those animals and fae that naturally lived there.

Augus still rocking his body, a metronome of desire and entitlement wrapped around him.

He closed his eyes again, tried to lose himself in it. Because just behind it was over-stimulation, a frustration that knocked at his body and tried to force its way in. And then it would feel unbearable and he would struggle and Augus would just keep going.

He groaned and Augus chuckled, moving like he had no intention of ever stopping.

The ache of it was hypnotic, and Gwyn drifted. He shifted fractiously several times, but every time he did, Augus only hushed him and pressed even closer. There was so much skin contact between them that Gwyn couldn’t concentrate. The bloodlust of battle tipping into a slower, lazier heat.

‘I’m impressed,’ Augus said some time later, when Gwyn was starting to get hard again and panting as sparks leapt inside of him. ‘I thought you’d be far more upset with me.’

‘Do you…want me to be?’ Gwyn managed.
‘I like you like this, too,’ Augus said, and then in a series of brutal, merciless thrusts, stole the rest of Gwyn’s breath away so that he was whimpering into grass and leaf-litter. His cock twitched and he shifted, tried to push his arms underneath himself, make the position easier. He couldn’t function. He went limp, whimpered for mercy.

Augus slowed down enough that Gwyn could catch his breath, but not enough to stop stoking that reluctant fire in his gut. How long had Augus been fucking him now? Too long.

‘Gods,’ Gwyn gasped.

‘Aren’t you more worried that people will find us? See you? You could be in danger.’

‘No one…’ Gwyn said, the sentence emerging unclear. He struggled to find the words. ‘Can’t sense anyone.’

Augus hummed, pleased, and then blew out a hard breath and kept moving. Gwyn wondered if he was close. Knowing Augus – probably not.

The second time he came, it was a slow, roiling thing that eventually steamrolled through his senses. He couldn’t manage to do much more than keen, Augus’ fingers resting gently over his nose and mouth, as though to gather the sound up and hold it. He managed nothing more than a weak spurt of come, and the rest of his orgasm was spasms and cramps, nearing painful.

Augus was still thrusting into him, rhythmic and demanding and Gwyn’s eyelashes were wet, eyes burning.

‘Augus.’

‘No, sweetness,’ Augus said, voice firm. ‘It’s been far too long.’

‘I can’t.’

‘You will,’ Augus promised, and then hushed him once more. ‘You’re King and a fae. Where’s that famed refractory period we’re all famous for?’

Gwyn was too tired to get free, though at one point he put in a good effort at trying. Augus petted him, whispered soothing words, even as it was obvious he wasn’t going to stop. Gwyn weakly clawed at him, and Augus only took his hands in a gentle but firm grip and pinned them down, stroking his palms with his thumbs so that Gwyn didn’t know what to do anymore. He needed whatever it was that Augus was offering, but the cost was so high that he didn’t know if he could stand it. He felt raw, bruised, his cock valiantly hardening again, though it couldn’t manage the same stiffness as before. His ears, cheek and neck burned, he blinked wetness out of his eyes.

He was limp and breathing raggedly when his release found him much later – nothing more than a dribble of come and his pelvis and balls convinced there was more. He moaned in despair, lust, and Augus was saying things – praising him, but Gwyn couldn’t focus on the words.

Augus picked up speed after that and Gwyn couldn’t bear it, begged Augus to stop, but couldn’t put much force behind the words because he knew it meant that Augus was close. He hung onto the things outside of his body that didn’t hurt. The sound of Augus’ breathing – that he could actually hear it now; the shakiness on the inhales that meant he was finding his own pleasure. The way Augus’ hands clutched at him more than they gentled, as though he needed to something to hang onto.

Augus came deep inside of him, moaning softly, once, then again, and then a third, unexpected
time. He was never particularly vocal, and Gwyn treasured every one of the noises he heard and tucked them into a secret place inside himself.

He curled up as Augus withdrew. He was aware of come leaking out of him, sweat rolling down his skin, tracking through the blood on his face and neck, tickling his spine.

‘You’re a mess. I suppose we both are,’ Augus said quietly. ‘You kill things like you expect to die. Has it always been like that? All that brilliance hiding all that need to seek an end?’

Gwyn was too tired to lie.

‘Always,’ he mumbled. ‘I tried to get killed on my first battle.’

‘You have a lot more to lose now.’

‘I don’t mean to do it anymore,’ Gwyn said, mouth open after his sentence, focusing on breathing. He felt so raw. ‘It just happens that way. It’s the way I fight.’

He wanted blankets, a bed and a shower. Perhaps not in that order. He hardly knew what he wanted. Augus had fucked him boneless. He couldn’t remember the last time this had happened. Augus was right, it had been far too long.

‘Do you want to die?’ Augus said. ‘Do you want to know what it’s like?’

An odd note in his voice.

‘Sometimes.’ He thought about it. He’d been tortured to losing consciousness before. He’d ached for death. Yet when he’d been underfae, he’d been so terrified. ‘That moment…before the black. I think about it.’

‘Do you want me to give it to you?’ Augus said, and Gwyn blinked his eyes open, confused. Augus crouched before him, naked, cock hanging slick and limp between his legs and as casual and free an animal as any Gwyn had ever seen in the wild.

‘Death?’

‘The illusion of it. You’ll come back after. I don’t imagine it’s the first time you’ve even experienced it. But since battle didn’t give it to you, and my cock can’t either…’

‘Then how?’

‘Come with me, back to my lake. You need aftercare anyway, you’re wounded and exhausted. And you can’t leave without breaking a blood-oath. Come with me. Let me take you down into the depths. Not just teleportation.’

‘Drowning,’ Gwyn gasped, and he hated that his heart jumped at the thought of it. It would hurt. He hated drowning. But if Augus was there…

‘You can’t die from it. But it will knock you out, for a time.’

‘It will hurt,’ Gwyn said, voice plaintive.

‘Yes,’ Augus nodded, calm. ‘What do you want more? We can leave that for now, and I can tend to you. Or-’

Gwyn pushed himself up to his elbows and took in a deep, shuddering breath.
'Do it,' Gwyn said, blinking the last of the tears of overstimulation from his eyes. ‘Do it, Augus.’

A craving so wide it threatened to swallow him whole.

‘You’ll come back from it,’ Augus warned him. ‘This won’t be the relief you want it to be. The end you dream of.’

‘Why doesn’t it bother you more?’

‘Because I knew you wanted to die a long time ago. Perhaps when you were visiting me in that cell,’ Augus said. ‘Earlier, even. When you first visited me. You were scared of me, yet there was a scent of death about you even then; you were looking for it. You’re not the first person I’ve met who has wanted to die. And you’re not the first who has learned to live, in spite of it. Though you are one of the most persistent in putting yourself in life-threatening situations. Here, let me take the edge off.’

‘Yes,’ Gwyn said. ‘Though…I need a moment before I can stand.’

The grin Augus gave him was frightening in how self-satisfied it was.

Chapter End Notes

In our next chapter, 'Drown:’

‘Sweetness,’ Augus said, and Gwyn bucked, shoved at him, or tried to- Augus shoved back, pushing him back down to the bed.

‘Get off me,’ Gwyn rasped.

‘Sweetness,’ Augus said, voice even softer, sounding sadder than he had any right to.
‘Do you not understand why?’

He was tired. He’d won a battle. This was not the way he was supposed to feel after winning a battle. He placed his forearm over his face and tried to twist away, and Augus let him. He ended up on his side, hiding like a child. If any of the fae at the Triumphant Entry could see him like this…
Drown

Chapter Notes

New tags: Drowning, Near Death Experience, Aftercare

This chapter officially completes Act 1 of The Court of Five Thrones, and with the next chapter, we commence Act 2, which will see a fair amount of shit hit the fan. Because you all know me, why have a moderate amount of trauma when you can have EPIC TRAUMA.

Anyway, here, have some aftercare. :D And proper discussions. (And a shoutout to all who are leaving comments, kudosing, and interacting with the fic! Origfic is always a lot quieter than fanfic overall on AO3, and it's great when folks take the time to leave their thoughts! <3)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Gwyn

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Augus dressed, but Gwyn left his armour where he’d shed it, only putting on the thin pants and shirt of before. Now he stood with his feet in the shallows of a lake near the battle, and Augus faced him, holding his hands in both of his own, making a steady, challenging eye contact. He was already knee deep in the water.

‘I want you to be very sure,’ Augus said, ‘because it will do something to me, to have you like that in my lake. I won’t be able to stop until you’re drowned.’

‘And then?’ Gwyn said, disturbing images of teeth in his flesh, shaking and tearing at him. The fact that Gwyn got gooseflesh from it still didn’t make it clear whether it was lust or terror the thought excited.

‘And then you’ll wake in my home. But I need you to be very sure.’

‘I’ve been drowned before,’ Gwyn said, like it was something he did all the time.

It hurt. It was an awful, waterlogged, vicious pain.

Augus’ eyes were very bright. Gwyn half wanted to do it just because he could see it was something Augus wanted.

‘How long?’ Gwyn whispered. ‘How long have you wanted to do this?’

‘Long enough,’ Augus said, matching his volume.

‘I’m sure. I mean to say – I’m very sure,’ Gwyn said, licking at dry lips. He just wanted to collapse. He felt wretched. Used and raw and blown out with battle and like he could sleep for a week.

‘Then come with me,’ Augus said, stepping backwards into the lake and pulling Gwyn with him,
never looking away, green irises slowly brightening. ‘Don’t let go of my hands.’

Gwyn stumbled, and Augus’ eyebrows twisted together.

‘Not much longer until you can rest. I promise,’ Augus said, and Gwyn stared at him.

He sluggishly tried to remind himself that Augus had killed Crielle, but in that moment, he couldn’t even understand it. All he wanted was Augus’ hands in his own, the rising water, the eye contact.

It was all that mattered.

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Gwyn remembered to hold his breath as they teleported from the battle location to Augus’ new lake. They landed just beneath the surface. Gwyn could see light dancing above him as he returned to buoyant, corporeal form. Augus already had an arm around his shoulder, the other around his torso.

They began to slowly sink. Gwyn met Augus’ gaze, his heart rate shooting up despite the tiredness in his limbs. Water a cold shock, and his hair floated above his head. Augus’ drifted all around them, and Gwyn noticed the way the waterweed in his scalp moved up towards the light, as though a separate plant spirit was woven into his energy.

For all Gwyn knew, it was.

Augus’ hands were firm on his skin. The water responded to him and only to him. It helped their descent, and Gwyn felt it as a slow increasing pressure encouraging the air out of his lungs.

A burn spread in his body.

He looked to the surface again, wondered if he should have-

‘No,’ Augus’ true voice rippled out around them. ‘Into the deep with you, I’m afraid.’

They sunk deeper, faster, and the breath was crushed out of Gwyn’s lungs. He expelled it quickly and tried to hold back from gasping. He closed his eyes, shook his head, pushed weakly against Augus’ body.

‘Breathe in.’

A thin noise in his ears, his own. A protest. He clutched at Augus’ shirt and then tried to push him away, kicking back. He wanted it, he did, but this part would hurt. More than he was willing to accept. His body was already so tired. Augus’ hands stayed firm around him, if anything gathered him closer, until Gwyn’s face was against Augus’ shoulder, Augus’ cheek pressed against his head.

‘Breathe in. Drown for me.’

He thumped Augus’ back in protest, arm sluggish in the water, trying to fight off the need to open his mouth and breathe. The pressure built and built, until finally he opened his mouth wide and instead of taking a tiny amount to accustom himself, he sucked down a huge draft of the lake, coughing immediately, trying to expel what was there by breathing in more of it.

His struggle was outside of his conscious mind then. He struck out hard against Augus, and his light built inside of him. He panicked, not wanting to truly hurt Augus, wanting to escape, unable to shove his light away. Only at the last minute did Augus use a combination of his waterhorse
weight and his ability to manipulate water to twist Gwyn so that he faced the opposite direction. A ball of light flung out away from them and Gwyn stared at it, trying to summon more, kicking back against the weight that dragged them further and further down.

Water in his lungs and agony screeching through him reminding him that this was wrong, wrong, and Gwyn tried to scream and couldn’t manage it.

‘Breathe it,’ the voice moving through him now, pressed into the back of his head. ‘Drown, my King. Listen to your heartsong. You wanted this. You were very sure. And you cannot know how delicious you are like this.’

Sharp teeth scraped across the back of his neck, blood bloomed around them.

A sob, water moving in, being pushed out, bubbles around them. His struggles became weak, automatic, and then his hands couldn’t find the strength to twitch.

Augus turned him easily and Gwyn stared at him, managing one last weak spasm as blackness encroached on his vision.

Augus’ eyes glowed. They lit the faint smile on his face, lit his hair and the waterweed. His hands were gentle against him. Gentle and firm.

He couldn’t look away.

Peace stole into him. A rare sensation that wasn’t dependent on the zahakhar of the Unseelie Court. It loosened tensions in his mind and left him hanging in Augus’ grip, staring at him and wanting it – the blackness. The death that wasn’t quite death.

Wonder, then, that Augus was so good at knowing what he needed. He could seek this on his own, but it felt…better to have someone else holding him through it. He didn’t fear what Augus might do – not now, not anymore.

He tried to offer a smile before he fell unconscious, but his body wasn’t listening to him anymore. One moment he was there, meeting Augus’ steady, reliable gaze; the next – his body shut down, and he was gone.

* 

He woke to spasms, a grip forcibly turning him as he expelled what felt like buckets of water – though it couldn’t have been. He was inhaling painful breaths of air, coughing up mouthful after mouthful, and there were gentle words above him and he couldn’t make them out and unexpectedly he was teary, wanting to reach up and rub at his face and not having the energy to manage even that.

‘Easy,’ Augus said again, as his voice resolved into clearer words. ‘Easy, this part is the worst part.’

‘Y-You’ve done…done this before.’

‘Yes,’ Augus said, wiping a cloth over his face carefully, thoroughly, catching at his eyes, his forehead, the splutter of lake water and drool around his mouth. Gwyn tried to reach up for it, but motor control was slow to return. ‘You’re not the first fae who’s wanted to experience that.’

‘Gods,’ Gwyn said, as another wave of wracking coughs hit.
'Be quiet for now, for a little while,' Augus said. 'Your healing is still kicking in. I suspect you took more injuries than you truly remember, in that battle.'

It was easy enough to listen. The coughing continued for some time. When it finally stopped, Augus eased him back onto…a bed, Gwyn realised. He’d been leaning over it, and there was a large basin on the floor. Augus picked it up like it weighed little and took it away. Gwyn listened to the sound of his rough, raspy breathing and distantly realised his ass was still sore, his limp cock, he still had wounds, his body had blisters and sores rubbed into it from poorly fitting armour. His neck hurt, and he was aware of a towel beneath his head.

He groaned roughly and kept his eyes closed.

Augus returned a few minutes later, crawling onto the bed and straddling him without settling his weight.

‘You’re healing,’ Augus said quietly, touching a place near his ribs that thrummed with pain. ‘It’s slow.’

‘I have to get back to the-’

‘No.’

‘I have-’

‘Do it, and you’ll break the blood-oath.’

Gwyn opened his mouth to protest, and instead shivered into silence. He didn’t – truthfully – want to move. His eyes stayed closed, and he sighed when Augus leaned forwards and smoothed fingertips over his face. Claws touched his eyelids lightly, then rubbed his eyelashes.

Gwyn sneezed.

He made a faint sound of annoyance, and Augus only moved his fingers over his cheeks, cupped his jaw, rested thumbs on his lips.

‘You’ll heal faster if you rest.’

He nodded automatically. Healers said that to him all the time.

Augus kept leaning forwards until his chest pressed against Gwyn’s chest. The pressure awoke faint pains throughout his body and he frowned. Augus buried hands in his hair and pressed kisses to his sternum, to the rise of his pectorals. Each one warm and soft.

‘You did so well,’ Augus said between kisses.

Cheeks burned, he turned his face to the side. What did he do so well at? Letting himself get fucked by Augus, and then indulging something he knew he was supposed to be ashamed of?

‘So well,’ Augus said. He pushed himself up, and Gwyn knew Augus was staring at him. ‘You are an incredible warrior.’

‘I had good teachers,’ Gwyn said.

‘I’m not talking about them,’ Augus said. ‘I’m talking about you. You are spectacular. You won the battle.’
‘We all did.’

But it was a tiny battle, a small thing, and the Unseelie Court had so few resources to begin with. What if Albion mounted a large scale retaliation, what then? Gwyn shook his head, his eyes blinked open. Augus’ new home. He’d only been here once before, when he was still underfae, when his instincts had screamed alarm at him every five seconds.

He didn’t feel very far away from being underfae.

‘Gwyn,’ Augus said, voice warning.

‘I can’t do it,’ Gwyn said shakily. ‘We can’t do it. I don’t know what I was thinking. That was a small-scale battle. It was nothing. Albion has resources and Mikkel is right, the only reason he hasn’t crushed us yet is that he just wants to wait and enjoy the outcome. He just wants to take his-’

‘Easy,’ Augus said, slowing the word down. ‘Take some breaths. Let’s start from the beginning. Take some breaths, Gwyn. That’s it. You panicked thing. You can hardly move and look at you.’

He focused on his breathing, squeezed his eyes shut.

‘Your first point – you can’t do it? Be King? Make the Unseelie Court a force to be reckoned with? You’re already doing the former. The latter is…it’s in the hands of the fates.’

‘I don’t believe in fate.’

‘You should. But let me be clearer – it’s not up to you. You can’t fix things by force of will alone. If Albion decides to crush us tomorrow, then he will. If he waits and gives us time, then we have time. If shapeshifters steal you away in a week, then we have to deal with that. Also, you? Not believing in fate? Celestial Unseelie King-of-two-Courts?’

Gwyn made a sound of protest.

‘Celestial Unseelie have likely existed before,’ Gwyn said. ‘They probably killed themselves and their families with their powers before they could be cultivated safely. I tried to do the same. Forced suppression seems to be the only way to survive to adulthood.’

‘Mm,’ Augus said, sounding unconvinced.

Gwyn sighed when lips pressed against his, stopping any further conversation. Augus’ tongue licked against his chapped lips, curled against the inside of his upper lip, and then lapped at his tongue. Gwyn made a rough sound, lungs hurting, and reached up with a weak arm – muscles still recovering – and placed a clumsy hand on Augus’ back.

‘You’re touching me more,’ Augus said, against his lips.

Gwyn tentatively dragged his hand down Augus’ back, and then raised it and repeated the gesture. Long strokes. It felt like petting a hound. He didn’t think he’d tell Augus that, but he liked the feel
of it. Apparently Augus did as well, since his mouth returned to Gwyn’s, assaulting him with lazy
kisses that ended with him tugging Gwyn’s lip forward between his teeth in a grip that didn’t quite
hurt. Gwyn groaned, and then shook his head faintly.

‘I can’t do anything,’ Gwyn said. ‘Not after…’

‘It’s only kissing. It comes with no cost.’

All too soon, Augus withdrew and sat back, watching Gwyn closely. Gwyn’s arm fell to his side,
and Augus took it by the wrist, measuring his pulse, frowning. He ran his palm along Gwyn’s arm
and the furrow in his brow deepened.

‘What is it?’ Gwyn said.

‘Your healing is slower than usual. Give me a moment.’

He slid off the bed and walked into what looked like a large room that doubled as a wardrobe.
Gwyn tried to turn to his side to watch Augus, but couldn’t manage it. His body was hardly
listening to him. He was terribly cold, but none of his muscles were shivering like he expected.

Augus came back with some small towels, and then grasped Gwyn’s arm in one hand, and started
roughly rubbing the towel over his skin with the other.

Gwyn raised his eyebrows in confusion.

‘Blood flow,’ Augus said. ‘You’ll start to warm soon. You should have told me.’

‘I didn’t realise,’ Gwyn said, feeling strange. ‘It’s not every day that I…experience that.’

‘I went easy on you,’ Augus laughed.

Gwyn only watched him, winced a little at the brisk strokes of the towel. His whole body tingled,
and when Augus picked up his other arm, began the same treatment, he shivered. Augus noticed,
nodded to himself. Gwyn’s shivering picked up and he became more aware of the aches in his
body. He grit his teeth against them.

‘Am I still bleeding?’ Gwyn said, as Augus stripped back blankets and started in on his feet, his
toes, his ankles.

‘There’s a nasty wound at your back which may still be bleeding. The rest have already ceased.’

Gwyn closed his eyes in relief. To think that once – not so long ago – he had nearly died from an
arrow to the shoulder. He touched the gnarl of ruined tissue lightly, then shuddered and moved his
hand away. His teeth started chattering.

‘That will stop soon,’ Augus said, and Gwyn winced when Augus started in on his calves, but said
nothing. He couldn’t quite understand why Augus was being so kind. Did he want something?
Gwyn watched him, and when Augus looked up minutes later, he stopped. He sat up straighter.

‘What is it?’

‘What happens when we go back?’ Gwyn said, steeling his muscles against the shivering, trying
not to let his teeth chatter.

*You have no reason to be this way to me, unless you want something. Why are you being like this?*
'What punishment are you saving up for me?' Gwyn added.

Augus said nothing, returned to Gwyn’s knees, rubbing more roughly than before – though not enough that it truly hurt. He then raised he blankets back over Gwyn’s lower body again and walked out of the room, taking the towels with him. When Augus returned, he looked sombre, unhappy.

Gwyn wanted to be petting him again, wanted the spell of only minutes ago. He even wanted the moment of peace in the depths of the lake, staring into Augus’ eyes.

‘How can you be like this…now, and then think that killing my mother without my knowledge wouldn’t…’

‘Wouldn’t what?’ Augus said, standing in the middle of his room on a wide, plush rug. ‘Wouldn’t upset you?’

Augus made a sound of frustration and then raised a hand in the air, fingers splaying. ‘Go on then, talk about it, since you seem so invested in bringing it up at every opportunity.’

‘No,’ Gwyn said, stung. ‘You- Augus, you mowed through the Estate. I’m trying to understand. I am. And I know it’s in your nature, I do. But it’s also not. You can’t look at me and tell me that massacres are your modus operandi. You simply can’t.’

Augus rubbed at his face as nervous energy built in the room between them. Gwyn pushed himself upright, still shaking, and then his body locked up from the fierce ache of it. Augus turned and bared his teeth in frustration.

‘I am trying to help you, and you seem to want to ignore all of that and fight with me.’

‘Help me by talking to me,’ Gwyn said, something hot lancing through him that had nothing to do with the blood rising to the surface of his skin.

‘What do you want to hear?’ Augus snarled. ‘Do you want to know what her blood tasted like? Or how she smiled at me as she died? Do you want to know that I think she half expected me to find you as disgusting as she did?’

Gwyn couldn’t think for several seconds, blinking away his shock. He hadn’t imagined…they’d talked. He didn’t know what he’d imagined. In fact, now that the images and words Augus had evoked were floating through his mind, he realised he’d tried not to give it any thought at all.

‘You want to punish me for suggesting a collar and chain – which, Augus, you know helped the Unseelie Court. But I cannot even talk about what you did to Crielle, without you becoming so defensive that you- What if I were to punish you? I am within my rights.’

‘I’m still not sure you haven’t,’ Augus said, staring at him. ‘And I do not become defensive.’

Gwyn laughed. ‘Don’t you? Ash isn’t here to interrupt us this time. I’m just waiting for you to find some way to run from your own home.’

Augus looked so affronted that Gwyn opened his mouth to apologise. He forced himself not to. He hurt. All over. This was wretched. All he wanted was to be fortunate enough to curl up on his side with Augus. To have more of that touch, if he might be allowed it. He didn’t understand why he couldn’t let it go. Why it was so important to him? Efnisien and Lludd had hardly mattered. He tried to bring his knees up to his chest but the motion was too painful, his ass and lower back still
ached too much.

He didn’t understand how he could want to be close to someone who angered him so much. He looked away for long moments, tension building inside of him, words that he’d said over and over coming back to him.

‘You killed her!’ He turned back to Augus. ‘You killed all of them! You say I might not have survived Crielle, then, all right- But the others? How could you kill Delphine? And even Melchor? How?’

He expected harsh words, but abruptly, Augus’ shoulders sagged, his gaze became less clear, as though he was trying to hide something.

‘I didn’t intend to,’ he said, quietly.

Gwyn blinked at him.

‘Then why?’

‘You know of bloodlust, don’t you?’ Augus said, sounding bitter. ‘I could also not be in that house, that perfect estate, and not think of…what you experienced. I could not think about the bystanders who did nothing.’

‘By your standards, Augus! Not mine!’

Augus stared at him, outraged.

‘Then what exactly did they do for you? Tell me!’

‘You don’t understand,’ Gwyn said. All the words clamouring inside of him fell away like stones, and he was left with nothing.

‘No, you don’t get to escape that easily. Tell me how they helped you. You’re so…wary of talking about your past, but how am I supposed to understand why they aren’t also criminals, when you won’t tell me?’

Gwyn made a sound in his throat on an exhale, he hadn’t planned to. He swallowed automatically, curled his legs underneath himself and rested his weight on one hip, looking away from Augus to a stained glass window that let in a strange, glowing werelight from outside. Sometimes it was very easy to remember they were underwater.

‘Delphine always made sure I was fed,’ Gwyn said quietly. ‘I was- I was always hungry.’

‘Because you couldn’t feed your light,’ Augus said.

Gwyn laughed, the sound far more caustic than he’d expected.

‘No, because…because I wasn’t being fed. I had- I had always done something wrong according to Lludd, so I was never welcome at the table – unless we had guests. And when he was away, Crielle- She- It wasn’t safe to eat around her. And- Augus, I was a Court fae in the Seelie Courtlands and I- I ate animals raw. I ate mice and rats, if I had to. I’m as good a ratter as any feist.’

Gwyn laughed again to say it. Memories of watching the terriers whip their heads back and forth to break a spine or a neck, and learning how to match the snapping motion with his wrist. How Court
status allowed him to digest any meat – no matter if raw, or diseased, or how it might turn his stomach to imagine Crielle and her guests with marchpane and cake, while he stole to the mews and helped keep them clear of vermin.

He flushed at what he’d revealed, and he looked down at the fabric of the bed, refused to see the disgust on Augus’ face.

‘Delphine did what she could. In that household, many…many servants were killed. ‘Died mysteriously.’ Aunt Penny was the worst for it, but Crielle too, if she was angry or slighted. And you have to understand that the coterie around my mother – Delphine, All’eth, Melchor, the others…they were hired to protect her. They were her allies. But they…I don’t understand it, they were not unkind to me. Delphine always cooked extra, left food out frequently so that I might steal it. Maids that could have been killed for disobeying my mother would leave food for me in my rooms, sometimes.’

He grit his teeth.

‘Is this it? Is this what you wanted? To humiliate me? Because you are so incapable of seeing them as anything other than evil?’

When Augus said nothing, only stood watching him, Gwyn grimaced and wished he could disappear. He decided that perhaps it was time to run from the conversation, if Augus wouldn’t. He did have to get back to the castle. As for the soreness, this was not the first or even hundredth time he’d had to bear pain until it healed properly.

He slid off the bed and couldn’t see his clothing; it was likely too bloodied to wear.

He called his light, just as Augus shouted in alarm and that blasted pain found him, rusting through his blood cells and dropping him to his knees.

‘Damn you!’ Gwyn shouted through gritted teeth, a blazing full-body pain. It was the blood-oath. ‘This isn’t aftercare!’

Arms around him as his breathing came ragged and tore through his lungs, making him cough again. He was lifted back onto the bed and dug his nails into Augus’ side so hard that Augus grunted in pain.

‘Get off me.’ He shoved, and Augus didn’t move. A careful hand in his hair and Gwyn made a strangled noise. ‘Augus, I swear, you-

‘I shouldn’t have done it,’ Augus said, voice low, Gwyn hardly catching the words. ‘Not like that. I could never have asked your permission to kill Crielle, you would never have said yes. But the others- I don’t entirely understand your loyalty, but I can see it, and I shouldn’t have done it.’

Gwyn went still, pain shrieking through him, reminding him of an ancient, broken blood-oath. The one he could almost forget until memories crept back, stirred and never allowed to settle properly.

‘I shouldn’t have done it,’ Augus said again.

‘Are you sorry?’ Gwyn said.

‘I don’t know,’ Augus said. ‘I don’t think so. Not the way you want me to be. I regret that it hurt you in the way that it has. But I know that’s not enough. Gwyn, I…had to kill her. And as for the others, I lost myself. I lost myself. I would have done it again, especially now, knowing that you were as good a ratter as any feist.’
Gwyn flinched away and Augus pushed him down onto the bed, following, climbing over him.

‘Release that blood-oath,’ Gwyn said, refusing to look at him.

‘Never,’ Augus said, hands hovering over different sections of his skin, before one finally settled on his chest, the other in his hair. ‘I thought you would take it in your stride, as you did Efnisien and Lludd. More than that, she had plotted against you. If someone had treated Ash the way she treated you, do you think I would have just…let them live because Ash held some sympathy for them?’

‘No,’ Gwyn said, shaking again. Perhaps he’d never stopped.

‘No,’ Augus said, though he sounded unsettled. ‘And if- If you knew someone had hurt me…’

Gwyn thought back to the soldiers he’d killed in the Seelie Court; the ones he’d killed for Augus. Men with families – children. He squeezed his eyes shut and didn’t want to be having this conversation. No one cared for him like that. No one should.

Perhaps Augus was lying about his motivations.

‘Sweetness,’ Augus said, and Gwyn bucked, shoved at him, or tried to- Augus shoved back, pushing him back down to the bed.

‘Get off me,’ Gwyn rasped.

‘Sweetness,’ Augus said, voice even softer, sounding sadder than he had any right to. ‘Do you not understand why?’

He was tired. He’d won a battle. This was not the way he was supposed to feel after winning a battle. He placed his forearm over his face and tried to twist away, and Augus let him. He ended up on his side, hiding like a child. If any of the fae at the Triumphal Entry could see him like this…

Augus was practically on top of him now, limbs draped on either side, a heavy weight he didn’t truly want gone. Augus who never seemed to leave, no matter what he discovered. Augus who might be ill.

‘Despite all that,’ Augus said, ‘I shouldn’t have done it. Not like that. I miscalculated. The cost was higher than I could have predicted. Too high.’

Gwyn said nothing, finding his mouth empty of words and feeling so tired of it all. The Kingdom, the Court, all of his responsibilities. Dogwill Borough in a cell and he would have to see Mikkel again and navigate the tensions amongst the generals and there were upcoming events and none of it looked like finding time to go to a cabin and experiencing the simplicity of the hunt, the stars. Not that it mattered; none of the old cabins he’d made were his anymore. It was all Seelie land.

Augus’ hand started rubbing slow circles into his back.

‘It’s all some kind of punishment to you, isn’t it?’ Augus said, musing aloud. ‘Is that what you want? For me to string you up in ropes and chains for that Triumphal Entry and how miserable it was? Do you wish me to repeat the threats I heard against my person? Do you know how many fae – how many upper class, respected fae – wish to see me ripped apart from the inside out? Ruined and bleeding and-’

‘Gods, no,’ Gwyn said, eyes opening, staring ahead. ‘No. But…’
‘But what?’ Augus’ voice was gentle. But he often said sinister things in that gentle tone. Still, it eased him, and Augus was warm around him. The hand hadn’t stopped rubbing those steady circles into his back.

‘Sometimes…it is easier for me to…’

‘Easier for you to be anchored when you know the punishment, and what you are being punished for? Poor Gwyn. You hate it, really. But you desire it too. The understanding that comes from reprimand. Don’t worry. I’ve not forgotten that Triumphal Entry. I’ll—’

‘You broke the collar,’ Gwyn said, face twisting. ‘You broke it.’

‘What is your fascination with that collar?’

‘I thought— I…’

‘Spit it out,’ Augus said, sounding amused. But his other hand came up to Gwyn’s chest and simply rested there, palm flat, an anchor.

‘I thought – when you said you had the extensions – that you would, you would do the same to me. And then you would hurt me, for how I’d hurt you. In…in your way—’

‘The way that you secretly like,’ Augus purred.

‘In that way, and then I thought we might…we might be okay. I thought you knew. The ivy. It’s my…it’s the plant of my birth.’

Augus’ motions faltered, and the hand at his back came up and feathered through the curls at the base of his neck. Gwyn pushed his head into the pillow and frowned.

‘Ivy? Truly? The survivor. How terribly apt. The one that overcomes all odds. Born at the time of the waning sun. Life is not often easy for those born under the ivy, is it?’

‘Delphine told me, once,’ Gwyn said, thinking back. ‘I have no birthdate that I can recall. It was never recorded. And no birthing day – though common fae do observe them. But I remember when I observed another year at the rising of the sun during Winter Solstice – Delphine gave me a small cake with ivy marchpane twined around it. She was so good with those things. Pretty cakes and carrots cut in the shape of flowers. She lay a hand on my back and she told me it was the plant of my birth, and that a man should know these things. Do you- Do you know yours?’

‘Hawthorn,’ Augus said, cupping the back of Gwyn’s head. He sighed. ‘No wonder you thought I’d made the collar for you. But how would I know it was of significance to you?’

‘Sometimes you just seem to know,’ Gwyn said, laughing softly. ‘Wait, is Ash…ash?’

Augus huffed in amusement. Gwyn smiled, unbidden, to think about it. Such an obvious name now, in hindsight.

‘There was a reason, perhaps, he found the trees so fascinating. I did show them to him frequently.’

‘Augus, you didn’t even try. It’s such an unoriginal name.’

‘Hush,’ Augus said, though Gwyn could hear the smile in his voice. ‘Hush, sweetness. And roll over, this is uncomfortable. Onto your back, if you please.’

They ended up entwined, Augus tugging the blankets up around them. This felt faintly more like
aftercare. Not that Gwyn had much experience of it. From his previous encounters with Augus, he knew this slightly more peaceable feeling – as though not every thing was going wrong – came with it. He kept his eyes closed, and Augus slid a careful leg between his and buried both of his hands into Gwyn’s hair, resting his upper body on his elbows, looking down at him. When those fingers massaged, Gwyn swallowed and was relieved to not be shivering as warmth sent welcome tendrils across his skin.

‘I think I understand now,’ Augus said quietly, ‘what it meant when I broke the collar. You thought you would wear it, and I would hurt you, and we’d be even. It must have seemed like I was far too angry for even that much. As though-’

‘If it were me, I wouldn’t forgive me,’ Gwyn said, voice rough. ‘I wouldn’t.’

‘Thankfully, I’m not you. Though I’m still not sure I have forgiven you yet.’

‘You want to leave me,’ Gwyn said, swallowing the end of the sentence so that it came out strangled.

‘No, you daft idiot,’ Augus said, sounding exasperated. ‘I don’t. That’s why I want you to treat me with more respect.’

‘But we’ll go back to the palace in…a few hours, a day maybe, and I have to- With everything I have to do, I’ll forget. I’ll-’

‘Oh,’ Augus said, smoothing thumbs across his creased brow, ‘trust me, if it’s punishment you’re looking for, if it’s wanting to make things even, you don’t have to worry. I won’t forget.’

There was a promise in Augus’ voice which was dark, frightening, rich, and if Gwyn wasn’t so spent, his cock would have attempted to rise to hardness once more. To anyone else, it might have sounded like a threat, but to Gwyn it sounded like…things were far better than they had been, recently. He shifted, breathed out a shaky exhale and wrapped a careful hand around Augus’ lower back.

He didn’t want to let go.

Chapter End Notes

In our next chapter, ‘Advice:’

‘You shove him in a collar and give him a leash, and yes, I do see the merits of it, Gwyn, but…you can’t play this game of everyone hating the Each Uisge forever. You have to build their respect for him now, and you have to find a way to do it fast. If you and I are not going to slaughter him. If we are going to give him this – it disgusts me to say it – this second chance, you cannot give him half a chance and call it whole. I believe he is acquitting himself well with the common work. Push him towards diplomacy like the Raven Prince did.’

‘I beg your pardon?’ Gwyn said.

‘Not amongst any freshwater fae, nor anyone he directly harmed, no! La! That would
be an unmitigated disaster! But the Raven Prince sent him to advocate and broker treaties, and he was – from memory – competent. We have no diplomat. I know you placed Ash in the position as a token, given his glamour – but we could use someone in the outreaches.’
Advice

Chapter Notes

No new tags!

Feedback is love, and thanks to everyone reading, you're all awesome. :D

Also, if you'd asked Gwyn where he'd get the lecture about putting in Augus in chains, I don't think anyone suspected it'd be Gulvi.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Gwyn

*

He needed some time to himself, taking a breather in the smaller of the two Court amphitheatres. He’d just finished up a meeting with his generals that was more successful than usual, even though Albion had ended up seizing the pass through to the crucial agrarian lands thanks to Dogwill’s information. Despite that, the fact that Dogwill had been captured, a small contingent of Albion’s military successfully defeated, and the Unseelie Court Military itself now had numbers, meant the mood was far brighter.

He stepped through sword drills with care. He held the long-sword two handed, and huffed out sharp breaths through his nose as his ruined shoulder tried to keep up with muscle memory that still wanted him to move like he was as whole as he’d once been.

Almost an entire day he’d spent, dozing next to Augus on his bed, sheltered in his underwater home. An entire day as his lungs healed and the various injuries he took in battle knit together. It had been restorative. He didn’t like how tired Augus still looked once they’d returned to Court. He’d vowed to ask about it, but over the next few days Augus was occupied with common work, and Gwyn had to send out many letters to the fae who attended the Entry, correspond with many more, and make sure he was generally present in the throne room at least once a day. The Unseelie Court had become a busy place.

Could it be possible to miss the days when he was breaking under the weight of being King of the Seelie, having defeated the two evils he’d been asked to defeat and not knowing what to do next? He missed the quieter days in the forested Seelie Court, seeking out Augus on a regular basis, having time with him.

Gwyn frowned. Reminiscing over having Augus as his captive always sent a cold, slinking feeling through his spine.

Losing himself in drills for the next hour – until his hair was damp with sweat – took his mind off troubling matters. Slowly, he became aware he was being watched. But plenty of Seelie fae had watched his drills in the Seelie Court, and it never bothered him anymore when others watched him work.

He straightened, lowering his sword as smoothly as he could to mask his bad shoulder, and marked
Vane leaning over the railing, a look of awe on his face. The fie elfyllon didn’t fight with anything heavier than an epee – broadswords and long-swords were beyond him, to say nothing of axes and maces.

‘They say you fought like a mad thing in battle. But then, they always say that, don’t they? You’re incredible. I wish the others would see it.’

There was a sweetness in the glint of Vane’s blue eyes, which took the edge off the flattery. If Dogwill had said it, chances were that Gwyn would have chafed under the smarminess lurking in every word.

Vane’s pale cheeks were pinked, his tangle of red hair set into curls that flew every which way. With the jewellery he wore – crystals in his ears, rings on his fingers, necklaces, a torc, bracelets and more – along with his pointed little fingernails and sharp canines, he always managed to look the way humans sometimes visualised the Fair Folk. Tall and slender, light on his feet in shoes crafted from the giant leaves of forests Gwyn wished he had time to revisit.

‘Your form is improving,’ Gwyn said, remembering seeing Vane with the recurve bow earlier that day. ‘Practicing around the generals is giving you a good eye.’

‘You think so?’ Vane said, cheeks tightening as he fought to hold back a smile. ‘Means a lot. I did research into how you and your father used to man longbows together! You…you could teach me, maybe? I know you’re busy…’

Gwyn walked over, curious. He leaned his hip against the railing and looked down at Vane. Gwyn was almost a foot and a half taller than he.

‘Perhaps,’ Gwyn said. ‘And what of you, young Prince Vane? How long have you known that your Princess would pledge so many soldiers to us? And so much wealth?’

He narrowed his eyes and Vane flushed. He looked like he wanted to edge sideways. He shrugged.

‘We’re taking a gamble. That’s what we do, you know? My Lady Braith has always been astute and we both have faith in your ability to rescue this Kingdom. You are the one who comes forward when all looks lost, are you not? You are a walking library of battle scrolls, and I think some of the others – Ifir, especially – do not want to see that when you defeated the Nightingale and the Each Uisge, you saved us too. You halted a very great danger that threatened all fae. Not just the Seelie.’

Vane trailed long, agile fingers along the metal he leaned against, tilting his head. Gwyn felt the glamour around him strengthen. Vane’s dra’ocht was sugary, tasted like berries and wine in the back of his throat. It was lovely, but Gwyn knew Vane had an angle. He waited, drawing him into conversation.

‘I do understand you can’t be seen to be playing favourites,’ Vane said finally. ‘Which is why I sought you out like this. Princess Braith has more warriors she is willing to pledge. More wealth.’

‘Are you trying to buy a way onto my Court, Vane?’ Gwyn said.

‘So crudely put, Your Majesty!’ Vane said, laughing. His eyes brightened, his pointed ears twitched with good humour. ‘We do, of course, understand that we must earn your trust first. These things take time, don’t they? But your Court is our Court too. We do care for it, you know.’

‘And you, Vane? What do you care for, besides the wealth of your people, and securing the safety of the Unseelie Court?’
Vane’s lips quirked nervously and he rose up on tiptoe. Gwyn wondered what he was like in the human world, feeding upon mischief and mayhem and deals gone wrong. There was something intriguing about him – not least because Vane was being far more subtle these days in his support of Gwyn and his methods. That subtlety was far more useful than the bald praise he’d been showering Gwyn in the presence of sceptical generals. Gwyn had to admit it held some appeal having actual allies when talking to more resistant War Generals like Ifir.

‘Family,’ Vane looked up, meeting Gwyn’s eyes directly. ‘Family matters to me. My sister. My mother and father. Those that are alive and those that didn’t survive the wars. I have to admit I like the idea of the longbow for long-range attacks.’

‘You have the recurve bow, and your magic,’ Gwyn said, pointing to the slender wand tucked into his leather belt.

‘Come, Gwyn, you know as well as I do that the magic of the wand has nothing on the School of the Staff. We can hold our own against non-magical fae, even some of the ones that can craft spells. But King Albion has a very powerful Mage in his Inner Court. Davix will recruit skilled fae to his cause, and land battles will see a more extreme magical element. We’ve talked about this, yes? I want to learn how to wield elfshot.’

Gwyn’s eyes widened. Elfshot was rare – only manufactured and used by the elven fae, and only with the bow at that. The tiny pieces of shrapnel that caused complete paralysis, and could only be cured by expensive Magecraft, or finding the piece of original elfshot and touching it to the wound; almost impossible in the midst of battle. Long ago, the elves had warred so brutally with each other that the famous elven militaries – known for their use of elfshot – dwindled.

‘Do you know someone who can teach you?’

‘I know someone who makes elfshot,’ Vane said, nodding. ‘But I’d like to use it across a variety of bows. Recurve suits my frame best. I’m afraid I’d be useless at the longbow.’

‘No!’ Gwyn said, shaking his head. ‘Who told you that? You have good musculature for longbow, and your arms are already strong from your wire-work. Do you have…access to longbows?’

‘I might…’ Vane said doubtfully. Gwyn wondered who had been teaching him. Clearly that person didn’t know what they were talking about.

‘Vane, I tell you – you can learn longbow. I do not know of many good Unseelie tutors, but—’

‘Aside from the one that stands before me,’ Vane said, and Gwyn smiled, uncomfortable.

‘Vane, I am too busy. Far too busy.’

‘No harm in trying, am I right?’ Vane said, smiling warmly. ‘Besides, I prefer the recurve bow. I mean no offense there! But longbows are so big.’

Gwyn laughed. He had the oddest urge to reach out and ruffle Vane’s hair affectionately. When training soldiers up for war, there was always one soldier that brought out that instinct in him. He suppressed it.

‘You sell your skills short, Vane. The fie ellyllon are competent, incredible fighters. You don’t need elfshot to win a battle. You’ve proven that time and time again.’

‘That’s very kind of you to say,’ Vane said. ‘And what’s brought the change over Your Majesty, if I might enquire? You seem far more relaxed today – and even at the Entry! It was quite something
watching you throw the *Nain Rouge* to the ground.’

‘I doubt the *Nain Rouge* lets anything happen that she doesn’t wish to have happen,’ Gwyn said, smiling. His shoulder throbbed at him with increasing persistence, and he tried to shove his awareness of it away. He didn’t like to bother Augus with requests for assistance, perhaps a hot shower might ease it.

‘Still,’ Vane said. ‘What a night that was. And the palace looks captivating. The night gardens – you’ve outdone yourself. None of us expected…I mean to say…’

Vane trailed off, looking uncomfortable.

‘I mean *no* offense, but we all heard what you did to the Seelie Court.’

‘It destabilises the Seelie, to live in a place so unseemly,’ Gwyn said, lowering his voice. ‘But I can understand your misconceptions.’

‘You mean you did it *on purpose*?’

Gwyn decided to borrow from Augus’ book of tricks, and gave a smirk as his answer. Vane’s eyes widened, and he grinned. He was one of those fae easily taken in by the actions of others. The celebrity status that Gwyn had attained amongst some soldiers and generals always made him uncomfortable. Truth be told, even though he didn’t trust Ifir *at all*, he did appreciate the fae’s grounded way of talking to him. Like they were equals.

‘I must excuse myself, Vane. I’ll see you at the next meeting, yes?’

‘Looking forward to it. It’s great having all the generals together at once like that. I mean I know we fight a bit but…I’m learning so much.’

‘How have you managed to come so far, with such a youthful attitude?’ Gwyn said, raising his eyebrows. ‘That game of yours, you play it well.’

Something flickered on Vane’s face, before his smile broadened even more.

‘And I’ll thank you for saying so, Your Majesty. No one takes children seriously, do they?’

‘I’d rue the day that anyone not take the *fie ellyllon* seriously, especially one of their key Princes. Good-day to you, Vane.’

‘And you, my Lord!’

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They sat – with shot-glasses of vodka in front of them – at their small table in one of the strategy rooms. Now that the throne room was a public space once more, Gwyn and Gulvi moved the bulk of their work deeper into the palace. Gulvi absently zipped up the feather filaments in her wings. He watched her surreptitiously, she groomed herself while reading over scrolls, and he’d come to notice that she had many nervous habits while going over matters of politics.

Gwyn rubbed his forehead and then pushed some papers over to Gulvi.

‘Yes, well, I’m not even sure Dogwill needs a *trial* to be honest, darling,’ Gulvi said, staring at what he’d written. ‘Augus and Ash voted for his execution after Augus interrogates him. I’m all for murdering him without further fanfare. Why give him a public trial?’
'He’s common fae,' Gwyn said. ‘They stand by ritual. They might protest.’

‘Let them. Let them protest their traitor General,’ she spat. Then she pressed her thumbs into her eyes and groaned lowly. ‘La! Gwyn! I’m not made for this bullshit. Just let me kill him and get it over with. Thinking of him down there in a cell, sharing the same space as us….’

Gwyn shuddered. He imagined this was how the Seelie talked about him, now that he was no longer there.

‘I don’t like Ifir,’ Gulvi said, looking up, her black eyes catching the werelight that Fenwrel had now provided to the whole palace.

‘You and everyone else, it seems,’ Gwyn said. ‘But people haven’t liked him long before I was made King. It seems that people have doubted his motives from the start. Everyone except the afrit, of course. I think to give him a chance to prove himself. I know very well how maligned people can be.’

‘He’s not you,’ Gulvi said, holding up a finger in warning. ‘But, yes, darling, everyone has played nice with Ifir to get access to those militaries. As it is, the people I have posted near him – not near enough if you ask me – can’t get much out of that situation, except that his family are worried for the strength of your leadership. But that is a common sentiment – all people worry when a new King comes into power.’

She picked up her shot of vodka and drained it, pouring herself another.

‘You chained him,’ Gulvi said, the next shot pinched delicately between her thumb and forefinger. ‘You chained and collared him. He is the Each Uisge, do you not think he will come after you for it? Do you seek to rouse his wrath? His betrayal?’

Gwyn tilted his head at her.

‘He’s no idiot, Gulvi,’ Gwyn said. ‘Of course he was angry. And we will settle that between us, as we have done for months now. He wants this Kingdom to work, he will not come at me through the Court.’

‘You don’t know that. You cannot,’ Gulvi said. ‘He is…’

She licked at her thin lips and then scratched at one of the black tattoos on her arm.

‘He told me you were aware, but you know he is having…ah, the humans call them flashbacks, of the Nightingale?’

Gwyn stared at her. Augus would have done anything for Gulvi to never learn that.

‘I do know,’ Gwyn said.

‘You shove him in a collar and give him a leash, and yes, I do see the merits of it, Gwyn, but…you can’t play this game of everyone hating the Each Uisge forever. You have to build their respect for him now, and you have to find a way to do it fast. If you and I are not going to slaughter him. If we are going to give him this – it disgusts me to say it – this second chance, you cannot give him half a chance and call it whole. I believe he is acquitting himself well with the common work. Push him towards diplomacy like the Raven Prince did.’

‘I beg your pardon?’ Gwyn said.
'Not amongst any freshwater fae, nor anyone he directly harmed, no! La! That would be an unmitigated disaster! But the Raven Prince sent him to advocate and broker treaties, and he was – from memory – competent. We have no diplomat.'

‘You’d have me send him out, while vulnerable, knowing he has that Soulbond and-’

‘I don’t mean now!’ Gulvi hissed. ‘I think you did him a disservice, even as you won yourself and this Court more respect in the process. Do not – do not think to misunderstand me, I would like to see him with knives in his ribs, begging for mercy for all that he has done. But you traded his reputation and his dignity for your benefit. Now you have to decide what you will do next with him.’

Gwyn stared at her. He’d not thought much of what he’d ‘do with Augus’ beyond the Triumphal Entry. He didn’t want to heap more responsibility on him.

‘You have to strike while the iron is hot, so they say,’ Gulvi pressed. ‘They believe him brought low by you. They believe you have this immense power over him. Even I believe it! I have no idea how you got him to wear that collar and leash and behave for you!’

‘Gulvi,’ Gwyn said, his voice hardening, ‘he saw the merits of it himself. He has always – always – advocated for trading his reputation away for the good of the Court. He did not like the suggestion of the collar and leash, but I did not make him.’

‘You are the King, and he – I am starting to believe this – he adores you.’

Gwyn shifted, uncomfortable.

‘Don’t push him too far, or too hard,’ Gulvi said, looking away. ‘The Raven Prince…Augus adored him too. But the Raven Prince and he had a tense friendship. The Raven Prince pushed him too, Gwyn. I observed as much. You may not have forced the collar upon his neck. But you are the King, he has given his heart to you, and you take advantage of that. Do you not even see it?’

‘When I came here this morning to discuss large scale battle movements, I didn’t expect a lecture,’ Gwyn said, staring at her, shoulders tensing.

‘Tough,’ Gulvi said.

‘You do realise who you’re advocating for?’

‘You can’t have it both ways!’ Gulvi snapped, glaring at him. ‘You can’t defend him in one breath, and then insinuate that I am mad for advocating for him! Either you think he is worth standing behind, or you do not! And if you do, and I believe you do, then stop cowering behind lines like that one and listen to me. I have not lived thousands of years to see you push him into malicious madness once more! I have lost too much, do you understand? That is what I am. I can live the life I do, but I am still a swan.'
‘And, Gwyn, my darling, I am beginning to think that he perhaps wants to assist. He offered to help Julvia, and the more I think on it, the more I think the offer may be genuine. Build him up, let the Kingdom have a chance to find some faith in him. There will be those who never come around, certainly. There will be generations of fae who wish him dead and seek that outcome. But there will be others, now, who are ready to see him differently once more. As the quiet diplomat who brokered better will amongst the civil unrest that has always plagued us.’

‘He offered to help Julvia?’

‘I’ve been meaning to talk to you about it,’ Gulvi said, downing another shot and smiling at him as he sipped at his own. ‘Is it a wretched play? Or do you think he means it? Ash says he is quite the healer, but I wish to know your thoughts, too.’

Gwyn narrowed his eyes, thinking back, and bit his lower lip.

‘I can see it,’ Gwyn said. ‘There was a period where I was unwell and my healing ability had been compromised, and he fed me tinctures that I believe helped my recovery. In his home, there was the scent of herbs drying, and he has a well-stocked healer’s kit. I’ve never…asked him much about it.’

‘Nor I, obviously,’ Gulvi said. ‘He gave me permission to show all his work to Aleutia first.’

‘Then I don’t see the harm,’ Gwyn said, tentatively. ‘Aleutia has been taught the skills of herb discernment, she will be able to divine immediately if he’s put anything in them to harm Julvia. But I don’t believe he would…’

‘I don’t understand him,’ Gulvi said, shrugging her wings. ‘I don’t understand him at all. Do you?’

‘I’ve hardly had the time to even see him, so-’

Gulvi shook her head at him, began to laugh in disbelief.

‘He is a bomb waiting to go off and you don’t have time for him? You cannot have him here and then neglect him.’

‘I don’t need relationship advice from-’

‘Don’t,’ Gulvi held up her hand. ‘I don’t need that shit from you. He murdered my family. The lake, the rivers I called home. You put a Soulbond on him which means I can’t kill him, so I’ve had to learn to accept a lot in a very short amount of time. Not least that he now works – technically – alongside me in a Court that I wish to see restored. You ask a lot from me. From all of us. Sweetling, it’s not only relationship advice. You need to see that for better or worse, he has made himself important to the Kingdom. Your neglect of him could have a ripple effect that eventually touches all of us.’

Gwyn couldn’t think of anything to say to that, and he finished the rest of his shot, pursing his lips and leaning back in his chair. He had the horrible feeling Gulvi might be right. He had an even worse feeling that Augus maybe knew it, too. His heartsong was destabilised and it was obvious he hadn’t wanted to tell Gwyn. Did he fear his own instability? He was having flashbacks in the Court. He’d had them before Gulvi.

‘I’m not sure giving him more responsibility is the answer,’ Gwyn said finally.

‘The work he does right now is gruelling. It would be for anyone,’ Gulvi said. ‘That’s why none of us want to do it. Seeing those underfae, all day – the ones who have suffered the most? And he
deals with them day in, day out, and from what I can tell – from all reports – he is doing… dare I say it? A reasonable job. But that is a crushing task, and I don’t believe it is his vocation. Give him the chance to broker some peace. He is not like me. He does not live upon the energy of discord as I do.’

When Gwyn ran his own Court in the Seelie Kingdom, his Inner Court had consisted of Albion – often away at sea – and Ondine, who disliked the Court environment with a passion. He’d deliberately selected something of an absentee Court – and had ended up managing the common work, treasury and matters of battle on his own.

He realised he’d been thinking of all of those individual tasks as easy jobs; if he could manage them all, why couldn’t everyone else? But then, he’d been an absent King, the trows had helped him a great deal – perhaps more than others might find reasonable – and he’d let the Seelie Court fall into disrepair.

‘Do the Unseelie really want peace?’ Gwyn said, offering a wry smile when Gulvi didn’t respond.

She left him stewing for at least a minute before raising her eyebrows and a hand in a gesture of disdain and derision both.

‘La! I don’t know! It’s not as though we didn’t live peacefully under the reign of the Raven Prince! What wars we had then tended to be amongst the Seelie. In fact, if I recall, some of them were against you.’

‘Okay, you’ve made your point,’ Gwyn groused.

‘After all this time, have you bought into the fairytales you’ve claimed to reject in your speeches regarding the cooperation of the alignments? You? Who lives both sides of it?’

‘Of course not,’ Gwyn said, voice flat.

‘I rather think you have,’ Gulvi said, her eyes widening. ‘Are you so ashamed of it? Being Unseelie?’

‘Gulvi,’ Gwyn said, his voice turning cold. ‘I’ll not have you speak to me like that.’

‘Tough,’ she said again. ‘For I’m your Queen in Waiting, and someone has to.’

‘I have Augus for that,’ Gwyn said, standing up and not liking the sudden sense of unease that spread frozen coils through his body. ‘And you-’

She was playing him, he realised. Stirring chaos because there wasn’t enough in the palace. Because Augus’ pain and illness, the oncoming war that tasted like ash and charred flesh in the back of his throat and Ash being a pinwheel of confusion wasn’t enough for her.

He turned back to her, stared her down. She stood, slowly, a smile playing at the corners of her lips and her fingers resting lightly on the table.

The worst part – she was playing him with the truth.

‘Does it help you, to do this?’ he said.

Gulvi’s smile broadened in answer. ‘It helps you too.’

‘For someone who hates Augus such a great deal, you certainly know how to speak in riddles as he
does,’ Gwyn said, and Gulvi didn’t take the bait, didn’t become distracted. Her fingers flexed on the table and she took a deep breath in like she’d just tasted a particularly fine liquor.

‘We weren’t born courtiers, Augus and I, but we learned how to talk the talk. ‘Sweetling, darling, creature, my Lord.’ It’s all very fucking tedious at the best of times. Have you ever heard him speak his native Welsh? I have. Did you know he had an accent? Even more soft-spoken than he is now. The Raven Prince asked it of him, as he could speak it too. Both of them walking through these corridors before you graced them, Augus’ voice softer than the Prince’s, if you could believe it.’

Gwyn’s throat locked up. He hadn’t heard Augus speak in his first language. Not properly. And as for his own first language...well, he wasn’t raised a courtier, but he was certainly raised to the Court. He’d spoken the common tongue and picked up other languages voraciously as he went.

‘Your dear lover is collapsing in rooms for fear of enemies that no longer remain. You can trust him when he’s stable, can’t you? I suppose. So Ash says. But when he’s not? Even Ash is worried…’

‘A moment ago you were telling me to place him in positions of diplomacy.’

‘I am telling you to watch that creature of yours,’ Gulvi said, licking her lips, shaking her head as though she’d let the game go too far. ‘I had a client similar to him, once. A very…unwell client. Powerful though. Ally to the Raven Prince and financial supporter of the Court. He acquitted all his debts one day, and then paid a Mage to kill him. Assisted suicide. There I was, eliminating all of his enemies at his bequest, only to find him one lovely evening, dead from Magecraft and a letter of apology in his hands.’

‘Augus isn’t like that,’ Gwyn said. ‘He is too self-serving.’

‘No,’ Gulvi said, shaking her head. ‘I don’t know what he is. But-

A knock on the door, they both turned. Gwyn bade the person enter.

One of the common fae servants opened the door – Anath – looking faintly apprehensive, as she always did in the company of Gwyn.

‘Your Majesty, there is a Seelie woman here to see you, and she says she will not speak to anyone else. An Ondine of the Seas?’

Gwyn stared at her.

‘Ondine? She’s here?’

His body turned slimily cold as he remembered the last time he’d seen her. The demotion. That cursed event that Augus kept needling at him to talk about. She’d been there. She’d seen it all. Why was she here?

He bowed an apology to Gulvi, and left with the servant.

‘Where is she?’ Gwyn said. ‘Are you sure it is her? Did anyone else come with her?’

‘She is quite alone, Your Majesty. She waits in the second antechamber to the throne room.’

‘Then you must excuse me, but I would rather see her directly.’
With that, he teleported away, leaving the servant alone in a well-lit corridor as his heart thumped an agitated beat in his chest.

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‘It’s literally the definition of a flashy entrance, isn’t it?’ Ondine said, her voice warm as ever, redolent of Mediterranean summers and the kind of seas where sea-fae might lounge on rocks and sing sailors to their doom.

Gwyn stood before her, towering over her, staring into almost black eyes and a heart-shaped face of olive skin, a necklace of generous black pearls around her neck and long black hair tumbling past her waist now. It had grown since he’d last seen her – though it had always been long. A pool of salt-water had gathered, dripping from her fingers, spreading from the bare soles of her feet. She wore a dress of fabric that, water-damp as it was, had turned into an opaque midnight blue, glints of silver within like stars.

‘Why are you here?’ Gwyn said, staring at her.

‘Is that any way to greet a once-member of your Inner Court?’ she said, voice stern, even as her eyes smiled at him. ‘Give me a hug, first.’

She stepped forwards and wrapped her arms around him, resting her wet forehead briefly on his collarbone, the scent of the sea rising all around him. He lifted his arms belatedly, went to return the embrace, but she was already stepping back and smiling at his awkward stance.

‘Did Albion send you?’ Gwyn asked.

‘Albion?’ Ondine sighed. ‘Do you think I’m welcome at that Court? I was the only one who didn’t vote for your demotion, Gwyn. The only one. Everyone marked it, and marked it well. Albion had me interrogated. I’m surprised – with your sources – that you didn’t know.’

He didn’t know – he’d not put a great deal into chasing it up. After being imprisoned in a cell, and then running for his life, and then being received into the Unseelie Kingdom as their King...

He’d had other things on his mind.

‘I think you and I should have a chat,’ Ondine said, her voice turning grave. ‘For closure, at least. The seas aren’t quite as peaceful as they used to be, and they were never entirely peaceful.’

‘Do you still divine?’

‘That is my vocation, it is what I shall always do, whether I am doing it for Kings or underfae beneath the sea. But, I do not wish to talk here. The energy of this Court feels abrasive to me. How… how did you stand the Seelie Court for so long?’

Compassion in her eyes, as fierce as any wave moving inexorably towards the shore. He didn’t want to be here either, searched his mind quickly for places they could go together; safe enough for the two of them.

‘If you’ll give me a minute, I will fetch something and we can make our way to the human world. I need to repay a debt.’

‘I like it there,’ Ondine said, though she looked down at the water beneath her feet and laughed. ‘They find me a little odd though. My glamour will keep them at bay. It’s not a densely populated area?’
He shook his head, and she smiled knowingly.

They’d both never loved crowded places.

Gwyn teleported deep into the palace and let himself into the main treasury. He opened one of the coffers, took a fingerful of cut diamonds and placed them in one of his pockets. From there he teleported to the place where he wrote his letters and notes to others, and he quickly, but neatly, scrawled some words on a note before teleporting back to Ondine.

‘Come along then,’ he said, ‘let’s get you away from this energy.’

‘Yeah, I’d like that. Very much.’

He carefully rested his hand on her shoulder. He knew not to take her palm. He couldn’t risk her accidentally divining his future now that he no longer had an old lore aithwick hiding the truth of him from her talents.

Chapter End Notes

In our next chapter, 'Pearl:"

‘What was he like?’ Mikkel said suddenly.

‘Who?’

‘The other Reader. Mafydd Brant.’

Gwyn stumbled to a halt and stared at him, feeling the blood drain out of his face. He’d not heard Mafydd’s name like that – outside of his own head – for millennia. He felt like he’d been sucker punched in the gut. For a moment, all he could do was breathe.

‘How’d you, of all people, fall in love with one?’
Gwyn

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They meandered down a side street as Gwyn got his bearings. The scent of the human world was more cloying than usual, reminding him of the thick patina of human waste and synthetic chemicals he’d found the time he’d sought out Ash in a bar, to tell him where to find the very Soulbond that Augus now loathed.

Here in the human world, they were less likely to be observed by other fae. Especially walking alongside tall fences and strange doors that housed the vehicles humans were so partial to. They both walked barefoot along bitumen, a strange, eccentric pair.

‘He made me Outer Court, you know. As an insult.’

‘Weren’t you born Court fae?’ Gwyn said. ‘He – I don’t understand, Ondine.’

‘I should have stood behind him, I suppose. As the only other member of the Inner Court. I think he expected blind loyalty – but he should know better. He’s too…he’s not made for that world anymore. He should be beyond.’

‘A god, you mean,’ Gwyn said. ‘In the upperworlds?’

‘He’s become too enamoured of himself, and arrogant besides. But I’m not here to talk about him.’

‘Then why are you here?’

‘I just have to know, Gwyn,’ Ondine said, looking to the side, something distant in her eyes. When she looked up at him, her thick brows had pulled together, her eyes glittered. ‘Did you make me a member of your Inner Court not because we were friends, but because I was a diviner? Was it all…strategy to you?’

Gwyn contemplated lying in the stretch of time it took for Ondine to see the truth anyway.

‘I didn’t know anything could confound my powers,’ Ondine said, sighing. ‘But then the old lore was supposed to stay hidden and forbidden, wasn’t it? Clever of you. You used me, Gwyn. Every time you asked me to read your palm, it was just to show everyone that even the world’s greatest diviner didn’t know you were Unseelie.’

‘Why didn’t you vote for my demotion? I’d betrayed you personally.’
'Yeah,' Ondine said, nodding. 'I was angry. But not just at you. I- Gwyn, I didn’t pick your alignment because of that aithwick they put in you, but I did divine you – even if I could only do it a day at time, because your future was always clouded after the twenty four hour mark. But, Gwyn, I never said anything about some of the things I saw because it never seemed relevant. I respected you, and I- But I saw things that mitigated…'

She made a strange sound in the back of her throat, like water gurgling and bubbling away. If a land fae had made it, he would have assumed they were drowning. But with Ondine, and many sea fae, it was a sound of frustration.

‘You are Unseelie,’ Ondine said quietly, ‘and you betrayed us. But you were not acting alone. You don’t realise that I knew Lludd before I knew you? Lludd – Captain of the Seelie Navy? Sailing the seas and the Oak King recommending me as the world’s best diviner? You don’t think I held his hands and saw how he treated you?’

Gwyn stumbled to a halt, refused to look at her, saw the glittering asphalt and realised it had rained recently.

‘Why are you here, Ondine?’ he said, a third time. Perhaps now he’d get a real answer.

‘You should be asking me if I betrayed you,’ Ondine said, her voice husky, soft. ‘That I knew what I did, and didn’t tell anyone.’

‘Did you know I was Unseelie when you took his hand?’ Gwyn said, his voice hoarse.

‘No. That aithwick was a power unto itself. It extended beyond you. It forced the lie into all of us. I don’t think you truly want to know what I saw. But I could have told someone. I should have… realised there was a reason they treated you the way they did. Now the Court are saying that you did it on purpose. Both Courts are saying it. So you have found a way to make their cruelty work in your favour.’

She resettled her hair over her shoulders.

‘I need you to know that I know elements of the truth. That you didn’t play us all from the beginning. That you didn’t gull your ‘poor mother.’ That woman was a storm unto herself and you were the wreckage she left behind. But there are some that make treasure and shelter out of driftwood and wrecked ships. There are merfae that live in those shelters and barter those treasures. And you, I suppose, turned yourself into treasure and shelter for others. I respect that. I still do. Despite your betrayal. I’m Seelie, I’m not an idiot.’

‘Are you- Are you here to blackmail me? To…tell everyone what you know?’

‘I’d be offended by your lack of faith, except I know you’ve had very little cause to cultivate any,’ Ondine said, looking over her shoulder quickly when she heard a dog barking. It stopped after several more territorial threats, and she turned back. ‘No, I’m not here for that. Like I said, I want closure. I wanted to know why you made me a member of your Inner Court. And I want to know if…if things are better now. For you? Even a little?’

‘I never meant to pull you into any of this,’ Gwyn said, surprised, touched, threatened by her compassion. ‘You have to believe me. I wouldn’t have- But I did, and there is no excuse for it. I didn’t know he’d demote you. I didn’t know you’d abstain your vote for my demotion. You should have protected yourself.’

‘There, you see?’ Ondine said, placing a wet hand on his arm. ‘There is how you are Unseelie and
I am not. Or…that’s what I think – the lines blur so much, don’t they? Cousins across the river – but some of us live on islands in the middle, maybe. But you think I should have saved myself. And I think I did the right thing for the good of the Kingdom. I did my duty to the Seelie Court, that day. Yes, I felt betrayed, but did you betray our Kingdom? You saved us! The Oak King tasked a General with the responsibility of bringing down evils we were all frightened of – and you did it. And what did they do to repay you?

Gwyn smiled bitterly.

Took my armour, my sword, my name, my status…

They rounded a corner and stepped onto a footpath made of concrete. His eyes brightened when he saw the house.

‘There,’ Gwyn said, glad for the lack of cars in front of it. It was late enough in the day that he hoped they’d be at work.

‘It’s not like you to need to square a debt with humans,’ Ondine said.

‘I was…hungry, when I was underfae. And desperate. So I…’ He shook his head. ‘So I owe them a debt of gratitude, because what I did was tantamount to theft.’

‘Oh.’ Ondine’s voice was muted, and she was silent as they approached the letterbox sticking out of the ground. It looked like a tiny house on a stick. He stood over it, and decided this might be the best way. ‘It must have been a really hard time for you.’

‘It’s over,’ Gwyn said. Ondine gave him a look, and he thought he’d have to deflect her in the same way that he had to deflect Augus. He hoped that if he didn’t talk about it for long enough, the whole experience would disappear.

He drew out the diamonds and the piece of parchment, and Ondine looked over his wrist to read it.

To the family whom I trespassed upon some months ago, to take your comestibles. Please be assured I would not have done so, were it not a matter of survival. Take this as a matter of gratitude, and may my debt to you be absolved.

When she saw the diamonds, she laughed.

‘Oh, Gwyn, no. That’s a little too ‘illegal drug trade’ or organised crime, you know? You can’t give them cut diamonds like that. If they took gems of that quality to a dealer – they might come under suspicion; a middle class neighbourhood like this. You’ll give them more problems than they likely had before!’

‘What do I do?’ Gwyn said, dismayed.

‘Here,’ Ondine said, moving her slender but short fingers to the back of her neck and undoing the clasp on her necklace. ‘A pearl necklace is something they can claim as an heirloom.’

‘No, Ondine, I can’t, you-’

‘I have my debts with you too, Gwyn,’ Ondine said, smiling at him. She coiled the necklace in the palm of his hand, and then plucked the diamonds out of it. ‘Doesn’t that work out nicely?’

She tucked the diamonds into one of the small, well-hidden pockets on her dress and Gwyn looked at the necklace itself. He could feel magic in it, but he wasn’t sure what the magic did. He
tentatively closed his fingers around it.

‘What will it bring them?’ Gwyn said.

‘Protection from hidden threats.’

‘You wore this…to see me? Am I a hidden threat?’ Gwyn said, placing the parchment and necklace in the letterbox.

They walked up the street, away from the alley and the house itself. Gwyn never wanted to visit this place again.

‘Yeah,’ Ondine said. ‘You always will be, Gwyn. But, actually, I have another reason for being here…aside from closure. Something that I think might anger Albion, if he knew I was coming to you about this. But I’m mad at him too, Gwyn. He lowered me to Outer Court status – a redundant status – out of spite. And the sea fae – he’s angered so many of them. I’m worried for the future of the Seelie and Unseelie both. There’s meant to be a balance between the two. I thought everyone could see that. But the agenda of the Seelie Court…’

‘It’s been that way since the Oak King’s reign,’ Gwyn said. ‘I thought you knew. I – you’re the royal diviner.’

‘Was,’ Ondine snapped. ‘I had an idea of the agenda to eliminate the Unseelie Court. I thought you would change things. I thought we all might. That – and this will be naïve, thus proving that a diviner doesn’t know squat about her own life – you would realise you needed us. That you and I, maybe even Albion, would find a way to restore that balance in a way that…mattered.’

‘I didn’t know that,’ Gwyn said, stopping underneath the shade of a sickening oak tree. He pressed his palm against the bark and willed it to live, to fight on. There was a fungal infection in the roots, pesticides clinging to it from runoff and poisoned rain. But he could only Call animals to him, he couldn’t truly heal anything. His mood became heavier.

‘The favour I owe you, Gwyn, is something obvious that I think you’ve forgotten. It is that…You were never one to call in your debts, were you?’

‘That’s right,’ Gwyn said.

‘How many life debts have you accrued?’

‘A few,’ Gwyn said, wondering what she was getting at.

‘A few?’ Ondine laughed. ‘Well, how many of those debts are owed by the Seelie?’

‘Wait-’ Gwyn’s eyes widened.

‘Yeah,’ Ondine said, smiling. ‘Let me help you. I never really helped you when you were King of the Seelie. But that’s just it, Gwyn. Call in the debts. Ask for goods. Boats. Caravans. Horses. Gold. Whatever you like. They’re obligated. You know as well as I do that life debts go beyond alignment.’

‘But…I was saving them for a time when-’

An emergency.

‘Believe me, Gwyn. Now is that time. Call in your life debts. They already hate you. Make them
pay for their betrayal.’

Gwyn stared as Ondine beamed.

‘It’s something you would’ve realised yourself, eventually. But you can’t afford to lose more time.
Gwyn, a lot of the Seelie owe you, and owe you big time.’

She placed a wet hand to his chest, and Gwyn immediately felt salt water spreading in a damp patch through his shirt, over his skin.

‘I always liked seeing that faintly stunned look on your face when you realised something for the first time. There – and now I have given you this favour and our debts are absolved and…I find I am not as angry at you as I thought I would be. I hope you are not angry at me for not speaking up for you earlier. That you can forgive me for seeing what I saw and not acting upon it.’

Gwyn placed his palm over the back of Ondine’s hand, dwarfing it in his own. He met her eyes, the power of the sea running through her – she could have been anything she wanted; but she lived a quiet life, a reclusive one.

‘There is nothing to forgive.’

They smiled at each other, and Gwyn wondered when it was that the Unseelie and the Seelie had lost their way.

* 

Fenwrel didn’t end up finding her daughter Yukti. Instead, Yukti turned up wild-eyed and grinning like a true trickster at the Unseelie Court, striding into the throne room, her brother Zrimat following in a cheap, three-piece black suit from the human world. Yukti wore a vibrantly coloured sari and choli in the colour of flames.

Gwyn watched, perturbed, as Fenwrel was torn between expressing relief that Yukti was still alive and rage that she was so impossible to find. These sorts of parental emotions were strange to him, and he watched to see if there were signs of mistreatment – if Yukti inwardly cringed when Fenwrel spoke stern words, or if she was afraid when Fenwrel spoke of love and relief.

But no, Yukti – a whirlwind of energy even as a demoted underfae – only laughed and hugged her mother. She slid her hands underneath her mother’s arms and picked her up, spun her, even though her mother was a good foot taller than she was.

They laughed together, and he saw the joy and fire in Fenwrel. Around her daughter, she was more than the composed Mage she displayed to others.

Fenwrel gathered the rest of her children together, and Gwyn was grateful for a quieter Court that day. There were three others in the throne room. Gulvi and her guest, quietly talking to each other. Augus sat nearby, watching surreptitiously as he pored over notes. He’d seemed distant of late. Gwyn had gone to his room several times to talk to him and Augus was never there. The trows said they saw him frequently, wandering the palace, but that he never wanted to be disturbed.

Finally, the night before, Gwyn had left Augus a note on parchment in his room, on his bed, that had simply said:

* I am trying to make time for you, and you are never here.*

He didn’t think it was a coincidence that Augus had moved some of his work into the throne room
the next day. But he looked worn. Inner Court status made him stronger, his hair more lustrous, his eyes more vivid – but the lack of sleep was telling.

For someone who was so willing to dig at Gwyn until he unearthed painful memories, he was remarkably evasive about his own history.

When Fenwrel and her children stood before him – some looking awed to see him, one looking positively terrified (Fenwrel had introduced him as Suvidh – at which point Augus had looked up and stared at all the tall, slender man with brown skin and odd scars across one side of his face). Yukti only smiled with impish irreverence, not intimidated by either the Court or his status.

‘Children of Fenwrel, who is granddaughter of Fluri, I acknowledge all of you by name – Yukti, Vilasini, Zrimat, Uday and Suvidh. I – King Gwyn, of the Unseelie – reinstate all of you, along with your mother, Fenwrel, to the status of noble Court family. I take from you your status of underfae, and return you to Court status, so that you, your children, and your children’s children, may all know the gratitude of the Unseelie Court for the services you have bestowed upon us.’

Power swirled in the room. Colours of flame for Yukti and, surprisingly, Suvidh, and the others attracting blues and greens – sparkling and flaring along the marble flooring. Yukti did a spontaneous dance and then leaped at her mother, wrapping arms around her.

They each reacted differently. Zrimat looked uncomfortable – though that was how he seemed to feel about the fae world; Fenwrel said he was habituated to human life, and she wasn’t even certain he’d accept the status raise. Vilasini and Uday embraced, and Suvidh clasped his hands together and finally looked up and met Gwyn’s eyes, nodding his head in thanks.

‘Celebration time!’ Yukti shouted. ‘Come on brats!’

She ran out of the throne room towards the night gardens. Her siblings followed, and Fenwrel – after bowing briefly to Gwyn – did the same.

Gwyn turned to Augus, who watched him with an unreadable expression on his face. Gwyn walked over to Augus’ throne and sat next to him.

‘Where have you been, of late?’

‘Busy,’ Augus said, handing Gwyn some of the documents he was looking at. Gwyn frowned when he realised it was intelligence on Dogwill. ‘I don’t want to question him without knowing more about him.’

Gwyn thought about what Gulvi had said, and pursed his lips.

‘I’d like to talk to you later, if I may, about the common work.’

‘I know I could stand to see more underfae per day,’ Augus said without looking up. ‘But not without short-changing them of the time they require to make their needs known. It’s incredible that there aren’t more seeking you for status changes as it is, really. I-’

‘No,’ Gwyn said. ‘I don’t need you to do more. I…I’ll talk to you about it later?’

‘Mm,’ Augus said, absently.

Gwyn watched him, could see his eyes moving over the page, knew that he was reading and not just pretending to read. But still, there was an air about him which indicated that Gwyn’s presence wasn’t…welcome? Gwyn swallowed quietly. He’d thought, after last time… Hadn’t things gone
well, last time?

You didn’t once ask him about his health.

‘Augus,’ Gwyn said, his voice hushed.

‘What?’ Augus said, reluctantly tearing his eyes from the page and meeting Gwyn’s gaze. His expression softened. ‘What is it?’

‘I’m worried about you.’

Augus rolled his eyes. ‘You and every other person here, apparently.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Nothing, Gwyn,’ Augus said, taking the documents back from Gwyn and sliding them together, running his claw tips along the edges of parchment. ‘Nothing. I suppose if I assured you I wasn’t heading towards villain status once more, you’d not be reassured?’

Augus laughed blackly. He stepped off the throne and Gwyn reached a hand out to him, tried to place it on his arm. Augus moved away, narrowing his eyes in suspicion.

‘I’m just worried,’ Gwyn said, keeping his voice as hushed as he could. ‘Am I not allowed to be worried?’

Something flickered across Augus’ face, and then his eyes closed.

‘Of course you’re allowed,’ he said.

Gwyn stared at him. The words I miss you lay like tiny creatures on his tongue. Too vulnerable to be allowed. But when Augus opened his eyes, he must have seen the words anyway, because his face twisted. Gwyn felt exposed. He could hear Gulvi and her guest talking in the distance. He hated that they were here in public.

‘I’m tired,’ Augus said, glancing over at Gulvi and then meeting Gwyn’s eyes again. ‘I go to heal one of the Blighted lakes soon. I’m only tired.’

‘I could come with you,’ Gwyn said.

‘Do you even have the time? At any rate, it’s something I have to do on my own,’ Augus said, offering a wan smile. He looked around the throne room, then walked away.

Gwyn wondered what memories trailed him. He couldn’t allay the feeling that something was wrong, and he was far clumsier than Augus at finding hidden truths when they lay inside Augus’ heart.

*

Mikkel turned up a day later. Gwyn sent the trows to fetch Augus, then teleported to meet Mikkel in a room protected from other Unseelie. He had to protect Mikkel, especially now that he knew that Mikkel hadn’t lied about Dogwill Borough. The man still infuriated him beyond reason, simply by standing in front of him, a sly smile on his face.

He couldn’t be certain it wasn’t a game to him. Mikkel never seemed to take anything seriously. Except his clothing. Every time he’d seen him, he was wearing that red leather cord around his neck, the brick red tweed flat-cap that covered his curly hair.
‘I like it,’ Mikkel said, waving his hand at the room and palace. ‘Very sort of...gothic chic. It’s not even like Disney dark, yeah? Didn’t see any bats hiding in the rafters or anything.’

Gwyn said nothing. Eventually Mikkel leaned back against dark blocks of marble and hummed a tune under his breath.

The tune became a song, and Gwyn picked out faint lyrics:

‘I can even Read you right now...’

Gwyn made a faint sound of outrage and Mikkel smiled and went back to humming his song.

‘You really have mastered that love-hate relationship with Readers thing, haven’t you?’ he said, just as Augus opened the door and entered. He looked up and snorted. ‘This? This isn’t gonna work.’

Augus looked at Mikkel with no expression on his face, though Gwyn could tell he was curious. Readers were rare, and he’d likely never met one before. Augus walked around him and stood about a foot away from him, leaning his shoulder against the wall. Mikkel looked unbothered.

‘I can’t Read him as well as I can others,’ Mikkel said, jerking a thumb at Augus. ‘He’s hidden, but also there’s always signal jamming with fae that can use compulsions and hypnotism and stuff.’

‘Are you here on behalf of Albion?’ Augus asked, and Mikkel raised his eyebrows and then started laughing.

‘You’re both so stupid! Compulsions don’t work on me! Jesus, I keep like, putting myself in danger to see you, and you still think I’m working to double cross you to King Dick? I mean, really? Don’t feel so put out by it, babe. I’m sure you’re the best compulsor of all the compulsors. Compellers? Is there a- I think it’s compellers.’

‘What do you want, Mikkel?’ Gwyn snapped, and Mikkel directed a look of mock shock to Augus, who wasn’t playing along. Augus stared at Mikkel with indifference. Mikkel shrugged and smiled in response.

‘News, I guess. Bored. I dunno, name your poison. Actually I was wondering if we could go for a walk or something.’

‘Is it a trap?’

‘You might as well quit while you’re ahead, they really don’t work on me. And no. I mean, hell, if it’s such a problem, we can just go for a walk in those night gardens everyone’s talking about? Four walls and a pokey little room like this reminds me a little too much of Albion’s shite.’

‘If I can’t compel him, I don’t need to be here,’ Augus said finally. ‘Unless you need me to be?’

‘There’s no reason for us both to suffer,’ Gwyn said.

‘Oi,’ Mikkel said. ‘I take offence.’

Gwyn offered Mikkel a bland smile and met Augus’ eyes as he left. Augus raised his eyebrows as if to say: Good luck with that one.

‘The night gardens?’ Gwyn said. ‘Most are publically accessible now, and it won’t do to have everyone know you come here.’
'I shield myself pretty fucking well, thanks,' Mikkel griped. Even so, he let Gwyn take his shoulder, faintly cringing away from the hand as though he expected...Gwyn to hurt him? He didn’t like touch? He enveloped them both in light and they landed in one of the secluded night gardens that could only be accessed by the Inner Court and their guests.

Mikkel stepped away from Gwyn and rubbed his arms – Gwyn saw gooseflesh over his skin. Mikkel looked around and whistled quietly.

‘Yeah, I can see it. It’s nice, isn’t it? A bit gloomy, but—’

‘They’re not all like this,’ Gwyn said, watching as Mikkel sauntered over to a low, stone bench carved in the shape of a sleeping lizard-doe with horns curling back from her head. The forest around them was gloomy. Black trees with glistening mosses on their trunks stretching snake-like branches towards a dim, muted navy sky. Leaves waxy and catching what little light there was. Around them, peat and an aromatic grass underfoot that smelled of mint.

‘So you come with more news?’ Gwyn said, not wanting to sit next to him on the bench, and not wanting to sit on the ground either. In the end, he stood, feeling awkward.

‘Nah, not really,’ Mikkel shrugged. ‘I just wanted to visit. You’re interesting. Don’t get angry at me, holy crap. People can’t just want to visit? I suppose with all that extensive family abuse and you basically being a poster child for you know, the ‘damaged kid’ – maybe I can let you off or something.’

Gwyn stared at him, and Mikkel shifted on the bench until he draped one of his legs over the doe’s face. He leaned back, arms supporting his head.

‘Don’t get upset, Cupcake. I saw it. Not in detail or anything. But it was there. When you were underfae you were just torn open like...it was almost wrong how easy it was to Read you. Here Albion thought you were gonna be all closed up like- I dunno. He made it sound like you’d be a fortress. But I started getting feelings from you before we even got to your cell. It was sad, actually.’

Gwyn pressed his thumb and middle finger into his temples. Mikkel was a walking headache inducer.

‘It gets a bit samey after a while,’ Mikkel said, his voice quieter, a smile on his lips. ‘You know, a lot of people have been treated like shit. A lot. Fae, human, doesn’t matter. And a lot of people treat other people like shit. I saw that too, with you. People are all the same. It gets dull. But whatever. As for news. I dunno what you want to know. Albion doesn’t share military strategy with me. But he gets me to Read his generals sometimes. Most of them just don’t like you and want you gone and are kind of upset that Albion won’t let them gun after you.’

‘Upset enough to rebel?’

‘Against Albion?’

Gwyn began pacing, thinking it over. ‘Who are his generals?’

‘I don’t remember their names,’ Mikkel said, reproachful. ‘I mean most of them are sea fae and have hard to pronounce names anyway. I dunno, get one of your sea fae to find out. Alysia doesn’t like you. She’s the Polemarch. After Dogwill got defeated, she’s vowed never to underestimate you again. So be careful. Like...she thinks of militaries like shoals of fish, and she’ll attack that way. I guess. That’s all I really know about her.’
It was something Gwyn had concluded for himself, but it was helpful to hear it.

He kept pacing, surprised to find he did believe that Mikkel wasn’t there to betray them. Though he’d still verify everything, best to play it safe.

‘What was he like?’ Mikkel said suddenly.

‘Who?’

‘The other Reader. Mafydd Brant.’

Gwyn stumbled to a halt and stared at him, the blood draining out of his face. He’d not heard Mafydd’s name like that – outside of his own head – for millennia. He felt like he’d been sucker punched in the gut. For a moment, all he could do was breathe.

‘How’d you, of all people, fall in love with one?’

Mikkel pushed himself into an upright sitting position and rested his elbows on his knees, leaning forwards.

‘People don’t fall in love with Readers. Ever. There’s stories about it. Sad ones.’

‘Stay out of my head, Mikkel,’ Gwyn said, voice low. ‘Or pretend.’

‘No,’ Mikkel said. ‘No way. I’ve gone so long meeting like…hardly any Readers at all. And none of them – us – are happy. No one falls in love with us. Which isn’t like, a problem for me, but…I have to wonder. You, as sensitive as you are, how did that work?’

Gwyn stalked over to him and grabbed him by the collar of his shirt, dragging him upright, staring into his pale brown eyes and breaking out into a cold sweat.

‘Aw, Cupcake,’ Mikkel said, looking almost sympathetic. ‘I’m not him.’

Gwyn turned and threw Mikkel down to the ground, knuckles aching with the need to do more. He forced himself to sit down on the stone bench himself, his hands curled loosely into fists at his side. Mikkel stayed on the ground for several seconds, then pushed himself to his knees.

‘And I don’t really…want to be him. Given how it all ended between you both.’

Mikkel’s eyes widened as Gwyn stood, fists ready, violence singing through him. Mikkel raised his hands defensively, looking so much like a child avoiding a blow that Gwyn forced himself to stop. His breathing was shaky, he felt far too cold.

‘Stop talking about it,’ Gwyn said, as Mikkel lowered his hands and gave him a look that might have been mischief and concern together.

‘No, man. You get better at hearing it,’ Mikkel said, fingering the leather cord around his neck.

‘What is that?’ Gwyn said, nodding to it.

‘This old thing? A gift, I guess. From my dad. You know. ‘Farewell, son. I love you and all but I can’t really handle this ability that you’ve got that lets you know all these things that I’m super ashamed of. So it’s time for you to make your own way in the world but don’t forget me and all.’’ Mikkel laughed. ‘I kept it. I like it. I accessorised around it. Hat and the shoes. Can’t forget my dad.’
‘How old were you?’

‘Young,’ Mikkel smiled bitterly. ‘Too young. My powers activated really early. Like, too early for a Reader. Usually we’re- Well, anyway, something happened and my Reading woke up and I was like, ‘Wow my parents don’t love me all the time like they say they do and they don’t really love each other and the world is full of shit.’ You and I. We both got cynical pretty early, I think. Or at least I did. Whatever, I like to project my bullshit onto others because firstly – most of us have the same problems – and secondly, I think I’ve been Reading other people’s feelings for so long now that I don’t really remember how not to project. I might be projecting your own emotions back to you. Who the fuck knows?’

‘So you were turned out when?’

‘Fifteen,’ Mikkel said, grinning. ‘I was fifteen. Geez, you want to know, don’t you? You want to know the story. A lot of people don’t, but I guess you have a high threshold for pain, given you know, everything. Also, I guess you wanna distract yourself from all the Mafydd feelings you have. Whatever, I get that.’

Gwyn had never spoken to anyone quite like him. Even Mafydd hadn’t been the same. Gwyn pressed a hand to his chest as he tried to get more comfortable on the bench.

‘It’s simple, really,’ Mikkel said, his eyes twinkling with genuine good humour, despite the fact that he’d hesitated before speaking, and his mouth was more grimace than smile. ‘Doesn’t everyone go through something? I had a best friend when I was a kid. She was actually my age, which you know – rare amongst our kind, I guess. She was a firecracker of a friend though. Her name was Angelica, and she was a mourning dove shifter. Seelie, like me. Underfae though. She was raped and murdered when she was fourteen, by an Unseelie moving through. I don’t remember what he was. Some species that feeds upon sexual violence. You know – the ones that even Unseelie don’t always like.’

Mikkel shrugged.

‘I was the one who found her. And I figured out…like, what had been done to her. And I guess I just…really cared for her a lot, because my Reading kicked in that day. I didn’t know what was happening at first? Like, my parents were gonna tell me what I was when I was older, when I started showing clear signs of my powers. But instead I was like – I hid it for a couple of weeks, and then I started like ‘testing’ to see if I was crazy or something and they realised and they…

‘Well, they did the best they fucking could. They put up with me for months, you know, and I was a little shit. You think I’m bad now, but I was awful then. You know those people who like, when they’re hurting, they think they can do whatever they want to others and get away with it? All because they were hurting? I did that. I played them against each other. I was an asshole. By the time dad snapped I guess I expected it. To be frank, I was just glad he gave me the cord. I thought they’d just ditch me.’

‘Where did you go?’

‘I was a Reader. I didn’t go anywhere, I got poached about twenty metres beyond my parent’s gates and started getting sold off around then. I was picked up by the Oak King for a little while, but he didn’t like me. Trained me though. Trained me up good.’

Mikkel rubbed his hands over his arms briefly, looking around at the canopy.

‘If you ask me, Mafydd was one of the lucky ones. Like it wasn’t easy for him, I’m sure, but it’s
no life, really. Being a Reader. It’s boring and it’s all very like…the same. Interrogate this guy. Question this guy. Better not mind if what you say gets another person killed, like, that’s just part of the job.’

Gwyn didn’t know what to say. Mikkel didn’t seem inclined to talk anymore. He looked at the trunks of the trees around him, touched the grass underneath his fingers. Minutes passed and finally Mikkel turned to Gwyn and shrugged.

‘It’s nice, sometimes,’ Mikkel said. ‘To tell a story and have someone feel so…horrified by it, they can’t find the words. Means they really heard me.’

‘And do you really hear other people?’ Gwyn said, tilting his head. ‘It must get confusing, since you’re obviously quite powerful.’

‘Yeah, well,’ Mikkel said, and then laughed. ‘Whatever! It all blends together. It gets tiring, you know.’

‘Do you have…someone?’

‘Why does everyone always have to go there? Dude, like, no. We don’t all need some waterhorse to tie us down and fuck us until our problems don’t feel like problems anymore. I don’t do any of that stuff.’

‘I didn’t mean- I meant-’

‘I don’t do any of it,’ Mikkel said, cutting his hand through the air to emphasise what he’d said.

‘Because of Angelica,’ Gwyn said, and Mikkel made a sound of frustration.


Gwyn opened his mouth to say something, and then closed it again. A moment later, Mikkel pushed himself to his feet, shaking his head and laughing under his breath.

‘There’s nothing wrong with me and it’s not because of trauma, and no, it’s not just because I haven’t found the right person yet or any one of a thousand things. Jesus, after everything you’ve encountered, you’re having a problem because I don’t believe that sharing bodily fluids is the ultimate sign of true love?’

‘No!’ Gwyn said, and Mikkel rolled his eyes.

‘Uh huh. I’ll give you a while to parse that one, then. But, seriously, it’s not rocket science.’

‘I apologise,’ Gwyn said, after a minute. ‘You have me at a disadvantage. I don’t wish to offend you.’

‘I know that, already,’ Mikkel exclaimed.

‘You’re extremely irritating,’ Gwyn said. ‘Tell me more about the generals whose names you don’t remember? And Alysia? And Albion, while you’re at it.’

‘Fuck,’ Mikkel said quietly. ‘I knew you were gonna make it about business eventually. But I’m
coming back, and we’re talking about Readers again. I don’t care if it makes you uncomfortable. I don’t think you realise how important it is to me. Consider it my…debt, whatever. We’re talking about Mafydd again.’

Gwyn desperately wanted to say: *Don’t count on it.* The problem being he was quite certain that whatever knowledge Mikkel could gather would be so valuable that he couldn’t afford to walk away just to avoid talking about a subject that made his chest feel like it was on fire.

He closed his eyes and when he opened them again, Mikkel stared at him hard.

‘I’ve just never met someone who’s loved a Reader like you have, man,’ Mikkel said, eyes suddenly brightening. ‘Never.’

‘I am sure you have,’ Gwyn said, and Mikkel’s face was already transforming into shock as Gwyn spoke what Mikkel could Read in his emotions. ‘It’s a great shame you started Reading after Angelica died – that you didn’t get to know the regard she held for you.’

‘You don’t know that,’ Mikkel said, staring at him. ‘You can’t know that. How do you know that? You’re an idiot. You can’t know that…’

‘Tell me I’m lying,’ Gwyn said, glad that he couldn’t feel an intrusive energy shifting through his emotions when Mikkel Read him.

‘Just because you believe it, doesn’t make it true,’ Mikkel said, turning away and wiping at his eyes briefly, laughing in a way that was entirely self-deprecating.

‘I get the impression you’re not shocked easily,’ Gwyn said, and Mikkel’s shoulders heaved briefly, and he turned back, tears on his eyelashes, a smile playing around his lips.

‘Not many people surprise me. I gotta figure you can take it, if you can dish it out like that. Screw you, Cupcake. Even if she did love me, she certainly would’ve stopped once she knew what I was.’ He wiped at his eyes again, and then offered him a bright grin. ‘Like I said, man. You’re definitely interesting. Now, what did you say you wanted to know about those generals? I could do with a change of subject.’

**Chapter End Notes**

In our next chapter, 'Blight:'

‘*Fuck,*’ Augus breathed. Terror turned his body hot, and then he realised it was his blood gouting out of him. The knife flashed upwards again. It made everything Gulvi had ever done to him look like child’s play. He sobbed. His lungs weren’t working properly. ‘Ash- I have a brother. I have a brother. You don’t-’
Blight

Chapter Notes

No new tags for this chapter, but some of the warnings are current.

(Also, a giant thank you to everyone reading, and to the folks who are leaving kudos / comments / talking about it on Tumblr / doing whatever you're doing, you're amaze).

(Also, sulamoon did this incredible art of Gwyn and Augus and I think you should check it out!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Augus

*

The Unseelie Court had many libraries, all of which were maintained by the trows. The libraries were inevitably dusty – because as tidy as the creatures were, they had a peculiar aversion to dusting. The common fae servants that Gwyn also had in his employ kept the more crucial areas of the Court dusted – the throne room, their bedrooms, whatever they could get to – but the libraries were left in a state of oddly organised disrepair. Augus was forever trying to wipe dust off his fingers and failing after handling books and parchment.

It was late – late enough that the trows had come in to clean and looked surprised to see him there. He hadn’t made any personal acquaintances amongst the Unseelie trows, but they all treated him with respect; even kindness. They didn’t seem to cling to animosity like other fae, and he wasn’t sure why.

He’d waved them on and kept reading.

He had two stacks of books beside him, but neither had been helpful. Trying to find information on Soulbonds – how to make them, how to remove them – was impossible. He knew Gwyn had ways of finding information that others didn’t, but this was ridiculous. He should – with the resources of the Unseelie Court behind him – at least be able to find more than a passing mention about how they were a myth, or at the very least old lore, and that no one should use them anymore.

Every few minutes his hand drifted to his chest and he rubbed at it.

When Gwyn and Ash had both stood in that room – the two people he cared for most – both of them swearing that he needed it…

Even then, he’d known it wasn’t the right decision.

He sighed and closed the latest book with a snap, dropped it to the floor. It was ancient, contained mentions of magics he’d never heard of, yet still – nothing about Soulbonds.

He knuckled his hands into his chest and his eyes drifted shut. Ash wore his with pride, wearing short sleeved shirts that constantly exposed it. It was disgusting.
He’d been avoiding Gwyn. There was too much waiting between them, and Augus felt unwell, far lower in mood than usual. Augus wanted to find a way to deal with everything he was experiencing, before Gwyn peered into his mind.

He forced his thoughts back to the task at hand, dragged another heavy tome from the carved wooden shelf and rested it on his knees. Little demons looked at him with impish faces from the shelving and he turned away. He sat with his back against the wall, knees serving as a platform for the book. Gentle werelight all around him, but he felt trapped all the same.

He looked for mentions of Soulbonds, and after forty five minutes of giving himself a headache, he let his head thump back against the wall and focused on his breathing. His chest ached. He wondered what Ash was doing.

A scuffling sound nearby and he startled awake, the book falling to the floor with a thump. Fenwrel peered around one of the stacks.

‘My Lord?’ she said.

He waved a hand at the mess he’d made. ‘Research.’

‘I’m not sure what research you think you’ll get done, looking like that. Come here.’

She walked over, extending a hand to him. He stared at it in disdain, then stood smoothly, looking down at her and raising his eyebrows. She only raised hers back, a quiet sort of challenge in them, and backed out of the way so that he could walk past her. He heard her flicking through pages and braced himself for more conversation.

Fenwrel, who could use his compulsions against him without a second thought. He shuddered.

She followed him, he braced himself.

‘Why are you reading about such old magic?’ Fenwrel said. ‘You’re not magically gifted.’

‘I know,’ Augus said. ‘Good evening.’

‘Wait, if you please. Augus, have you thought about the offer I made to you? About the-’

‘Yes.’ Augus paused, rested a hand on the back of a chair. ‘Yes, I have.’

‘And?’

He turned back to her, not able to read her gaze properly.

‘Why are you awake, so late? Why are you always here?’

Fenwrel smiled, her face warming. Mouse ears twitched. She walked over to one of the tables and sat on the edge of the table. She crossed her legs, leaned back on her palms.

‘It is not every day that I get to plumb the Unseelie libraries for their knowledge. I’d like to do it while I have the opportunity. Life has taught me that things can become unexpected at a turn, and I’d best not take this for granted. Now, to you again – do you wish to accept my services or not?’

‘Do you know anything about Soulbonds? Do you know anything about removing them?’

‘No,’ Fenwrel said, her voice firm, but not unkind. ‘Is that what you seek in these books?’
He met her eyes. ‘I don’t even know how Gwyn found the information that he did. Let alone a Mage who could perform one. Leaving Ash with an open debt with a Mage – yes, exactly my point,’ he said, when Fenwrel winced. ‘They are two great idiots, and I wish to remove this…thing, it’s – It’s actually none of your business.’

‘It’s not,’ Fenwrel said, smiling. ‘That’s true. And for a minute I thought you were volunteering the information because you needed someone to talk to. It’s no matter. You do realise you still haven’t answered my question?’

‘I’m unsure,’ Augus said, lifting his hands in something of a shrug. ‘You say it may make me worse. I’m not sure you want to see the results of that.’

‘I’m not sure you do,’ Fenwrel said, and Augus resisted the urge to bare his teeth at her. ‘Augus, I don’t think you understand that I will be very gentle and careful with what I am doing. This is new ground for me also.’

‘Then perhaps we should leave it,’ Augus said. His face twitched. He risked losing the invisibility altogether. He had no idea what else he might lose sight of, over time.

‘My grandmother used to talk about you,’ Fenwrel said, voice softening. ‘It was an odd kind of affection. Sometimes she couldn’t stand you. Sometimes it was more than evident that you were dear to her. Now that I’ve met you, I can see what she meant. Won’t you sit down?’

Augus sighed and pulled out a chair. Once seated, he looked up at her and almost laughed at the thought that Gwyn didn’t trust Fenwrel, while Augus didn’t think twice about it.

‘Why do you want to break the Soulbond?’ Fenwrel said, and Augus shrugged. It wasn’t exactly a secret.

‘Ash’s life should not be bound to my life in the way it currently is. My life is forfeit, and—’

‘Do you truly believe that?’

‘If you saw as many fae determined to kill me as I do, you’d become quite certain. I’ll not take him down with me. I just want you to fix this damn poisoning. Instead you only ask questions.’

‘Give me your hand, palm up,’ Fenwrel said, and Augus extended it, fingers curling lightly. She flattened them with her palm, rested her warm hand upon his. The touch was cloying, he resisted jerking backwards. He felt a thread of energy spool into him. But then the sensation disappeared and he felt nothing, could no longer tell if she was using her magic at all.

Then he felt it, a small increase in those pools of green energy that he used to heal wetlands and swamps. Emerald sparked behind his eyes, blood rose to the surface of his body.

‘What are you doing?’ he said, staring at her, eyes widening.

‘Supporting what healthy systems you have left,’ Fenwrel said. ‘I don’t want to start prodding anything until you are stronger.’

‘I don’t feel sick,’ Augus said, frowning. ‘You’d think, if I was as sick as you say, I’d—’

‘I think you’ve had time to acclimatise to this. I think, Augus, you’ve had time to acclimatise to a lot of things that most people do not.’

She looked at him with that incisive gaze and he looked away. Her hand squeezed his and he
started to slide it out from under her grip. She made a small noise with her tongue. He stayed still, closed his eyes after several seconds.

‘Leave it,’ he said. And then he laughed quietly, because wasn’t that what Gwyn said all the time? ‘My apologies, I’m borrowing some rather bad habits from the King.’

‘I make you uncomfortable,’ Fenwrel said, voice measured. ‘It’s all right for you to want me to leave you alone sometimes. You can ask for that, without apologising.’

‘Would you say the same to the King?’

‘I would,’ she said, frank. ‘Status doesn’t scare me as much as it probably should. When your grandmother bossed around the Raven Prince, it makes you grow up with an odd lack of appropriate humility. And you? I thought you did things your own way too. You’re meant to be fierce, proud and unapologetic?’

‘Yes, well, and then I destroyed a Kingdom and can’t be trusted by anyone.’

‘Anyone?’ Fenwrel said, frowning. ‘Even Ash? Gwyn?’

‘Anyone,’ Augus said, meeting her frown with a wry smile. ‘But these are things it’s wise not to talk about. Must keep up appearances.’

‘He didn’t leave you with much pride, did he?’ Fenwrel said, nodding towards the hand she held, indicating the meridians that were polluted. Augus shuddered. When he pulled his hand away, she let him, and he left it in his lap, feeling cold.

‘Thankfully, one is not born with a finite amount of the stuff. It can be found again.’

Augus stood and resisted the urge to stretch. Whatever she had done with his energy had left him feeling sleepy and refreshed. Fluri’s manipulation of his meridians had often been harsher and noticeable. This was gentler.

‘See how that goes,’ Fenwrel said, scratching at her furred ear with sharp claws. ‘And Augus?’

‘Yes?’

‘I want to meet that unapologetic, proud creature you used to be, because you are not it, right now.’

Augus hesitated, looking over his shoulder at her. But she looked sincere, as though she wasn’t mocking him. He wanted to say something, some final words, a quip to turn it around on her, but nothing came to mind. After a while he turned and walked away.

*

A day later, he felt predatory, hungry when he walked to Gulvi’s rooms, climbing staircase after staircase until he was in one of the many turrets and still climbing with two bags of herbal cures that he had no idea would be helpful for Julvia.

He’d spent the morning interrogating Dogwill Borough. At first, he’d thought it would be difficult to return to fae prison cells. Worried about memories of the Seelie prison that might stir. So much of the Unseelie Court was filled with unpleasant reminders, he didn’t know what being in the cells would do.

But as he walked down the long, wide, underground corridor – passing empty cell after empty cell
– he was without fear. He thought about the time Gwyn had spent in a Seelie cell, underfae and weak, a time Gwyn never talked about despite the fear that clung to him, as though he knew he’d lose everything in an instant if someone else willed it.

Dogwill played at insouciance at first, but he’d crumbled nicely under the weight of Augus’ compulsions. It was a relief to feel powerful again. Between Gwyn’s resistance, Mikkel’s immunity and Fenwrel’s ability to turn them back on him, he was starting to feel like they were a useless power to have around the fae; a far cry from how he used to feel, having some of the strongest compulsions in the fae world.

Unfortunately, the interrogation yielded little. He did find out that Dogwill was not aware that Mikkel had been the one to sell him out. But Albion had clearly known that Dogwill might be captured, and Augus gathered nothing of true strategic importance. Dogwill was a pawn.

In the end, Dogwill was a sweating, shaking wreck on the floor, trying to raise a trembling hand to brush his lank, brown hair away from his tanned face. Augus stood over him and looked at the notes he’d taken.

Dogwill did keep insisting that there was at least one other traitor in their midst. But he knew nothing more than that, and the information sounded planted by Albion. Still, it was something to keep an eye on.

Gwyn wouldn’t like it, he was paranoid enough as it was.

‘You’re gonna kill me,’ Dogwill said, wrapping his arms around himself. ‘Just do it.’

‘Ah ah ah, that’s not for me, I’m afraid,’ Augus said, smiling toothily. ‘Gulvi gets that honour. She’s been quite looking forward to it.’

He knelt beside Dogwill and watched him flinch away. Augus hadn’t touched him once.

‘You know, I have to commend you for the attempt. Selling us out like that.’

Dogwill made a weak sound and his eyes rolled back. He was exhausted from fighting the compulsions. Blood vessels had burst in both his eyes, he’d clawed his own arms and screamed between gritted teeth, trying not to talk.

Augus had not an ounce of pity for him. The creature was selling information back to the Seelie for an extortionate amount. It was uncouth at best, to betray the Unseelie Court to Seelie fae.

‘Farewell, Dogwill,’ Augus said, walking from the cell.

Blood coursed hot in his veins and he wished there was a human nearby to feast upon. Using the compulsions for so long had wakened the waterhorse within, and he was careful not to lick his teeth, not wanting to cut his tongue.

Now, as he walked up yet another spiral staircase, he adjusted the bags and hoped Gulvi was where she said she’d be. In amongst all his common work, he managed to find time to harvest flora, lichen and fungi from the night gardens. He’d even snuck out to some land nearby, covering himself with the invisibility and wheezing his way through it, trying not to think of Tigbalan or Fenwrel or anything to do with illness.

It had taken several days to titrate and process everything he’d harvested. The trows found a lot of the equipment he needed, and he ended up using one of the extra rooms Gwyn had given him for the processing of herbs. It was a well-ventilated space, open windows exposing the perpetual night
sky beyond. Constellations he and the Raven Prince used to gaze at together.

He taste-tested everything he made. After however many months of being fed Aleutia’s cures, Julvia would need something palatable. It was all well and good to give fae medicines that tasted disgusting if they were aware that the medicine would help them. But all Julvia knew was that the caregiver who provided food and water and shelter, also forced her to consume things that tasted repellent. He was certain that if Julvia could come to like her treatments, her healing would possibly progress faster.

Though he was not certain it could. She was already a healthy swan. Calling the sister she’d been back into that body was perhaps futile.

He placed the bags on the ground and then rapped sharply on Gulvi’s door.

The door swung inwards, Gulvi’s frame blocked him from seeing properly within. He could only make out a lot of space, a lot of light – a skylight? Or, no, simply a great open hole that led to the sky above. He pointed to it.

‘That must let in an awful lot of spiders,’ Augus said. Gulvi shrugged her wings.

‘Bats, more than anything, darling. And they eat the spiders. Now, what have you got there?’

‘I need to show it to you,’ Augus said impatiently. ‘Are you going to let me in?’

Gulvi huffed, but she stepped back and Augus walked into a room which held a single, large bed covered in far too many pillows and cushions to be anything more than a great nest of fabric. Otherwise, the rest of the room was bare. There were sconces for werelight, but not a single bookcase, chest of drawers or wardrobe. There were two other doors in the room, perhaps leading to where Gulvi kept everything.

‘Do you not like it?’ Gulvi said, smirking.

‘I’m surprised there’s no fresh water,’ Augus said.

Gulvi tipped her head to one of the closed doors, indicating that she did, in fact, have access to fresh water. Then she looked at his bags once more.

‘There’s no table,’ Augus said, perturbed.

‘Use the bed.’

Augus rolled his eyes and set the bags out. He’d made about two weeks of doses – it would be enough to judge Julvia’s reactions and adjust dosages. Most of the medicine was rolled up into small, dark green pills. He handed Gulvi an itemised list of the plants he’d used, how he’d prepared them, the dosages.

‘Aleutia could do all of this herself,’ Augus said, ‘but as she was getting you to harvest plants yourself, she may be too busy. In which case – if Aleutia approves the medicine itself – I’ll keep making it and adjusting the doses accordingly.’

The predatory drive that found him while interrogating Dogwill disappeared as he explained each of the medicines and how they’d support Julvia. Most of the herbs were of a bolstering nature. As he talked, he remembered Fenwrel mentioning the necessity to boost his own remaining meridians, before they started any serious healing work. He had the oddest feeling that he liked Fenwrel more when he was thinking back on their conversations, than when they were actually having them.
‘Are you seeing Gwyn later?’ Augus said, as he closed the bags up and left them on the ivory sheets.

‘Mm, yes,’ Gulvi said. Her mood was sober, and she seemed to lack for quips. But she hadn’t mocked him yet for his collapsing in front of her the other day, so he felt no need to jab at her either. They’d entered into a strange sort of truce, and he wasn’t sure he liked it.

‘Let him know that I go to try and rehabilitate one of the Blighted lakes today. I’m not sure it will be successful. I looked for him myself before interrogating Dogwill – who, by the way, is free to be slaughtered whenever you wish – but I think he was with his generals.’

‘He was,’ Gulvi said, tightening her ponytail and stretching one of her wings behind her. ‘Should you be going to the Blighted lake alone?’

Augus shrugged.

‘If it works, a family gets their home back.’

‘And if it doesn’t work? What, exactly, are you setting out to do?’

‘If it works, I’ll tell you,’ Augus said, and Gulvi made a face. ‘As it is, I’m late to meet with the family.’

As Augus turned to walk away, Gulvi reached for him. He stepped back quickly even as he realised that she was only trying to get him to pause.

‘Do you think you can ever truly reverse the damage you’ve done?’

Augus swallowed, met her black gaze, the sharp brows pulled together. A flash of spite moved through him.

‘No. Just as you cannot bring those two girls back, no matter how you apply yourself to Julvia’s care now.’

She backhanded him, a step up from being stabbed in the gut. His head snapped to the side, and he collected himself. He didn’t like her insinuations, and he was tired of playing nice all the time. He was amongst Unseelie, most had done terrible things.

‘You’re disgusting,’ Gulvi said, and Augus resisted the urge to touch his cheek to check the damage. It throbbed, but she hadn’t split the skin.

‘And you don’t like to hear the truth,’ Augus said, walking away.

The only response she gave was a sigh as he closed the door behind him, but he was certain it wasn’t intended for his ears.

* 

He could sense the moment he entered Blighted waters, as he teleported into the damaged lake. The water was sluggish, it didn’t respond to him as other lakes and rivers.

He swam to the surface in human form, drawing a breath of cold air as he saw a family of five standing nearby. They were otter-pelted creatures with frog’s eyes and rows of sharp teeth, with a name unpronounceable to most fae, though in the common tongue they were known as otterkind. They fed upon the energy of accidental drownings.
He only knew the advocate for the family – a gentleman who went by the name of Amarth and seemed a quiet, peaceable fae. He was desperate for new land for his family, and seeing them all watching him with grave faces, Augus felt a pressure in his chest. He inclined his head to them, but only Amarth approached him. One of the younger fae – he couldn’t pick their age but they couldn’t have been more than about a century – watched him with a calculating gaze.

He saw a lot of gazes like that. A lot of the Unseelie didn’t like him.

‘You do realise this may not work?’ Augus said softly. ‘In which case I will appeal to Gwyn to allocate you fertile land as soon as possible.’

‘You’ve said all this,’ Amarth said. ‘We only want you to try. This used to be our home.’

Augus looked at the blackened mess of what were once trees. Rotting stalks of grass that had lost their ability to hold life. He thought of Gwyn’s horror the first time he’d shown Augus the wasteland he’d created with his light. Even though they were both Unseelie, he understood it. Landscapes were not supposed to be like this. Not anywhere, except, perhaps, the Underworlds.

Which was where he’d gotten the idea in the first place.

‘Of course,’ Augus said, turning back to Amarth. A breeze rustled the dead twigs on trees that hadn’t yet fallen. Augus shivered, looked back towards the lake.

‘Can you truly fix it?’ Amarth said. ‘I’ve lost family.’

Augus had nothing to say to that. He met Amarth’s gold-spun frog’s eyes for a long moment, then walked towards the lake, wavelets lapping at the bank. He knelt and placed his hand on the ground, sent his awareness through the waterways around him.

As he closed his eyes, he saw all the living waterways light up in a pale, vibrant green. And amongst it all, hollowed out in his field of vision, he saw the Blighted land. He could only see it by the absence of light.

He couldn’t detect any body of water with a genius loci so wounded. It was life he looked for, and it lacked in this lake. He could call rain back to this land and it might fall, but nothing would grow.

‘Please be patient,’ he said, as he stood and looked over his shoulder. ‘I have no idea how long this will take. I will return to you once it’s over.’

He swallowed down an odd lump in his throat and dove into the water, turning himself to bubbles and currents and allowing himself to sink deep. He had to use far more of his waterhorse ability than usual, as the lake didn’t have a sentience about it, didn’t help him. He looked for the root of the lake. He made his way to the bowl of it, spiralling down, gathering errant thoughts together and damming them behind a wall.

His mind became cool blackness. He could feel the knocking and clamouring of thoughts but in the water it was easy to not pay attention. He called on his waterhorse mind and sank deeper into himself and the river both.

What he was trying to do, he’d only done once before when he was very young.

It had been an accident then, he had no idea if he could achieve it again.

He pooled his awareness around the entirety of the lake. From the small spring that fed it, to the countless places where water threaded through soil and kept it perpetually damp, once nourishing
thirsty root systems and subterranean creatures. He extended his awareness – with some effort – above the surface of the lake where water evaporated, and down beneath the bottom of it, stretching himself out until it was difficult to know where he ended and the lake began.

He couldn’t drown in water, but he found himself wondering – as he lost awareness of himself and a crushing pain vibrated through him – if this was what drowning might feel like.

He reached even further, seeking a spark, something. Here, somewhere, a creature lived. Old as the lake itself, hiding, perhaps finding him as repellent as he’d found the Nightingale.

*Please,* he thought. *Please, let me in.*

When he’d done this accidentally as a child in his own lake; he’d not had to ask. The lake deva had enveloped him in a dream he’d had while in waterhorse form. He’d not known that land spirits truly existed before then. After all, he’d assumed that *he* was the land spirit.

He was grasped by energy, funnelled quickly down as a spiral of water into blackness. Terror pinged through his awareness. He panicked, then all at once he was pushed out of the funnel into a hidden space. Part of the lake and yet not, at the same time.

He opened his eyes and blinked in surprise. There, curled at the bottom of a lake cave, was a giant otter. Its pelt glowed pale green along the ridges of its ears, the tip of its nose, at the ends of its long eyelashes. Its paws glowed where they were tucked under its curled stomach and its chin. Its unmoving tail glowed at the tip.

Augus could see the glow of his own eyes lighting the way before him and he swam closer, holding his breath.

The creature at the bottom of the lake that had birthed him had not been any creature he’d seen before. And he wasn’t entirely sure this was an otter. It was – for a start – about the size of a cottage. Here, however, the water listened to him. He sank to his knees and buoyancy left him. He pressed his hands to the floor and was surprised to see fingers, not hooves.

‘My dear,’ Augus said quietly. He couldn’t see any wounds on the creature. Nothing that he might have to heal. It wasn’t dead – he could see its chest rising and falling.

Not dead meant the lake had a chance.

‘My dear, won’t you please wake up? I need to speak with you.’

The giant otter made a small noise like a whine, and then its front and back paws splayed in a stretch. It turned and sighed some bubbles. Kept sleeping.

‘Lake spirit, I know I am nothing to you, but will you not hear me? There are…there are those above who miss you. Who wish you to return.’

A wave of dizziness blasted through him and Augus raised a palm to his forehead. Either the creature or the place was incompatible with his energy. He was being drained.

He moved forwards on his knees, lowered both his palms flat to the floor once more.

‘Please…I’

The giant otter’s eyes opened. They were a pale white, and they moved to him. That awareness, centred on him, froze him to the spot.
‘Little thing,’ the otter said, without moving its mouth. ‘I was having such a nice sleep.’

‘I’m so sorry to disturb you,’ Augus said. ‘But it’s time to wake up now.’

‘Such a nice dream…’ the otter said, its voice sleepy and high, almost like a child’s.

Augus bowed his head further. It might have looked like respect, but pain built in the base of his skull. He forced himself to take several deep breaths, and the giant otter shifted lazily.

‘I didn’t feel well. So I needed to sleep. Sick things need rest. I need rest.’

‘Sometimes,’ Augus said carefully, ‘you need nothing more than some energy to get you started. And I am- Of course I understand that I am nothing to you, spirit of the lake. But I-’

‘You look familiar,’ the otter said, creeping closer and stirring currents all around him. Augus blinked through blurred vision and shivered to see a giant nose against his face, whiskers twitching. Those pale eyes – milky and translucent and veins threaded all the way through them – studied him.

The creature gasped.

‘I know you.’

Augus backed away from the sudden deepening of the voice. It sunk octaves and boomed through the cave. Giant paws wrapped around him, claws dug into his chest. He was held tight, staring up as much into the creature’s giant nostrils as its eyes. It opened its mouth and its teeth gleamed sharp in the dim light of its own whiskers.

‘You hurt me!’

‘I think I can help you,’ Augus gasped. He trembled and couldn’t tell if it was the pain in his head, the dizziness, or the knowledge that if he died here, his brother died too, and Gwyn would never know where he’d gone. ‘Let me help you. I did you a terrible wrong. I know it. I do not seek your forgiveness, I seek only to help you. Take from me. They say- they say I am a powerful waterhorse. I don’t know what that means. But I do know…’

‘Yes,’ the otter spirit said. Augus was rolled back and forth in the creature’s paws, as though he was a merchant’s wares being tested by a customer. ‘Yes. You are filled with much life. But I cannot kill you, little thing. And you are sick. You’d taste bad.’

‘Then, here…’ Augus said, placing each of his palms over a large claw and looking for the energy he’d called into lakes before. ‘Let me…’

He sent the healing, green energy through himself into the otter spirit. The paws tightened against him and his skin bruised, began to give. Water was crushed out of his lungs. Then all at once the otter stilled and made a sound that could have been a laugh.

‘Oh yes, oh yes, all right. That is- Yes. I see it now. Let me- I’ll try not to take too much, little thing.’

‘I thought you’d be angrier,’ Augus said, and then pain lanced through him. It was almost as bad as when he’d been force-fed liver, and his spine arched in spasms. His hands splayed, his eyes rolled back in his head, the arches of his feet cramped, his mane floated into his mouth and his scream pushed it out again.
'Oops,' the otter said, its voice high and childlike again. ‘Oops. Oopsy. Didn’t mean to- Here. Here we go. Here. Better?’

Better?

Augus exhaled harsh breaths, limp in the otter’s paws. He could hear a faint, thin sound, over and over, realised he was moaning. He tried to stop himself. He could hardly concentrate.

‘Oops,’ the otter said. ‘I was greedy.’

Augus had a strange sense of time passing. He kept expecting to be put down, but the spirit held him in a tight grip. He felt it nosing at him, giant scent-glands rubbing against his cheek. Whiskers tickled his skin. At one point the paws shifted, the grip became careful, considerate.

‘You’re a baby,’ the otter said. ‘How did you hurt me so badly?’

‘I was…shown how,’ Augus said, too weak to bother lying. ‘Shown how. It was… At first it was repulsive. To be shown. He took such delight in… But then I did it myself.’

‘You are filthy with poison.’

‘Can you fix it?’ Augus said, the words slurring together.

‘Oops. I was greedy. No. I can’t fix it.’

‘Please,’ Augus said. His tears burned in the cold water, his eyes were hot.

‘I feel a lot better now. Almost well enough to stay awake for a time. You brought my people back. I feel them. Above. Oh they can…they know. They know I’m here!’

‘Yes,’ Augus said, hardly aware of what he was saying. The otter shook him and Augus made a strange sound in the back of his throat.

‘Not angry,’ the otter said, its voice deepening again. ‘I don’t work that way. There. You nearly killed me. I nearly killed you. Will you come back and give me energy like this again? It was nice and warm, like the sun and green shoots.’

‘I have to…help other spirits.’

‘Tell them not to be as greedy as me.’

Augus laughed weakly. After a pause, the otter spirit laughed as well. The sound was ebullient, joyous. Something bubbling and bright rose in Augus’ chest. A pure contentment he hadn’t felt in years and years. His own spirit lifted, then fell heavily when the otter stopped laughing. After that, he felt the weight of his waterhorse self like a burden, and he kept his eyes closed, pretended the burning in them was from something else.

‘Are you…are you Seelie or Unseelie?’ Augus said, to distract himself from the weakness in his limbs, the pain in his body.

The otter laughed once more, then shifted Augus in his paws so that he was only being held by one. The other paw pressed against his chest with an odd tenderness.

‘Little thing, those words aren’t our words. They’re so arbitrary, aren’t they?’

‘Are they? Doesn’t…everything…?’
‘I’m older than those words and what they mean. And you are going to need a long sleep. You’re very tired. Thank you for coming here and waking me. I could have slept a long time, without you.’

Augus had the sense of rising upwards through the water, still being held. He tried to gain control of his body, but a throbbing pain in his nerves left him limp after several attempts.

‘Thank you,’ the otter spirit said. ‘But I don’t want to see you again, if you’re not coming to feed me.’

‘All right,’ Augus said, trying desperately not to think about the number of lake spirits he intended to visit, or the amount of energy they would each take from him. How could he even begin to hide this from Gwyn? He was supposed to see underfae the next day. He had to go back to work.

How?

‘Baby thing,’ the otter said, its voice soothing. ‘Baby thing, so sleepy. Get some rest.’

He wasn’t sure how it happened, but he gained a modicum of energy from the otter spirit. Enough that when it let him go, he could swim to the surface with slow, tired strokes. Enough that he thought he might have enough energy to teleport back to the Unseelie Court and drag himself to bed. He could explain it to Gwyn later.

It wasn’t until he broke the surface of the lake that he realised how different things were.

He’d not noticed the waterweed he’d swum past, nor the roots of lilies or carpets of green algae. He’d not seen the fish and crustaceans and tiny snails and little wyrms that could easily be mistaken for snakes except for their jewel-like eyes.

No, it wasn’t until he broke the surface and saw the green around him, that he knew it had worked.

It should have been a moment of personal triumph, but he was too exhausted to do much more than push himself out of the lake and stagger to his feet. His chest blazed with pain. It hurt to breathe. The waterweed stung where it grew out of his scalp, his head thundered. He took several ragged breaths, tried to master himself – it only needs to be for a few minutes – and then walked towards the otterkind family.

Amarth didn’t step forwards to meet him, but they all watched him with a careful wonder.

‘It’s yours,’ Augus said, surprised at how weak his voice sounded. He cleared his throat. ‘It’s yours. It’s done.’

‘And a fine job you’ve done of it too, Lord,’ Amarth said.

Augus noticed them coming towards him and managed to stop himself from making a face of distaste. He didn’t want to be thanked or hugged or-

He saw the glint of a knife and he blinked at it, then looked into Amarth’s golden eyes.

‘I lost two of my kids,’ Amarth said.

‘I- Wait- I have a brother…’

The knife flashed up and Augus staggered backwards, dread turning his insides cold. He held up his hands. He was shaking too hard to manage his own rapier.

‘I have a brother, Ash, and he-’
‘We know,’ a woman said. He stared at her. She had a vicious hooked implement in her hands and he tried to jump into the lake. Instead, a hand on his shoulder and a slash of pain that started at his sternum and raked deep enough into his belly that he felt a sudden caving where his organs were meant to stay in place.

‘Fuck,’ Augus breathed. Terror turned his body hot, and then he realised it was blood gouting out of him. The knife flashed upwards again. It made everything Gulvi had ever done to him look like child’s play. He sobbed. His lungs weren’t working properly. ‘Ash- I have a brother. I have a brother. You don’t—’

‘We had two more children,’ the woman said. Amarth stood in the background, watching grimly. Augus wanted to laugh. Wanted to say something about gratitude. Wanted to accept what looked like the certainty of his fate except he couldn’t, because Ash was-

Augus reached up with weak limbs, teeth sharpening in his mouth, poison dripping through his gums and sliding bitter onto his tongue. His claws scraped across skin and a knife slashed deep across his arm, severing nerves, turning one hand unusable.

‘Ash,’ he said, knowing it made no sense. He was begging them, but instead of saying ‘please,’ he could only remember his brother’s name.

He had so little energy left. He felt the heaviness of the Underworlds looming over him, poison in his veins and the Nightingale looking down on him with those red eyes. He was aware it was a memory, summoned what little energy he could find. He had to fight.

He growled weakly, the ground shaking beneath him. He stumbled backwards into water and they followed even as he snarled at them, a weak, exhausted creature.

*Baby thing…*

He made a sound of faint outrage and lashed out harder, catching someone in the side, but others advanced upon him. It reminded him too much of darker times, the Nightingale’s breath on his neck while he pleaded for something he knew was a lost cause.

*Ash! I can do it. I can do this. I can save you.*

*I have a brother…*

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**Chapter End Notes**

In our next chapter, 'Death:’

Gwyn was already reaching for the viscera, hardly feeling the hot, slippery mess of them as he gathered them in numb fingers. He could see cuts, nicks on Augus’ organs, and his mind finally clicked into gear and he realised someone had *done* this to him. Someone he could *kill*. He breathed through clenched teeth, broke out into a cold sweat as he saw ribs that had been broken in his rib-cage, lungs that weren’t moving, the bluish-red-black tangle of veins and nerves, muscle and ligaments and fascia, amongst the yellows and pinks and purples of even more.
All Gwyn could think, for a moment, was how horrified Augus would be that anyone would ever see him so exposed.

‘It’s all right, Augus,’ Gwyn said, his voice shaking, losing its force. ‘It’s going to be all right.’

*ducks projectiles*
Death

Chapter Notes

New tag: temporary character death.

No long notes before the chapter drops today since I don't want to get in the way of everyone getting their follow up after last week's cliffhanger; but thanks to everyone reading! And thanks also to those leaving kudos / commenting and otherwise interacting with the fic, you folks are great. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Gwyn
*

Gwyn was of a mind to leave yet another note for Augus. He had no idea where he was, and tracking his scent had left him with nothing but empty rooms.

He sat in the throne room, avoiding the dais and the thrones. Instead, tables hid behind columns and he looked over paperwork, making himself publically available for anyone who wanted his time. It was a quiet day. Fenwrel talked to Zrimat at another table. Zrimat was heading back to the human world and wasn’t likely to return for a long time, if at all. At a low bench, Gulvi idly sharpened her blades and had a sharp look in her eyes. She was either preparing to hunt, or looking forward to one.

A door swung open. Ash staggered in, and Gwyn held back a groan.

Drunk. Dealing with Ash sober was bad enough, but he’d learned – over the past two weeks – that a drunken Ash was even worse.

Gulvi stood, eyes wide, and Gwyn noticed the Soulbond on his forearm – black with blue luminescence set into his skin – pulsing as though alive.

‘Hey guys,’ Ash gasped. Gwyn took in the pallor of his face and the way he held the forearm with the Soulbond. Something crystallised in his gut, icy splinters shooting into the rest of him. He stood, lurched forward as Ash went to his knees.

‘Hey guys, I don’t feel so well,’ Ash said, and then pressed both his hands to his stomach and bowed over himself, taking deep, shuddering breaths. ‘I don’t…’

*The Soulbond hasn’t triggered when Augus has been ill, or injured, or having flashbacks, which means this can only be…*

Fenwrel now stood alongside him, staff out.

Ash tried to inhale through a closing throat and then coughed violently. He looked up, hardly seeing them, panic in his eyes.

‘Guys, just help him! Oh, fuck. Pl-’
Ash listed sideways, collapsed. Gulvi rushed to his side, pressed two fingers against the pulse in his neck. She swore in Latgalian as Gwyn turned to Fenwrel, heart pounding so hard he felt like vomiting.

‘Activate the tracking spell,’ he said, low enough that no one else heard. Fenwrel nodded. She shifted her staff, moved her fingers. He saw nothing, but he felt an immediate flare inside his blood and knew the location, the lake that Augus was at because it was one of the Blighted lakes. Gwyn felt slimy with nausea. Augus wasn’t supposed to do that alone, and he was – at the very least – supposed to tell Gwyn first.

But even as Gwyn summoned his light to teleport, the certainty of Augus’ location disappeared, and suddenly he couldn’t feel Augus at all.

‘What is happening?’ Gwyn said icily. Fenwrel stared at him for several seconds before replying. She closed her eyes as she spoke, concentrating hard.

‘He is in transit, but he cannot hang onto his teleportation. I think…’

‘We are losing his pulse!’ Gulvi shouted, her voice cracking. ‘And his heart, I cannot feel it beating at all.’

The crystallised feeling in his torso snapped in half. Gwyn resisted seizing Fenwrel by the arms and shaking her.

‘Where is he?!’

Seconds passed, and Gwyn’s hand rested where the hilt of a sword would sit on his hip. He couldn’t feel the temperature of the room, couldn’t feel the surface of his own skin. Ash lay still and pale on the ground. The only thing about him that showed any sign of life was the Soulbond, glowing so brightly it was almost incandescent. Zrimat stood nearby, staring in horror. Gulvi shook Ash quietly, muttered to him, petted his cheeks and checked his pulse and pressed her hands onto his chest and then held her ear near his mouth. She looked stricken.

‘Fenwrel, if you do not answer me in the next-’

Fenwrel’s eyes flew open, she grasped Gwyn’s forearm.

‘He’s here – at the lake in the palace.’

Gwyn knew the lake she was talking about. He teleported them both, not waiting for Gulvi.

He saw a limp form lying still, the water covering its lower half. He strode towards it before his light had faded. As soon as the glare disappeared from his own eyes he ran, because it couldn’t be Augus, not with so much of his body outside of him like that. His chest not moving, eyes open and rolled back in his head. His fingers limp and lying there, wearing more carnage than many soldiers who ended up dying in battle.

Seconds later, Gulvi arrived by teleportation, holding Ash in her arms. She saw Augus, made a small, inhuman swanlike sound as she lowered Ash to the ground. Gwyn could see more of Augus’ organs than he ever truly cared to. Beneath a shredded shirt, his Soulbond pulsed in a weakening glow of pale blue.

One forearm and hand was completely stripped of skin, as though someone had skinned him. But Gwyn knew better. Augus hadn’t managed a complete teleportation.
‘Gulvi,’ Gwyn said, turning to her. ‘Get Aleutia.’

‘Someone should-’

‘Get Aleutia!’ he roared. Gulvi nodded faintly and disappeared in a whirl of feathers. He and Fenwrel stood by the gently rippling lake, Ash and Augus lying on the ground. Gwyn bent beside Augus, noticed the way wavelets lapped at the curve of pale intestines.

‘Gods,’ Gwyn gasped.

‘Move them back into his body,’ Fenwrel said, kneeling by Augus’ head and placing her fingers on his temples.

‘What?’

‘If Aleutia can heal him – and he’s Inner Court; anything’s possible – you must at least make sure he is as whole as possible when she arrives.’

Gwyn was already reaching for the viscera, hardly feeling the hot, slippery mess as he gathered organs in numb fingers. He could see cuts, nicks on Augus’ organs, and his mind finally clicked into gear and he realised someone had done this to him. Someone he could kill. He breathed through clenched teeth, broke out into a cold sweat as he saw ribs that had been broken in his ribcage, lungs that weren’t moving, the bluish-red-black tangle of veins and nerves, muscle and ligaments and fascia, amongst the yellows and pinks and purples of even more.

All Gwyn could think was how horrified Augus would be, exposed like this.

‘It’s all right, Augus,’ Gwyn said, his voice shaking, losing its force. ‘It’s going to be all right.’

Fenwrel said nothing. Gwyn refused to look at the still form of Ash beside him.

He placed a hand on a bloodied shoulder, then touched a cold – just cold from the water – cheek and tried to smear blood away with blood-stained fingers, fingers dipping into the hollow under his cheek, stroking up to trace the lines at the corner of his eye.

‘He’s too sick,’ Fenwrel said softly. ‘I…knew he could do something like this to himself. He’s too sick.’

‘What?’ Gwyn said, staring at her. His fingers stilling on Augus’ cheek. ‘What are you talking about?’

‘He came to me for assistance. He has a severe case of poisoning from long-term exposure to underworld energy. It will make it…it will make this harder.’

‘Why didn’t you tell me?’ Gwyn said, staring at her.

‘He came to me in confidence, and…’ She saw something in his gaze and her own expression hardened. ‘He has a right to his privacy. You can put as many spells on him as you wish, Gwyn, and yes – I’ll grant you – the tracking spell has come in handy. But he has a right to his privacy.’

‘Can he be healed?’

‘No,’ Fenwrel said, shaking her head. ‘Though it may not matter now.’

The rage that flowed through him was so cold, so sharp, that he almost killed her there and then. He forced himself to look down, but staring at Augus wasn’t helping. He couldn’t remember how
to move.

*If Augus is...*

He fumbled fingers down to his pulse and felt nothing at all.

‘He’s not gone yet,’ Fenwrel said quietly.

‘How can you tell? He’s not breathing.’

‘His meridians are still alive, though barely. I wish—Ah.’

Aleutia arrived, a healing kit in one hand and Gulvi holding her elbow. Aleutia looked between Ash and Augus and then wrinkled her face.

‘You could’ve at least *tried* to get them to a cleaner fucking environment. *Honestly.* Oh, shit, never mind, look at that, someone finally gutted the waterhorse. It was only a matter of time.’

Gwyn stared at her, moving closer and closer to the killing edge and working hard to shove down his light. He trembled. When he’d been Seelie War General, he’d sent soldiers out to kill Aleutia and they’d all failed. But he wouldn’t fail.

‘Get out of the way,’ Aleutia said, marching forwards and giving Gwyn a hard look. ‘I mean it, your energy is *not* helping him. He needs *healing* energy. Not whatever bullshit you’re giving off. Fenwrel can stay. I need to know where we’re moving them, and I’ll shift Augus if I can get him stable enough to handle the teleportation.’

She was down on her knees, one leg in lake water and the other on moss covered cobblestones. She thrust her paws directly into his torso, staring at him, muscles in her jaw tensing.

‘This is not good,’ she said finally. She looked over her shoulder and glared at Gwyn. ‘I mean it, Lord. *Get out of here.* Tell us where you want him and we will do what we can, but your energy could kill him off. You do not make things grow.’

Gwyn realised she was right. His light was rising within his body. He couldn’t contain it. Any moment, it was going to crackle along his forearms and he *ate* fae. Just being in the same room with the two of them was dangerous for Ash and Augus both.

‘Transfer them to Augus’ primary room,’ he said to Gulvi. ‘Ash too, he won’t want to be away from his brother.’

‘Where are you going?’ Gulvi said, as Gwyn’s light curled around him.

‘To do something useful.’

*

He remembered the location of the Blighted lake from the tracking spell. It was a beacon in his chest. He’d braced himself for dead land and landed in an oasis of deep greens, thriving trees, a dense understorey and a lake covered in lilies, grasses and sedge. The croaking of frogs, the calling of birds, and a family of otterkind standing nearby, still covered in blood spatter and holding their knives and he felt his mouth curve into a smile and his fingers curled because he didn’t need *weapons.*

They didn’t all see him at the same time. It seemed to take them a moment to realise who he was.
‘You harmed a member of my Inner Court,’ Gwyn said, his light bubbling and expanding inside of him until he could see it himself – the glow that everyone else talked about. ‘My primary advisor.’

‘He hurt our family,’ one of them said. A young fae. Perhaps not more than a hundred years old. His voice shook. Their jewel-like eyes contracted and dilated before him. He scented fear.

‘I am not a merciful King,’ Gwyn said, advancing upon them.

His forearms ached as light ran underneath his skin, reaching his fingertips.

‘It’s in your best interests to run,’ Gwyn said quietly, and continued walking after them as they spun and fled, their feet pounding out across the landscape that Augus had revived.

He wasn’t planning on letting them escape. He wanted the chase. Saliva filled his mouth, the skin across his palms and fingers, wrists and the back of his hands split as his light bloomed. He flung the first ball of light and watched as it sailed firmly across the sky and landed square in the back of one of the fae. It took them down without damaging the environment, and Gwyn experienced an odd twinge of gratitude, because it would be a shame to destroy what Augus had made.

They screamed, pleaded, and felt only cold rage and the knowledge that killing them once wouldn’t be enough.

The remaining members of the family split up after he’d killed one of them. Gwyn pursued. One, a tall man, turned to stall Gwyn.

‘Get out of here!’ he shouted to his remaining family. Gwyn shook his head. It was futile. These were not as fast as fleet deer, and he could run even those down on bare feet when he felt the need to do away with bows, arrows and any semblance of dignity.

Gwyn snarled, brought his fist down upon the man’s face, then snapped his neck as the man tried to retaliate with his blade. The audacity of it all, knowing that Augus was- That Augus could be-

The creature’s spine snapped and Gwyn bore down upon the other one, sprinting through the forest. She was begging him for mercy, brandishing her knife at him, Augus’ blood slicking the blade. He had no words for her as he tore her skin open with his fingers and soaked his clothing in blood.

He could have slowly stalked the remaining children through the greening forest. A part of him wanted to. But Augus was waiting for him, sick, and he had the powers of King, and if there was anything they needed – any herb on any mountain that was hard to get to, any item from any Mage, he would get it.

So he used the powers of scent and sight and then finally his animal Calling and instead of stalking, ran after his prey. He found the boy first, struck for his eyes with his fingers and his throat with his other hand. The girl came out, shrieking, terror piquant on his tongue, and her slaughter was an afterthought.

He’d fallen to the ground while killing her, and pushed himself upright once it was done, shaking blood off his hands. He wiped off his arms on grass, teleported back to the Court, breathing hard.

None of them were there, only a large, watered down blood-stain where Augus had been.

He teleported to Augus’ room, nearly landing on top of Aleutia, only adjusting his coordinates at the last minute. A moment of hope when he realised they’d stabilised Augus enough to move him, but no, even here in the bedroom, he wasn’t moving, he was too still, and Ash next to him, neither
of them breathing.

‘Will making him King help?’ Gwyn blurted. Fenwrel stared at him in horror.

‘You can’t transfer your Kingship to someone who’s near dead,’ Aleutia spat, her hands still in Augus’ viscera and a glowing light pouring from her fingertips, Fenwrel’s hands by Augus’ head. ‘And I wouldn’t fucking let you. I’d quit healing before I saw that abomination happen. Now get the fuck out of here, if you please! He won’t heal with you in the room!’

‘Do you need anything?’ Gwyn said, his voice a rasp.

‘Get out!’

Aleutia was clearly past all patience, and Gwyn sickened to realise it was because she wasn’t certain if she could save Augus at all. He wavered in a moment of indecision, not wanting to leave Augus while he still lived. But his rage hadn’t abated, and he stormed from the room, closing the door behind him, pacing the corridor beyond.

Gulvi sat in a chair that had been placed against the wall. She said nothing, watching him pace.

A minute later, Fenwrel opened the door and pointed her staff at Gwyn. He bared his teeth at her, hands clenching into fists.

‘This? This is not helping. Gulvi, will you take him somewhere else, please? He’s far too caustic. Augus needs peace.’

‘I need you back in here!’ Aleutia shouted.

Fenwrel shook her staff at Gwyn.

‘You. Leave. It’s the best chance he’s got right now, Gwyn.’

‘Oui,’ Gulvi said, standing. ‘She’s right. Come on, we should both give them space to work. Fenwrel can seek us out, come here. Come here.’

She beckoned Gwyn over as Fenwrel nodded to her in thanks and closed the door once more.

‘I need to be here, in case they need something,’ Gwyn said, staring at her.

‘No,’ Gulvi beckoned him again. ‘La! Come here. Come- Or I could just come to you, mm?’

A steady hand touched a patch of blood-spattered skin on his arm, then closed around it. He took a breath, another, and then he was transformed into gale winds and they whisked through the palace.

They landed in one of Gulvi’s many rooms. This one filled with a daybed, a long table, a chaise, and more antique furniture besides. The room that Gulvi had called her ‘gift room.’ For some reason, many of her clients gave her charmed furniture in thanks for her services. After a while rumour had spread that she enjoyed it, and now she had many rooms of charmed furniture. The room itself projected calm and peace. Likely, one of the mage charms worked into the wood.

Gwyn turned a full circle in the room as Gulvi took a few steps back and stood nearby, the palms of her hands resting on the hilts of her blades.

He took a few steps in one direction, turned and walked back the way he’d come, and then started pacing. He couldn’t contain himself, not like this. Surely there were other people to kill. They had an itemised list somewhere, didn’t they? He could hear rough, shaking breathing in the room,
realised it was his own. He still had Augus’ blood caking his light-split hands and forearms where he’d placed his organs back into his body. He had the blood of those creatures covering it, the vague musk of otterkind clinging to his skin.

After several minutes, Gulvi stepped into his path and he growled at her.

‘Stop this,’ Gulvi spat at him.

‘If he dies…’

‘What? What would you do?’ Her voice was sharp, far more barbed than he expected. He stopped and stared at her. Words fell down on top of themselves inside him.

‘I need him,’ he said, staring at her.

Gulvi opened her mouth, and he could see the twist of fury barely banked. But then her expression smoothed and she stepped towards him, taking his blood spattered face in her cool hands. He realised then how feverish he was, how close his light to the surface of his skin.

‘Look, my darling, you may not have noticed – understandably – that you are not going through this alone. You are not the only one who has given his heart to one of those two brothers. And-’

Gwyn realised how callous he’d been. He’d not even thought of Gulvi’s connection to Ash, nor thought to ask her about it.

‘Gulvi, I-’

‘La! Be quiet, and listen.’

She rose on her feet slightly and pressed her forehead to Gwyn’s.

‘I’m listening,’ Gwyn said.

‘This is a chaos I hate,’ Gulvi said, and Gwyn could hear the dark smile in her voice. ‘And yet even now, I feed upon it. And I hate that more. But, Gwyn, they still live. Ash and I have blood-oathed to each other, and Augus has blood-oathed to you and vice versa. We would know if those blood-oaths broke. They need us to stay focused. Both of us.’

‘I can’t just stand here and do nothing,’ Gwyn said, pressing his forehead into Gulvi’s, feeling her fingers tighten on his face. ‘I need to kill something.’

‘No,’ Gulvi said warmly. ‘Perhaps we just need to spar?’

Gwyn considered it. He was too dangerous.

‘I could hurt you,’ he said under his breath. ‘I could, without realising.’

‘Then I will be armed with knives, and you will have yourself, and no light.’

‘I don’t know if I can-’

‘Then learn some self-control,’ she said. Her hands tightened on his face and once more they were teleporting through the palace. Gwyn felt as though the past moments of his life had been nothing but frustrated movement as Augus lay too still.

They landed in the middle of one of the enclosed sparring rooms. Empty but for a floor thick with
mats, some weapons hanging from the wall where Gwyn had left them, and one of Augus’ rapiers
nearby. Gwyn stared at it until Gulvi kicked him in the shin.

He turned back, crouching, hands coming up in fists. Gulvi grinned at him, her knives already out
of their sheaths and spinning in her hands.

He waited for her to make the first move, wanted to give her a chance to step back, to step away,
because his mind flashed horrific images in his head. His hands around Gulvi’s neck, snapping
bone. The sensation of pleasure as he’d forced Cyledr to eat his father’s heart so long ago that he
shouldn’t be able to taste the joy of it like fresh blood in the back of his throat.

She rushed him, her wings helping, and he stepped back, trying to master himself. Taking deep,
long breaths and shoving his light down so roughly that it hurt.

‘Have you forgotten how to fight?’ Gulvi said sweetly, tilting her head at him. ‘Are you some
neutered little thing now? Look at you, covered in blood and dodging a swan.’

‘Do you bait everyone you’re about to kill?’ Gwyn said, and Gulvi laughed.

‘So many fae fall for it. Oh no! A swan about to kill them! Come join them, Gwyn. Come see what
three thousand years of training has done for me.’

In the end, temptation and the need to forget that he was so useless while Fenwrel and Aleutia
poured themselves out for Augus’ wellbeing, forced him into action.

He stepped towards her blades, unafraid of the damage they could do, reaching for them with his
bare hands. The first time he did it, she jumped backwards, her eyes narrowing.

‘That’s a different technique.’

‘Come fight me,’ Gwyn said. ‘Come see how different.’

They moved around each other, Gulvi like a dancer, and Gwyn with the efficiency of someone
looking to get those knives away from his enemy and into his own hands. He had to that he cared
for her, and he shouted those words at himself as they began to spar in earnest, because his light
wanted him to destroy her.

She could see it in his eyes. But there must have been a thrill in it for her, because she laughed
more than she looked alarmed.

They exhausted themselves as minutes crept by. Both of them occasionally looking up as though
they could see through the ceiling to where Ash and Augus lay. When minutes became an hour and
Gwyn hadn’t heard from either of the healers, his energy began to flag, and he took yet another
slash from her blades. She dripped blood from his fingernails and teeth and at one point one of her
own daggers turned back on her. They were not fighting prettily, both relying on their healing to
absorb the damage they were doing to one another; Gwyn wishing he could funnel his own healing
directly into Augus’ body.

He sensed when Gulvi was done, even before she straightened and drew her wings back in tight,
wiping the back of her hand over her sweating brow and baring her teeth at nothing.

‘We should have heard something by now.’

‘I don’t understand it,’ Gwyn said, flicking sweat and blood off his body and gooseflesh rising all
over his skin. ‘I don’t understand why he did something so dangerous. He’s- He’s Augus. His
'actions are always ultimately self-serving.'

‘No,’ Gulvi said, kneeling down and her wings splaying tiredly. ‘No. He puts Ash first. Ash told me one night. Back when Augus was in the Seelie Court and Ash was perpetually drunk, Ash said that Augus put Ash first often enough that I ended up ripping Ash a new one for trying to derail my anger so. He was very contrite. But he was also very firm. Augus puts himself into positions of great harm.’

Gwyn thought back to something Augus had said a long time ago, in the Seelie Court. When he’d woken from a nightmare and had been too vulnerable, too raw – truths about the Nightingale, his captivity, slipping from his lips.

*But it had to be worth it. It had to be. I think of Ash going through a day of that, and I…*

‘Gods,’ Gwyn said, staring ahead. ‘I want to drag him into a room and not let him out of it.’

‘Darling, that’s just repetitive,’ Gulvi said quietly.

‘Not like that,’ Gwyn said, staring at her. ‘I only mean…he gets away from me. He’s done it before. He’s doing it again. I haven’t been…’

...Attentive.

Fenwrel had said he was sick. Underworld poisoning. He shuddered to think of it. Augus would have loathed learning that. Would have hated it. His reaction to being possessed with underworld creatures was horror and hatred.

‘Gods,’ Gwyn said. ‘I’m an idiot.’

‘Your neglect could indirectly get Ash killed,’ Gulvi said, her voice deep. ‘It’s not a threat, but I am becoming aware just how important Augus’ health is now. I can’t not. Ash is a hale fellow. Even as a waterhorse allergic to alcohol, he doesn’t care. He poisons himself because he enjoys the outcome. Seeing him…’

‘Why did you give your heart to him?’ Gwyn asked abruptly, and Gulvi’s eyes brightened before him, and she laughed while blinking away a tear.

‘La! You pick your moments.’

‘Sorry,’ he said. ‘I only-’

‘No, it is fine. I’ll tell you, shall I? It’s amusing, really. Everyone knows it’s unrequited, but no one really knows the story.’

‘You don’t have to.’

‘I know,’ Gulvi said, walking a few steps away, walking back, still filled with agitated energy despite having sparred themselves to a less intense killing edge.

‘We met at a concert,’ Gulvi said, smiling briefly. ‘Cockney Rejects, I believe. That we both managed to be in the same place at the same time was strange enough. But there we were, in east London, and we both managed to be in the same human year, around the same age ourselves, and he marked me out. To fuck me at first, but of course. Everyone’s prey when he’s in the human world. But I wasn’t interested. I told him to shove off, because I was there for the music.'
‘One thing led to another and we ended up drinking and wandering the streets, talking about issues with the fae world, delighted that we were both Unseelie and well…we hit it off. And I wanted a place to get away from the shit in the fae world, and he had given up on the fae world a long time ago. Do you know, I still don’t know why? What made him so tired of it, when his brother lives here and he loves him so deeply. You would think there would be something that drove him away? But he swears there’s not.

‘It was years of friendship before I gave my heart to him,’ Gulvi said. ‘It wasn’t all about him, in the end. I didn’t want to bind myself to someone in the fae world, someone…relevant. I- It’s hard to explain. I was cynical about love. Very cynical. I didn’t want someone to use a loved one against me. There I was, a mercenary using everyone’s loved ones against them. I thought my swan’s heart a waste of time and something to rid myself of as soon as possible. And Dubna, my mother, she warned me, she did…’

Gulvi laughed, spread her arms and splayed her fingers.

‘I never listened to her, and almost always at my folly. La! Except becoming a mercenary. That I was right to do. That has never felt like the wrong choice.’

‘Ash felt like the wrong choice?’

‘It’s not that simple,’ Gulvi said, dropping her arms. ‘The reasons I gave my heart to him weren’t as clear as they should have been. They couldn’t be. They never are! Swans think they have such pure hearts, but… Ash is worthy, make no mistake, but I never wanted to be with him. Even as I gave him my heart, without his consent I might add, because he would have refused it – I knew I didn’t want to be with him. I didn’t want him to fuck me, I didn’t want to lie on a bed with him beyond collapsing together on a bed with marshmallows and fried foods while watching silly human movies about very profound things.’

Gulvi rubbed at her eyes again. She looked down at the tears on her clawed fingers and shook her head.

‘He has always been a gentleman about it, even as I took something from the both of us the moment I staked him with the permanency of my love. But, Gwyn, I’ve never wanted to be with anyone. Ash gives me all of himself in our friendship. His love is a whole thing. He has such an abundance of it. It spills everywhere. It makes him do and say stupid things. It makes him wiser than he should be. He loves love. Whether it makes him a fool or seer. And me, with my cynical heart, I needed his idealism, his romanticism, all of it. He gives me something I have never been able to give myself. And he has enough of it – so much – that he can give it freely and I never have to worry about depleting him of anything.’

She smiled at him, the gesture free of cynicism and bitterness. Her eyes glittered brightly with tears, and in that moment he could see the softer swan maiden that lurked behind the hardness.

‘You see? Everyone thinks it’s unrequited. But that implies that it is one-sided, and it is not. They say unrequited love is not returned in kind, but he returns it. And they act as though I accidentally tripped over his feet, looked up, and fell in love with the stupid idiot he can be. But I did not. I made a conscious declaration to myself, to the world.’

‘A declaration in favour of romance,’ Gwyn said, smiling crookedly.

‘I’ll thank you not to mention that to anyone else but him. For he’s the only one who knows the whole story in full, and cherishes it truly.’
Gwyn nodded, but Gulvi drew in a shaking breath and closed her eyes, pained. After a few seconds, she opened them again and her wings spread.

‘And you?’ she said. ‘Why did you give your heart to the one who murdered so many of us?’

Gwyn didn’t have a story. He didn’t have a tale to weave for her.

‘He understood,’ Gwyn said, his voice muted. ‘He understood where others didn’t.’

‘What did he understand?’

‘The…the trap of it all. The Seelie Court. The awfulness of- He saw my nature. Even before he was a prisoner. A long time ago. I wanted to hate him for it. I couldn’t.’

He was rarely this candid with anyone, and he stumbled over his words. He opened his mouth to speak again when he felt an odd shivering pain move through him. It fluttered over his skin, then centred on his fingers.

He spread them, confused, and then watched, mouth dropping open, as the scars from blood-oaths he’d made to Augus disappeared from his skin.

Gulvi stared at the inside of her left thumb, mouthed the word ‘No’ over and over.

He teleported back to Augus’ room. He swallowed down bile, his body turned numb. Aleutia and Fenwrel were speaking to each other quickly when he arrived, Fenwrel by Ash’s arm – her hand on his Soulbond, and Aleutia’s hands somewhere in the gaping wound that was Augus’ chest.

‘He’s died! You’ve killed him!’ Gwyn roared.

They were screaming at him to leave, but all he could think was that the blood-oaths had all undone themselves and there would be no more touch and no more aftercare and it was gone, all of it, and he thought he’d fall apart before them but instead he was screaming back at them to do more. To do more and why hadn’t they asked him for what they needed and why couldn’t they just-

Gulvi dragged him backwards. Gwyn fought her off, trying to shake the blood-oaths back into his hands. A weight had disappeared from his blood. A bond that he needed, hadn’t known he’d needed until it was gone.

When he flickered with light, Fenwrel turned, a detached, cold sympathy on her face. She waved her staff at him, and he could feel the yank of forced teleportation in his skin and he yelled at her, threats and more, trying to break through the magic with his own untrained skill and failing, despite the widening of her eyes. He was forced from the room, Gulvi with him, and they both stood in the night gardens, Gwyn in the middle of roaring at them and Gulvi’s breath hitching.

‘I’ll kill them!’ he shouted, half in outrage that they would force him – the King – from the room. He called his light and Gulvi leaped at him, the weight of it causing him to stagger sideways, halting his teleportation.

‘Idiot!’ she shouted. ‘If they need us to leave, they think there’s still hope!’

But her voice broke. She slid down his body until her palms rested on cool, peaty ground. Her wings shook.

‘I’ve lost too many people,’ she said, her fingers clawing the ground. Gwyn watched her, hardly
able to move. ‘But if they want us to leave, they think there’s still hope. If they were…if they were truly gone, Aleutia and Fenwrel would have- They would have let us say goodbye.’

Gwyn stared at his shaking hands. The blood-oaths gone. He’d always chafed against the one that had permitted Augus to give him aftercare. He’d always wanted it reversed, removed. It was gone, and he curled his fingers together as though he could force it back into place.

In the end, he knelt beside Gulvi. At first to help her up, but he couldn’t move once he felt the earth beneath his knees. He placed his hand over hers. She turned her hand so it was palm up. They wrapped their fingers around each other’s hands and held on.

It was an hour later, Gulvi and Gwyn cold, still linked by their hands, when Fenwrel teleported to them. She looked exhausted and she was shaking. Gwyn couldn’t make himself stand. He was terrified of what she might say.

‘They’re not yet out of the woods,’ she said, her voice careful and stern. ‘But they’re breathing.’

‘Can I see him?’ Gwyn said, voice small.

‘I think you should.’

Chapter End Notes

In our next chapter, 'Alive:

‘He died,’ Aleutia said. ‘He died and he’s still sick. What do you want me to say? You need to keep an eye on him? You know that. Or you wouldn’t be here non-stop, with the trows bringing you food so that you don’t have to leave. I think he’ll wake up now, which is something. If you’d asked me a day ago, I would’ve flat out said coma. For months.’

‘What?’

‘We didn’t want to tell you. But anyway, I think that’s no longer a risk. With Ash doing so well, and them being connected by the Soulbond as they are, I think Augus will wake up in a day or so. But I’m not entirely sure he wants to. His energy has been resistant to healing. He’s fought me just about every step of the way. It wasn’t until Fenwrel tried to link his energy to Ash’s in a more concrete manner, that he started fighting a bit more. But, frankly, it didn’t help as much as we thought it would. So Fenwrel unlinked them again yesterday.’

She slid the needle out of Augus’ skin and placed it in a container. She sighed, folded her arms, faced Gwyn.

‘He needs rest. When he wakes up, he stays put. You’re the King, you make it happen.’

‘I intend to,’ Gwyn said. ‘Believe me.’
The next few days were nightmarish. Augus and Ash weren’t stable, and even though Gwyn was now allowed to stay in the room – he ended up in a chair shoved into the corner and was told to stay put – Aleutia was there frequently, adding healing energy, altering what she was doing from time to time, disappearing and returning on her own schedule.

He felt guilty for using his rank and status to make Gulvi handle some of the thornier Court matters, when she was also distraught over Ash. Guilty, but not guilty enough to leave Augus’ side. He was missing meetings with the Generals. It didn’t matter.

Neither Augus nor Ash woke. Augus’ breathing was laboured, and it was obvious he was in pain, even unconscious. His mouth was constantly tense, his eyebrows pulled slightly together. Ash, by contrast, was doing much better, and Aleutia and Fenwrel both claimed that he would be the first to wake.

‘It’s a good sign, Gwyn. It’s good, that Ash is doing so well. It means that Augus is pulling through, despite how he may appear.’

For Augus’ skin hadn’t started knitting properly, and beneath layers of herbs and gauze and bandages, his torso was still an open wound. It wasn’t normal for healing to be so decelerated and when Gwyn had asked about it, demanded an answer, Aleutia had left and Fenwrel had sat on the very corner of the bed by Ash’s feet.

‘Our prevailing theory is that he exhausted himself before the attack.’

Everyone knew, now, that Augus could rehabilitate the Blighted land. Rumours of how he did it spread, and Gwyn had been informed by Gulvi that an ‘unreasonable’ number of underfae had come to visit while Augus was unconscious. Gwyn realised he needed an expanded Court. Not just Inner Court members, but Court fae he could rely upon to handle some of these tasks. Just as Albion had Mikkel to act as interrogator and Reader, even though Mikkel was only Court status, Gwyn needed his own extended network. He wasn’t sure he would trust any of them, but surely it was better than the fragile Court functioning now.

‘He should have taken someone with him,’ Gwyn said, looking at the still, grey form of Augus on
the bed.

‘I agree,’ Fenwrel said.

‘He’ll be too vulnerable to rehabilitate further landscapes on his own. I don’t want him doing it.’

‘See how he feels when he wakes,’ Fenwrel said evenly, with a stubbornness that chafed against him. She behaved as though he didn’t want the best for Augus, but he didn’t think sending Augus out there again, just because Augus wanted to go – was in his best interests.

‘It shouldn’t be like this. His heartsong is balance. I tell you, he-’

‘His heartsong is destabilised. He is soul-sick, and has been since his time in the underworlds. He is a polluted creature trying to appear otherwise. It’s folly to accept his self-possession. He might believe in it, but if you care for him, you should doubt it. Augus cannot look after himself as he once did. And he might not ever be as self-sustaining a creature as he once was.’

‘Ever?’ Gwyn said.

Fenwrel looked over to Augus and something grave crossed her features.

‘He still believes that he is the same Each Uisge that existed before his encounter with the underworlds; but I do not think that being exists any longer. Not as he remembers it, anyway. And I do not think he’s come to terms with everything he’s suffered. I think he wants to be perceived as a villain, because the reality – to him – is far worse.’

Some of it was news to Gwyn, but a lot of it wasn’t. His eyes were drawn to one of Augus’ hands, above the blankets pulled halfway up his body. It rested palm up, curled slightly, claws filed down to bluntness in case he tried to claw at himself or the pain in his body. His fingers were long, fragile. He wanted to take Augus’ hand so badly, but Aleutia had cautioned him against touch. Apparently his energy could have a toxic effect.

‘If my energy is so bad for him, is it always that way?’ Gwyn said, reluctantly meeting Fenwrel’s eyes. He’d been avoiding asking the question for some time now, not wanting to hear the answer.

Fenwrel’s mouse nose wrinkled briefly, then she shook her head.

‘It is only when he is in a critical condition, like now.’

He sighed in relief, rested his head against the wall and looked up at the ceiling.

‘He’s coming to you,’ he said quietly. ‘To learn more about pressure points?’

‘And for healing. But he still thinks that a complete healing is possible.’

‘It’s not?’ Gwyn said, frowning.

‘It’s not. I’ve warned him, but he doesn’t yet believe me. I wish I were wrong. I’m not wrong.’

‘He must trust you,’ Gwyn said. His eyes were drawn to Augus’ hair. It lay limp on the bed, but not from the effect of water. He’d stopped shedding water from his scalp early on, and the waterweed he grew had died and been pulled from his head by Aleutia. She’d said it would stop him wasting resources, he needed all the water in his body, for his organs.

Even so, Aleutia regularly injected Augus with lake water. Enough that he had puncture marks along his arms and neck – those also taking too long to heal. She didn’t know how long it would
take for his scalp to begin shedding water once more.

Gwyn had always idly wondered what Augus’ hair might feel like when it was dry, no longer damp. Now, the idea of touching it when it glinted dully in the light and clearly wasn’t waterlogged, felt repulsive. This was nothing like the horror he’d felt when the shapeshifter that looked like Augus had been killed. This was something else entirely. A prolonged outrage, and the knowledge that when Augus woke, things were going to have to change.

‘I am not a good…friend, to him,’ Gwyn said. ‘To anyone. It is good that he trusts you. He needs more allies.’

‘I agree,’ Fenwrel said. ‘I’m going to head out and see if Gulvi needs any help. Do you want me to pass on any messages to her?’

‘Tell her to leave the work. If Ash is going to be waking soon, she should be here.’

Fenwrel smiled as though Gwyn had said something especially kind, and then teleported away. Gwyn leaned forwards and rested his elbows on his knees and his head in his hands. He only felt more guilty for not allowing Gulvi to stay the entire time.

* 

Ash woke first.

Gulvi sat in a chair right by the bed, watching him quietly for hours, something adoring and heartbroken in her gaze. Gwyn had read over documents and other parchments – assessments from the Generals, information on the underfae, missives from messengers and the trows – and tried to give her as much privacy as he reasonably could, without actually leaving Augus’ side.

Gwyn realised the moment that Ash woke, because Gulvi’s breath hissed through her throat and she was touching his hair, and then feathering fingers through it. Like Augus, his scalp had stopped shedding water for a time, but he’d started again two days later, and his pillow was now damp. Though he, too, needed injections of fresh water.

‘Hey, baby,’ Ash said groggily. ‘That was…some bender. Are you hungover too?’

‘You don’t remember?’ Gulvi said, smiling, her eyes wet and her hands in his hair and Gwyn stared at Augus and willed him to wake. To be a part of this moment. To wake up.

Augus still struggled to take regular, even breaths.

‘Remember what?’

Ash sounded confused, good-natured, happy. Gwyn shoved down a twinge of jealousy. Because Ash would realise he was there, and the mood would be ruined. Because that warm glamour felt so real when it was enveloping Gulvi and others, but it was nothing more than a weapon whenever Ash was near him. He’d never told Augus, but he…envied Ash’s glamour, his ability to be so easy with others. He’d thought, when he invited him onto his Inner Court, that things would get better between them.

‘Remember what, babe?’ He reached out with a weak hand and touched her face, and then seemed to realise where he was. He saw Gwyn sitting on the chair as his face turned, he opened his mouth to say something and then he saw Augus lying next to him.

‘Augus?’
Ash looked up at Gwyn, his gaze hardening.

‘What the *fuck* did you do?’

‘Darling,’ Gulvi said, as Ash touched Augus’ dry hair and then made a horrible sound in the back of his throat, trying to turn to face his brother and still too weak to manage it well. ‘Darling, Augus was attacked after healing one of the Blighted lakes. Gwyn and I, along with Aleutia and Fenwrel, have been working around the clock to make sure both of you *live.*’

Truthfully, he and Gulvi had done nothing more than get in the way. But Gwyn was beyond grateful that Gulvi was trying to get Ash to see him as someone who had helped, and not someone who had…

Possibly caused this whole situation in the first place, with his neglect.

Ash had started to pull back the blankets and saw the bandages, the blood-stains from sheets that were changed; but not frequently enough to be clean constantly. He went paler than before, trying to push himself upright in a sitting position and hardly managing. His eyes were wet, and the words he tried to say next were choked.

‘Oh my god,’ Ash managed, blinking tears out of his eyes. ‘Oh my god. Is he okay? Is he okay? Is he going to be okay?’

‘You’re the greatest sign of that,’ Gwyn said, as Ash’s hazel eyes shot up and met his. ‘That you are awake, and speaking, and doing okay – is a sign that he will pull through with time. This is what Fenwrel and Aleutia have both said.’

Gwyn didn’t say that they’d died. He didn’t say anything about the blood-oaths Ash had made to Gulvi having disappeared. Ash would realise that in his own time.

‘Oh my god,’ Ash said, looking at Augus again. He lowered his head towards Augus’, and Gwyn started to get up, wanting to warn him to be careful. But Ash only pressed his lips to Augus’ forehead and then braced himself, so that he could keep his head there without resting the weight fully.


Ash said nothing else. He didn’t move from Augus’ side, fingers in his dry hair and trying to move closer without actually pushing himself against him or hurting him. Gwyn settled back in his chair, and Gulvi sat on the edge of the bed, keeping one of her hands on Ash’s back, and closing her eyes. They were all tired.

* *

Aleutia returned a couple of hours later. She had many syringes of water, but upon seeing Ash awake, she walked into Augus’ bathroom and returned with a glass of water and told him to finish that up, and then go into the bathroom himself and drink another four. He was shaky on his feet, but getting stronger by the hour. Aleutia didn’t seem happy – she was a brusque healer, and her military background showed in her manner with clients – but she did seem to relax. When Ash returned, rubbing his hands slowly through his hair, she offered him a stiff smile.

But Ash looked horrified as she injected water straight into Augus’ body.

‘Why aren’t you using an IV?’ he said.
‘Because we’re not in the human world, and I don’t like them,’ Aleutia said, staring up at him. ‘You want to try your chances in a human hospital? You’re more than welcome.’

‘No, I didn’t mean that. Sorry,’ he said, wincing. ‘Sorry, I just…’

‘No harm done,’ Aleutia said abruptly. ‘Fae veins don’t collapse from repeated shots – though his might, if his damned healing doesn’t pick up. As for you, young man: I want you to start walking and moving around a bit more, and you’re going to need to hunt. But I want you to leave it for three or four days, if you can bear the wait.’

‘I’m honestly not that hungry, hey,’ Ash said quietly.

‘Your body has been through a shock, and since your organs failed as Augus’ did, I don’t think you’re up for the full range of digestion just yet. You’re functional, but not entirely back on board. Unseelie waterhorses can’t tolerate meat early on in their lives, and you’re…sort of back in that state again. If you start feeling hungry, go to fruit and vegetables first. Check with me first before eating any meat – even non-human. Got it?’

‘Cool,’ Ash said. He nodded after a few seconds. Gwyn still didn’t think he had any true concept of just how serious things had become. For all Ash knew, he’d only collapsed yesterday. Gulvi would let him know, he was sure.

‘Then get out of here, and get moving. I know you want to watch over your brother, and you’re welcome to come back in an hour or two. But for now, go and move your body around. Remember, everything you do for your health, helps his. Got it?’

‘Yep,’ Ash said. But he hesitated, and it wasn’t until Gulvi prodded him on the shoulder that he ended up walking reluctantly towards the door, looking at Augus as he went.

‘We need to get you some new clothes!’ Gulvi said, exasperated.

‘Yeah,’ Ash said, acknowledging her, but not really paying attention. Gulvi still flashed Gwyn a sharp grin as she left, herding Ash out of the room, giving them all some space.

Aleutia sighed when the door was closed.

‘How is he, really? Augus?’ Gwyn said, keeping his voice soft.

Aleutia slid another needle from the inside of his wrist and pushed in the next, shrugging.

‘He died,’ Aleutia said. ‘He died and he’s still sick. What do you want me to say? You need to keep an eye on him? You know that. Or you wouldn’t be here non-stop, with the trows bringing you food so that you don’t have to leave. I think he’ll wake up now, which is something. If you’d asked me a day ago, I would’ve flat out said coma. For months.’

‘What?’

‘We didn’t want to tell you. But anyway, I think that’s no longer a risk. With Ash doing so well, and them being connected by the Soulbond as they are, I think Augus will wake up in a day or so. But I’m not entirely sure he wants to. His energy has been resistant to healing. He’s fought me just about every step of the way. It wasn’t until Fenwrel tried to link his energy to Ash’s in a more concrete manner, that he started fighting a bit more. But, frankly, it didn’t help as much as we thought it would. So Fenwrel unlinked them again yesterday.’

She slid the needle out of Augus’ skin and placed it in a container. She sighed, folded her arms,
faced Gwyn.

‘He needs rest. When he wakes up, he stays put. You’re the King, you make it happen.’

‘I intend to,’ Gwyn said. ‘Believe me.’

‘I think I just might, at this point. And I don’t mean he stays put forever, but a week…two weeks. As long as it takes until I’m satisfied with him, anyway. Now, on the matter of payment – I was so happy with that seed I got last time, but the bastard germinated then never actually grew properly, so I-’

Gwyn’s eyes narrowed.

‘It took?’

‘Yeah, but it never-’

‘You said that if the seed germinated, you would come and work here. That you would become the Unseelie palace healer. That was declared as one of your offerings in the transaction.’

‘No, I said that if it…’

Aleutia closed her eyes. In that moment, he knew she was looking in herself to see how the debt they’d made in the Unseelie Court – before Gwyn was even King – resonated. Was she telling the truth? Was Gwyn? He leaned forwards. Could he just have landed himself a Court healer? They were hard to source, because many didn’t want to leave their day jobs. Gaining Aleutia – for all he didn’t love her personality – would be a coup indeed.

And he knew he was right. He leaned back in the chair and folded his arms, raised an eyebrow, waited for her to chafe against the words she’d laid down herself.

She pushed her hip out and rested her hand on it. Her black rat ears twitched rapidly and finally she reached up with both of her paws and pulled the tips of her ears down in frustration, catching tangles of red hair as she went.

‘Ooo, fuck you,’ Aleutia said. ‘I did say it. Fuck me.’

‘Welcome back to the Court. You have a week to tie up loose ends with clients, and then you’re working in residence here, thank you.’

‘You wait until you see my rates,’ Aleutia laughed. ‘Ooo, damn it, I don’t want to live in the same place as all you nutters. I suppose it’ll be nice to live with Gulvi. All right. Whatever. You’re, of course, right. I did say that if the Immortalis germinated, I’d come work for you at the Court. Gods, I even gave my word as a healer, didn’t I?’

‘If you like, I can contract out some more seeds as payment, alongside whatever other remuneration you require. You can keep trying. I didn’t expect it to germinate.’

‘You’re telling me!’ Aleutia laughed. ‘Whatever. Well I can’t stay for now anyway. I do have other clients, and I’ll have you know they’re not loose ends.’

She straightened her button-up shirt over her round belly and then her snoutish nose wriggled.

‘You got me good,’ she laughed.

She started to walk out of the room, taking the syringes with her, and Gwyn leaned forwards in the
chair. He’d forgotten to ask- He needed to ask…

Perhaps he should have waited until after he’d called her on her verbal contract.

‘Aleutia,’ Gwyn said. ‘Can I…Can I touch him? When will it be safe enough for me to be closer to him?’

Aleutia turned back and looked at Augus consideringly.

‘I should say never just to get some revenge but thankfully, for you, I’m not that petty. But not until he wakes up. Drifting in and out of consciousness is acceptable if he’s not feverish. But not until he wakes up and speaks a word. Until then, I’m sorry, but you’re relegated to the chair.’

‘If it’s so bad now…surely it means…surely it means I’m dangerous to him at other times?’

‘No,’ Aleutia shook her head. ‘Look you don’t understand how it works, which is stupid, given you were born a psychopomp and really should. The general rule amongst the Unseelie is that psychopomps are all well and good around the living, but should really keep their distance from the almost dead in case they, you know, hurry things along.’

‘But I don’t want to hurt him.’

‘And I don’t think you would! I’m not sure how much of it is superstition, and I’m sure it doesn’t apply to all fae who feed upon fellow fae in ways similar to you. But let’s be safe, yeah? Anyway, my week just got a fuckton busier, between the brothers that just won’t quit and sorting out the rest of my clients and moving into the palace. So I’m gonna love you and leave you.’

Gwyn nodded, even as he stared at the distance between the chair and the bed like it was a gulf. He hadn’t been able to touch Augus since…

Not since they’d laid on Augus’ bed together in his underwater home.

In the end, Gwyn sat on his hands, hoping that Augus would wake up soon.

Ash returned a few hours later, opening the door and looking at Gwyn cautiously, before crawling onto the bed where he’d spent so much time already. He couldn’t look away from Augus, after his initial glance at Gwyn. He slid a hand underneath his head, very carefully, and left his palm there cradling his scalp. The other went to rest on his chest, but that was still open and not up to pressure beside the bandages, so in the end he placed his hand by Augus’ collarbone.

‘Have there been any changes?’ Ash said, without looking at him.

‘He’s improving,’ Gwyn said, hoping that Ash didn’t use this time as an opportunity to insult him. He didn’t know if he could bear it. He felt frayed at the edges. He tried concertedly, frequently, not to think about the implications of Augus dying, about his own neglect, about the guilt that ate at him, about any of it. But consequently, he was thin on resources. ‘Aleutia says it could be one or two days before he wakes. She also said…he might drift in and out of consciousness.’

‘I’ve only seen him look this bad like, once,’ Ash said, touching Augus’ skin, caressing where Gwyn had been told to stay back and away.

Gwyn looked to the side. He couldn’t bear seeing Ash do something so tender, while Gwyn had his back to the wall and was under orders not to move closer to Augus.
‘When?’ Gwyn said, trying to keep his voice soft. There was a pause. He had no idea if Ash looked at him.

‘After he disappeared – you know, ah... when the Nightingale had him. He came to me after that. He looked awful. Worse than this, actually. Jesus. I should’ve... anyway, and thin. Like, he’s always been like... but this was just so much worse. He pretended he was fine? Sort of. We both knew he wasn’t. He left like, that night. He had these nightmares. Jesusfuck. I’ve never seen anything like it. After that I was shut out. Pretty much...’

Gwyn looked over to see Ash stroking Augus’ shoulder.

‘Maybe since before then. I don’t know.’

‘He does it very easily,’ Gwyn volunteered. ‘He makes it hard for people to care for him.’

Ash’s hand stopped moving, after a few seconds, he looked up. Gwyn tensed. He couldn’t deal with this now. Not now. But after a long minute of feeling scrutinised by something of a fae celebrity – he wasn’t sure how he felt about that – Ash looked down at Augus again.

‘Yeah,’ Ash said. ‘Yeah, he does.’

After that, Ash lay down and curled up into his brother’s side. He pressed his forehead against Augus’ shoulder and kept one hand on his collarbone. Gwyn picked up some parchments and read over them, and Ash fell into a doze. It wasn’t peaceful exactly, but at least it wasn’t insults. Gwyn thought he’d feel relieved, but there were too many other things clamouring in his mind. Peace never came.

* 

Aleutia had visited for the last time that day, about two hours before midnight. Now, as they eased towards dawn – Augus a lot more stable than he was before, but still needing regular shots of lake water and still not shedding water from his mane – Augus was beginning to rouse.

Gwyn thought it would happen quickly. That Augus would be breathing unevenly and unconscious, and then his eyes would open and he’d be awake.

Instead, it began with small twitches. Ash noticed them first, and then said his brother’s name a few times until he and Gwyn both realised at the same time that this was not... how they thought it was going to be.

He needs to wake up and say a word, and then I can touch him. He needs to wake up...

‘He’s hurting bad,’ Ash said, an hour later, when Augus had broken into a sweat. ‘Can we give him anything else?’

‘You were here,’ Gwyn said. ‘You heard what Aleutia said.’

‘Fuck,’ Ash said. ‘Yeah... whatever. Okay.’

When Augus woke, an hour later, one of his hands was clenched into Ash’s shirt and his knuckles were white. He shook violently, eyes moving behind his eyelids, in what Gwyn hoped desperately wasn’t a fever-dream, because that would mean he couldn’t touch Augus even if he did wake up and say something. He was standing now, in front of the chair, feeling helpless and trying not to think about how useless he’d been as underfae and how useless he was now, and how even status didn’t make a difference, when he couldn’t help Augus.
‘Ash,’ Augus said, his voice thick and wrecked. And then he was saying his brother’s name over and over again, and Gwyn wasn’t jealous – not exactly, Augus’ bond with Ash was fierce and sacred and everyone knew how important it was. But seeing Ash lying next to Augus, speaking soothing words, watching him with such tenderness, roused something fierce and unwelcome in his gut.


Augus’ head rolled to the side. His other hand came up and went for his stomach, and Ash caught it straight away, even as Gwyn took a step forward to make sure Augus didn’t do any damage to himself.

‘Shhh,’ Ash said. ‘Shhh, you’ve been hurt. You’re healing. It’s gonna be fine, Augus. Yeah? Come on, open your eyes.’

Several minutes of deep, shuddering breathing. Gwyn thought Augus had fallen unconscious again – perhaps he had, then he rolled his head towards Ash and opened his eyes.

‘You’re all right,’ Augus said. The hand curled in his shirt flexed and curled once more. He pulled Ash closer. ‘Gods.’

‘I’m fine,’ Ash laughed quietly. ‘It’s you we’re all worried about.’

Gwyn didn’t realise how aggressively he was clasping his hands together until he tore skin on the inside of two his fingers. He didn’t bother forcing his hands apart. Augus was right there, and awake, and Gwyn wanted to kick Ash out of the room and-

Augus made a faint sound of pain, breathed through his nose, and then his nostrils flared. He turned towards Gwyn, and Gwyn stared hungrily, desperate for eye contact, for something.

They looked at each other. Augus’ eyes not nearly as vivid as usual, dull and washed out and far paler than they should be. But his gaze all the same. Lips chapped and eyebrows drawn together in perpetual pain. Gwyn had sentence upon sentence stacking up inside of him, until they all fell down and he wasn’t left with a single one to say.

And then Augus’ eyes narrowed and he turned back to Ash.

‘The Soulbond,’ Augus managed. ‘Did it…affect you?’

‘Didn’t feel great,’ Ash admitted.

Augus made a sharp sound of frustration, and then another of pain. He turned back to Gwyn, teeth bared.

‘You- Can you do something about this blasted Soulbond? It’s untenable, it’s un…’

His eyes rolled back in his head, his fingers went limp, and Ash was trying to get him to come back, to wake again, but Augus had drifted unconscious once more.

* 

Aleutia returned at dawn, and Ash dozed again by his brother’s side while Gwyn informed her of what had happened. She seemed oddly disappointed to find Ash there.
‘You!’ she shouted, and Ash woke with a start, blinking groggily. ‘I didn’t turn myself inside out for you and your brother, for you not to be up and about, and getting your body working properly again. I want you out of here. At least a day. Go to the human world. Do whatever it is that you do. But clear out.’

‘That’s a bit harsh,’ Ash said, rubbing at his face in confusion. But Gwyn thought he could see what Aleutia meant. The more Ash seemed to lie down next to Augus, the less aware and awake he seemed to become.

‘It is. Because I need you well, and because your brother needs you well. You’ll have all the time in the world with him, in a day or so. For now, get out of here, go get something to eat. You haven’t eaten yet, have you?’

‘I’m really not hungry, hey,’ Ash said.

‘Go eat something!’ Aleutia said, pointing to the door with a clawed finger.

‘Your bedside manner is so uncool,’ Ash grumbled, walking past her and looking down at her as he went. But he winked at her as he passed, and the relief Gwyn had felt that maybe Ash didn’t like someone else aside from him, disappeared.

When the door closed, Aleutia breathed a sigh of relief and then faced Gwyn.

‘Thought you could do with that. You’re on leave, until I say so.’

‘I’m not leaving,’ Gwyn said. ‘You’ll not order me around like you just did—’

‘I said you’re on leave, not that I’m asking you to leave! Don’t jump down my throat. Listen to me. I know this is hard on you. I’m not an idiot. I’ve asked you to leave your lover alone during one of the most difficult times either of you has gone through recently. You’ll be a shit ruler right now if you return to work, and frankly, Gulvi and Fenwrel are doing just fine. I got Ash off your back so you can have some time with Augus. His fever is broken. Be as close to him as you like.’

‘What?’ Gwyn said, forgetting his Court manners and side-stepping towards the bed, testing her response. She didn’t yell at him.

‘Use your powers to change the permissions and lock yourself in with him, I don’t care. But I’m telling Gulvi and Ash that you and Augus are on leave until I say so. Forced holiday. Not much of one stuck in these rooms, but you need sleep, and he needs rest. He can’t have any more analgesia, though he’s going to want it. I’m sorry, you’ll have to find a way to deal with that. I’m knocking my visits down to twice a day from here on out until he’s recovered. If there’s an emergency, fetch me.’

‘What’s an emergency?’ Gwyn said, staring at her.

‘If he doesn’t wake again in the next twelve hours, or if he stops breathing. Either one.’

But then she hesitated and started talking to him in detail about all the things he should be on the lookout for. Instructions on how much water he should drink once he’s capable and to monitor his scalp and make sure that his wound started knitting over properly – and to remove the gauze once it had. In the end, more than twenty minutes had passed before Aleutia offered him a half smile and nodded her farewell.

She teleported away, and Gwyn stood alone in Augus’ room, Augus breathing evenly, steadily on the bed.
He didn’t go to the bed straight away. Not yet. He wanted to, desperately, but first he went to the closed door and pressed his palms against it. Leaned his forehead to the wood. Changing the permissions was easy enough. And he could let people in if they knocked. He just wanted a space where only he, Augus and Aleutia could enter. Just for a little while.

After that he walked over to the bed and instead of crawling onto it, he knelt on the floor by Augus’ side. He folded his arms on a section of bedspread that smelled of Augus’ dried blood, rested his head on his wrists. The position hurt his shoulder, but he couldn’t bring himself to move. He had permission from Aleutia to touch Augus. Why was it so hard to just reach out and touch him? Ash found it easy.

He took several deep, shaking breaths and then stood up and walked back to the chair – that he now thoroughly hated – and brought it over to Augus’ bedside. He sat and looked at Augus’ face. He reached for his hand carefully. Touching the cool backs of his knuckles, repeating the touch again after jerking back. But Augus didn’t seem to respond. Didn’t seem to have a negative response to his presence.

He swallowed a lump in his throat and took Augus’ hand into both of his. Augus was almost his height, his fingers were as long as Gwyn’s, though his palms were thinner and smaller. There were fresh calluses on his palm, but Gwyn couldn’t tell what they were from, because Augus was left-hand dominant like he was, and so he would be wielding his rapier with the other hand. Something else, perhaps?

He turned Augus’ hand carefully, looking at the pattern of calluses and then hissed out a breath when he realised what they were from.

How long had Augus been digging his own claws into his palm for? How long and how deeply, for calluses to build up? He stood and reached over for Augus’ other hand and turned it. There, a pattern of calluses from rapier use. And, along the top of his palm, four calluses under each of his fingers.

‘Oh, Augus,’ Gwyn said softly, sitting down and taking Augus’ right hand again. He raised his knuckles to his lips and closed his eyes. He was clueless, and Augus had nearly died because of it.

Not just ‘nearly died.’

Gwyn shuddered.

After some time, he carefully drew the blankets back. He lifted gauze and stared, trembling, at the new skin that had formed over his wounds. It was translucent. He could see straight through it to organs within – organs that he had placed back in his body, that he had felt over his hands and scented in the back of his nose.

He scrambled to Augus’ bathroom and threw up violently, hands gripping either side of the toilet so hard his fingers hurt.

He could feel the weight of it pressing down upon him and he closed his eyes, gagged, spat saliva and bile into the toilet and then staggered over to the sink, running water from the tap and scooping it up with his hands. Drinking it, rubbing it over his face, trying to clear away the sense that he was falling from a great height.

But he couldn’t rid himself of the sensation, and eventually walked back into the bedroom and sat by Augus’ side once more, taking his hand and squeezing it gently. He listened to the sound of Augus breathing.
He had to stay here, he knew that. Maybe Augus wouldn’t want him in the room when he woke up. Maybe he would talk, again, about how neglectful Gwyn had been. They both knew it. Would Augus look at him with condemnation?

Did it matter? Gwyn wasn’t going to leave his side, no matter what Augus said to him. Everything else could wait. He wished he’d realised that sooner.

*

The trows tapped quietly on the door. He recognised their little knocks and changed the permissions, and they looked between he and Augus and handed him a hamper of food that Gwyn wasn’t certain he’d be able to stomach. But he nodded in thanks to them, watched them scuttle off down the corridor to whatever they were going to do next. He closed the door, left the permissions. He didn’t mind the trows coming.

He put the hamper down and went to take Augus’ hand, only to freeze when he saw slivers of green peering at him from under thick lashes.

‘Augus?’ Gwyn said.

Augus made a faint sound, then another, pained. He squeezed his eyes shut and his breathing wheezed in his throat. His arms started to lift on either side, then dropped back down to the bed.

‘Analgesics,’ Augus rasped.

His next exhale was a series of shallow sobs and he shook his head slowly from side to side. His eyes closed tighter, he snarled, and then a tear leaked down the side of his face.

‘Get me something,’ Augus said.

‘I…’

Augus’ eyes opened, pain making them bright, and he looked as though he would tear Gwyn apart, if he could only move.

‘You cannot have anymore,’ Gwyn said, his voice firm. ‘Aleutia’s orders.’

‘I can have…ule-moss, at least,’ Augus said, eyes narrowing in challenge.

‘No,’ Gwyn said.

He sat down cautiously by the bed, as Augus’ fingers curled into fists and he turned his head to the side, trembling. A high, thin noise pushed out on the next exhale. Gwyn’s mind stumbled over an unwanted memory, a time when Augus had shaken in agony in his arms and then Augus unhelpfully said:

‘This reminds me…of when you fed me liver.’

‘Augus.’

He told himself his voice didn’t break.

‘I don’t have…your mastery of pain,’ Augus said, dark amusement in his tone, despite how he struggled to shape the words through the worst bout of shivering. ‘I’m not…like you. I need more.’

‘I can’t,’ Gwyn said, reaching for his hand. And then he had an idea.
I’m not…like you.

Gwyn leaned forwards and lay his arm carefully across Augus’ chest, not resting any of his weight. He lifted one of Augus’ hands and lowered it to his forearm. Lifted the other and placed it, as Augus finally turned his head to watch what he was doing.

‘Augus, hurt me,’ Gwyn said, his voice low, sure. ‘Hurt me. You know I can handle it. You want to lash out, don’t you? Aren’t you angry that I’m not giving you more painkillers?’

Augus’ fingers slowly turned, blunt fingers pressing hesitantly into his skin, then moving into precise positions. Pressure points. Gwyn closed his eyes.

Gwyn thought that Augus would ask, would double check, but after several seconds of Augus’ unsteady, shallow breaths, Augus’ hands clenched around his forearm in a horrible grip. Every one of his fingers seemed to find pressure points that evoked pain and Gwyn’s body tensed, he made a faint, thready sound and then clenched his teeth together and forced himself to breathe through it.

He could ride this out, he could.

‘Does it help?’ Gwyn said, a blaze of white flooding across his vision. His arm jerked, an involuntary impulse that he couldn’t control, and Augus’ grip tightened.

‘Yes,’ Augus growled.

It was helping. He was helping. Finally he was doing something that mattered. He began shaking, almost as violently as Augus, refused to open his eyes. His breathing became audible, and Augus hushed him on an uneven breath.

‘Shhh,’ Augus said, something malicious and pained and sharp in his voice. ‘Shhh. Let me. Just let me. You’re much better at this than I am.’

Gwyn nodded, because he couldn’t think of what else to do. He didn’t think it was true, anyway. He wasn’t recovering from being recently disembowelled.

But Augus didn’t let up, and the pain continued, lanced down his arm and into his good shoulder and then across into his bad shoulder. And then he bowed over Augus’ body and tried not to cry out, and failed.

‘Shhh,’ Augus said, something softer in his voice. ‘Just…a little…longer.’

But Gwyn would put up with it for as long as he needed to. Because Augus was talking to him, and wasn’t sending him away, and he was alive.

Chapter End Notes

In our next chapter, ‘Blood:

‘What am I supposed to oath to you?’ Augus said, his lips moving against Gwyn’s lips, and Gwyn’s mouth opening just enough to catch Augus’ lower lip and then stay there, making it impossible for Augus to say anything else without breaking the kiss. He wanted the kiss more than he wanted the words. He stroked fingers along Gwyn’s carotid artery, feeling the heavy, rapid thump there and thinking of all that blood
coursing beneath his veins. When Gwyn pulled back to kiss him again, Augus spoke in the space between them.

‘Do I oath never to walk into a dangerous situation, and get killed breaking the oath simply for living in the Unseelie Court? What do you want from me, Gwyn? How can you make my life safer?’

‘You knew it was dangerous,’ Gwyn said, his voice low. ‘You knew. That’s why you didn’t tell anyone of relevance. That’s why you didn’t tell me, or, or if I don’t matter-that’s why you didn’t tell Ash. Because I know you enough, Augus, to know that when you’re about to do something very, very stupid, and very, very dangerous, you don’t tell the people you should. Fenwrel told me you’re very sick. Very sick.’

‘Shut up,’ Augus said, feeling tired. The dull pain in his body strengthened. His grip on Gwyn’s neck became stronger as he started to sag. ‘Shut up.’
Blood

Chapter Notes

A lot more of the 'comfort' part of hurt/comfort in this chapter, I think some folks will be happy to hear! And thanks so much to everyone reading / kudosing / commenting, who are along on this strange, epic journey with me! <3 You folks are awesome. Seriously.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Augus

*

He struggled to consciousness again. He didn’t know why he bothered swimming to the surface of his mind. Everything hurt.

Noises, his own noises, he couldn’t stifle them. All that vaunted self-control gone. The humiliation of it was worse than the pain itself. The Nightingale had seen him like this. Day after day after day after-

Or, given that it was the underworlds, perhaps night after night after night was more appropriate.

Always, Gwyn was there. The first time it had been Ash, but now that he knew Ash was alive, safe, he found he wanted it to be Gwyn. Because at least he could get an adequate amount of revenge on Gwyn later for seeing him like this.

Gwyn who was stronger at dealing with pain than he, because he had the benefit of hundreds of years of torture and conditioning; and Augus had only managed a single year with the Nightingale before he’d crumbled.

Well, really, only a couple of months with the Nightingale before he’d crumbled – the ensuing months after that was…

‘I can’t…hold them back,’ Augus gasped, wanting to claw memories out of his head. He’d never thought about these things this much. He tried trick after trick to shove it away again, and it was all just there. Why was it so hard? What had happened? An attack. The Soulbond triggered. Ash unwell. The Soulbond was a curse. It was possibly the only reason he was alive and it was a curse.

A gentle hand prying his own away from his chest, where he attempted to claw the Soulbond away.

Augus growled, and Gwyn said something comforting and Augus didn’t care. He just didn’t care.

*

He was willing to concede that he wasn’t a gracious patient.

Even drifting in and out of consciousness as he was, he could tell that the bruises over the pressure points on Gwyn’s forearm had healed, re-healed, returned, healed again. Whenever Augus woke in
agony, Gwyn was there presenting his arm, and Augus gritted his teeth and dug his fingers in so hard that he broke the skin even without his claws. Hearing Gwyn suffering through it, his caught breaths, feeling the muscles tensing and trying to slip away from his fingers even without Gwyn willing it…was something of a balm.

Truthfully he just wanted to drug himself on analgesics until he was unconscious for another few days, but that didn’t seem to be an option.

He was thirsty, he craved water. Gwyn brought him glasses of the stuff and the first time, had held the rim of the glass to his lips and Augus managed to knock the glass away with a violent movement because of the indignity.

Pain flared. He moaned over and over again, because he’d used the arm he’d apparently damaged while teleporting. Gwyn had returned with another glass and let Augus have the illusion of holding it with a shaking, sore hand, as Gwyn gave him as much water as he wanted. His scalp felt itchy and sore and the pillow wasn’t wet and it was all so confusing. He kept expecting Gwyn to explain it to him. To tell him what had happened.

Gwyn hardly spoke at all, except to tell him to get some rest, to drink some water. He sighed every time Augus threatened him if he wasn’t brought more pain medicine. And then Gwyn would present his forearm and Augus could barely keep back whining, because spreading the pain around wasn’t enough.

* * *

Aleutia prodded at his gut, and he snarled awake and pushed her away – or attempted to. He was weak, and hands caught his hands and held them still. It was only the light in the room that strongly reminded him that he was not in the underworlds at the hands of someone else, which made him stop actively fighting. But he growled on and on, until finally Aleutia yelled at him to cut it out, because she couldn’t hear his heart over the thick, menacing rumble he was sending into the room.

‘Then give me pain medicine, you bitch,’ Augus grit out, and he could have sworn the next poke to his kidney was harder than it had to be.

‘You’re on it!’ she exclaimed. ‘Believe me, Augus. There’s just some things it hurts to recover from, and this is one of them. If you…’

Augus tuned her out, because his heart rate was shooting up and he didn’t know if she’d poked something too hard and then he realised it was panic. Delayed panic. And he didn’t want this around them. Not now. Not-

Because Ash, he’d almost lost Ash. The desperation he’d felt before, at the lake, returned. He’d nearly lost him, and begging hadn’t been enough. That he’d been reduced to begging, and it still hadn’t been enough.

Familiar, isn’t it?

He couldn’t raise his hands to cover his face, because they were being held and it was unbearable. He struggled and fingers tightened around his wrists and he shot waterweed out in a burst of rage and fear, only to scream as his wrists blazed with pain and nothing happened.

Yelling around him, a rapid scattershot of voices, and someone was saying something about trauma, and he was trying to shape the words: ‘I’ll give you trauma,’ and then his head cleared just
enough that he could hear what they were saying.

‘Is he in any immediate danger?’ Gwyn, voice rushed.

‘No, he’s just going to waste resources like this, he should be-’

‘Then get out,’ Gwyn said.

Augus waited for Aleutia’s argument, but there must have been something in Gwyn’s tone or expression which made the order an order. He went still as he heard a door open and close. His wrists were dropped, they burned where he’d tried to push waterweed through his skin and couldn’t even make it. He gasped.

‘Augus,’ Gwyn said, his voice firm. Not that stupid croon that Ash used on him. Gratitude flooded him as fingers threaded through his fingers. ‘Augus, she’s gone.’

‘I need a shower,’ Augus said, to avoid thinking about everything else. Then he started laughing.

‘We need to talk,’ Gwyn said, and Augus didn’t like that tone of voice. He opened his eyes and then tried to project as much disdain as he could when he saw the thunderous expression on Gwyn’s face.

‘You got me a Soulbond that nearly got Ash killed,’ Augus said. ‘I’m going to flay your skin from your body and watch it grow back.’

‘I should do that to you!’ Gwyn shouted, and Augus’ eyes widened. His fingers clenched into the sheets automatically, wrists hurting; but the pain of his wrists was nothing to that in his torso, and even that was easier to ignore when confronted with the force of Gwyn’s anger. He was aware that he couldn’t defend himself like this, from anything. His own weakness disgusted him. ‘You chose that Soulbond, and you-’

‘I was a captive being bullied by the King of the Seelie and my brother,’ Augus said cautiously.

‘Are you saying you didn’t choose it?’ Gwyn said, something in his expression shuttering. The anger being tucked away for later.

‘I’m saying it’s complicated,’ Augus said. ‘Given that I was playing said King of the Seelie. It’s complicated. At any rate, I’ve changed my mind – I hate it, I want it gone! He nearly died, Gwyn!’

He pushed himself upright and groaned through the pain of it, and then slapped Gwyn’s arms away when Gwyn pushed him back down onto the bed.

‘I can handle sitting up,’ Augus said.

‘Augus,’ Gwyn snapped, and Augus hesitated. It sounded like anger, but there was panic in his voice. Augus’ eyes narrowed. His mind wasn’t working properly. He had none of the measured, careful thoughts he usually had.

‘What?’ Augus said.

‘Do you remember how I was after Tigbalan? How unwell?’

Augus nodded.

‘This is worse, Augus. What you went through was worse. Considerably.’
'Was my spine broken at least *three times*?’ Augus hissed. Gwyn said nothing, and Augus smiled grimly. ‘Then we’re at least on a *par.*’

‘No, Augus.’

Augus wanted to slap him, the way Gwyn kept saying his name like that, trying to anchor him in the present. It was a trick he used himself. He decided he hated that too. His fingers curled, dug into his own palms and then he made a sound of shock when Gwyn took one of his hands again and started prying his fingers free.

‘Don’t hurt yourself,’ Gwyn said, his voice not soothing, not warm, not concerned – *cold.*

*He’s afraid.*

‘Augus,’ Gwyn said again, and this time Augus looked at him, watched him while Gwyn wouldn’t look at him. Gwyn stared at his palms instead. ‘Augus, you-’

Gwyn shook his head. When Augus relaxed his fingers, Gwyn still didn’t let go of his hand. Was it Augus’ arm that was shaking? Or was it Gwyn’s fingers? His breath hitched around a brief spasm of pain, but it faded back to that duller, grating, but more manageable level. He waited, because otherwise he’d ask for a shower again. He felt so *thirsty.* There was something wrong with his water levels. He couldn’t even think about his mane. The pillow was dry. His mane hadn’t even dried out after six months in a Seelie cell with no water.

‘Augus, you once told me you’d never…kill me or do permanent harm to me, when you were… when we were…’

‘Yes, I oathed it,’ Augus said, confused at the change of subject. And then the finger that held the blood-oath curled automatically and he stilled.

He slowly raised his hands to his face, looking for the scars left behind by blood-oaths – the small amount he’d made over the years. He looked for the weight of them in his blood and beneath the pain, couldn’t feel them.

He couldn’t think properly. He checked his fingers, checked them again. Then, on impulse, he took Gwyn’s hand and spread his fingers apart, looking for the scars he’d *seen* him make.

‘Did Ash die too?’ Augus said, voice low.

‘Not like you did,’ Gwyn said, his voice even. But Gwyn still wasn’t looking at him,

Augus remembered exhaustion at the lake, and *healing* it, and a…conversation with a lake spirit and he remembered the flashing of silver from a knife. He didn’t remember teleporting back to the palace. But he knew he had a teleportation injury. Even though his skin had grown back, it still didn’t feel quite right where he’d literally left part of himself behind.

‘I need you to find a way to remove this Soulbond,’ Augus said.

‘I need you…to understand that without it, we may not have found you in time. Because Ash came to us, and let us know that something was wrong.’

But Augus was carefully rubbing his fingers over the empty space on the inside of Gwyn’s little finger. He could argue about the Soulbond later. It was obvious that Gwyn was immoveable on the subject, and he’d learned that the creature’s stubbornness couldn’t always be worn down. Gwyn let him keep rubbing at the space, his body hunched.
'Could you feel them, when they went?' Augus asked.

Gwyn nodded.

‘Do you have a knife?’ Augus said.

Gwyn’s eyes flashed up to him, hope and fear and something else in the wideness of them. And Augus grit his teeth together as Gwyn got up and then looked around the room in confusion. This wasn’t his room, and he didn’t know where anything was. Augus pointed to one of the closed, adjoining doors.

‘Through that door, through the door straight ahead, and then in the third chest of drawers along the wall you’ll find my knives. Choose whatever one you wish.’

Gwyn hesitated, and then walked through the door quickly, and Augus used the opportunity to carefully pull another pillow behind his back and push himself into a sitting position. He moaned softly, pressed a hand tentatively to his torso. He was improving. He knew he was. He could tell. Hour by hour, he was improving.

When Gwyn returned, a small, sharp blade in his hand and a faint scent of Gwyn’s blood in the air – which meant he’d tested the sharpness of at least one – Gwyn gave him a hard look at Augus’ change in position. But then he went to sit in the chair by the bed and Augus placed a hand on his arm.

‘On the bed,’ Augus said. ‘Sit here.’

He patted a space beside him, and Gwyn slid onto it carefully, watching Augus for any signs of increased pain. Augus fought hard not to show them.

‘Do you still need me to oath that I will not kill you or cause you permanent harm in a scene?’ Augus said, spinning the blade slowly in his hand.

Gwyn shook his head, and Augus reached out and pressed the tip of his blade into Gwyn’s skin, over the back of his wrist. Blood beaded where the metal parted flesh. Gwyn didn’t react. Augus slid deeper, found a pressure point, needled the metal in, and Gwyn made a noise and jerked his arm backwards. It was an involuntary reflex, and he pushed his wrist back into place like Augus had chided him for moving it away.

All right, then.

‘You’re still an oaf,’ Augus said. ‘Since I don’t want to do those things, I think I still want this blood-oath. Because I’ve nearly killed you in a scene before. You like knifeplay a little too much, and I have too many blades made from Ingrit.’

Augus looked at his fingers and made the cut on the inside of his right index finger.

‘I, Augus Each Uisge, do blood-oath to Gwyn ap- to Gwyn, King of the Unseelie, not to do anything that will cause him permanent harm or death during whatever qualifies as a scene.’

There. A familiar weight in his blood again. A tether that leashed his energy to Gwyn’s once more. Augus licked the blood off his finger, and Gwyn took the knife from Augus’ other hand and looked at the blood on the tip of the metal. He wiped at it with his thumb and then placed the tip of his finger in his mouth, and Augus felt a bloom of arousal like a spreading bruise and he closed his eyes.
‘You,’ Augus said, nodding to the knife. ‘Aftercare.’

‘I don’t like that one,’ Gwyn said. He tensed and slid off the bed, taking the knife with him.

‘My stipulation in this relationship remains,’ Augus said, watching him with focus. Something wasn’t…right. ‘There is no relationship without that blood-oath. I cannot do what I do, without you accepting aftercare in the forms I offer it. And I need you to oath it. Because you want it,’ Augus said, wishing he could lean forwards and unable. ‘Because you need that, but you need to be made to accept it.’

‘And you?’ Gwyn said, turning to him, scowling. ‘Do you need to be made to accept it?’

‘I don’t need to be made to accept aftercare, the one who is generally getting fucked and tied up in this relationship is you. And when the tables turn, you’re very solicitous, trust me.’

‘No,’ Gwyn said. ‘I mean any care at all, Augus. You avoided me for days, and then got yourself killed. You can’t be trusted. You’ve said to me, for so long, that I cannot be trusted with my own welfare. And it used to grate at me that you’d say that. Because my welfare is my own. But, Augus – you cannot be trusted with your own safety. I want an oath.’

‘Maybe it would be easier for me to care for myself, if others were better at showing me care,’ Augus said, knowing it was an unfair jab to make. ‘Perhaps, for example, if the first sign of decent attention from you didn’t come at the cost of my death.’

Gwyn’s expression twisted, and Augus mentally applauded himself for knowing Gwyn’s emotional pressure points as well as he knew the physical ones.

‘I don’t know how!’ Gwyn shouted, turning away, turning back. ‘I don’t know how to do this! I know you need more, I do. I didn’t realise. I didn’t- I’m not good at any of this and look at what it led to!’

Gwyn faced away from him, his shoulders bowed forwards even though it must have caused him pain. He clutched the knife, and Augus smelled the sharper carbon scent of more blood spilling.

Damn it.

‘I know,’ Augus said, softer. ‘I know, Gwyn.’

‘I don’t know how to do this,’ Gwyn said, hoarse. ‘I don’t know how. I don’t-’

‘I know.’

‘I know you need more than this, more than me. I do. If you can find it with-’

A flash of anger, Gwyn was getting off the subject, and Augus’ teeth clenched together.

‘It shouldn’t take me – Ash – dying, for you to-’

‘I know!’ Gwyn said, and then he tensed, walked quickly past the bed and into the bathroom and closed the door behind him. Augus couldn’t hear anything – every section of his living space thoroughly soundproofed. Gwyn, likely throwing up and panicking in there, and Augus too sick to follow.

Minutes passed, time trickled by, Augus knew he’d pushed far too hard. He was angry, bitter, hurting. Gwyn had always been a convenient target for anything he didn’t want to deal with.
When Gwyn returned, he looked clammy and exhausted. His face drawn.

‘It’s my fault,’ Gwyn said, leaning weakly against the doorframe. ‘You have every right to be angry.’

‘I know I do. But what, exactly, is your fault?’

Gwyn made a vague gesture towards the bed. Augus grimaced, because he knew what Gwyn was trying to say, but he was tired of always having to guess.

‘The bed? Me? This whole…area is somehow a crime you’ve committed?’

A sound of frustration, and Gwyn was still holding the knife and one of his hands was still bleeding.

‘I should have seen it coming,’ Gwyn said. ‘You died.’

‘That is not your fault,’ Augus said. ‘Now come over here and get onto the bed properly. I’m tired and sore, and I don’t want to have this conversation with you all the way over there. I can’t come to you, remember? Come here. You tell me you don’t know how to do this, then listen to me, and come here. Lie next to me.’

Gwyn walked over to the bed and hesitated, then crawled onto it. This close, Augus could see faint droplets of water around the bottom of his chin, dampening sections of his hair. He’d splashed his face. He’d likely thrown up. Gwyn curled stiffly onto his side, and Augus took the hand that held the knife and rested it in his lap. He pried the knife free, examined the cuts on his skin. He shaped his fingers around Gwyn’s hand and brought it up to his mouth, licking carefully, running his tongue over faint splits in his flesh. Gwyn’s hand twitched, he blinked several times, watching.

Augus didn’t stop until all the blood was licked away, and Gwyn’s wounds had closed too much for him to tease anything more out of them.

‘You warned me,’ Gwyn said. ‘I didn’t pay enough attention.’

‘No. But my death is not a punishment.’

‘I want an oath from you,’ Gwyn said, and Augus’ fingers tightened on Gwyn’s hand.

‘What oath?’ Augus said, and then closed his eyes as another wave of pain found him. His fingers crept over Gwyn’s skin and then dug hard into his wrists, and Gwyn grunted and bore it. That was very, very convenient. Ash would want to coddle him. Would shower him with hugs and affection and touch; and a part of him did want that, very much. But a far greater part wanted this. Gwyn understood something that no one else had any patience for. Augus was petty. Inflicting pain when he hurt made it easier to carry the load, especially upon someone who could bear it.

He dug his fingers deeper and Gwyn groaned softly and Augus hummed a sound of approval.

Augus eased the terrible grip as the pain faded. He needed a shower. A bath. He needed to be taken to a lake. He needed water.

‘This oath will have to wait. I need water,’ Augus said. ‘A lot of it.’

‘I’ll get you more,’ Gwyn said, but Augus didn’t let go of his arm as Gwyn turned to roll of the bed.
'I need a *lot* of it,’ Augus said, persistent. ‘I need you to take me from this bed and teleport me somewhere with a lot of water.’

‘You can’t just drink it?’ Gwyn said, though there was a look in his eyes that suggested Augus was going to get what he wanted. At least in this.

‘No.’ Augus shook his head.

Gwyn hesitated, then moved closer, sliding his arms underneath Augus’ body. His own nudity didn’t bother him, but the fragility of his newly grown skin made him wary of how Gwyn might touch him. But none of the roughness he feared came, and instead he was gathered close in a grip that was careful. Fingers stroked his back. Augus’ breathing was laboured – being jostled in ways he couldn’t control was still painful. Instead of insulting him or causing him pain, Augus pressed his head into Gwyn’s shoulder and wrapped his arms slowly around Gwyn’s back, testing the movement.

‘Does it matter where?’ Gwyn said softly, his own head moving towards Augus’.

‘No,’ Augus said. ‘Somewhere private.’

‘Hold onto me,’ Gwyn said, and Augus’ grip tightened. He pressed his head closer. Gwyn’s light came and it was blessedly warm.

* 

Water all around him, up to his bare chest. Gwyn’s clothing sodden against him already. Augus took huge breaths as water seeped in through his pores, and then he moaned as pleasure raced through him, from his feet to the top of his head. Gwyn stood chest deep in a lake nowhere near the Unseelie Court, water so fresh that he could taste its sweetness in the back of his throat without even taking a mouthful.

His spine arched and he kept moaning, unable to stop the visceral reaction. Gwyn’s grip shifted as Augus leaned back, and then further back, and when Gwyn’s hands tightened on him to stop him from falling, Augus remembered that he had to be clear.

‘Let me get my head beneath the water,’ he breathed.

Gwyn’s grip slid down to his hips, strong fingers bracing him. Augus wrapped his legs around Gwyn’s thighs and arched back as carefully as he dared, but the water around him made it easier. It kept him safe and stable as much as Gwyn did, and he stretched his stomach and belly out for the first time since the attack, opening his mouth and gasping through the pain, even as his mane and then scalp touched the water. He kept arching back, until finally the water came up past his ears, his cheeks, flowing into his nostrils, and he immersed his head completely, breathing mouthfuls of water into his lungs.

A sensation of fine bubbles clinging to the surface and underside of his skin, tingling through him. He moaned again, closing his eyes and feeling his scalp prickle and zing. He raised his fingers to his mane, feeling over his head. He could feel the places where waterweed would grow again, but more than that, could tell that his scalp was going to start weeping water again.

He closed his eyes in wonder as his body found its homeostasis. He’d read so much folklore about how every Each Uisge and Glashtyn, and many other waterhorses besides, had always yearned to experience the sensation of true dryness and warmth. That it was the one thing they could never have, so they yearned for it. And – for the most part – it was true. Waterhorses craved dry beds and
warm places. Fires in hearths and fluffy towels and blankets and having their hair combed in sunlight. They lived as though they didn’t shed water through their scalp. Rather than spending all their times in lakes, they purchased water-wicking fabrics, lived in homes they kept as dry as possible.

But now that Augus had lived it, he was delighted to learn that he wasn’t missing out on anything. He gulped down mouthful after mouthful of water, and then tilted his head up after long minutes, looked at Gwyn through the rippling water.

Gwyn watched him. Hands steady at his back. Augus squeezed his legs around Gwyn’s muscled thighs to acknowledge him, and Gwyn’s thumbs stroked his sides in response. Gwyn here, anchoring him, disobeying the healer’s rules to get Augus what he truly needed. The burn in his wrists disappeared. His organs felt like they were settling properly.

He closed his eyes, mane floating out around him, and for the first time in a while he felt like he could think. He wandered through the wreckage of his mind and found what felt like a small, shallow pool and sat within it, trying to martial his thoughts.

He hadn’t yet found the Raven Prince, and he needed to learn how to calm himself properly again – for many reasons, but also so that he could divine where his Prince may have gone. Augus was ill. He and Ash had died. Gwyn and Aleutia had saved them both.

_How many life debts do I owe him now? Sweetness, this is my least favourite hobby of yours._

But here he was, alive, yet again.

He let his awareness spread out in tendrils and realised he had no idea where they were. Unlike Ash and Gwyn, he was not a traveller. He had not been all over the fae world. He knew they were somewhere cold, and he sensed no fae nearby.

Gwyn let him lay under the water for some time. Augus closed his eyes and let his mind drift, legs loose around Gwyn’s thighs, water fresh and cold in his lungs.

When he opened his eyes and looked at Gwyn again, he saw that his eyes were still open. Blue eyes watching him through the water.

In a single moment, Augus pushed the water out of his lungs, his legs tightened and he rose through the lake, using his waterhorse abilities to make it easier until he could reach for Gwyn’s arms and pull himself up. The pain was less awful, even as the cold air seared his lungs. His mane dripped rivulets down his back, his hands moved up and clasped Gwyn behind the neck.

‘Better?’ Gwyn said, and Augus realised that his rough breathing made it sound like he was still in pain.

‘Yes,’ Augus said, emphatically. ‘Oh, yes. Much better.’

He touched cold lips to Gwyn’s, pressing his chest to Gwyn’s wet shirt, feeling the muscles beneath and proud he’d managed to command that strength, bring it to heel. Gwyn’s lips were pliant, soft and sun-warmed against his own. Augus forced them open, slid his tongue inside and tasted the sourness that came from Gwyn not having eaten enough, and then something behind it that was metallic and tart and _his_. He groaned into Gwyn’s mouth and then reached up and clutched at his hair.

Gwyn’s arm slid up his back, bracing his spine, the other still low, by his hips.
He licked noises straight out of Gwyn’s mouth. Enjoyed the hungry way Gwyn pressed forwards, kept his lips apart, even slid his tongue against Augus’, participating far more than usual. Augus enjoyed it for as long it took for him to realise that there was real desperation behind each of Gwyn’s movements, that his breathing was fast and shallow, that his grip on Augus was strong enough that it would leave bruises.

He pulled back and Gwyn followed, leaning forwards, nearly unsettling them in the water.

‘Easy. Careful,’ Augus murmured, shifting his hands against Gwyn’s neck. He kept one curled around the back, and then stroked the front of Gwyn’s neck with his other hand, curling his fingers gently around Gwyn’s throat. ‘Careful. I’m alive. It’s fine.’

He remembered how frantic Gwyn was the last time he’d feared for Augus’ life, and the time before that. Augus knew then, how much it was costing Gwyn to be as calm as possible. All for Augus’ benefit.

‘Easy,’ Augus breathed, tightening his hand enough that Gwyn’s eyes closed, Gwyn’s neck thick in his fingers. ‘It’s fine, Gwyn. I promise.’

‘I want an oath,’ Gwyn said, quiet and strained and he was leaning forwards again and Augus let him, because he didn’t want to think about it. But Gwyn wasn’t opening his mouth, he was pressing those closed-mouthed kisses against his lips. Lingering ones, one after the other, catching the corner of his mouth, his bottom lip, the side of his face.

‘What am I supposed to oath to you?’ Augus said, his lips moving against Gwyn’s lips, and Gwyn’s mouth opening just enough to catch Augus’ lower lip and then stay there, making it impossible for Augus to say anything else without breaking the kiss. He wanted the kiss more than he wanted the words. He stroked fingers along Gwyn’s carotid artery, feeling the heavy, rapid thump there and thinking of all that blood coursing beneath his veins. When Gwyn pulled back to kiss him again, Augus spoke in the space between them.

‘Do I oath never to walk into a dangerous situation, and get killed breaking the oath simply for living in the Unseelie Court? What do you want from me, Gwyn? How can you make my life safer?’

‘You knew it was dangerous,’ Gwyn said, his voice low. ‘You knew. That’s why you didn’t tell anyone of relevance. That’s why you didn’t tell me, or…or if I don’t matter, that’s why you didn’t tell Ash. Because I know you enough, Augus, to know that when you’re about to do something very, very stupid, and very, very dangerous, you don’t tell the people you should. Fenwrel told me you’re very sick. Very sick.’

‘Shut up,’ Augus said, feeling tired. The dull pain in his body strengthened. His grip on Gwyn’s neck became stronger as he started to sag. ‘Shut up.’

‘You’re tired,’ Gwyn said. ‘You need rest.’

But Gwyn didn’t teleport them back as he expected. Lips crashed into his, and Augus’ eyes flew open as Gwyn’s lips forced his mouth open and his tongue thrust inside. Augus made a sound of shock, and Gwyn’s fingers dug into his skin and pulled him closer, until Augus no longer needed to be gripping Gwyn at all.

It wasn’t like Gwyn to take control like this, and the kiss was painful, fierce, and yet Augus still stirred regardless, breathing harshly through his nostrils as Gwyn bit his bottom lip between blunt teeth and stretched his lip enough that Augus grunted in pain.
‘You’re to take an escort with you to heal those lakes,’ Gwyn said, when he finally let go, his voice cold – and this coldness no façade. Augus chafed beneath the order, but he was so tired and dazed, he couldn’t think of anything to say. ‘And you’re not to return to the work for at least two weeks.’

‘The water is helping. I’m fine. Aren’t you listening to me?’

‘No.’

Lips against his again, teeth biting his tongue when Augus tried to gain something of control once more. Gwyn bit down hard, once, and then dragged his mouth away and bit the underside of Augus’ jaw, moving upwards until he could close his teeth on Augus’ earlobe. He bit hard, then harder, and finally hard enough that Augus dug his nails into the back of Gwyn’s neck, inching towards a pressure point to make him stop. Only then did Gwyn let go, and Augus tried to summon outrage, but Gwyn – when had he become so devious? – was pressing tender, closed-mouthed kisses to his lips again and Augus wasn’t relaxing into that. He wasn’t.

‘Two weeks,’ Gwyn gasped. ‘You’re not to leave the palace.’

‘I’d like to see you try and stop-’

‘I’ll change the permissions and lock you in, much like I did in the Seelie palace.’

Augus froze, and met Gwyn’s eyes. It was something of a shock to realise how much Gwyn meant it. In the past, Gwyn’s fear of losing Augus pushed him into terrified, irrational places where he mostly needed reassurance. But here, he was watching Gwyn reassure himself. Taking action. He half wanted to applaud him, and settled on scraping blunt claws down his neck to vent his anger at being threatened.

‘It’s been a long time since I’ve seen this side of you. Since before you were underfae.’

That got a response. Gwyn winced, but then he smiled grimly.

‘That may be so. Perhaps now it will be harder for you to go off and get yourself killed in the future.’

‘You’re one to talk,’ Augus griped.

A wave of dizziness fell through him like a stone and his vision greyed out. He became aware of Gwyn’s hands being the only thing holding him up, as he blinked back to full awareness. He made a faint sound in the back of his throat, and Gwyn’s expression changed from cold to concerned.

‘Do you need more water?’ Gwyn said.

Augus looked around, trying to clear his head. Where were they? The air was thin. How high were they? Meadows of flowers on the left and a green, wild forest on the right. Mostly pine.

‘Where are we?’

Gwyn adjusted Augus in his grip and threaded his fingers through Augus’ hair. Then, as Augus shivered at the contact, Gwyn cupped the back of his head with his palm and a wave of calm came over him. He pulled closer to Gwyn, trying to get as much body contact as possible, not caring how it looked. No one could see them. He could pretend he wasn’t trying to re-establish himself as a limpet later.

‘I come here sometimes. At night usually. But it doesn’t matter where we are. This place is a
secret. It has no name. But it doesn’t matter, Augus.’

Light suffused him, and just as they teleported, he felt the brush of lips against his.

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Gwyn lay him down again, even as they both dripped water.

‘Look at that, your clothing is wet. Take it off,’ Augus said, trying to brush his fingers against Gwyn’s shirt even as Gwyn drew away. Gwyn walked from the room, into the bathroom and came back with towels. He sat on the bed and took up one of the towels, pressing it carefully against Augus’ skin, towelling him dry. He had a single-minded look on his face.

‘You’re taking Gulvi with you, from now on,’ Gwyn said. ‘To the Blighted land.’

‘What?’ Augus said, squinting at him. ‘I’m sorry, did you just say you wanted the one who’s stabbed me in the gut several times to-’

‘She doesn’t want you dead,’ Gwyn said, staring at him. ‘She doesn’t want Ash dead.’

‘I don’t want to talk about this right now,’ Augus said, reaching over and tugging impatiently at Gwyn’s shirt. ‘I want to talk about it later when I can manage a decent argument. You’ve said a lot of frustrating things today. Not the least being you threatening to imprison me again.’

Gwyn blanched. He fumbled the towel. Augus tugged at his shirt once more.

‘Take your clothing off and lie next to me,’ Augus persisted. ‘If you take longer than sixty seconds to listen to me, I’m going to find at least ten pressure points with knives the next time I tie you up, and fuck you while every one of them is stimulated. And I know you like pain, Gwyn. But even you don’t like- Ah, there we go. Thank you.’

Gwyn stripped off so quickly that the only thing stopping Augus from laughing when Gwyn got his foot stuck in his wet pants was the fact that he was exhausted. The conversation, staying awake for so long, the lake, all of it had been ridiculously taxing.

But when Gwyn was finally naked, his nipples still pebbled from the cold of the lake, and his cock smaller than usual between his legs, he hesitated. Augus raised his eyebrows and Gwyn pointed at the empty space on the bed.

‘That’s Ash’s side,’ Gwyn said, and then he seemed to realise what he’d just said and looked like he wanted to disappear.

Augus made a sound of impatience.

‘It’s my bed, and that’s my side, and I’m inviting you to lie on it, you dolt. You have ten seconds.’

Even so, Gwyn was still hesitant. Enough that Augus bookmarked it for later. Did Gwyn have a problem with Ash? He knew they’d never really gotten along, but this seemed…strange. Gwyn eased onto the bed and by the time he settled awkwardly on his side, it had been longer than ten seconds, but Augus decided not to be menacing about it, because all of that would take energy.

‘Blankets,’ Augus said, and Gwyn reached down and pulled them up over the two of them. Augus didn’t mind the damp sheets beneath him, and his hair was weeping water into the pillow behind his head and it felt wonderful.
‘Now what?’ Gwyn said.

‘Sleep.’

‘I’m…not tired.’

‘Yes, you are. You just haven’t had a chance to stop and realise it yet. Here…’

Augus pushed his arm underneath the blankets and brushed across Gwyn’s torso until he found his arm, and then trailed down and took his hand in his.

‘Here, come closer,’ Augus said.

Gwyn shifted closer and then stopped, and Augus’ eyes half-opened in alarm as Gwyn sat up and the blankets fell down his chest and would he have to make Gwyn stay? Because he didn’t have the energy for that.

Instead, Gwyn settled back down with something in his hand – the small knife he’d fetched earlier. He took it under the blankets with him and then stared at Augus with a strange, intent look on his face.

Some more shifting under the blankets, and then Gwyn licked his lips cautiously and closed his eyes.

‘I, Gwyn…King of the Unseelie fae, blood-oath to allow Augus Each Uisge to administer aftercare, for a length of time he deems sufficient.’

The words felt as sweet in Augus’ ears as the lake water had felt seeping into his body.

‘You’re doing so well,’ Augus said, knowing he had things to be upset about and hardly caring. He was alive, wasn’t he? Again? How many times did that make it now? He’d lost count.

Gwyn made a sound of discomfort next to him, and Augus decided he had just enough energy left to push, just a little.

‘So well,’ Augus said, reaching out once more and risking turning onto his side, wincing. ‘Look at you. It must be hard for you. Nearly losing someone you care for.’

Another sound, and Augus forced his eyes open. Gwyn stared at him.

‘I lost you.’

Augus knew they weren’t done. This wasn’t over. Arguments and more waited when he woke up again, and he needed to do damage control. A lot of it. But he didn’t care. There was precious little in his life that felt good these days, and he curled fingers around Gwyn’s arm and pulled him closer, until Gwyn’s forehead pressed against his own and their breaths mingled.

‘Sleep,’ Augus said, his own body dragging him to sleep or unconsciousness.

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Later, he roused in a state of confusion.

He heard sounds nearby. Shaking, uneven breathing, something like muffled sobs. His first thought was Ash, but Ash never stifled his crying. And he realised it was Gwyn, tried to wake himself up properly, because Gwyn never did that, not like this, or certainly never did that around him, but his
body was too demanding. Augus made a low, fierce sound of discontent, dragged back into his sleep cycle, even as the sounds were stifled completely and he heard them no more.

Chapter End Notes

In our next chapter, 'Trust:

‘Lie down,’ Gwyn said, and Augus stared at him. ‘You’re locked in. You’re not going anywhere. Get on the bed. Take your clothes off.’

‘Which is it, Gwyn? Do I get on the bed or take my clothes off?’

‘You’re intelligent,’ Gwyn said, smiling at him. ‘I’m sure you’ll work out a way to do both.’

Augus unbuttoned his shirt slowly, refusing to lick his lips in anticipation or betray his nervousness. It had been a long time since Gwyn had been like this with him. He thought about Gwyn taking control perhaps more than was healthy. He stepped out of his pants as Gwyn opened the drawers in Augus’ bedside cabinet and found lubricant, tossing the vial onto the bed and then stripping himself.
Trust

Chapter Notes

New tag: Sounding. (As always, with any of this stuff, please don't try this at home unless you know what you're doing!) EDIT: I also added the tags 'disordered eating' and 'eating disorder not otherwise specified' to indicate Gwyn's food issues.

Thanks to all you readers out there! You are all so awesome. And an extra thanks to the commenters. *bounces*

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Augus

*

‘Don’t wake him,’ Augus said, as Aleutia let herself in.

Augus knew it hadn’t been long since he’d fallen asleep. He’d expected to need days, but he’d woken from a violent nightmare. He was trapped in the darkness, his body scoured out and hurting; demonic otterkind tearing him apart. The worst part, upon waking, was realising that even though otterkind had never attacked him in the underworlds – every component of the dream had once happened. His mind was just finding new and exciting ways of tying it together.

‘I’m not waking him,’ Aleutia said, her voice hushed. ‘Life is far better when he’s sleeping. His energy was so discordant when we found you, he had to be made to stay away.’

‘What?’ Augus said, leaning forwards, testing how it felt. Her eyes brightened with pleasure when she saw the movement, and she placed her healer’s kit on the bed. Her clawed fingers reached towards him and he was somewhat proud of himself for not flinching backwards. The last time clawed hands had come at him…

Well, he couldn’t remember it very well, anyway.

‘He’s only been allowed to touch you or be in close proximity to you since you woke. Even untrained in using his light and…off kilter as he is, he’s still a shepherd of the dead, Augus.’

‘You made him stand back and not…be close to me?’ Augus said, looking over at Gwyn, who – even now – was curled up in a ball on the bed and hadn’t reached out to touch him.

Had he imagined Gwyn crying the night before? He thought he had. Now he wasn’t sure.

‘It was necessary,’ Aleutia said, turning Augus’ head back and checking his eyes. She lifted his lips and checked the state of his gums. Then she bowed his head forwards and picked claws carefully through his scalp, sighing in relief. ‘You are doing so much better. A lot better than I expected.’

‘I told Gwyn to take me to a lake,’ Augus said, and she tilted his head up and glared at him.

‘Did you?’ she said, and then she smiled mischievously. ‘Well, at least it’s better than you forcing him to get you painkillers. Which you don’t really seem to need now. How’s the pain?’
‘Dull,’ Augus said. ‘Unless I move too quickly. Nothing like before.’

‘Are you hungry?’

‘No,’ Augus said. ‘Not at all.’

‘You’re on a no-animal-product diet until your appetite comes back. Your organs have had a shock.’

‘May I ask…why you didn’t put me in a lake before now?’ Augus said, tentatively.

Aleutia put her hands on her hips and raised her eyebrows.

‘Because I didn’t want your fucking organs to float away.’

Augus took pause, for a moment all he could see was the details in the warp and weft of the sheets covering his legs. They had seen him like that. They had seen him torn open and exposed and- He knew things had been bad. But he hadn’t…

‘Ah.’ It was all he could manage.

‘Yeah, my thoughts too. Now, what’s this I hear about you trying to overtake Julvia’s healing schedule?’

Augus shook his head. He’d not known how Aleutia would react, but he hadn’t wanted a confrontation while he still felt not quite himself. Even his mind wasn’t working the way he wanted it to. He used to be able to compartmentalise a lot better than he did now. Instead of a lot of interconnected lakes he could jump to, his mind had flooded, it was all murky swamp. Everything everywhere, and he had no idea how to start putting everything back in its place.

‘No, not at all,’ Augus said. ‘I tried to be clear to Gulvi that I wasn’t trying to-

‘Calm down, geez. I was joking,’ Aleutia said, laughing. ‘I’ve looked over everything and you know, I think it’s worth a shot actually. I think your dosages are a little too high, so I’ve stretched what you’ve made over the three week mark. That cool?’

‘Of course,’ Augus said.

‘It was a pretty sophisticated regime – some of the herbs I’ve not been trained in using. You’re not trained, are you?’

‘Self-taught,’ Augus said. ‘I hope you’re not offended.’

‘I’m not fucking offended. To be frank, Augus, I was trained as a green healer, but the fact is I ended up – through a series of really weird circumstances – as healer that specialises in brutal battlefield injuries and poisoning. Life kind of took me in a weird path – and I’d re-apprentice as a red healer but there’s not much fucking point now, is there? I mean, everyone knows what I do and what I am and I can’t be assed apprenticing for a smidgeon of what I’m making now. So I was kind of relieved to get some assistance. Even from a murdering, deranged pony like you. I guess everyone has some good qualities.’

Augus didn’t respond. He was becoming quite inured to insults. There was a time when calling him ‘pony’ would have put his back up, made him bristle, these days it was definitely not the worst thing he was called.
‘I want to know why the hell you didn’t apprentice?’ Aleutia said.

‘Ah. I did think about it. For a long time. But there was Ash when he was young. And then I just… particularly enjoyed staying home. I didn’t think I’d like the lifestyle.’

‘And now here you are, huh? Away from home. You might want to look at that. Because you would’ve been way more suited for healing than you are for whatever this is.’

She waved her hand at him and then walked around to Gwyn’s side of the bed, standing over him. She held her hands out over him and Augus opened his mouth to tell her not to wake him, and she silenced him with a look. A tiny thread of green energy coiled into Gwyn, and she made several unhappy tch-ing sounds with her tongue. She shook her head, her rat-nose wrinkled.

‘What?’ Augus said, looking at the deeply breathing Gwyn and how peaceful he looked, even curled up as tightly as he was.

‘That shoulder. God, I’d like to ream Kabiri out for that. But no, there’s just an unsteadiness in him I don’t like. I thought it would settle after last time, but it hasn’t. Some fae don’t handle switching status well? Just a few, they get sick from it, and the drop from King to underfae back up to King…’

She shook her head and placed a hand gently on Gwyn’s arm. It was odd to see her do something so kind, when usually she was so brusque. Perhaps it was because Gwyn was so deeply asleep, and couldn’t see her offering it.

‘He won’t talk about it,’ Augus said, pursing his lips.

‘Then you’re both made for each other, aren’t you? All this fucking non-communication. In the meantime, you have to keep an eye out on that brother of yours. He has the same poisoning you do. But-’

‘What?’ Augus said, sitting bolt upright too quickly and wincing, holding his hands over his belly. Aleutia came around again immediately, glaring at him, moving his hands away and pressing her palms flat against his bare skin. He could feel the healing energy she sent into him, and then something happened to his nervous system and the worst of the pain spiralled away.

‘I was going to say ‘But it’s not as bad.’’ Aleutia said, voice hard. ‘Not nearly. Fenwrel noticed. He’s making a slow but…natural recovery, we think. We’re almost certain it’s not permanent, unlike with you. Look out for changes in his character and just make a note of them. Underworld energy corrupts, and you’ll notice better than most.’

Augus stared ahead for several seconds. He’d done that to Ash. When he’d asked Ash to carry those creatures in his body so that Augus could have use of them later, just in case. It had only been a few slurchers. Hardly anything at all. And Augus had managed hundreds of them and lived to tell the tale. He could hardly wrap his mind around it. He’d only…it had only been a handful. And proportionately, for hardly any length of time.

‘Then the Nain Rouge would…have the same poisoning, I think,’ Augus said, staring at her. ‘Gods help us all.’

‘She’s handling herself fine. Not that I’d know personally, or anything. But she’s too old and experienced. Anyway, don’t look at me like that, your brother has a super mild case. Not just compared to you, but in general. Really mild. But we don’t know how that impacts people, and so yeah, just keep an eye out. Fenwrel or I will approach him later about healing – but he seems to be
course correcting himself. It’s just really slow.’

Augus kept up a steady flow of swearing inside his own head, even as Aleutia wove healing energy into his body and soothed the worst of the pain so that it faded back to that dull ache. As she took her hands away, he placed a careful hand on her wrist. She stared at him with sharp, mistrusting eyes.

‘Thank you,’ he said. ‘I owe you a life debt.’

‘Yes.’ She grinned. ‘Yes, you do. But whatever. I’m the Court’s Healer now. So you can actually come straight to me if you want to alter Julvia’s treatments or talk to me about them. I’m gonna be living here as of…tomorrow, I think. Or the day after.’

‘The immortalis? You were able to make it grow?’

‘Ha. No. It germinated for a very fucking exciting day, then shrivelled up and died. But His Majesty Gwyn is pretty unforgiving on wording. Asshole. Now, talk to me about some of these herbs you used. Red elodea – weren’t you worried about the side effects?’

‘Contraindications are minimal,’ Augus shrugged. ‘Especially with freshwater fae. We digest all species of elodea with ease. Even the poisonous ones. But I paired it with stone willow, which-’

‘Cool, cool, yeah, to balance things out. Stone willow was a nice choice.’

Half an hour later, Augus was flushed with excitement and pleasure. He’d been talking herbs with Aleutia non-stop, not able to keep up with all of her knowledge, but able to keep up with some of it. He remembered more and more of what he used to do when he was younger, and she didn’t talk down to him. He’d leaned forwards on the bed and she perched next to him, her hands moving animatedly as she talked.

Aleutia smiled at him as the conversation wound up. She took up her healer’s kit and shrugged at him.

‘Maybe if you’d apprenticed to a healer, none of this would’ve fucking happened. Do you ever think about that?’

‘Do you?’ Augus said, and she paused, her gaze becoming distant for a little while.

‘Yeah, actually. I fucking do. I lost a lot of people.’

Augus flinched before he could control his reaction.

I lost two of my kids.

It wasn’t guilt, but fear. He would be hearing those words, or words like them, for the rest of his life, and sometimes it would be attached to murderous intent and he would never know when it would happen, when it would come. He had the oddest sense that he was living on borrowed time, and knew he had to get the Soulbond removed as quickly as possible. He rested his hand on it.

‘Do you, by any chance, know anything about removing Soulbonds?’ Augus said, meeting her unreadable gaze.

‘Nope, sorry,’ Aleutia said. ‘Your best bet is the one sleeping beside you, since he was the one who dug up the old lore and figured it out. But to the best of my knowledge, they’re not supposed to be reversible.’
‘ Anything is reversible, ’ Augus said, and Aleutia laughed.

‘Tell that to the people you fucking killed. ’

Aleutia pulled the doors closed behind her, so she didn’t hear his weak retort: ‘I meant magic. ’

Though, what he truly knew of magic was very little. He leaned his head on his bent legs and looked over at Gwyn, eventually reaching out and settling his hair. He felt indulgent. He wished Gwyn was awake.

*

The next time he woke, Gwyn wasn’t there. He pressed his hand to the bed and it was cold. He stood up, stretching tentatively. He then walked straight to the main door and tested it.

He grimaced when the doorknob wouldn’t budge for him.

*He’s done it. He’s gone and locked me in.*

Augus would never admit it to Gwyn, ever, but he was somewhat grateful for the chance to not have to go down and resume the common work. Now that he’d had time away from it, he realised how taxing it was. It was important work, and he wanted to do it, but it was overwhelming.

Waterhorses weren’t supposed to work at all. They were supposed to live relative lives of leisure. Their only task was to grow a healthy, appealing swamp or lake. Augus had already gone against the grain by becoming a dominant, but at least then he’d been able to control his hours.

He’d taken weeks, months, sometimes longer, seeing no one at all.

Half a day later, Aleutia visited and informed him that Gwyn was ‘catching up on a fuckton of stuff and I’ve ordered him back tonight. ’ Augus was glad of that, wandered around his rooms somewhat aimlessly until he heard the door open and stepped back into his main room, thinking it was Gwyn.

It was Ash, looking well.

Augus smiled in spite of himself, in spite of the worry that he’d poisoned his brother.

‘Hey, bro, ’ Ash said, grinning at him, closing the door behind him.

‘Hello, ’ Augus said. ‘Did you want a formal greeting? ’

‘I want a fucking hug. But I want like…hours of one. ’

For once, Augus didn’t even want to put up a pretence of not wanting that too. He stepped into his brother’s arms, and allowed himself to be coaxed back to bed. Augus ended up tangled up with his brother, both of them silent and aware that things weren’t completely all right between them. But Ash still cradled his brother’s head like it was precious, and Augus stroked his back languidly, listening to their breathing slow and deciding a doze would be very welcome.

*

Augus was surprised at how hungry he wasn’t. He thought his body would be clamouring for a proper feed, but instead he had to force himself to pick at spinach leaves, and in the end oddly ended up craving faintly sweet foods. He asked the trows to fetch him dandelion flowers, and ate a whole bowlful. He’d been taught some time ago that if his body craved something unusual, he’d best satisfy that craving, but it was odd that it was flowers. He usually preferred the more peppery
taste of nasturtiums.

The day before, Gwyn hadn’t been in the room when he’d woken from his doze. But he could see signs that Gwyn had returned and then…left again. The chair by the wall had shifted. Gwyn had sat, watched them both, and left.

When Ash woke, Augus narrowed his eyes at him, bit the inside of his lip. ‘What is going on between you and Gwyn?’

Ash raised his eyebrows and shrugged.

‘I dunno what you mean, hey,’ Ash said, shaking his head faintly. ‘I mean, I don’t like the guy, but it’s not like I go out of my way to give him a hard time.’

‘Was he here earlier?’ Augus said.

‘Was he?’ Ash said, looking around. ‘I guess he was, maybe.’

Ash was lying to him. Augus tilted his head and pinned his brother with a look.

‘Yeah, maybe,’ Ash said, flushing beneath his brother’s gaze. ‘I just said I wanted some time with you, since he gets you all to himself the rest of the time, thanks to Aleutia. Maybe he made her say that, so that-’

‘Did it ever occur to you that I might want some time with him?’ Augus said, keeping his voice soft.

Ash scrunched his face up and then rubbed a hand through his hair. ‘He didn’t seem to mind. I mean, he-’

‘Don’t lie to me,’ Augus said, frowning. ‘You might want to consider that things might go better for all three of us, if you both tried to get along with each other. I’m not leaving him.’

‘Jesus,’ Ash said, staring at him. ‘So what exactly is it about getting raped, that’s so fucking appealing to you?’

Augus went cold, a visceral rage streaking through his body until he felt it in the tips of his fingers and toes. For a moment, he couldn’t think of what to say. And already, Ash looked chagrined and was backtracking and apologising but Augus slid off the bed and pointed to the door.

‘You’re kicking me out?’ Ash said, voice going higher.

‘Yes,’ Augus said. ‘I am kicking you out. I have explained to you before what occurred between Gwyn and me, and you choose not to listen to me.’

‘You know what I choose to listen to?’ Ash said, staring at him, gaze hardening. ‘The fucking evidence. In the company of Gwyn ap Nudd, you’ve been in a cell for six months, you’ve – by your own goddamned admission – been raped by him, you’ve raped him back because that makes you fucking square or something. You’ve dealt with god knows how many assassination attempts and you’ve been forced into a collar and chain twice and you fucking died!’

Augus forced himself to take a slow, even breath. He tried to sort through his thoughts. He was becoming aware that some of this – he desperately hoped – was those very character changes that Aleutia had told him to watch out for.
But he had to keep his mouth closed, because on the tip of his tongue were sentences he didn’t dare say:

*Who betrayed me, Ash? Who was the one who put me in that cell in the first place? Gwyn was doing his job. What were you doing?*

‘I can’t talk to you when you’re like this,’ Augus said finally.

‘I just want to help you,’ Ash said, getting off the bed. ‘That’s all. I just want to help.’

‘We’ll talk about this later.’

‘Maybe you could tell me what you fucking see in him. Maybe you could do that later,’ Ash said darkly, even as he walked towards the door.

Augus watched him go and then closed his eyes. He sat on the bed and stared at the floor. In the end, he walked to the shower and took the longest one he could stand, warm water pounding into his scalp, and his palms resting against the tiles as he let his head hang.

*  

He stood in front of one of his chests of drawers. He had a thin, rectangular wooden box in his hand. It had a lacquered finish, and was very finely made, though it wasn’t carved. The clasp was shaped like a tiny snake. Augus clipped it open and stared at the long metal rods. He shivered, stroked them with his fingers.

He had no idea what happened to the first set of sounds – very likely, Gwyn had disposed of them, which was unsurprising given what Augus had forced upon him. But, quietly, Augus had ordered a second set. Because the first time Gwyn had sounded him had been a startlingly pleasurable experience.

The door opened and closed in the main room, and he could tell by the cadence of the steps that Gwyn had returned. Augus reached for the drawer quickly to put the sounds away, and then bit his lower lip and decided not to. He kept the box open, looking at the long, rounded lengths of metal bedded down in self-cleaning velvet.

‘Augus?’ Gwyn called.

‘In here.’

Augus looked up as Gwyn reached the doorway. And then Gwyn caught sight of the sounds and his somewhat neutral expression turned terrified so quickly that Augus felt a corresponding surge of adrenaline. Gwyn backed out of the room, and Augus snapped the box shut and followed. They’d never had a proper confrontation about this, and now he rather thought they needed to.

‘Gwyn, wait!’

‘No, you said never again,’ Gwyn said, without looking over his shoulder. Augus jogged to keep with his long steps, only getting a hand on his arm when Gwyn was nearly at the door.

‘I meant it,’ Augus said.

‘Then why do you have them!’ Gwyn shouted, turning on him, eyes so wide with fear that Augus swallowed and held the box behind his back.
'They’re for me,’ Augus said, his breathing faster. ‘They were for me, to be used on me. They’re not for you. For me.’

Gwyn blinked at him, and then his brow furrowed.

‘For you?’

‘I…enjoyed it,’ Augus said, shrugging. ‘It’s something I can do to myself. But I did hope that with time, you might be able to do it again, to me.’

He removed the box from behind his back and held it out to Gwyn. Watched the wariness in his features, in every line of his body. Gwyn looked from the box back to Augus, and Augus knew that one day they’d have to talk about it. About the fact that Augus had used sounds on Gwyn without anything approaching consent. Certainly, they played around with consent all the time. But nothing Augus had done to Gwyn had ever created this fear response afterwards. Even knifeplay to the point of nearly killing him.

‘Take it,’ Augus said, keeping his voice modulated. ‘Take it and look at them. Is it something you could do again?’

Gwyn reached out and took the box, and then squeezed his eyes shut and Augus held back from going to him. He forced himself to remain still. This was something Gwyn had to decide for himself, and Augus found the whole idea difficult enough. Yes, he wanted to be sounded again. But being forthright about wanting Gwyn to take over for a little while sat uneasily with him.

After a minute, Gwyn opened his eyes and then carefully opened the box. He looked at the sounds, his breathing shallow but steady. He touched his fingers to the smallest ones, and then looked at Augus with something open, less frightened in his eyes.

‘For you?’ Gwyn said. He cleared his throat. And then he turned and Augus thought he was leaving. But no, Gwyn only pressed one of his hands to the closed doors and closed his eyes, shifting the permissions again. Augus felt something turn over in his gut because he hadn’t meant now. When Gwyn turned back to him, there was dark promise in his gaze.

‘I didn’t mean-’

‘Be quiet,’ Gwyn said, looking down at the sounds again. He pressed his lips together as he touched them again. ‘It was quite something, taking you apart like that.’

Gwyn snapped the box shut with a click! then approached until there was hardly any space between them.

‘Is that what you want now, Augus?’ Gwyn said. Augus looked sideways and tried to think of ways he could say no while meaning something else entirely. Nothing adequate came to mind, and Gwyn touched him with the hand holding the box of sounds. He pushed him lightly towards the bed.

‘Lie down,’ Gwyn said, and Augus stared at him. ‘You’re locked in. You’re not going anywhere. Get on the bed. Take your clothes off.’

‘Which is it, Gwyn? Do I get on the bed or take my clothes off?’

‘You’re intelligent,’ Gwyn said, smiling at him. ‘I’m sure you’ll work out a way to do both.’

Augus unbuttoned his shirt slowly, refusing to lick his lips in anticipation or betray his
nervousness. It had been a long time since Gwyn had been like this with him. He thought about Gwyn taking control more than was healthy. He unbuttoned the fly of his pants as Gwyn opened the drawers in Augus’ bedside cabinet and found lubricant, tossing the vial onto the bed and then stripping.

As Augus pulled his pants down, exposing a mildly interested cock for Gwyn’s eyes – not that he was looking – he wondered if he should ask about Gwyn’s day. Check if he was truly interested in this. But when Gwyn kicked off his pants and then stared at Augus with that cold expression, he felt nothing but a nervy lust kicking up inside of him.

‘Maybe I’ve changed my mind,’ Augus said, testing the waters.

Gwyn just stared at him, his expression determined. Augus eased onto the bed, and Gwyn followed, putting down the box and pushing Augus down onto his back with one hand on his chest. Gwyn looked down his torso, eyes tracking the soulbond, moving down further. He couldn’t look away from Augus’ belly for long moments. He turned pale and then looked sideways, closing his eyes for several seconds. The play between them broken.

Augus placed a hand on Gwyn’s hand where it rested on his chest. Squeezed reassurance. He was whole, he was alive, and he wanted to not have to think.

Gwyn turned his pale blue gaze on him and pressed his lips to Augus’ lips carefully, before withdrawing. ‘Do you need an oath?’

Augus turned the offer over in his mind. Last time, the first time, he had demanded that Gwyn blood-oath not to hurt him, to listen, to be careful. He’d even secretly hoped that Gwyn would break the stupid oath and die, even if it meant things wouldn’t go well for him in the Seelie palace. Things had changed so much since then, he couldn’t fathom it.

‘Let’s try it without.’

Gwyn inhaled sharply. ‘That’s a big risk to take.’

‘I’m Inner Court now,’ Augus said calmly.

‘It’s still a big risk.’

Augus nodded, and couldn’t help licking his lips. Nerves and more, bubbling away inside of him.

‘I trust you,’ Augus said, and watched Gwyn’s eyes widen. Gwyn opened his mouth and Augus braced himself for the denials. But Gwyn forced his mouth shut and looked at the closed rectangular box and nodded as if to himself.

‘Then I’ll try and be worthy of it,’ he said. ‘Lie back. Wait there.’

Gwyn slid off the bed and Augus lay down and watched him go. Gwyn disappeared into the room Augus had just been in, and Augus found himself staring, because he had no idea why Gwyn was even in there. What did he want?

When Gwyn came back with a length of black fabric, Augus began to protest, and Gwyn held up a hand.

‘I want to blindfold you,’ Gwyn said. ‘May I?’

Blindfold, not a gag. Not a gag. Augus licked his dry mouth, trying to work saliva back into it
again. Blindfolded and Gwyn sounding him. This was a level of...they’d never gone this far before. Not with him as the recipient.

Gwyn climbed back onto the bed with the blindfold, kneeling over Augus, staring down at him. Without waiting for an answer, he pulled Augus into a sitting position and wrapped the black strip of fabric around his eyes. Augus didn’t respond. He didn’t pull in the shaky breath that he wanted to. He didn’t bite his top lip or wince. He kept himself still. He didn’t like to give away too much of himself. If Gwyn wanted responses, he’d have to earn them.

The room was blacked from view, and Augus went still. Even though light bled in slightly at the edges, he didn’t like the dark. For a few seconds he couldn’t think, couldn’t breathe, his hands rose up to pull off the blindfold and Gwyn caught his wrists.

‘Easy,’ Gwyn said. ‘There should be a little light. Can you see it?’

Augus nodded automatically. He bared his teeth in frustration. He hated that Gwyn already knew what the problem was.

Gwyn’s hands squeezed reassurance and then lowered Augus’ hands back down by his side. Gwyn pushed Augus onto his back, and Augus’ mouth opened slightly, because he couldn’t really see anything except for two strips of faint light. He blinked at them, shifted nervously. Gwyn was asking rather a lot. Enough that Augus decided he could afford to push hard, the next time he had Gwyn in his hands.

‘Remember: Anything you do to me, I will pay back in kind,’ Augus said finally. Gwyn didn’t say anything, and when Augus heard the click of the box of sounds behind opened, he squirmed, uncomfortable.

Gwyn knelt between Augus’ spread legs. He touched the flat of his palm to Augus’ thigh, then smoothed up slowly and stroked the dip of his pelvis, rubbing across his flat, straight pubic hair, scratching his fingers across it. Lips kissed the rise of one of his hips and Augus relaxed somewhat. The kisses continued until Augus felt Gwyn reach for the lubricant and heard the vial being opened.

When Gwyn shifted sideways and hesitated, Augus knew relaxation wasn’t going to be something he was doing much of. He’d forgotten how this felt. Not only that, but he was now remembering that it wasn’t exactly comfortable, being sounded. He wondered if he should just call it quits and tell Gwyn to wrap a hand around his cock instead.

He expected to have to tell Gwyn not to pick the smallest size again, but Gwyn’s hesitation vanished and Augus listened to his own breathing as Gwyn must have been lubricating one of the sounds. A moment later, the flat of a thumb pressed lubricant over the head of his mostly limp cock, and he shivered. One of his legs bent, he felt restless. He definitely wasn’t sure about this. Imagining it was a lot easier than experiencing it.

Gwyn’s fingers around his cock were careful, and there was a sureness in the movements which surprised him. He expected Gwyn to fumble, to be as nervous as he, but no...Gwyn had slipped into that mental place he went to when he wanted to take charge. Augus wasn’t sure what to expect anymore. He closed his eyes, shutting out the strips of light. He rested his hands on his ribs.

He expected to have to tell Gwyn to stop, but Gwyn’s hesitance vanished and Augus listened to his own breathing as Gwyn must have been lubricating one of the sounds. A moment later, the flat of a thumb pressed lubricant over the head of his mostly limp cock, and he shivered. One of his legs bent, he felt restless. He definitely wasn’t sure about this. Imagining it was a lot easier than experiencing it.

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Stroking along the inside of his left thigh. Gwyn’s hand slightly wet from lubricant, his fingers digging into muscle and dragging down, creating lines of sensation that seeped into him. Augus’ fingers twitched, and he thought Gwyn might say something, but instead Gwyn kept up those drugging touches, until he trailed his fingers up and anchored the base of Augus’ cock. Augus
swallowed, the sound audible.

Cold metal traced the head of his cock. The rounded bulb at the end of the sound dipped between foreskin and the corona, so that he opened his mouth wider and focused on breathing. Everything was wet, slick, cold and only just starting to warm up. His hands slid to the bed, and he curled his claws – now grown back – into the sheets.

He kept expecting Gwyn to talk, because Gwyn was the nervous one, wasn’t he? The one who needed reassurance, who needed to check in.

When he felt the tip of the sound dipping into the slit of his cock, his body tensed and he pushed himself up on his elbows, gasping. Gwyn shifted his grip and freed one of his hands, pressing Augus back into the bed again with a palm against his chest.

‘Lie down,’ Gwyn said, his voice firm but soft.

‘You have to be careful,’ Augus said, and Gwyn rubbed a circle into his chest. The same gesture that Augus did to him whenever Gwyn felt distressed. He grit his teeth together.

‘I remember,’ Gwyn said, and then moved his hand back and teased the slit of his cock with the end of the sound. Augus’ legs shifted, and he turned his head to the side and pulled a deep breath.

‘You have to-’

‘Be quiet,’ Gwyn said. His voice was soft, but it was an order, and Augus’ eyes blinked open behind the blindfold. His fingers curled into sheets. Why was he doing this again? What was wrong with him?

He felt it when Gwyn secured his cock in a firm grip and then pressed the sound down, in, carefully. Resistance at first, even as Augus’ mouth stretched open and he remembered what this was going to feel like in visceral detail. He wasn’t a masochist, not really, not in the way that Gwyn was, but this was…a penetration he liked and hadn’t expected to. An invasion that felt painful, incredible, and he vaguely recalled how he’d broken down many clients this way and their sounds of pained pleasure and squeezed his eyes shut because he was going to become one of them once more.

‘Your fingers are digging into the sheets,’ Gwyn said.

Augus made a sound of exasperation. ‘Are you going to keep stating the obvious?’

‘Yes,’ Gwyn said, and Augus snarled when he heard the hint of a smile in Gwyn’s voice, then choked into silence when he felt Gwyn push the sound down, into him, and his lips pressed together. He trembled, monitoring the sensations. The sound moved deeper, slowly, but with a confidence that was stealing the rest of Augus’ thoughts away. A stretching sensation combined with pain, the grip Gwyn had around his cock felt good and grounding. Augus opened his mouth and gasped once.

‘I don’t know why you’re not more afraid,’ Augus said, and Gwyn pressed the sound deeper and Augus hissed.

‘Your reactions keep me focused,’ Gwyn said, and then he turned the sound and Augus gasped. His cock was getting hard, already. ‘Easy.’

‘Fuck,’ Augus breathed. His cock thickening, compressing the sound in his urethra, and it was sore and good and Gwyn wasn’t even waiting, but slowly edging the sound deeper and it was nothing
‘Slower,’ Augus managed, and Gwyn pushed the sound a fraction deeper before holding everything still. Augus focused on his breathing, and Gwyn kept the metal sound still with one hand and used the other to rub at Augus’ flank. Each stroke over his side was slow, steady, rhythmic. Gwyn was providing a guide, and Augus followed the motions – inhaling as Gwyn stroked up towards his face, exhaling as Gwyn’s hand moved down towards his thighs.

Everything after that blurred together. He was aware that he was trembling and he couldn’t make himself stop. His knuckles hurt where they dug into the sheets and he couldn’t seem to unhook them. Gwyn kept moving the sound deeper, occasionally turning, sometimes moving it back and pushing it forwards again, and each time Augus was finding it harder to stay silent. Shaking moans were dragged from the back of his throat, and he forgot to monitor what Gwyn was doing, because Gwyn was right – he did remember. Every stage where Augus was vaguely aware that Gwyn had to stop, or be patient, or wait for something; Gwyn knew what to do.

When the sound was as far as it would naturally go, Augus’ prostate stimulated, he had his teeth clenched together. Sparks and colour whirled in his mind. He let his thoughts drift, caught in Gwyn’s careful hands.

He was surprised when, after several minutes, Gwyn slowly removed the sound. Augus caught his breath, expected a hand to wrap around his cock – now hard and leaking. He drifted, time passed, and then his eyes flew open when he felt cold, slick metal pressed against the tip of his cock again. It was too cold – not warmed by his body. A new sound. Larger.

‘Gwyn,’ Augus said, one of his hands reaching out to stop him.

Gwyn caught his wrist in a gentle grip.

‘Easy,’ Gwyn said. ‘They wouldn’t be there unless you planned to use them this way.’

‘Not with you,’ Augus gasped, voice thready. ‘I’m-

‘Be easy,’ Gwyn said, pushing the bulb of the sound into the slit of his aching, hard cock and holding it there, and Augus felt his cock twitch in anticipation and he moaned faintly because this was something he’d really wanted to experience on his own – just in case he couldn’t predict his responses. But Gwyn had done everything well, and Augus equally wanted the opportunity to float, to not have to think.

Gwyn fisted his hand around Augus’ cock, a firm grip with the sound only at the tip and not pressed inside, and stirred that faint, scratchy pain and heavy, thick pleasure by pumping his hand up and down several times. Augus’ mouth opened on a moan.

‘Take the blindfold off,’ Gwyn said, his voice rougher.

Augus’ hands moved up and he picked at the edges of the fabric, realising that Gwyn hadn’t tied the blindfold as tightly as he’d first thought. It slid up and over the top of his head, and he blinked at Gwyn, then looked down at the sound itself as Gwyn steadied Augus’ cock once more and pushed. Augus’ breath hitched.

But Gwyn wasn’t watching the sound, he watched Augus’ face, and Augus felt the weight of that gaze even as his neck arched and he bit the inside of his lip.

‘You look amazing,’ Gwyn volunteered, his voice less strong than before, and Augus’ lips tipped up in a smile at the praise.
When Gwyn pushed the larger size down, Augus’ breath caught. There was a far more noticeable stretch, even after the first sound, and his hips squirmed enough that Gwyn made a faint sound of alarm and Augus froze; he was jostling the sound.

‘Stop moving,’ Gwyn said.

Augus nodded, raised his hands to his head and shoved his fingers into his own hair because it helped him concentrate. He dug his claws into his scalp as the sound pushed down again, and if he couldn’t writhe to deal with the situations, he made faint, repeated sounds in the back of his throat instead. Gwyn’s breathing became audible, but Augus didn’t care about that. He was being dragged along on a ridge of pleasure-pain and he wanted to come and he couldn’t until the sound was out and it wasn’t even halfway down yet. He moaned in despair.

His toes curled, he smoothed his thumbs over his own hairline because Gwyn didn’t have the hands free to soothe him and Augus felt like he was being driven out of his mind. Gwyn felt terribly far away, even though he was right there, and Augus forced himself to breathe, even as the sound itself drove all coherent thought away.

When it was deep, settled, a throbbing, aching pleasure spreading inside of him like tidal waves, he keened faintly.

‘Hurry,’ Augus gasped.

‘Hold back,’ Gwyn said calmly. ‘You do it well enough when you’re fucking me.’

‘Fuck you,’ he whimpered, clawing at his hair. Then he made a high, faint sound when Gwyn tapped his fingernail against the sound and sent vibrations all the way into the core of him, making his gut feel like it was on fire. For a moment he thought he’d detonate.

‘Wait, wait, wait, wait,’ Augus said, his voice frantic.

‘A little more,’ Gwyn said, voice rough, and Augus knew that Gwyn wouldn’t be able to hold out much longer himself. He wanted to look down, see how hard Gwyn was, but he could hardly move. His awareness had become Gwyn’s steadying hand wrapped around the base of his cock, his other hand on the sound, the heaviness in his cock and balls, the hands in his hair.

‘Just-’

The sound twisted slowly, and Augus opened his mouth on a silent cry. He was closer than he thought possible and he tried to indicate it, forced his body to hold back but he wasn’t sure how to tell Gwyn that he didn’t have the same fine control over his bodily responses since he’d been killed since he didn’t want to ruin the mood, but he couldn’t come with the sound inside of him. He pushed himself up on a shaking arm and clawed at Gwyn’s hand.

He opened his mouth to speak, whimpered as Gwyn started drawing the sound back. Slowly, still drawing those sensations out of him, and he couldn’t make himself stop moaning. Gwyn would like that anyway, so he didn’t bother making himself stop.

Once the sound was free, he reached for his own cock to chase the sensations and growled when Gwyn caught his wrist. He opened his eyes in time to see Gwyn shift quickly, his head lowering down to Augus’ cock. Augus’ eyes widened as a wet furnace enveloped the head of him and then sank lower still – no teasing, just Gwyn sinking down and swallowing him, thick tongue massaging the underside of his cock.

Augus jack-knifed, grasped Gwyn’s head between unforgiving fingers and pushed him down even
as he thrust up and bullied his way into the back of Gwyn’s throat. Gwyn choked, stiffened, but Augus’ eyes were rolling up in the back of his head because it hurt and yet felt so good. His mouth was open, he moaned over and over.

He thrust roughly, pushing as deep as possible as Gwyn scratched fingernails down the inside of his thighs, and there, heat flooded through him and he was coming. Deep pulses finding their way into the back of Gwyn’s throat and Augus realised dimly that Gwyn was scratching hard, chest heaving and Augus had been too rough, too violent. He dragged Gwyn up even as he kept coming, and Gwyn clasped Augus’ hips and coughed violently. That shouldn’t have sounded as good as it did, contributing to the curl of pleasure in Augus’ gut.

He gasped as his muscles continued to contract, pulling Gwyn towards him, forcing him to move on clumsy limbs.

He saw a streak of oil-slick sheened come against Gwyn’s mouth and cheek, dazed blue eyes, and kissed him violently, digging teeth into his lips and then sucking his tongue deep into his mouth and scraping his teeth against it. Gwyn moaned, opened his mouth wider, his hips pressing a very hard, very hot cock into the crease where Augus’ thigh met his pelvis.

‘Oh dear,’ Augus breathed against Gwyn’s mouth. ‘We seem to have a problem, don’t we?’

He gripped Gwyn’s hair, holding him in place, and reached down between them. He took up some of the lubricant from the head of his own over-sensitive cock and then spread it quickly over his fingers and grasped Gwyn’s cock. Gwyn pushed his face down alongside Augus’ and quivered like he was seconds away.

Augus let go of Gwyn’s head and quickly slipped the fingers of his other hand into his own mouth. He sucked quickly, wetly, laving them. He kept his other hand still on Gwyn’s cock, and smiled as he withdrew his fingers from his mouth with a pop. It wasn’t perfect, but Gwyn didn’t like things to run smoothly.

He ran his thumb into the crack of Gwyn’s ass and soothed Gwyn’s nervous jump by stroking his cock roughly, even as he pressed his index and middle fingers against Gwyn’s hole and pushed.

Gwyn gasped hoarsely into the pillow beside him, and Augus drew his own legs up, catching Gwyn’s hips and holding him still, pushing fingers into him, feeling the stretch and tension of it, Gwyn’s shaking a vibration against his own body.

‘There,’ Augus said. ‘Yes, there we go. My dear heart, you-’

Gwyn jolted against him, tensed. He clenched hard around Augus’ fingertips and his cock expanded and then pulsed hot jets of come against Augus’ hipbone. Augus, tired but pleased, stroked him through it even as he withdrew the tips of his fingers from Gwyn’s ass and stroked Gwyn’s back firmly, pressing him closer.

With a weak, pained moan, Gwyn sagged against him. Augus, aching and more relaxed than he’d felt in a long time, let him. But he kept his hand around Gwyn’s cock, the other between his shoulder blades, keeping Gwyn contained through the force of his own orgasm.

Gwyn opened his eyes, stared at him. His cheeks and neck were still flushed red, lips swollen where Augus had bitten at them.

‘Do you have a sore throat?’ Augus said, and Gwyn smiled guilelessly, nothing of judgement or disapproval in his gaze. Simple acceptance. And Augus purred a rich sound and pulled Gwyn
'I want to do that more,’ Gwyn rasped. ‘Take control. Maybe sometimes. I haven’t done it as much
in case you thought I was- And I thought…I thought you would have wanted to exert control over
me, after your- After what happened.’

‘Mm,’ Augus said, digging his fingers into Gwyn’s muscles and massaging carefully. From the
buttery sound Gwyn made, Augus made a mental note to explore massaging Gwyn at some point
in the future. ‘I felt neglected. Perhaps I wished not to.’

Gwyn stilled, then he pushed himself up on his palms and Augus had to let go of the careful,
covetous hold he had of Gwyn’s cock. Gwyn stared at him steadily.

‘Should I not have said that?’ Augus said flippantly.

‘I want you to be honest with me,’ Gwyn said, the graveness of his voice offset by the fact that he
still had come on his face. Augus reached up and wiped it off, and Gwyn looked down at Augus’
fingers, caught them in his own. He lowered his tongue to Augus’ hand and licked carefully,
thoroughly. Augus shivered, smiled.

Gwyn kept a hold of his hand and met his eyes.

‘You don’t like being honest,’ Gwyn said carefully. ‘You didn’t tell me that you’d gone to
Fenwrel, or how sick you were. You haven’t told me how many assassination attempts there have
been. You didn’t tell me you were going to the An Fnwy estate – which was dangerous for you.
And you didn’t tell me you were going to heal that lake. You so fiercely seek your independence
that you deceive the people around you to maintain a false play at it.’

Augus felt a sluggish anger move through him but he was too tired to do anything with it.
Especially when everything Gwyn was saying sounded like it might be true.

‘It’s so odd,’ Augus said quietly, ‘getting this lecture from you, of all people.’

‘I’m not saying I don’t have many of my own issues, Augus.’ He laughed, but the sound was bitter
and Augus pressed his hand against Gwyn’s mouth. Gwyn moved his head back. ‘I’ve neglected
you. I didn’t want you to feel like a captive here and yet I’ve done nothing but treat you like one.
And I don’t know how to not do it again. I just don’t know. I don’t know how to be with anyone.
I’ve never been with anyone. Even with M- Even in the past, he and I weren’t together. It’s always
been…’

‘You’ve always been fucked,’ Augus said, his voice grim. ‘And what would you have learned of
healthy relationships from that family?’

‘I made you something,’ Gwyn said, avoiding the question. He pulled back and then got off the
bed, looking for his pants. He dug his hands into the pocket and drew out a pale green crystal.
Augus didn’t recognise what kind it was, but Gwyn brought it back to the bed and held it out for
Augus to take.

‘It’s yours,’ Gwyn said, pursing his lips as Augus twisted it in his fingers. ‘It’s charmed. I…made
it. Well, not the crystal, but the charm. I can’t do much with magic, but I can make charms
sometimes. Especially communication charms. It’s…for emergencies. If you squeeze it and think
of me, I’ll know, and I’ll come to you. I’ll teleport wherever you are. No matter what.’

Augus squeezed it in his fingers, called Gwyn to mind – easy enough to do with him right there –
and Gwyn made a noise. Augus watched him, looked at the crystal again.
‘How long did it take to make?’ Augus said.

‘A while,’ Gwyn said. ‘I don’t…it’s not an easy thing to do. I should have had Fenwrel make it, but I wanted to do it myself. She would have done it without a second thought. It took me a few hours to set the energy properly. I don’t really know what I’m doing. But I know it will work. Will you take it with you?’

Augus closed his eyes, felt something jagged move through him. He could imagine Gwyn taking time aside to make the charm. Neglecting his work as King to construct it.

‘I don’t know what I’m doing either,’ Augus said abruptly, hating saying even that much. A moment later he dropped the crystal and dug his fingers hard into Gwyn’s forearm, finding the pressure points, needing to distract himself from the humiliating truth of it. Gwyn flinched, then blew out a long, slow breath. He inched closer.

‘Be easy, Augus,’ Gwyn said. ‘How would you like to be moved into diplomacy, to start taking some time away from the common work?’

Augus blinked at him in surprise, even as a rush of anticipation moved through him, followed by despair. ‘I can’t, there’s no one else to do the common work.’

‘Let me worry about that,’ Gwyn said, leaning forwards and kissing Augus’ cheek. ‘Answer the question.’

‘Yes,’ Augus said, with no preamble. ‘But I hardly see why you’d let me do something like that, since my excursions outside of the palace never seem to bring much good.’

‘With guards, and keeping you away from freshwater fae and the systems you damaged, I think we can make this work.’

‘Did that family end up moving into the lake?’ Augus asked abruptly. It had never occurred to him to follow up on it. Were they still given the lake? Were they in cells? Had he managed to hurt any of them when he’d failed at fighting for his life?

Gwyn blinked at him, and then something dark and predatory stole over his face. ‘I killed them, Augus. I thought- I suppose…no one would have told you.’

Augus stared at him.

‘When?’

‘About five minutes after Aleutia indicated I was useless and told me to go away. I found something _useful_ to do. About ten minutes after I put your organs _back inside of you_.’

Gwyn grit his teeth together, made a sound of frustration, and Augus saw the moment he checked out, went into denial. It was the same moment he tried to run. Augus grabbed him with both arms and wouldn’t let him leave the bed, listened to his ragged breathing. Augus kept one of Gwyn’s arms in a tight grip, and with the other, stroked fingers over his soft, pillow-mussed hair. Gwyn whimpered and Augus carefully tugged him back.

‘Come here,’ Augus said, closing his eyes. ‘Come here, Gwyn. That’s it, you can face away if you want. Just come back. There. Lie down.’

Gwyn went down heavily, collapsing all at once, curling into himself once more – the position Augus saw Gwyn sleeping in a few days ago. He remembered Aleutia talking about Gwyn’s
health, and pressed his lips to his shoulder. He tuck his legs behind Gwyn’s legs, spooned him. He felt how much Gwyn was shaking, and he closed his eyes, grimaced.

‘Careful,’ Augus soothed, sliding his hand underneath Gwyn’s arm and feeling sore and sated, yet bothered as well. ‘Let me just…’

‘I don’t need this from you,’ Gwyn said, his voice stiff.

‘I need it,’ Augus said, to cover Gwyn’s embarrassment.

‘I’m meant to be taking care of you.’

‘You are,’ Augus said, huffing in frustration. ‘Certainly more than usual. You can’t see how attentive and caring you just were? But just because I need more care, doesn’t mean you deserve none.’ Augus felt the bumps of Gwyn’s ribs and they were more prominent than usual. ‘When was the last time you ate?’

‘I don’t know,’ Gwyn said, and his voice was higher than usual, he sounded lost. Augus gathered Gwyn closer, pressed his fingers into his skin. ‘Days. I killed the fae at the lake and then…’

Augus’ brow furrowed. He’d been led to understand he’d been unconscious for days, and it had been at least a week since he’d woken.

‘Sweetness,’ Augus whispered, ‘you have to eat.’

‘I did…I think.’

It was a lie, and Augus frowned. Gwyn’s appetite had been patchy since he’d gone from underfae to King status. What was behind it? He recalled how thin and starved Gwyn had been as underfae and frowned. He stroked his hand down Gwyn’s chest, and then rubbed slow circles into warm skin. Gwyn who had broken down, cried on his own, and not thought to rouse Augus. Who always – as far as Augus knew – dealt with those things on his own.

‘Are you tired?’ Augus said.

‘I can’t sleep,’ Gwyn whispered.

‘You won’t lose me again,’ Augus said, testing his theory, and Gwyn’s flinch was more like a spasm, forcing Augus to curl around him even as Gwyn bent in on himself.

‘I want to be better at this,’ Gwyn said, and Augus told himself the horrible pain in his chest was from the whole being recently dead thing, and not the way Gwyn’s voice shook as he said it.

‘Gwyn, my dear heart, no-listen to me, you are becoming better at this. And you are starting at a great disadvantage. You are kind and solicitous when you think you have a right to be.’

‘Stop,’ Gwyn whispered, and Augus pressed his lips to the back of Gwyn’s neck and tasted a faint sheen of sweat. He licked up to his hairline and nuzzled it with his nose.

‘You need to sleep, sweetness. You can. I promise. I’ll be here when you wake. And then you’ll need to eat, I’m afraid.’

He ignored the crystal, cold against his skin where he lay. Instead, he pulled Gwyn closer, pressed his nose and mouth where Gwyn’s neck met his shoulder. He kissed Gwyn slowly, not rushing, sucking faint marks onto his neck that would heal quickly, licking over them, scraping his teeth
gently and blowing cool air over areas wet with sweat and saliva. And Gwyn, in his arms, beginning to squirm, small sounds of pleasure caught in his throat.

Augus closed his eyes and stretched his neck, pressed his lips to Gwyn’s ear.

‘I want us to sleep in those rooms you made. The ones for the both of us. We should at least try, shouldn’t we?’

Gwyn hesitated, then nodded, and Augus licked his tongue into Gwyn’s ear and couldn’t help the smile at the noise Gwyn made – as though he’d just been wounded.

‘Sleep,’ Augus said, and this time decided he would wait until Gwyn slept, before doing it himself, so as not to miss any more future breakdowns that might be coming. But he helped Gwyn along by stroking him, kissing his shoulder and the back of his neck, licking letters and symbols into his skin. And Gwyn relaxed slowly, eventually shifting in Augus’ grip until he was almost entirely on his stomach and Augus nearly on top of him.

Only then did his breathing go sleep-slow, and Augus found himself following behind not long after, mouth half open against Gwyn’s shoulder blade, head pillowed on a curve of muscle. His last thoughts were of how pleasantly sore and warm he felt, like floating under the summer sun.

Chapter End Notes

There is NO update next week - *The Court of Five Thrones* will resume on December 5th! After that, weekly chapter posts as usual. :)

(For those following, however, chances look good for a possible *The Wildness Within* update instead).
Mirror

Chapter Notes

A long chapter today! 9000+ words, but I blame Augus and Gwyn's sex life. It's...time consuming. Enjoy!

Also, some people may have missed this last week, but I've added the tags Disordered Eating, and Eating Disorder Not Otherwise Specified for Gwyn. It's relevant to this chapter.

Feedback is love! :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Gwyn

* 

Gwyn woke from his doze slowly, a weight on top of him, a heaviness in his limbs. His body was pushing for a full sleep cycle, but he couldn’t afford one. Still, there was warmth and lassitude, and he shifted quietly, aware of a dried stickiness around his pelvis, his limp cock. His eyes shot open as he remembered the night before.

He saw Augus’ hand draped over him – the slightly blunt, short curved nails of his fingers. He could smell fresh water, the fainter scent of their sex behind that. Augus lay on top of him, and Gwyn was face down on Augus’ bed. Gwyn flared his nostrils, could still detect tiny threads of Augus’ blood from his now-healed wounds. He didn’t like this room anymore. He liked that Augus was in it, but the room itself reminded him of days spent powerless, watching Augus lying too still upon a bed.

Gwyn reached up carefully, not wanting to disturb Augus, and brushed his hand. Augus’ breathing was slow and even. It bore no signs of pain.

He slid out from underneath Augus, then sat on the edge of the bed, watching him sleep. Augus’ face was always faintly troubled in rest, even when he was relaxed. It was the slight pout to his lips. Gwyn wanted to lean down and kiss them, but he didn’t want to wake Augus. Augus needed as much rest as possible, and Gwyn knew he needed it as much for emotional reasons as he did for physical.

He had seen for himself what Fenwrel and Aleutia had told him; Augus was unwell. If Gwyn looked at Augus’ life as objectively as possible, he was a creature that had gone from a stable, nourishing life, to abduction, torture, possession and a great deal more. Gwyn wanted to protect him, but he knew Augus would chafe against any further constraints placed on his actions. Augus was one of the most powerful waterhorses in the world; but there were creatures far more powerful, and far more malicious.

Gwyn walked into Augus’ bathroom and closed the door behind him. He’d been sick in this room the night previous. Gwyn rubbed his hands over his face, trying to wake himself up. Augus was right; Gwyn shouldn’t have needed him to die, to realise that Augus needed more care than he was
He found a towel in a cupboard, studiously avoiding looking at himself, the ugly scar tissue on his shoulder, in the mirror. He turned on the taps of an opulent shower, stepping in before the water had heated, tensing at the cold and hoping it would wake him faster. He needed his body to realise he wasn’t entering a sleep cycle, and he’d been more sluggish than usual. Augus had noticed something Gwyn tried not to think about – he hadn’t been eating much lately. Not nearly as much as he should be.

It was odd, for when he was underfae, he ached for food. He dreamed of the hardy digestion system a higher status would afford him, and then he dreamed further of the trow’s cooking, of Delphine making small marzipan cakes and leaving them for him. Yet when he became King again, something about food and the act of eating became deeply off-putting. After a while, it just became easier to not think about it anymore. The trows brought him food; sometimes he ate it, sometimes he didn’t.

At some point, he’d just stopped eating as much as he needed to keep himself healthy. Every time he thought about doing something about it, he told himself he’d deal with it later. Every time ‘later’ came, he tried not to think about it again.

The water warmed, and he closed his eyes with pleasure. The stiffness in his shoulder started to unwind, until the worst of the gritty pain faded to the ache that was more bearable.

The soap Augus had didn’t lather much, and was mostly unscented. But what scent it did have reminded him of Augus, and he could feel his cheeks flushing hotter than the water at the novelty of using his soap, knowing that he would smell like Augus for the rest of the day. It was embarrassing that he wanted that so much, and he fought the smile that tried to form.

Perhaps you could focus on the fact that he died, and that you were indirectly responsible for that. Augus can say what he likes; he’s so damaged because you’ve done very little to help him, beyond getting him out of the Seelie Court in the first place.

Gwyn paused, a soapy hand on his good shoulder and gooseflesh rippling across his skin.

Seconds passed before he snapped himself back to what he was supposed to be doing, but he scrubbed himself harder, the movements abrasive.

He startled when the door opened, turned quickly, and saw Augus – naked and still yawning – through the steam of the shower.

‘I hope you don’t mind,’ Gwyn said automatically.

‘No,’ Augus said, walking towards him and stepping into the shower without hesitation. He hissed at the temperature, reaching past Gwyn to turn up the cold, until the water became a few shades warmer than lukewarm. Gwyn stared in surprise as Augus came closer, placing a proprietary hand on Gwyn’s chest, the other grasping his hip, claws digging in. ‘Good morning.’

‘Ah,’ Gwyn said, feeling like an idiot. He’d never shared a shower with anyone before, not like this. He’d stepped into lakes and rivers and waterfalls with fellow soldiers, but that was very different. Worse, Augus’ proximity was like a drug, and he couldn’t stop his cock reacting to the sting of Augus’ nails in his hip.

‘Oh, it’s a very good morning, is it?’ Augus said, looking down. His lips quirked. ‘I’d say it’s flattering, but I’ve come to know your cock quite well.’
‘Stop it,’ Gwyn said. He tried to step backwards, but Augus followed him, crowding him back into the tiles. Gwyn blinked at the cold, the flare of pain in his shoulder, as he hit the wall. Augus used the hand on his hip to steer him away from the bulk of the shower’s spray. Gwyn was covered in soap, hair plastered to his head. Augus looked him up and down, and Gwyn looked away, disconcerted. ‘What are you doing?’

‘What I quite like about being Inner Court status, is that you can do what you did to me last night, and I’m not at all sore now. Which leads me to think that your throat feels fine this morning. And I think I want you to feel me in you for longer than that.’ Augus dragged fingers up Gwyn’s torso, and Gwyn’s eyes closed. ‘Also, you’ve left me sticky. I’d reprimand you about tending to me better, but you seemed tired.’

Augus took Gwyn’s wrist and moved it so that Gwyn’s palm was pressed against the jut of Augus’ hipbone, moving Gwyn’s fingers so that they touched flaked come where it had dried in place. Gwyn’s cheeks burned. Usually Augus dealt with clean up, and they’d both been so tired afterwards that it hadn’t occurred him to do anything. He liked resting with his sweat sticking to Augus’ sweat, with the evidence of what they’d done around them. Even now, his fingers moved of their own volition, moving over the smoothness of Augus’ skin, to the come that had dried to him. He wanted press his nose to it, run his tongue over it.

‘I’m surprised you didn’t run off as soon as you woke,’ Augus murmured, the spray of the shower softening his voice. ‘Whatever happened to the Gwyn who could not stand to stay near me any longer than absolutely necessary?’

‘My priorities weren’t balanced,’ Gwyn said, looking at Augus’ shoulders, his chest and the black-turquoise of the Soulbond, the dusky nipples and the muscle definition which was more prominent when Augus was a higher status. Gwyn wanted to touch him. He wanted to press his own mouth to Augus’ chest and taste him.

‘Aren’t you worried about the Kingdom?’ Augus said, and Gwyn flinched hard when fingers touched his cheek. ‘Easy.’

Gwyn relaxed his jaw. He hadn’t expected it. His reaction was stupid, he just hadn’t expected it. He kept thinking Augus would come to his senses, realise how awfully Gwyn had behaved. The gentleness felt anticlimactic every time it came. He was certain it would be the prelude to something cruel and brutal.

A hand on his chest, and Gwyn didn’t realise Augus was measuring his heart rate until it was too late. He tried to step out of the way, but Augus caged him.

‘Are you afraid because you’re worried about the Kingdom? Or because of something else?’ Augus said. ‘I heard you, the other night.’

Gwyn’s brow narrowed in confusion. The other night? The other night? That was private and Augus had been asleep. Gwyn stared at him and Augus returned the gaze, expression unreadable.

‘I don’t know what you’re talking about,’ Gwyn said.

‘Don’t you?’ Augus said, frowning. ‘Well, for now I’ll give you your illusions, I suppose. My poor, stressed King. Aleutia also says that you are unwell. The status changes. King to underfae to King. I think-’

Gwyn pushed Augus backwards by the shoulders, quickly enough that Augus was taken by surprise. Gwyn sank down, the tiles hard on his knees, shower spray falling upon him, trickling
down his face and side.

He wrapped his hands around the backs of Augus’ thighs, leaned forwards and licked over the patch of dried come. He didn’t want to waste a shower with Augus by speaking about subjects he had no interest in discussing. Not now. Not after the night they’d had.

Augus laughed under his breath. ‘Like clockwork, Gwyn. And you are filthy. Go on then, clean me up.’

Gwyn looked up, saw the arch of Augus’ eyebrows, the green of his eyes – healthier and brighter than before. He curved his hand around Augus’ flank and looked down, seeing the curve of a thigh, pressing his lips to it. Everything felt far too tenuous. How could he go from feeling so confident, so sure the night before, to this strange shakiness now? He opened his mouth and rested his teeth lightly on Augus’ thigh, moving his head slowly upwards, teeth scraping, tongue pressed flat. Augus liked slow, and Gwyn refused to let himself rush.

He nosed the place where he’d spilled the night before. Water from the shower already coated Augus’ skin, and Gwyn licked straight up over it, tasting bitterness and a wash of chemicals, like someone had left untempered steel in a fire for too long. He could feel tension in Augus’ muscles, but the hand that came and rested on his head was relaxed, the fingers sprawled over the wetness of his hair, shifting it, scratching softly at his scalp.

‘While you’re down there…’ Augus said, and then his fingers grasped Gwyn’s hair and tilted his head backwards. Gwyn looked up once more. His knees hurt, but it was an easy enough pain to push away. His cock was still hard, words stolen from the back of his throat. ‘You will place your hands behind your back, and clasp them together. It will strain your shoulder, but I’ll release the nerves afterwards.’

Gwyn’s heart thumped harder. He shifted, then did as Augus said. He hissed at the strain in his shoulder, gritting his teeth through the pain. It wasn’t as bad as what he forced himself to endure through training and sword-fighting, but even so, he was distracted for a few seconds as he breathed through it. He clenched his teeth together. This position reminded him of the few times he’d been captured, of Efnisien’s games back before Gwyn had any ability to fight back.

Augus’ hand was still in his hair, and Gwyn’s head was forced up once more. He met Augus’ gaze reluctantly, hating that his cock was still traitorously hard, that Augus looked so hungry, so good. Kneeling like this, Gwyn wanted to press his face to Augus’ crotch, but with Augus’ grip in his hair and his hands behind his back, he couldn’t.

A part of him ached for the way Augus plucked threads of control from Gwyn’s grasp until all Gwyn had to do was close his eyes, lose himself in sensation.

‘Hold still,’ Augus said, bending over him and draping both of his arms over Gwyn’s shoulders. He hissed as his sore shoulder sent a pulse of pain through him, uncertain what Augus was doing.

He jerked when he felt the rubbery texture of waterweed sliding over his wrists, coiling tight. Augus hissed, even as Gwyn’s wrists were bound tightly and his shoulder blared rough pain at him. Gwyn opened his mouth, wanted to say Augus’ name, to warn him, but only exhaled harshly.

‘Making the waterweed still hurts more than it should,’ Augus complained, cinching off the waterweed and standing up again, Gwyn’s arms bound. In this position, with his shoulder the way it was, he couldn’t struggle free. Not without causing himself a great deal of pain in the process. He looked up at Augus, hoped his eyes weren’t as wide as they felt.
He suspected they were from the way Augus pressed the pads of his thumbs down on Gwyn’s cheekbones.

‘Sweetness,’ Augus said, ‘are you with me?’

Gwyn nodded.

‘Excellent,’ Augus said, a cruel smile creeping across his face. ‘Then, what are you waiting for?’

Gwyn ducked his head to hide a faint smile, then nearly fell when Augus nudged him harshly, indicating he should move. He grit his teeth together as the nudging continued, moving on his knees awkwardly, not having the benefit of his hands to brace himself. Augus pushed him into the direct line of the shower spray, until it was falling upon his head and the front of Augus’ chest. Then Augus twisted and the second shower head was turned on. They were surrounded by water on all sides, steam rising around them.

Gwyn kept his head down so the water wouldn’t fall into his eyes, and then realised what Augus intended. He opened his mouth, exhaled slowly. Even with his head bent down, water trickled down his cheeks, dripped off his chin.

Augus’ hand on his head, claws scraping across his scalp. It was more pain than pleasure, and Gwyn squeezed his eyes shut. He couldn’t struggle properly. Maybe if his wrists were bound in front of him, but no, Augus had deliberately picked this position, he was sure. He pressed his forehead to Augus’ pelvis, water falling on and around him.

Claws tightened on his head, beginning to break skin, and Gwyn turned his head automatically, nuzzling into the pelt of Augus’ black pubic hair, bumping into a quiescent cock. When he mouthed it, keeping his eyes closed, the claws turned into a palm smoothing over the top of his head, and he shuddered.

The noise of the shower muffled Augus’ breathing, so Gwyn couldn’t read Augus’ reactions as easily. But he could feel Augus’ cock plumping beneath his lips, beneath the curve of his tongue. As he moved, opened his mouth, water trickled into his mouth, spattered constantly across his forehead, running down his closed eyes, on either side of his nose. If he inhaled too quickly, he got a nose full of water for his trouble.

Augus reached down with his other hand, gripping his cock at the base, sighing loudly enough that Gwyn could hear it over the shower.

‘I grow impatient,’ Augus said, moving Gwyn’s head back far enough that he could press the head of his cock to Gwyn’s lips. Gwyn’s hands automatically clenched at each other as he opened his mouth, Augus sliding in over his tongue. The motion caused his shoulder muscles to strain and he exhaled hard, inhaling quickly and his eyes flying open as water went the wrong way down his throat and he fought back the urge to cough. Augus’ cock hardened on his tongue, and Gwyn couldn’t brace himself on Augus’ thighs as he’d done in the past.

Gwyn was reminded of the night before. Augus simply grabbing him by the head and forcing his way into Gwyn’s throat so roughly that he’d tasted blood when he’d swallowed. Having his airways abruptly cut off, struggling against the reflex to bite down, he’d been so hard that it hurt, even as he panicked when Augus didn’t let him up. Yet after all that, it had made him mindless with a heavy pain-pleasure.

Now, though, he had enough presence of mind to know that this would be difficult. He looked up at Augus, and Augus stared down at him, smirking, eyes lidded with lust.
‘You know, don’t you?’ Augus said, smiling wider as he rolled his hips carefully deeper into Gwyn’s mouth. Gwyn wanted to spread his knees to brace himself and couldn’t on the slippery tiles. He wanted a hand free. He felt unbalanced, unstable. He kept his mouth open, tongue curling around the taste of Augus. ‘You’ll have to be careful.’

Gwyn stared at him until water ran into his eyes and he looked down, blinking it away, wanting to shake it out of his eyes and unable to with Augus’ cock in his mouth.

‘I’ll give you another two minutes to acclimatise, Gwyn, and then I’m taking over. You’d best open your own throat so that we don’t have a repeat of last night.’

Gwyn couldn’t nod, couldn’t squeeze Augus’ thigh or torso to say that he’d understood. Instead, he moved his tongue underneath Augus’ cock, then moved backwards. He was careful with his breathing, not wanting to inhale too much water accidentally. He moved forward again, Augus’ cock an increasingly heavy weight in his mouth. Augus’ hands were gentle on the top of his head. But Gwyn knew that Augus was likely counting down the minutes in his own head and that the gentleness wouldn’t last. His own cock – frustratingly – twitched at the thought.

Gwyn felt the head of Augus’ cock pressing at the back of his mouth. Water ran down his face. He tried to tune all of it out and focused instead on bobbing back and forth carefully, testing the way it felt, getting his throat used to it. It had been a long time since he’d had time to accustom himself. He knew Augus liked listening to him struggle, choke, but Gwyn liked this part too.

He swallowed, once, then again, and his throat opened around Augus’ cock, his gag reflex close, but held at bay. Over the white noise of the shower, he heard a faint groan, and his arms jerked automatically. He wanted to touch Augus, to squeeze at his side, run hands over him. He shoulder throbbed, he cried out, inhaled unthinkingly – water and air merging together. He pulled backwards, coughing, drawing rough breaths through his mouth, water dripping down his ears, off the bridge of his nose.

‘You couldn’t have made this any easier?’ Gwyn said, voice deeper than usual.

Augus’ hands tightened on the back of his head. ‘Keep that up, and I’ll instigate the ‘no speaking unless spoken to’ rule. And if you think I couldn’t make this more difficult, keep up the back talk, and you’ll see that I can make this much more challenging.’

Gwyn didn’t doubt it.

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He moved forward again, but this time Augus didn’t help him, and Gwyn had to shift his torso to get the head of Augus’ cock into his mouth. He tried to move his bad shoulder as little as possible, reminded viscerally of when he had to baby it, nurse it back to health. When his fever had broken but he was still underfae, and his shoulder could still be the death of him. He squeezed his eyes shut, focused on breathing, didn’t notice Augus stroking his hair back from his forehead until Augus pulled his hand away and cupped the back of Gwyn’s head instead, grip turning stronger, hips rolling forward.

He had to be out of time, and he pushed himself, swallowing repeatedly around Augus’ cock to take him deeper, until his throat started to ache. He had to keep his breathing slow, unable to gasp for breath like normal if he didn’t want to cough around the water streaming down his face. He had to keep his eyes closed, unable to look, unable to touch. When he drew back to take a breath, he made a sound of frustration.

‘Augus,’ Gwyn said, and Augus laughed softly, the sound echoing off the tiles.
‘You’d best get it all out of your system now, Gwyn, because the next time you swallow me down, I’m not letting you off easily again until I come.’

Gwyn’s body shook at the promise in Augus’ words, even as he bared his teeth at the tiles, reigning in the worst of his agitation. He shifted his wrists again, gritted off a sound of pain, then cried out in shock when Augus fisted both of his hands hard enough in Gwyn’s hair that he felt strands coming loose.

‘I mean it,’ Augus hissed.

Gwyn’s thoughts cleared and he shifted again, taking Augus’ cock into his mouth and making a sound of alarm when Augus pulled him forwards firmly, undulating his hips so that Gwyn had no choice but to swallow to stop himself from gagging. He kept his mouth open wide, teeth behind his lips, pressed his tongue up and wished he could tell what Augus’ breathing sounded like over the harsh spray of the shower around him.

Augus kept him distracted. He started fucking his way into Gwyn’s mouth slowly, steadily at first, but he picked up speed. Gwyn had no choice but to focus on his breathing, keeping his mouth open, aware of the weight of Augus’ cock. His throat ached, his hands twisted behind him absently, twisting his fingers together. His cock throbbed between his legs, his knees were two sharp points where they pressed into the tiles.

Augus shoved forwards too quickly, too hard, while Gwyn was trying to breathe in – his rhythm was thrown off. He opened his mouth wider, choked, tried to pull backwards. Augus’ hand tightened at the back of his head, holding him in place, and then Augus’ other hand twisted down quickly and fingers dug into a pressure point at the hinge of his jaw, forcing his mouth to stay open. He made a sound of shock, cried out, and Augus ignored him, kept up the rhythm until Gwyn was straining backwards against it and fighting the waterweed, pain flaring down his arm.

‘Concentrate,’ Augus said, voice calmer than Gwyn’s would have been if the situation was reversed. ‘Just swallow for me, Gwyn. That’s all. Concentrate, sweetness. Just swallow.’

Gwyn’s eyes leaked tears that were hotter than the water. He made a pained sound even as he forced himself to swallow clumsily, keeping his throat as open as possible. His sense of balance felt precarious at best, Augus leaned into him for a better angle, and Gwyn had to arch back. Every other time they’d done this, Gwyn could hold onto Augus for support. He had to concentrate, because making sure he could breathe properly, keep his gag reflex under control and not slip or fall or lose his balance was getting harder.

‘I can still feel your mind ticking away,’ Augus said, his voice thicker now, rough with arousal. ‘What will it take, Gwyn? I can do this all morning, if necessary.’

Gwyn whined around Augus’ cock, part protest, part desire.

Seconds passed into minutes, and Gwyn’s throat was raw, his shoulder hurt, but he was beginning to drift and it was warm and welcoming. The water pounding on his skin was hypnotic. He knew he was drooling, saliva filling his mouth, but the water washed it away. Augus’ rhythm was relatively predictable. Firm and rough one moment, followed by long, deep thrusts that ended up with Augus grinding his hips, moving his cock deeply into Gwyn’s throat. The hand at the back of his head was uncompromising, the one at his jaw keeping his mouth open.

Gwyn had mostly worked out how to breathe with water streaming down his face. It trickled in rivulets down his back, his arms, around the base of his cock. Just enough contact to be maddening, not enough to do much more than remind him that he was hard.
He wasn’t sure when the drifting became a pleasant buzz. One moment he was thinking about all the places he still hurt, how annoying it was to have his hands tied up, and the next all the sensations coalesced – pleasure and pain – until his thoughts disappeared. Augus sped up, and Gwyn adjusted for it, moaning hungrily. In response to that, Augus muttered something that sounded like relief, or gratitude, but Gwyn wasn’t concentrating on words and it was just one more texture blending into the others.

Augus groaned loudly, not long after. Gwyn could hear his breathing now, echoing in the shower stall. Gwyn knew he was making choked off noises of want, of strain, but he’d ceased caring.

Gwyn moaned when he knew that Augus was going to come. Augus’ thrusts slowed, but became more forceful, so that Gwyn lost his rhythm once more, choking and straining backwards unthinkingly.

Augus’ grip tightened on the back of his head, and then Gwyn felt it – the pulsing in Augus’ cock, and a liquid heat in the back of his throat, slightly stinging, but welcome and tasting fresher than he’d imagined. His throat hurt as he swallowed, but he didn’t care. He was only aware of the heat coursing through his body, light pulsing along his spine, his cock heavy between his legs.

Augus held him in place for some time after he’d finished coming, forcing Gwyn to get his breathing under control even with Augus’ cock in his mouth. It wasn’t until Gwyn’s breaths had steadied, nose pressed against Augus’ pelvis, that Augus slowly drew backwards.

Gwyn couldn’t stop the long moan he made when Augus withdrew completely. Gwyn was so hard he was shaking. He’d lost track of how aroused he’d been, and without Augus taking up all his thoughts, he slammed back into the ache of it, gasping around the tight knot in his gut.

‘Stand up,’ Augus said, voice firm. ‘Stand up. Careful.’

A hand sliding underneath his good arm, not untying the waterweed like he’d hoped. He pushed himself up on one foot first, centre of balance thrown off. Augus made sure he stayed upright. Gwyn could hear himself gasping as though from a distance. His head spun.

‘Augus,’ Gwyn breathed. His voice was roughened, his throat stung.

‘Careful,’ Augus said, voice softening. ‘It’s slippery.’

A hand underneath his chin, tilting his face up. He was aware of the green of Augus’ eyes, a calculating gaze, and then Augus’ lips quirked up.

‘There,’ he said, as though he’d seen something he was looking for. ‘Are you floating for me, sweetness?’

‘Augus,’ Gwyn complained, hips jerking forwards, pulses pounding in his body, heaviest between his legs.

‘Ah-ah,’ Augus said, kissing his way up Gwyn’s jaw. ‘Ask me.’

Gwyn shivered, it took him a little while to work out what Augus meant. When he did, he shook his head and then moaned shakily when Augus bit at his earlobe, when a tongue traced over the shell of his ear.

‘Ask me,’ Augus said again.

Gwyn looked to the side, his breathing rough, his throat feeling hollowed, like it had been shaped
for Augus’ cock.

He flinched when claws dug into his flank, and then cried out when they pierced his skin, blood oozing hot down his side. It was a burst of pain that quickly became pleasure, and he lost his thread of concentration.

‘This is not a request, Gwyn. I am telling you to ask me to make you come. If you don’t, there will be consequences.’

Pain was an echo through him, only winding the desire in him tighter.

‘Augus, please.’

The claws dug in harder and Gwyn’s teeth clicked together. He took several breaths while Augus’ claws flexed in his side. Gwyn opened his mouth, tried to shape the words. The heat of humiliation stole through him and he shook his head.

‘You have no choice but to obey me,’ Augus said, each word unfurling directly into his ear. ‘The faster you obey, the kinder I’ll be. Remember, I’ve had my fingers in your guts before.’

Augus’ claws pressed in deeper and Gwyn bit Augus’ shoulder wetly, trying to concentrate. He could say it, couldn’t he? If Augus was making it a command. Augus liked it when Gwyn obeyed him. It wasn’t a trap, surely.

‘Augus…’ Gwyn said, voice cracking. ‘Will you…’

‘Actually, I think I want you to say: ‘Augus, I want you to make me come.’’

Gwyn made a vague sound of discontent, trying to push his hips forwards and not having the leverage needed to get any sort of satisfying contact.

‘It’s eight words,’ Augus said, claws still in Gwyn’s side, blood flowing down the drain, the scent of it thick in the air. ‘You can manage eight words, can’t you? You’ve asked me before, and I listened to you, didn’t I? Even when you thought no one was listening. You can ask me, Gwyn. You really have no choice in the matter.’

Gwyn wished there was a way to say it without actually having to say anything. He was losing the pleasant floating he’d had before, and his forehead thumped onto Augus’ shoulder, thumping again. He was hard, sore, aroused. He needed to come.

‘Augus,’ Gwyn said, his voice low and slight and small, ‘I…’ His head turned, he pressed his face into Augus’ neck. In response to that, Augus made a sound that Gwyn couldn’t hear over the shower spray, but rather felt in his throat. ‘Augus, I want…I want you to make me come.’

He wished fervently that he could disappear. His wrists twisted behind his back, fingers digging into each other.

‘Augus,’ Gwyn said, voice shaking. What if Augus had no intention of following through? What if it was just a game, and he-

‘Shh,’ Augus said into his ear. ‘Move back for me. Step back, that’s it.’

Gwyn’s hands and arms pressed against warmed tiles. Augus pushed Gwyn’s head back, exposing his throat, biting wetly across it, teeth scraping but not stinging. His other hand trailed down Gwyn’s torso, wrapping around his cock without teasing him. Gwyn gasped, and then his knees
began to buckle when Augus’ hand started moving.

Augus leaned into him, chest against his chest, using his weight and stance to keep Gwyn in place.

‘Just a little longer,’ Augus said. ‘You’re doing well, Gwyn. Very well. Let me make you feel good.’

The praise jarred. He wanted it, he didn’t want it. But how he felt about it didn’t matter very much, because he was dragged down into heat and light, Augus’ hand working him firmly, quickly. Arousal spooled in his gut, the shower muffled the moans and noises he was making.

When Augus’ hand stopped working on his cock, he shouted in frustration, his hands worked the waterweed so hard that his shoulder flamed.

‘Augus! You said- You said you would. You said-’

Augus was murmuring words to him, but Gwyn couldn’t believe that he’d asked, he’d done what Augus had said, he’d asked, and now Augus was-

‘Gwyn,’ Augus said, voice firming, ‘listen to me, listen, I know you asked me, and you did so well. I’m not stopping. I promise. I need you to lock your knees for me, otherwise you’re going to fall and I’m not going to be able to keep you up. Are you listening to me?’

A long sound of frustration and Gwyn locked his knees, unthinking.

‘Good, perfect,’ Augus said, and Gwyn keened when he felt Augus’ hand around him again, moving slowly at first, but picking up speed quickly. His mind was blanking, he was aware of bucking into Augus’ hand and then having to stop, because he couldn’t brace himself against the wall properly. He knew he was saying Augus’ name, could feel the shape of those syllables in his mouth.

‘You look so good like this, you have no idea,’ Augus purred.

Gwyn couldn’t process the words, didn’t even think to have a problem with them. All he knew was that there was heat, fire, and he wanted to combust, wanted it so badly he couldn’t stop shaking.

He tumbled into his release roughly, the sensations of it building in jags until he muffled sharp cries into Augus’ skin. Augus said something but Gwyn didn’t catch it, a sharpness flaying thought from his mind until he could do nothing more than lean half against the wall, half against Augus. Even once he’d finished coming, he could do nothing more than stay pinned, breath rough, throat still sore.

Augus reached behind him and snapped apart the waterweed. Both of Augus’ arms were wrapped around Gwyn’s torso like an embrace. With the waterweed removed, Augus’ fingers massaged carefully at his wrists, drawing his arms apart more slowly than Gwyn would have done it himself. His shoulder shrieked at him, but Gwyn felt it as a red-white noise that he could almost push aside. He was still shaking when his hands were by his sides, Augus holding his arms by the wrists.

‘Move your fingers for me,’ Augus said, and Gwyn nodded. He wriggled his fingers obediently, and Augus rubbed Gwyn’s forearms with something that felt like reassurance, before letting go of them completely.

‘Did you mean it?’ Gwyn whispered, despite the soreness of his throat. Augus hesitated, then reached for the soap and placed it in Gwyn’s fingers.
‘Clean me,’ Augus said quietly. ‘Also, you do realise I have no idea what you’re talking about?’

Gwyn stepped forwards and rubbed the soap in his hands until they were creamily slicked. His wrists still ached and he winced, but pressed his hand first to Augus’ chest, the faint dip between lean pectorals, feeling the heavy thump of his heart – so much slower than Gwyn’s. He moved over the Soulbond and Augus looked away. Gwyn cleaned the Soulbond quickly, even as he marvelled at its magic, that it had given them a chance to keep Augus alive.

‘Did you really want to move into those rooms I made?’ Gwyn said, putting the soap down on a ceramic shelf, using both of his hands to rub soap down Augus’ arms. Unbidden, Augus raised them so that Gwyn could duck fingers into his armpits, a fine covering of hair there – straight and pelt-like, the same as his pubic hair – Augus wasn’t ticklish and didn’t squirm. Gwyn looked at him, curious, knuckling his fingers gently, then firmly into that more tender space, and Augus’ eyes fluttered shut. Gwyn did it again, and Augus’ licked his lips, his eyes opened, he looked at Gwyn sidelong.

‘You’re getting distracted again,’ Augus said.

‘I don’t think I’ve done that before,’ Gwyn said, continuing on, down Augus’ sides.

‘You haven’t, but I wish to feel clean, and now is not the time for your explorations. And, yes, I meant it. Now be quiet, Gwyn. Stop fighting it. Let your mind be still, or as still as it can be.’

Gwyn nodded. He focused instead on what he was doing, soaping Augus’ body, kneeling down again to soap his legs, knees and feet, grunting in pain when his knees pressed into tiles. But it was worth it when Augus dripped hair product onto Gwyn’s head, and massaged his scalp with long, smooth movements that made Gwyn forget what he was doing. He bowed forwards, forehead resting against Augus’ upper thigh. Gwyn’s mouth was open, he could taste the hair product as the water rinsed it from the top of his head and it trickled past his lips. His hands were cleaned of soap and he wrapped his palms around Augus’ calves.

Eventually, Augus slowed to a stop and turned, and Gwyn continued to clean him, needing to apply soap again several times. He liked the wiry muscles of Augus’ back, the way Augus shifted slightly, allowing him better access. Augus’ head tilted back when Gwyn trailed the pads of his thumbs from the base of Augus’ spine all the way up to the top of his neck.

Augus was right, Gwyn was fighting it. He let his thoughts narrow to the feel of skin beneath his hands, the heavy white noise of the shower around them. Eventually, Augus stopped him with a murmur and returned the favour.

Augus cleaned him quickly, thoroughly. The touch wasn’t overly sensual, but it didn’t matter. Just having Augus near him in such close proximity, while they were both naked, was distracting enough. Augus tapped Gwyn’s half-hard cock with the tip of his finger and clicked his tongue.

‘I have just the thing for that,’ Augus said. He reached up with his hands and Gwyn didn’t know what he expected, but he certainly didn’t expect Augus’ hands to dig deep into his bad shoulder, triggering what felt like weeks of pain at once.

He cried out, thumped back into the tiles, his breath a hoarse wheeze. He tried to struggle out of Augus’ grip, but Augus was merciless.

‘Such panic, with you,’ Augus said. ‘You know what I’m doing. I’ve done it before. Ride it out, Gwyn. Breathe for me. That’s it.’
He could hardly feel his arm as anything other than a lightning rod of pain. This was the worst it had been in a long time, and his light was jump-starting along his back. There was a threat in front of him and his other hand clenched then opened, fingers splaying. He could stop this. He could-

‘Gwyn,’ Augus said, cutting into his thoughts. Was he using compulsions?

Augus’ hands shifted and Gwyn almost got away, except that Augus swore in frustration and dug fingers in once more and Gwyn sagged when the pain vanished, leaving nothing but a residue of tingling in his arm, neck and back. He made a pathetic, embarrassing sound, breathing rough and ruined.

‘This,’ Augus said, his own voice rougher than usual, ‘this is why I should be doing this on a more regular basis. What would you have done, Gwyn? Would you have killed me? Are you ever going to talk about what it was like when you were made underfae?’

‘That was underhanded,’ Gwyn rasped, coughing, wanting to moan in relief and just angry enough that he held the sound back.

‘Yes,’ Augus said, smiling. ‘It was. Do you feel better now?’

And damn Augus, but he did. His shoulder wasn’t hurting for the first time in weeks. He felt sated, his throat was sore in a way that made Gwyn swallow more often just to feel it. He could still taste Augus’ spill in the back of his throat. Perhaps he was imagining it, but he hoped not.

Augus pulled him out of the shower by his forearm and took another towel out of a cabinet, handing one to Gwyn, before towelling himself down. Gwyn was in the process of turning his water-slicked hair into an unruly, fluffy mess, when Augus paused him. Gwyn dragged careful fingers through his hair, settling it.

Delicate fingers touched the edges of his scar tissue. The nerves sent back mixed signals. He didn’t look down, because that would mean looking at the scar, so he looked away instead.

Augus traced the edges of the scar, which was broad, ugly. Augus draped his towel over his shoulder so he could free up his other hand, which he used to touch the other side of Gwyn’s back, where the arrow had entered. Both sides were gnarled.

‘It’s starting to fade,’ Augus said. Gwyn saw him lick his lips in his peripheral vision. ‘You don’t talk about it. You don’t look at it. But you are still stunning to look at. Look at yourself in the mirror.’

Gwyn shook his head. He would tolerate this for another few seconds, then, if Augus continued, he’d walk away. He was beginning to learn that Augus liked to choose the times when Gwyn was tired, exhausted, sated, to try and tunnel underneath his walls.

‘Look at yourself,’ Augus said. The words became harder, and Gwyn could tell this wasn’t optional. He sighed, the sound laboured, and looked at his own face, before meeting Augus’ eyes in the mirror. ‘The scar, Gwyn.’

His eyes glanced over it. All he saw was a red, disgusting reminder of how stupid he’d been. How utterly, irredeemably stupid. His nostrils flared, the light that had pulsed through his bones before came back, heating him. All he saw when he looked at the scar was a worthless, incompetent fool who couldn’t even-

A smashing sound, pain in his fist, and Augus standing to the side of him, looking down at the shards of mirror in shock. Gwyn calmed his breathing, straightened his fingers, then lowered his
arm back to his side like he’d done nothing at all. His knuckles were cut open. They would already be healing.

Unlike his shoulder, which would never heal.

‘Perhaps you’re not ready for that yet,’ Augus said, voice light.

‘Perhaps not,’ Gwyn agreed, voice stiff.

‘You can’t keep evading the subject forever, Gwyn. It’s not just going to go away if you refuse to think about it.’

‘I’ll get you a new mirror.’

‘Oh,’ Augus said, and then laughed, the sound self-deprecating. Augus gestured desultorily at the Soulbond. ‘I’m not one to talk, actually. Mirrors and I don’t get along as well as we used to.’

‘How can you say that? It’s-

‘It will be the reason my brother dies. It has already been the reason my brother has died. Don’t you dare tell me that it’s pretty, or beautiful. I can already see it in your eyes Gwyn, but if you say the words aloud, I am going to get angry.’

Gwyn thought that was a double standard, but he didn’t say as much, given that he was also quite sure he would let Augus walk all over him for some time, given how remiss Gwyn had been in his attentions. He sighed and examined his knuckles, picking out some pieces of mirror and letting them fall to the floor. The trows would clean up, and – knowing them – would provide a new mirror by nightfall, provided he and Augus left the room long enough that they could enter.

They both exited the bathroom, and Augus seemed perfectly happy to stay nude; Gwyn wasn’t about to discourage him. He pulled his shirt on, because he knew he didn’t look as good decorating a room as Augus did. It was a novelty to steal a few minutes unhindered by the pain in his shoulder. He pursed his lips, eventually he would have to go back to work, he couldn’t spend all day in this room.

‘Augus,’ he asked, watching Augus fish the small green crystal out from the bed and place it carefully on the bedside drawer. ‘If I were to ask Fenwrel for her recommendations for potential staff to cover your common work, and other duties, would you trust those recommendations?’

‘Yes,’ Augus said, unthinking. Then he stilled, his face drained of colour. Gwyn stood, adrenaline coursing.

‘What is it?’

‘I just remembered,’ Augus said, staring at him. ‘It’s…the events before my death are muddy, and they’re only just- I interrogated Dogwill. I have very thorough notes but there was one thing I meant to tell you as soon as I- Damn it.’

‘Tell me,’ Gwyn said, voice firm.

‘Dogwill swore, under compulsion, that there was another traitor in our midst. Now, wait,’ Augus raised his hand as Gwyn tensed. ‘There were some signs that Dogwill had been spoon-fed information by Albion in case he was ever discovered, so I can’t be sure that Dogwill wasn’t simply told that there were other traitors for the purposes of reassurance, or to allay his fears, or to further destabilise us. I’m uncertain. But Dogwill swore to it.’
'He doesn’t know who it is?’

‘He doesn’t,’ Augus said. ‘He didn’t even know if it was another General or random staff. I tried teasing that apart from all directions, believe me he broke quite beautifully.’

‘And he doesn’t mean the plot with the shapeshifters?’

‘That’s Crielle’s plot, he knew nothing about that at all,’ Augus said, frowning.

Gwyn made a sound of frustration. His fists clenched again.

Augus stepped towards him. ‘Gwyn, tell me what you’re thinking.’

‘Only that I need to allow more staff into the palace. I need to. This Court is barely functional, it drifts into outright dysfunction at times. I can’t trust these people, yet I have to allow more in?’

Augus paused, then settled his hair carefully behind his back, twirling excess water out of it. ‘I think I should interrogate the Generals and the common fae servants – some of them were here before you were in power, and could have been turned. But it would have to be done carefully. As soon as rumours spread that interrogations were happening again, a fae could possibly get more hands on that herbal block- Not to mention that to do this twice to your Generals will sully their faith. They will know immediately that there is likely another traitor amongst them, if I interrogate them once more.’

‘Let them suspect,’ Gwyn said, shaking his head as he thought about it. ‘Let them. They are competent, and their faith is already sullied. Ifir knew the shapeshifter before I did, and – though I question his methods – he did potentially save my life. Let’s assume that not every one of them is a traitor. Perhaps they will see something I cannot, once more.’

‘Could it be one of the Generals?’ Augus said, and Gwyn shrugged with one shoulder.

‘Could it? Vane ingratiates himself to me frequently, but he is over-eager and he has none of the subtlety that I’d expect from an educated, trained traitor. It may be some of the more competent Generals. Perhaps Mu or Ocypete. I hate to think it’s Zudanna. She helped lead the charge against Albion’s military when we set the trap for Dogwill in the first place. There’s no help for it, Augus, they all have to be compelled.’

‘I’ll find a way to do it delicately, at least,’ Augus said, sitting on the bed with his legs together, kneeling on his haunches. ‘What about Mikkel?’

‘I doubt it,’ Gwyn said, frankly. ‘He’s revealed his ‘price’ for his information – which is valuable, but I genuinely sense he has no idea just how valuable some of what he knows is to me. He wants stories of…of a certain other Reader I once knew.’

Augus’ eyes widened a fraction, his mouth tensed. Gwyn fiddled with the hem of his shirt.

‘And is that going well,’ Augus said, ‘considering you still struggle to say his name?’

Gwyn winced, felt a tightening in his chest. ‘What else am I supposed to do? He Reads the emotions anyway. From what he’s said, I was- I was easy enough prey when I was in the cell.’

‘When you were in my cell,’ Augus said, with that belligerent persistence that meant he wasn’t nearly done dropping the subject of what things had been like when Gwyn was underfae. Gwyn tried to gather his thoughts.
'He has very valuable information. And I-’ like him.

Gwyn’s lips pressed together when he realised what he’d been about to say. Mikkel was infuriating, unfit and didn’t seem to care about fae etiquette. He was invasive and rude and sometimes outright intolerable. And yet…the man had an odd charm about him. After a lifetime of lies and needing to keep things hidden, being able to spend time with someone who peeled everything back to its most truthful core was oddly appealing.

Even if it did come in a mind-bogglingly annoying package.

‘It could be Mikkel,’ Gwyn forced himself to admit. ‘He can’t be compelled.’

Augus said nothing for some time. He was looking off into the distance, and Gwyn wanted to ask him what he was thinking, but decided waiting might be more polite. He swallowed quietly, to feel the pain in his throat, already fading.

‘I’m going to start moving my things into those rooms,’ Augus said finally, looking at him. ‘I’ll start today. Since I’m sure you’re not in the mood to let me heal another lake?’

Augus laughed at the look Gwyn gave him. After a few seconds, his expression sobered. He slid off the bed and lifted the blankets, looking underneath the bed. He then drew out one of the wicker hampers the trows often dropped off, containing foods that were easy to snack on – meals that could be eaten while working, or in Augus’ case, while recovering.

‘Sit next to me,’ Augus said.

‘I don’t see what the fuss is about,’ Gwyn said, rolling his eyes, even as he sat on Augus’ other side, away from the hamper. His chest was still tight. It was frustrating that Augus had decided to pick on this matter of all matters. Especially when Gwyn was sure it would resolve on its own.

Augus handed him a crusty roll of bread, it was warm, like it had just come from the oven. The trows had magic that allowed them to preserve food, the roll could have been baked some time ago. Still, it smelled fresh. The scent alone made Gwyn’s stomach rumble, his mouth water.

‘The fuss,’ Augus said, taking up some spinach leaves and nibbling on them primly, ‘is that Aleutia told me that you aren’t as well as you should be, and that I have noticed your eating habits have been…shall we say, off kilter, since you came to the Unseelie Court. Though, honestly, they were always neglected. You abused your King status terribly when it came to personal care. Likely, you’ve begun to again. But not eating will impact your health. You can survive it, but I’m not sure you should be seeing your Generals, or ruling this Kingdom, with anything other than an alert mind and sound body.’

Gwyn picked the crust apart, pulling some of the softer bread out of the middle. It was soft against his fingers, like the down or fur of some animal. He ate it easily enough. But all the same, after that first mouthful, he didn’t eat more.

‘Are you so dense you haven’t realised why?’ Augus said, taking the roll from Gwyn’s hands and tearing out some of the fluffy insides. He pressed the bread to Gwyn’s lips, and Gwyn scowled at him before taking it, his lips brushing over Augus’ fingertips.

‘I’m sure you’ll tell me,’ Gwyn said around a mouthful of food. Crielle would have reprimanded him for that, Lludd would have hit him in the face at the dinner table, if they’d not had guests. He resisted the urge to hunch in on himself.

‘Oh, I’m sure there’s a lot of reasons,’ Augus said, pressing bread to Gwyn’s mouth once more.
Gwyn took it from Augus’ fingers, and Augus hummed with approval. ‘But I think one of the main ones is that you were starving to death while you were underfae. And one of the things I learned as a dominant, is that fae end up with particular triggers that, when touched, unlock a whole cascade of other matters; almost like a mental pressure point. That one thing becomes the lock and key to a gate that can hide or let forth everything connected to an event, or a series of events. And for you, I think, the act of eating has become a very loaded act.’

Augus cleared his throat. ‘It was likely very loaded already.’

Gwyn swallowed and took the roll out of Augus’ hand, biting into it directly and tearing off a huge mouthful.

‘See? I’m fine,’ Gwyn said with his mouth full, getting up and walking around to the other side of the bed and looking for his pants.

‘Ah yes,’ Augus said, smirking. ‘Of course. Very believable.’

‘Good,’ Gwyn said, belligerently.

Augus laughed outright, and Gwyn looked at him as he finished tugging on his pants. He was taken aback by the lack of irritation on Augus’ face, as though he found Gwyn truly amusing. Gwyn glowered.

‘You know I’m not letting this go,’ Augus said, shrugging, and Gwyn bit down the growl lurking in the back of his throat. ‘Oh? You do know, wonderful.’

‘I have to get back to-’

‘Running the Kingdom? Work?’ Augus said, raising his eyebrows, the smile not leaving his face. Gwyn’s cheeks began to burn, and Augus dug into the hamper and picked up some more spinach leaves. Gwyn didn’t want to say anything, but he felt a small curl of warmth to see Augus voluntarily eating, after Aleutia had noted that his and Ash’s appetites would be stifled after their organs had shut down.

‘I am actually the King. That does actually mean something,’ Gwyn said.

‘It does. Speaking of, will you really…transfer me into diplomacy? If you can- if we can find someone to help out with the common work?’

‘You should have told me you disliked it this much,’ Gwyn said.

‘I- I don’t dislike it, per se,’ Augus said, though Gwyn very much doubted it from the way Augus’ jaw tensed. ‘It’s important work. And diplomacy seems a distant goal, given you also slaughtered my reputation at the Display- Ah, no, at the Triumphal Entry.’

Augus wasn’t looking at him, and Gwyn was grateful for that because it meant he missed Gwyn closing his eyes, a bolt of pain coursing through him. He thought back to Gulvi’s lecture, and decided that as hard as her words were to hear, he needed to hear them. He walked over to Augus’ side once more, sat next to him, taking one of Augus’ hands in his own.

‘I did you an injustice,’ Gwyn said. ‘And it’s time I took measures to make sure people respect you as they once did. It won’t be possible with everyone – but we can make steps in the right direction. You say you trust Fenwrel? I’ll ask her to recommend potential candidates. If she doesn’t know who to suggest, I’ll find others who can help assist in Court matters. The common work could be spread out, titrated.’
Gwyn pressed Augus’ hand between his own, meeting those green eyes.

‘I wanted to tell you,’ Gwyn continued, ‘Ondine came to visit me, a little while ago. She gave me the seeds of a plan, and I wanted your blessing. Given you are, after all, my primary advisor.’

‘Oh?’ Augus said, curious.

Gwyn resisted smiling, explaining the plan. In the end, it was Augus who grinned darkly, and Gwyn took that as a good sign.

‘Mm,’ Augus said, sliding his hand out of Gwyn’s grip and stretching. ‘I think you have a Seelie King to vex.’

‘I think so,’ Gwyn said. He got up, wanted to lean down and kiss Augus on the lips, wanted to do something, but unsure what he could do. In the end, he walked from the room saying an awkward farewell. He’d taken Augus’ hand hadn’t he? That was plenty. Besides, it had been a strange but good evening and morning. He wanted to put the energy he’d gained from it to good use.

Chapter End Notes

In our next chapter, 'Fracture:'

‘Duribard,’ Gwyn said quietly, not turning around, ‘you owe me three life debts.’

‘Everyone knows you don’t collect on those. Everyone.’

Gwyn did turn around, leaning against the doorframe, folding his arms. ‘If I hadn’t saved your life, three times over, you would never have become the primary systems weaponeer for the Seelie fae. In point of fact, Duribard, they would have overlooked you if it hadn’t been for my personal recommendation to the Oak King.’

Duribard’s eyes narrowed, then practically disappeared behind the wrinkles on his face. Gwyn could tell he was lost in thought, and then Duribard clapped his hands over his face and shook his head.

‘What do you want?’ he said, looking at Gwyn once more over his fingers.

‘I want forty trebuchets,’ Gwyn said. ‘And then you can consider the debt half paid.’

‘Forty? What!? I can’t make you- I can’t do that! I can’t! Albion would- I couldn’t even make them. Do you know how long they take to make? We’re not Mages, you know. We don’t just wave a wand and conjure them from nothing. Even Mages couldn’t do it.’

‘That does sound hard for you,’ Gwyn said. ‘Doesn’t the Seelie Kingdom already have forty trebuchets in its military? Actually, as I recall, they had more. I wouldn’t even be leaving them in the lurch.’
Gwyn

Gwyn thought he would feel nervous, but he didn’t. He wore nothing more than simple pale brown pants, a creamy linen shirt, and a short sword belted to his side. Many didn’t know he could wield a short sword nearly as well as a longsword and claymore, and he almost wished someone would give him the opportunity to show them. He itched for a good battle, the Unseelie couldn’t risk the soldiers to have as many as he truly wanted.

He waited, arms folded, in front of the door to a villa built with yellowing limestone. He’d knocked loudly and looked around, curious. Perhaps he should feel more threatened, but he didn’t. It was incredible what having a task did for his confidence, and this was one he was looking forward to completing.

The aging door opened, and a short, squat fae with burly arms and curly hair stared up at him. His small eyes widened in his weathered face, he gasped, and then Gwyn smiled as the fae went to slam the door in his face.

He slid his foot forward and the door hammered into it, not closing.

‘Go away!’ the fae shrieked.

‘Now, Duribard, is that any way to greet the Unseelie King?’

Gwyn felt it as the door was shoved against his foot even harder. It hammered against the edge of his boot, and Gwyn simply leaned into it, resisting the urge to smile wider.

‘Go away, traitor!’ Duribard shouted.

‘Duribard,’ Gwyn said quietly, ‘do you want your neighbours to see me? I can wait out here all day. And the day after that, and the day after that. Not to mention the fact that you owe me at least one life debt. Don’t you?’

The thudding on the other side of the door stopped, and Gwyn saw the square head, the bright eyes, poke out from behind the door. The stare was wary, frightened.

‘You remember those early days, yes?’ Gwyn said. ‘Quite a reckless young fae you were out there with us all. Weapons repair, back then, wasn’t it? But you always put yourself out in the line of fire, just to make those weapons worked for the Seelie fae. So very loyal. But foolhardy. Even feckless.’
‘What do you want?’ Duribard said, staring at him.

‘Invite me into your home,’ Gwyn said coldly, dropping the smile.

‘Never,’ Duribard hissed. ‘I’ll not invite you into my home. Not ever. Lord Albion should have killed you ten times over.’

‘Duribard, I don’t actually need an invitation to enter, I’m the King,’ Gwyn shoved past him, pushing aside the muscled dwarf like he weighed nothing and entering his home, closing the door carefully behind him. ‘Do you ever wonder why Albion hasn’t killed me ten times over? It’s no matter. Now, if you’ll not observe the fae laws regarding etiquette, I will observe them myself. Where is your kitchen. Ah! I see it.’

He walked towards the kitchen and listened as Duribard scrambled to his feet, trotting after him.

‘Get out!’ Duribard shouted. ‘I’ll summon the King! I can do that now!’

‘Duribard,’ Gwyn said quietly, not turning around, ‘you owe me three life debts.’

‘Everyone knows you don’t collect on those. Everyone.’

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‘Gwyn,’ Duribard said, mouth going slack, horror, fury and more on his face.

‘It’s King Gwyn, to you,’ Gwyn said, voice clipped. ‘And you know the debt is fair. Don’t you? This is my price, you must pay it within two weeks. Deliver the trebuchets to the Unseelie Kingdom. Before the Gwylwyr Du. And don’t think to lay a trap for me, Duribard, for I’ll just end up living, and I’ll ask even more from you.’

‘Why don’t you just kill me?’ Duribard said.

‘Because you are far more valuable to me alive. And because I’m quite fond of you, Duribard. We used to drink together, did we not? I remember those stories we shared. You talking of your large family, your beloved sisters, how novel it was that your mothers and fathers were still alive. How fond you were of the tiny sparrows that you bred.’
Duribard stared at him and Gwyn smiled coldly when he realised the threat had landed. By the gods, but he’d missed this.

‘Albion will kill me,’ Duribard said. ‘He’ll kill you.’

‘Perhaps,’ Gwyn said, shrugging. ‘Though, honestly, if he kills everyone who ends up paying off a life debt to me, he’s going to lose a significant chunk of the most powerful minds in his land-fae military.’

‘I’m not the first you’ve visited,’ Duribard said, voice flat.

‘Nor the last. And Duribard? As part of the life-debt, I demand that you not inform any of your peers, or use any method to let others know about our exchange.’

‘Those- Those trebuchets are old. They need maintenance. Let me…let me make you new ones. Give me more time,’ Duribard said, and Gwyn pretended to look like he was thinking it over.

‘Forty of the Seelie trebuchets would do just fine, Duribard.’

‘You can’t do this. What about…what’s to stop fae from doing the same to you? Claiming their debts back from you?’

‘The simple fact is I have operated many military sieges, battles and missions for almost three thousand years, and my heartsong was triumph for a great deal of that time. I won a lot of battles, I elected to save a lot of lives, and you would be surprised how many fae will volunteer the words: ‘I owe you a life debt’ to someone who has just saved their life in order to set the debt in stone. Perhaps they said it because they were convinced I would never call them to repay it. But then, everyone thought I was Seelie, too.’

‘I fought by your side,’ Duribard said, shaking his head slowly. ‘I helped you. Over and over again. We all did. We worked for you. You don’t know what your lie has done to us, the Seelie. You don’t even care. And you don’t know what we’ll do to you, if we get the chance.’

‘I’m sure it will look like torture, followed by death,’ Gwyn said.

Duribard quivered all over, not in fear, but suppressed violence. To attack someone calling in a life debt was physiologically impossible, especially if that life debt was reasonable. There were some fae laws that went beyond words, deep into the marrow of a person. If Duribard didn’t pay the debt, he would eventually sicken and then die.

‘Do you honestly think Albion will let this stand?’ Duribard said, voice shaking, and Gwyn shook his head.

‘No, I don’t. Do you truly think I haven’t considered that? You’re saying nothing that comes as news to me, Duribard. Now, you know the terms. The trebuchets, delivered within two weeks. I want them delivered whole and untampered with, and should you breach those terms I will declare the life debt unpaid and then take the lives of your family as payment. You were with me the day we took Nwython’s property. You know I am more than capable.’

‘Even without the trebuchets, our military is stronger than yours,’ Duribard snarled.

‘Yes,’ Gwyn said. ‘Partly why I consider the debt half paid. I’ll come back for the incendiary cannons later. Now, if you must excuse me, I have someone else to visit. It has been a busy day, you understand.’
Gwyn walked towards the front door and then looked behind him as he opened it. Duribard hadn’t moved, save for his head which tracked Gwyn’s movement.

‘And Duribard, do remember your manners next time. The laws of fae etiquette are sacred, and you do your alignment a disservice when you ignore them. Farewell.’

He closed the door behind him, and teleported to his next location.

It really had been a busy day.

* 

Gwyn returned at midnight, and a trow intercepted him immediately. He crouched down to the trow’s level, a rush of warmth finding him as he read what the trow was saying. He signed back instantly.

Are you sure? Gwyn signed. Augus was approved to hunt by Aleutia?

The trow nodded vigorously. The waterhorse said he will not return for a week, and that you should still rest in mutual rooms, and not your own rooms. He was very firm. Shall we be delivering food and so forth there now?

Gwyn nodded, and then thought about how to phrase his next sentence. If you could keep bringing some linens and clothing to my old rooms, however. Just enough that I can utilise them on occasion.

The trow nodded, spindly fingers moving a quick agreement. Gwyn inclined his head in thanks and then teleported to one of the strategy rooms he and Gulvi had commandeered. She wasn’t there, which was more the norm these days as she and Ash spent a great deal of time together since his temporary death. Gwyn looked at the large list of Seelie fae on a parchment hanging from the wall. He highlighted another five names, and then wrote down what each had pledged to do, or not do. Wealth, trebuchets, a promise to halt the military manoeuvres for three squadrons, for four weeks.

The list contained two hundred names, with another one hundred and seventy on the side as back-up. They represented the most significant land fae in the Seelie military, the skilled engineers, the most successful farmers, even the best farriers and hound breeders.

It made him uneasy, looking at all of them. Ondine had told him to get revenge, but Duribard – and many of the others – were right; Gwyn had fought to protect these people. He’d put his life on the line for them and everything they stood for, and a part of him still believed in the Seelie principles. He knew for the sake of the Unseelie Kingdom, he had to buy time and resources. He knew that he was hurting the people he’d once supported for thousands of years.

He clenched his fists and walked away, before losing patience and teleporting straight to the training rooms.

* 

The next day, still sore from training for hours without cease, he visited another thirty Seelie fae, jumping from place to place with teleportation that no longer fatigued him now that he was King status again.

At the end of his day, when the sun had already set in the Seelie courtlands and the stars had come out to watch all he did, he found himself at a property neighbouring the An Fnwy estate. It was a landscape he hadn’t visited for some time, and he felt oddly nostalgic, even as his mind revolted...
with a wealth of unpleasant memories.

He walked down a pristine drive lit with the orangey flames of torches that were spelled to self-ignite, then burn down to nothing at dawn, before springing up anew the following night.

A high pitched whining. A rush of air zooming past. Gwyn looked up, withdrew his short sword, and his night vision allowed him to see fae on the battlements.

A cold sweat bloomed through him. The last time an arrow had come at him, it had-

But no, since he’d been underfae he’d been in battle, there had been arrows and spears aplenty and his bloodlust had driven away his terror at what it felt like to be shot as an underfae. He let himself fall into that cold hunger, his grip tightening on his hilt, then deliberately loosening.

It would be a good way to test if his reflexes were up to par.

Another three arrows came as he walked calmly up the path. He knocked each one away with the sword, muscles bunching and relaxing, the movements a blur. Only fae that battled with him knew how fast he could be, how quickly he could move his bulk. He’d trained hard for the fitness he carried with him, his power accelerated with the privilege of his status.

Aggravation stirred slowly and thickly within. All his life, everyone knew you treated the King of either alignment with respect. You invited them into your house, you offered them refreshments; even if you were planning on going straight to your alignment’s Court afterwards and telling them everything. There were rules that transcended the individual principles of each alignment. Rules of etiquette, rules of courtesy.

Even his mother and father observed them, painstakingly.

To be knocking arrows away as he approached the wealthy, verdant villa set his teeth on edge. He’d expected the fae to start informing others of Gwyn’s sudden urge to collect upon life debts, but perhaps he should have expected this instead.

The front doors opened as he approached, light spilling on balustrades and a landing that looked as though it were made of blue and pink mother of pearl. He’d never liked the aesthetic of the daoine sidhe at the best of times.

‘Marika!’ Gwyn called, ‘I call upon the laws of life debt, you must hold council with me!’

He heard the whine of the arrow as it came from behind, and stepped out of its path, knocking the arrow down. There were bow wielders behind him. No matter. He walked up the steps and a flurry of arrows came towards him. He leapt aside, dodged some, and an odd, feral glee found him. This was no harder than some of his training as a child, when Lludd had decided to take realistic trials one step further. He’d only been twenty the first time he’d been expected to dodge arrows from skilled bow-wielders. Back then, he hadn’t been able to dodge them all, but he had a good rate of success only two years later, when his father wouldn’t stop the trials even if Gwyn had arrows jutting from his flesh.

Was he trying to kill me even then? Did he realise what it would mean when I didn’t fail?

Abruptly, the shower of arrows stopped, and Marika came to the door with her hands on her hips. Gwyn was sure that, to others, she was stunningly beautiful. She had a more refined face than even his mother, and had been beloved of the Court for longer than many could remember. Marika of the daoine sidhe was one of the trusted tutors who had taught him his skills with the recurve bow, and it pained him to be here.
There was a reason he’d saved this visit for the end of the day.

‘Good to see all that training paid off,’ Marika said, her voice flowing and rippling, almost like a brook.

‘I’d missed your sarcasm,’ Gwyn said, shooting her a bright smile. She looked taken aback for several seconds, but Gwyn meant it. Marika was one of the few tutors whom he’d been permitted to spend more than a year or two with, because Marika had constantly maintained a brutal coldness around him. To the point that Gwyn had wondered if Marika was secretly trying to kill him when he was a child. It wasn’t until he was older, a General moving up through the ranks of the military, that he met Marika again and realised that nothing was quite as it seemed. ‘Invite me into your home, Marika.’

‘You have a standing invitation,’ Marika said quietly, stepping back with the tall, slender grace of her kind and tilting her head, her pointed ears. She fit the fairy stereotype far better than he did, and Gwyn resisted the urge to touch his rounded ears, the ones that made it so easy for him to pass as human in the human world.

He followed her down a corridor that shimmered like the inside of a pearl. He felt magic all around him, but nothing particularly hostile, though he did not sheath his sword until:

‘Gwyn,’ Marika said, without looking back at him, ‘if you truly wish me to observe the older fae laws, then you will put away that weapon inside my home.’

‘I’m just trying to assess how many bow-wielders could be hiding inside,’ Gwyn said, sheathing his sword easily and following her past plants that grew flowers that glowed cream and pink, smelling richly of vanilla and cinnamon. His mouth started to water, and he knew he should eat something when he returned back to the palace.

He was led to a sun parlour, the light provided by werelight and a profusion of glowing flowers, of leaves limned with light. It was an older, kitsch fae décor that had fallen out of fashion, yet it put his mind oddly at ease. He watched as she walked straight to a daybed and sat easily upon it, adjusting her transparent robes. She gestured for Gwyn to sit opposite her.

‘I would offer you refreshments, but I know you would not trust them. I will not besmirch you in this way.’

‘I appreciate it,’ Gwyn said, sitting stiffly. The chair was comfortable. He didn’t want to be lulled.

‘Now,’ Marika said, ‘you mentioned a life debt? There are three, aren’t there? That is what I get for supporting you in some of your campaigns. But before you simply come here and ask me for what you will, let us chat first.’

Gwyn scowled at her, looked around the room slowly. There was no one else hiding in here. Carefully, he let his ability to sense other fae spill around him, and aside from fae that seemed to be gathered – hiding? – in the opposite wing, and the bow-wielders on the property, he sensed no one. Still, he kept his power spilled, in case she had summoned others without his knowing. She wasn’t a Mage, but she’d always been adept at magic.

‘What do I tell you, Gwyn ap Nudd?’ Marika said, looking at him closely – to see, he presumed, if he noticed the use of his full name. The one taken from him by his family, by the King. ‘I voted for your demotion. I was one of the many Court fae summoned that day, and I saw the aithwick cut away from your bones. I felt the lie revealed. I was not furious as the others, but struck with melancholy. I knew a little of your childhood, and I had once confronted your father as to why he
was rushing you through the training of war and war skills at such a young age. Why he would put you in the military when you were only a baby. He told me he was confident you would triumph over all. And he said it with a tone of voice that I’m sure you knew very well, one that brooked no further discussion.’

She smiled coldly. ‘I came to my own conclusions and I kept them silent. You are Unseelie, perhaps he should have killed you the moment he knew. But we are covetous of our reputations are we not? Our positions close to the King. And the Oak King, though he ruled justly, played favourites. He played us against each other to make sure our loyalties were to him and not each other, to make sure they were fierce, devoted, that we were always plying him and his Court with favours.’

‘Marika, I-

‘Hush,’ Marika said, trailing her hand down the silks. She looked relaxed, in repose, but Gwyn knew that her reflexes were as sharp as his, that she could be up and have a knife to his throat if he didn’t keep a close eye on her. ‘Your mother never much liked me, though she invited me to many of her soirees and other functions. King Albion’s sea fae don’t much like me now. They don’t much like any of us. They don’t understand the fae of the land. Can you imagine what it’s done to the land fae, to find their Court palace turned into an idyllic place for merrows and mer-fae?’

‘I can,’ Gwyn said quietly.

‘He wouldn’t be King, if we didn’t have your betrayal to pit ourselves against.’

‘He would,’ Gwyn said, shaking his head slowly. ‘There was no one else to rally behind, and the fae will not go without a monarch.’

‘Strange, isn’t it?’ Marika said, leaning forward and offering him a bright smile. ‘Now, when you told Duribard he could not speak of your debt price to the King or his peers, you did not tell him that he could not speak to those he considers **beneath** him, and I believe you may have underestimated Duribard’s rage. By now, King Albion knows well and truly what you’re doing, if he hadn’t already divined it for himself. You stir an ant’s nest, Gwyn. But it’s one that some of us want to see stirred.’

Gwyn stared at her. She couldn’t be suggesting what he thought she was suggesting.

‘I’m not an ally,’ Marika said, holding up a hand at his expression. ‘But nor do I support the Oak King’s agenda, Albion’s agenda of annihilating the Unseelie. I quite like the Unseelie. They throw intriguing functions. Their masques are something to be reckoned with. The Wild Hunt only exists because of the accord between the Seelie and Unseelie. And I have cousins and other family members, **daoine sidhe, bean sidhe, cu sidhe** and more, who are Unseelie. So you see, I have never supported the Oak King’s agenda, as you haven’t. That was why I liked you so much.’

‘Is all this talking leading to a point, or are you going to put me off claiming my debt from you forever?’ Gwyn said, and Marika gave him a pointed look, and then lifted her fingers in a shrug. The gesture reminded him of Augus.

‘You are Gwyn ap Nudd, child of Crielle and Lludd, and as they did not kill you, they had no right to take away your name. I always appreciated your strategies, and I appreciate them now. Do you know what Albion will do, with you impacting so many of the significant military land fae? He will remove them from power, or put them on the bench, and then he will put his mer-fae and merrows into positions of power. For they owe you no life debts. He will create a very powerful military. He already has. But the land fae, the **Seelie** land fae, will not appreciate Albion’s
‘You talk like you already know what he’ll do,’ Gwyn said, though he’d suspected Albion would do the same. He was banking on it. More dissent in the Seelie ranks could only work in his favour. What Marika didn’t know was that Gwyn wasn’t only targeting high status military fae. He was a soldier, he’d worked alongside other soldiers, he knew just how crucial it was for every part of the team to pull its weight. He knew just how quickly things fell into disarray if soldiers didn’t work together.

‘This is not a game only you and Albion are privy to. It’s one we all get to see. Moves and countermoves. Those that are obvious, like this one – this you do to stir him from his palace and throne, and those that are subtle. Now, I suspect you are here to ask me to pay you a debt. Here is what I am going to give you, for free. Not because I support you, but because I support the outcome of what you are doing. I will cease tutoring all Seelie fae in the art of the bow, for a period of five months. Five months only. And I will cease working in the military in any capacity, except advisory, for three months.’

She straightened and had a small knife in her hands. He hadn’t seen where it had come from. She snicked a line across her middle finger and blood trickled down her hand.

‘This I oath to you on pain of death, should I break my oath.’

Gwyn stared at her.

‘Now, save your life debts with me, for you may need to call upon me in five months or more. I will tell Albion that you have exacted a crueller price upon me than some of the others, and simply state you have saved my life more than once. You are not alone, Gwyn ap Nudd. Now that the dust has settled, I have had a…shall we say, surprising number of fae come to me and ask me what I think of your upbringing, of your nature. After all, I lived so close to you, tutored you, fought alongside you. So I have had a surprising amount of opportunities to examine just what I think about you.’

Marika licked the blood away with a pointed tongue, and her pupils constricted long and narrow like a cat’s as she did so. She tucked the knife away, and then settled her silks once more.

‘The Unseelie Kingdom cannot collapse,’ Marika said. ‘It simply cannot. And there are of those of us with cousins across the river whom we care for, very much, who are fighting to make sure it does not collapse. And we have been here longer than you have, and we have a much older agenda to fight. I don’t know that I care for you, young man, and nor do I know if it will be your reign that pulls us through this rocky time. But I have come to hope that it will.’

‘You shot over seventy arrows at me while I approached your home,’ Gwyn observed.

Marika smiled down at her fingers. ‘I was only making sure my tutoring had left its indelible mark on you, as I am glad to know it has. You know as well as I, that I could mount a far more aggressive attack upon you if I wanted, and you would still survive it.’

That much was true.

‘Now,’ Marika said, standing and gesturing for Gwyn to do the same. ‘I demand that you take back your name. You are Gwyn ap Nudd. We made you, did we not? The least you can do is make us stand up and notice you. And some of us do, young man.’

Gwyn stared at the healing cut on her finger. The one that would scar, because she’d made him a
blood oath to stop tutoring all her students. He knew Marika, she trained the bow squadrons – the most advanced. He’d planned on asking her to halt her tutoring for a week, two weeks at best. Five months was a coup he couldn’t quite fathom.

She walked him to the door quietly, and Gwyn felt out of sorts. What had just happened? And why? They were supposed to hate him. Ondine only liked him because…because she was Ondine, and had a soft spot for everyone.

She paused before she opened the double doors of her home. ‘Gwyn?’

‘Yes, my Lady?’

‘Perhaps the Unseelie Kingdom will be crushed. But, on the small chance that it’s not, you should also think of who you want to see ruling the Seelie Kingdom. For it cannot be Albion. We must all think of who we want to be running our Kingdom.’

‘With all due respect, Marika, this is not my Kingdom any longer,’ Gwyn said, smiling ruefully.

‘With all due respect, Gwyn ap Nudd, I do not think you truly understand the position you’re in, or how to make it work for you. The sooner you realise that we are not ‘the enemy,’ or not all of us, the sooner you will understand that there is an opportunity at your feet. Although,’ Marika smiled darkly, ‘you cannot trust Duribard as far as you can throw him. Not even that far. Now, leave, so that I might pretend at terrible distress, and tell Albion what a cruel, cruel thing you have done when he comes to question me – as he will.’

‘You gave me a blood-oath,’ Gwyn said, staring at her hand once more. ‘I would not have asked it.’

‘That is why I gave it to you. It is my gift. I look ahead to a day when I might be able to tutor someone such as you, or any Unseelie, my own cousins, and not be demoted for it.’

‘A day that doesn’t exist,’ Gwyn said grimly. ‘Has never existed.’

‘I have lived far longer than you,’ Marika said smiling. ‘And I look ahead to a future you cannot see. Now, you’d best teleport away, since my bow-wielders have been instructed to be most merciless upon your exit.’

Gwyn stepped onto her landing, holding her eldritch gaze as he summoned his light and left her property, his head ringing.

* 

Four days later and Augus hadn’t yet returned, though the trows were on alert to let Gwyn know as soon as he had.

Duribard and some of the other Seelie fae had found ways to report to Albion and each other, and almost half the fae on his priority list were not to be found in all the places he sought them, so he moved to his back-up list. Many of those fae clearly hadn’t considered themselves to be in positions significant enough to be visited, and so his hit rate stayed high.

Still, as the days passed, he found himself funnelling more and more of his time into training. He used a mixture of private and public training arenas, though he often had an audience of Unseelie Court fae when he trained publically; they circulated frequently in the outer circle of the Unseelie palace now. It didn’t impact his performance to have spectators, but he did have to clamp down on his urge to growl through the worst of the pain in his shoulder.
Lurking through him was a growing agitation that he couldn’t sate with splitting and shattering wooden dummies with a longsword. Marika’s words bothered him, the attitude of many of the other Seelie fae he met filled him with disgust. But the more he trained, the less control he seemed to have over the anger that coursed through him.

Fenwrel had informed him that Ash had a mild case of the underworld-sickness that Augus had. What did that mean? Should he be nicer to Ash? Was there a chance that Ash was treating Gwyn the way he was, because he was ill? Gwyn made concessions for Augus, but then – even ill as he was, Augus didn’t treat him the way Ash did.

And apparently Gwyn was ill, Augus insisted on it. How were they supposed to run the Kingdom? Gulvi hated being cooped up in the palace and he couldn’t blame her, but it also meant that she was absent with increasing frequency. He needed to keep shoring up the defences of the Kingdom, and fast. He needed to know that if anything happened to him, the palace had a fretwork in place that it could build a future reign upon. Augus had left the Unseelie Kingdom with nothing. Gwyn at least wanted to ensure a Kingdom would function if he surrendered his Kingship in the future.

Right now, he knew it wouldn’t.

He looked up from the large parchment list he was updating, when a trow entered.

‘Is Augus back?’ he said, and the trow shook its head, scratched at its gnarled, wrinkled face.

_The Reader is here to see you. We have taken him to the private night garden with the sculptures, as you requested._

‘He came alone?’ Gwyn said, already summoning his light. The trow nodded, and Gwyn disappeared.

* 

Gwyn approached Mikkel, where he sat on the bench that was formed from an antlered doe made of stone. But he approached quietly, from behind. He’d managed to surprise Mikkel once before, and wondered if he could do it again.

Mikkel’s red tweed flat-cap made him stand out. He was a thickly built man, lounging back against the chair and whistling a tune that sounded creepy in the night gardens. Gwyn couldn’t pick the tune, but he liked the way it sounded.

When Gwyn deliberately let his foot crunch down on a twig, Mikkel made a sound of shock and turned around, staring at him.

‘Fucking- How do you do that?’

‘Good evening, Mikkel.’

‘Yeah, uh huh, to you too. And- Oh yeah it’s coming through now,’ Mikkel said, waving fingers near his head, indicating the Reading. Gwyn clenched his teeth automatically as he stood before Mikkel, who looked up at him with a cheeky smile. ‘So, like, wow – pretty much all the people you love end up kicking the bucket, don’t they?’

After a week of dealing with Seelie fae and their petty words, after the weeks previous – worrying about Augus and his health – Gwyn felt something within snap.

His fist clenched, he punched Mikkel so hard he drove him from the seat, standing over him,
already panting with rage.

Mikkel groaned, spat out blood. He looked up, that shit-eating grin still on his face. ‘Now, now. Can’t solve all your problems with violence.’

The anger spiralled higher, white and red crowding on the edges of his vision.

‘Three thousand years has taught me that I can,’ Gwyn snarled, punching him down to the ground once more. His teeth were still bared, but Mikkel stayed down. Then, in a flurry of movement, Mikkel curled into himself and Gwyn thought he’d hurt him too badly, he always underestimated his strength as King, but-

Mikkel had his flintlock out and pointing at his crotch, hands shaking. ‘Hit me again and I will shoot your fucking dick off. See if I won’t.’

Gwyn was taken aback, and he stepped backwards, raising his hands. The gun didn’t scare him, truthfully. Whatever Mikkel shot would remake itself with time. And though a bullet wound was inconvenient; they weren’t nearly as damaging as being stabbed with a sword or blade.

‘I apologise,’ Gwyn said, still breathing roughly, surprised at how quickly his anger had risen, how quickly it was draining away.

‘Screw you, Cupcake,’ Mikkel said, groaning, spitting out blood once more, before pushing himself up onto his palms and shaking his head slightly. ‘You’re scary.’

Gwyn stared at him. He’d only punched him, and Mikkel was Court status, how was that-

Mikkel turned his head, stared at Gwyn with his mouth open, blood oozing from one side of his lips. ‘How do you- How are you shocked at that? You’re legit scary, Gwyn. You can’t just go up and… I was joking before. I made a joke.’

‘It was tasteless, given what you were joking about,’ Gwyn said, as Mikkel pushed himself back up to the bench and rubbed at his cheek, wincing.

‘You should deal with that temper of yours,’ he muttered.

‘You should learn some tact,’ Gwyn said.

‘What I said was true though,’ Mikkel shrugged. ‘I’m not doing something wrong if I’m telling the truth. Also, there are a lot more people like…more loudly pissed off at you lately. Not just saying so but like…I can feel it. A lot of anger at Gwyn happening in the Seelie Court.’ Mikkel winced and touched shaking fingers to his cheekbone. ‘Jesus, I think you broke something.’

‘I’m sure I did,’ Gwyn said. ‘But you’re Court status, and if you don’t move your face too much beyond speaking, the bone will have knit together by tomorrow.’

‘It hurts,’ Mikkel said, staring at him. ‘I don’t care if it heals by tomorrow, it fucking hurts now.’

Gwyn shook his head, impatient. It was only pain, and Gwyn knew very well that it was frustrating, but it would go.

‘You’ll heal,’ Gwyn said, sitting on the ground in front of him, folding his legs together. Mikkel stared at him again, for a much longer period of time. Gwyn looked up at the constellations to avoid the fact that he could tell Mikkel was sifting through his emotional state, those pale brown eyes looking into him in a way most others couldn’t.
'You know,' Mikkel said finally, 'if you didn’t like the way your dad treated you, maybe you shouldn’t fucking do it to others.'

Gwyn blinked, refused to look at him. His lips thinned. ‘Mikkel, have you Read anything about Albion having another agent in the Unseelie Court?’

‘What?’ Mikkel said. ‘No. Why?’

‘Dogwill swore that there was another traitor, like him, under the force of compulsion.’

‘Well, shit,’ Mikkel said quietly. ‘No, I haven’t Read anything. But Albion…isn’t easy to Read. His surface emotions are easy enough – you know he’s generally angry at you, generally a proud, officious twat, sometimes he wants to bang some mermaid, but the specifics are locked pretty deep. You know that, man. And if Albion got someone inside and didn’t tell anyone else, I wouldn’t know, would I?’

‘You couldn’t find a way to ask him?’

‘Huh, and what would I say? ‘Hey Albion, you got another traitor in the Unseelie Court? Oh, why am I asking? No reason!’ He already dislikes me. Can’t wait to give him an official reason to kill me.’

Gwyn sighed, it was true enough. Mikkel couldn’t insert himself closer to Albion without acting too much against the personality he already had – which was someone who didn’t really enjoy Reading, and only did it because he was being paid to. Mikkel had no particular interest in war, and any increased interest he showed would come across as too suspicious. He realised that he cared too much for Mikkel to want him to put himself in any greater danger for Gwyn’s sake, and winced.

‘Anyway,’ Mikkel said, scratching at the back of his head. ‘I gave you a lot last time. A lot of shit. A lot of information. And you told me squat about Mafydd. So I’m coming to collect. I had a bad day too, you know. I can have them as well.’

Gwyn rested his hands in his lap and looked at them. He’d cut his knuckles on Mikkel’s cheekbone. The pain was distant, and faded even behind the background noise of his shoulder. He shook his head.

Mikkel leaned forwards. ‘Oh yeah, you’re not getting out of this, and you know you can’t. Not with what I’ve given you so far. I just…come on, maybe it’ll be good for you to talk about it. I don’t know. I don’t really give a shit. So, I dunno, let’s start somewhere easy. How’d you two meet? How old were you?’

Gwyn took several breaths, trying to gauge if this was indeed something he could talk about. But it wasn’t about ‘coulds’ and ‘couldn’ts,’ after a week of collecting debts, he knew he couldn’t back out of the one he’d made with Mikkel. He had to respond. He owed.

‘I was sixteen,’ Gwyn said, ‘and he was the son of someone my father worked with. I’d never met him before. The father of Mafydd thought he was friends with my father, but…my father didn’t have very many friends. I think for Lludd, it was a matter of strategy.’

‘You were sixteen,’ Mikkel said, voice flat. Gwyn rolled his eyes at his hands.

‘If you don’t mind, I’ve heard that diatribe from Augus already.’

‘Oh, so like, Augus knows about it then? Then you can definitely talk about it with me. Also,
really glad that the dude that everyone thinks is super evil also gets that you were fucking sixteen. Good to know he has like, a principle or two.’

‘It wasn’t like- He wasn’t that much older,’ Gwyn said, looking up at Mikkel and shrugging. ‘Or at least he wasn’t officially…an adult by fae standards.’

‘How old?’ Mikkel said, biting his top lip.

‘Two hundred and…something.’

A strange, cold feeling was creeping around Gwyn’s chest, like a wet blanket getting colder and colder, tightening. He focused on his breathing. He didn’t like that Augus had made a big deal out of it at the time, and he didn’t like it now. It didn’t matter if he was supposed to have a ‘fae childhood,’ he didn’t have one. It wasn’t like they cared nearly so much that he’d been on his first battlefield at the age of thirty five, or that they started giving him to Efnisien as a plaything when he was…when he was much younger than sixteen.

‘Okay,’ Mikkel said. ‘Cool, friend of the family. So he was already in the Court system then. They would’ve been grooming him for the King. Actually I know that much, because it’s in the records.’

Gwyn was shocked at that, he couldn’t remember Mafydd saying much about it.

That cold feeling in his chest got tighter, and he bowed over it.

‘What’d you like about him?’ Mikkel said, and Gwyn’s skin crawled, pimpled with gooseflesh. But he could do this, couldn’t he? It all happened a long time ago. Mikkel hadn’t asked him to say Mafydd’s name once, which made this…easier.

‘I don’t really know,’ Gwyn said, and then cringed to hear himself. Even he wouldn’t accept that answer. He held up a hand at Mikkel’s derisive response. ‘He was…what do you want me to say? He was different to what I was used to. He was good with a bow. He was friendly to me. Even kind.’

He was, he was, he was. Past tense, because you killed him. Even though he was friendly to you, and kind.

Gwyn shifted, and couldn’t seem to get comfortable where he was sitting. He found the lines on his palm fascinating for several seconds, and heard a voice sailing over him until-

‘Earth to Gwyn, I want more than that, come on.’

‘Why?’ Gwyn said, as though from far away, stretching his hand out and looking at the thick line that curved around the fleshy part of his thumb.

‘Because I do,’ Mikkel pressed. ‘I just fucking do. So he was friendly, and kind, and…what?’

‘He liked…’ oranges.

Gwyn watched the fingers of one of his hands press into the wrist of his other arm. And then, with unerring accuracy, he found the pressure points that Augus had used so often when he was recovering, he could tell where they were even with his eyes closed. Or so he thought. When he pressed down, he didn’t catch all of them, only glancing off two. But the rush of pain was sudden, mind-clearing.

‘He talked to me,’ Gwyn said, looking down where he dug his fingers into his own arm. ‘And he
was kind.’

‘Oh man,’ Mikkel said quietly. ‘Is it really that hard for you to talk about? It happened ages ago, man. Ages ago.’

‘You don’t understand,’ Gwyn said.

‘Huh,’ Mikkel said, then laughed. ‘I don’t? Which part? The part where you fell in love with him? Or the part where killing him broke you into pieces? Or the part where I think he was the first person in your world to actually like...see you for you. Or the first person who could see you for who you were, and who still liked you. I don’t know. But he knew, didn’t he? Could he Read you? Was he even old enough?’

‘No,’ Gwyn said, shaking his head. ‘Not exactly. His powers hadn’t properly activated when I met him, but they...activated while I knew him.’

‘You- fucking hell,’ Mikkel groaned. ‘Like me and Angelica? I bet he saw something fun.’

‘You could say that,’ Gwyn said, mind tripping over flashes of memory that were fuzzed at the edges and sharp in the centre. ‘I didn’t know he was there. He wasn’t supposed to see anything. Lludd realised that he and I were...getting along, though he truly had no concept of how much I liked him. But he’d explicitly told me to avoid Mafydd, to not even befriend him. But Mafydd wanted to be friends and I- I didn’t realise how much I wanted it, until it happened. Lludd divined enough to know that he needed to intervene. And so he did...intervene.’

‘He hit you,’ Mikkel said, and Gwyn nodded.

‘A lot, actually,’ Gwyn said. ‘Not too badly really, considering how he could get when he was in one of those moods, especially after a hunt. But enough. It would have looked quite frightening, sounded quite frightening to someone unused to it. I didn’t know that Mafydd was hiding in my bathroom. And I didn’t get off the floor straight away, so he found me...like that. He- His Reading came soon after, and then in increasing amounts. I should have- I was- The right thing to do would have been to tell him to stay away. He told me he’d stay away for me, for my sake, to stop my father treating me like that. But I asked him to- I asked him to stay. He should have stayed away. I didn’t think I was risking him too.’

A long silence, and Gwyn closed his eyes when he realised that he’d said Mafydd’s name aloud. He’d said it, and his heart felt cold. Not just his chest and ribs and lungs, but all the way through the centre of his chest. It felt hard to take a full breath, but he tried.

‘Why did you like him?’ Mikkel said again. ‘Why else?’

‘He was vibrant,’ Gwyn said, lips quirking haplessly. ‘He was- Well, you’re a Reader, you know how you are. He had some of that...recklessness, even young, before his Reading had properly activated. He wanted to- We broke out of the house on the first night we met. The very first night. And he was bold. So forward. It was like- It was like being taken by the hand and dragged into adventure. I didn’t know- And he showed me how to control my light better. I didn’t know how. I wasn’t supposed to tell anyone what it was, or that I even had it. He didn’t know it was destructive, he thought I was Seelie too. But he taught me anyway.’

He’d been in a shower stall when he’d been shown how. Mafydd kneeling at his feet and looking up at him and talking him through it, even with a hand on his cock for the first time, the very first, and Gwyn had been scared of someone finding them both but no one had come, and he hadn’t known he could have something that felt so good with anyone. Anyone at all. Gwyn shuddered, his
head pounded.

He didn’t want to think about these things.

‘Mikkel,’ Gwyn said, keeping his voice small. ‘May we stop now?’

‘I know what I gave you was really, really valuable last time,’ Mikkel said, his voice rough. ‘I know, man, I could feel it. I don’t know why it was as important as it was, but I don’t know if I’ll ever be able to tell you shit that important again. So, like, I’m sorry? I am, but…just a bit more. You can’t know what it’s like for there to be so few of us, we’re like- There are endangered species in the human world, critically endangered species that are like, more plentiful than us.’

Gwyn closed his eyes. Mikkel was right. Gwyn was common fae, a type of fae so prevalent, they’d earned a species name stating just how prevalent they were. But he’d gotten glimpses of that Reader loneliness even with Mafydd. A desperation in all of his acts, as though he wasn’t quite sure just how much life he would get to live before he had to be a Reader, work for another, lose so much of his autonomy.

He tried to imagine Mafydd interrogating suspects, relaying information to monarchs and Generals that would get people killed, and he couldn’t.

‘You broke out of the house the first night?’ Mikkel said. ‘You couldn’t just leave your own home?’

‘No,’ Gwyn said, shocked. ‘No, of course not. There was a curfew. And I wasn’t meant to socialise with Mafydd in any way. At all.’

‘Where did you go?’ Mikkel said, smiling a little. The expression suited him. Made him seem playful, puckish.

‘We shot some arrows together. He was very good, really very good. Then we went to the orange grove,’ Gwyn said, returning the smile. ‘On the estate, we had an orange grove. We…’

We kissed. The memory so visceral that Gwyn swore he could taste salt and oranges all at once, his tongue moving absently in his mouth.

‘You forgot to answer the question,’ Mafydd had said against the corner of his mouth, the stickiness of oranges between them. ‘Do you want me to stop?’

‘Please don’t.’

The coldness within fractured, and he felt it as a sudden shaft of pain. He swallowed hard, fist going to his chest, remembering that he was trying to take slow, deep breaths. Something wasn’t right. He looked up at Mikkel, and then had to look away from those pale brown eyes, because he just couldn’t-

He just couldn’t.

‘The hardest part, sometimes, about the Reading, is knowing that there’s so much more and not knowing how to get at it,’ Mikkel said, almost to himself. ‘Do I just, what- ask a different question? What do I do? You’re having all these emotional responses and I can’t even Read them all because they come and go, and now you’re just…I think- Huh, I think we’re done for the day.’

Gwyn nodded. He felt nauseous, swallowed saliva down the back of his throat and couldn’t get the taste of oranges out of his mouth. He licked at his lips, and then wiped at them with the back of his
hand. He was imagining it, wasn’t he? It was in his imagination.

‘Oh man,’ Mikkel said suddenly. ‘Oh shit.’

‘What?’ Gwyn said, looking up. His heart was pounding. When had that started? He needed to clear his head, to…go for a walk. Get away from the palace. Just for a little while. He pushed himself up and felt like he’d been sitting on the ground for hours.

‘Ah. I think I broke something that wasn’t supposed to be broken.’

‘What?’ Gwyn said, staring at him.

‘I’m sorry, for what it’s worth.’

‘What are you talking about?’ Gwyn said.

‘Yeah, yep, nothing. I’m not talking about anything!’ Mikkel said, flashing a bright, false grin. ‘You just keep up with that denial as long as you can and I’ll…catch you next time. Thanks though, thanks for this. Really. Really. I don’t know why it helps me so much, and I’m sure you wish it didn’t, but it does. So thanks. Given you’re fucking over so many Seelie fae right now, thanks for helping me.’

Gwyn nodded, felt dizzy. It wasn’t his heartsong was it? But no, that awful heartsong of his, the core energy of surrender, it was still there. Still. Then what was Mikkel talking about? He blinked at Mikkel, and Mikkel offered him something of a chagrined look as he teleported away.

What was Mikkel talking about?

Gwyn shook his head. Pressed the heels of his palms to his forehead. When was the last time his head had hurt this badly? And he could still taste oranges in his mouth. Still. He walked over to a tree and picked several leaves and put them in his mouth, chewing them, making a sound at the likely toxic bitterness. He was King. He couldn’t get sick from something like that.

Still, he could taste oranges.

*

Clearing his head wasn’t working. He’d completely forgotten it was day beyond the Unseelie palace, and squinted at the sky in confusion before trying to shake his head clear of both the headache and the sudden sense that things weren’t all right. He only succeeded in making his headache worse.

Then, after minutes of just wandering through forests close to the Unseelie palace, he got the sense that he wasn’t alone.

He could still taste oranges in his mouth, on his tongue, behind his teeth. Sticky and sweet and rich. If he chased the sensation, he could feel hands, a mouth against his, breath mingling with his breath that didn’t smell of fresh water and green waterweed as Augus’ did.

He threw out his sensing ability, narrowing it so that he stopped picking up most animals, the trees, the plants, and caught several fae nearby. Some were unmoving, perhaps resting. One was moving from tree to tree away from him – perhaps a native of the forest.

But there was something there moving towards him, stealthily, slowly.
He had no patience for this.

Skin prickling, his hand reached for his longsword only to remember it had been a while since he’d worn one, and he didn’t even have his short sword at his side.

His vision swum when he saw his father. Swum for seconds before he realised what was happening. He ignored the frantic thump of his heart and the pain behind his eyes and walked straight up to him; the man even taller than he, with cold blue eyes the colour of the sea under storms, black curly hair that was Gwyn’s hair too, not in texture, but in shape.

‘Son,’ Lludd began.

Gwyn shook his head.

‘We’ve so wanted to get one of you into our prisons for interrogation,’ Gwyn said, voice thick, and then smashed someone down to the ground for the second time that day.

Chapter End Notes

In our next chapter, ‘Loss:’

‘I should never have told Mafydd I was Unseelie,’ Gwyn said, and still Gwyn wouldn’t look away from him, something steely in that gaze, hiding the fragility that Augus had witnessed before. Was it a test? For if so, it would be dismayingly easy to pass.

‘Shouldn’t you?’ Augus said, raising his eyebrows. ‘Truly? You once told me, sweetness, that you liberated the lost. Did you not think, in that moment when Mafydd asked you to bare your secrets for him, when he showed you care, did you not hope that perhaps you were to be liberated?’

Gwyn’s faced screwed up, his eyes clenched shut. One of his hands dropped from Augus’ side and pressed over his face.

‘Did you not think,’ Augus whispered, pressing his lips to Gwyn’s knuckles where they rested over his eyes, ‘that it would be more bearable if someone knew? Just one person who would not use it against you?’

‘And he died,’ Gwyn said, voice tight.
Loss

Chapter Notes

Get your blankets ready folks!

Thank you so much to everyone who’s reading. I’ve had a truly trying week, this week, and knowing there are folks following this story (whether you lurk, or comment, or leave kudos, or however you consume it) is just a really bright spark in a not very bright sky this week. :) So thanks again.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Augus

*

Augus couldn’t teleport to the cells like Gwyn could, so he had to walk there, which gave him plenty of time to worry. Another shapeshifter that resembled Gwyn’s father, Lludd Llaw Eraint – Captain of the Seelie fae’s navy, and brutal abuser of Gwyn for much of Gwyn’s life while he lived – was in a cell in the Unseelie Court as of this moment. Augus had to clear his head as quickly as possible when the trows found him first, then Gulvi found him second, both confirming that Gwyn had detained a shapeshifter for questioning. The murky, watery mind he was left with after hunting would be of no use to him, and he needed to see Gwyn.

The Unseelie palace buzzed like a hive when he passed the outer circles. Everyone knew what Gwyn had been doing to the Seelie fae, calling in his life debts. But Augus knew there would be consequences for Gwyn antagonising those he’d previously been allied to in his past. And now this.

Augus had his rapier belted to his side. He wore the fine, formal clothing he could now afford thanks to the building wealth in the treasury. He felt more alive, healthier than he had in a long time. He needed to ask Aleutia and Fenwrel how they’d healed him, what they’d done, since he suspected Fenwrel had done something to his meridians while he’d been unconscious. The idea of her doing anything without his permission... Yet he couldn’t be sure she’d done anything more than help him survive, perhaps this was just how he was meant to feel with a decent amount of food in his system, and things improving with Gwyn.

He’d been informed that the entrance to the Unseelie prison was a mirror of the Seelie entrance; but he’d never seen the Seelie entrance, having been insensate when they’d tossed him in the cell, and then only ever leaving it through Gwyn’s use of teleportation. So looking at the tall, gnarled black oak on the outer edges of the palace still caught his attention. A prison constructed in the soil, with the roots of an oak tree holding it together. He’d sat on one of the roots of the Seelie oak tree for six months, alone, before Gwyn started visiting him.

He descended the steps quickly and licked at his teeth. He fancied he could still taste the warm, rich blood of his prey clinging in the gaps; though it was all gone now, sucked clean by the ravenous beast he became when he fed.

He could hear a voice, it wasn’t Gwyn’s. A stern, low voice talking quickly. Augus walked faster.
The voice didn’t echo, muffled by the dirt. But it sounded exactly as Augus remembered; he’d lived in proximity to the An Fnwy estate as a young waterhorse, after all. Ethallas forest neighboured the An Fnwy estate – rare public land in the Seelie courtlands – and Gwyn’s family regularly went hunting through it.

He turned a corner and walked down a longer corridor, and there Gwyn leaned against the outside of the cell the Lludd-shapeshifter was contained within. Gwyn’s arms were folded, and Augus didn’t like the energy he felt. Something strange and passive and wrong.

‘I see we have finally netted a shapeshifter,’ Augus said as he approached, and Lludd stopped talking, Gwyn looked over his shoulder.

Augus took in his expression, the worn quality in his eyes, the faded brightness, the corners of his mouth pinched. Was the Lludd-shapeshifter stirring memories? Was it something else? Gwyn didn’t often wear his fatigue so obviously.

He couldn’t afford to ask how Gwyn was, not here, not now. Instead, he drew his glamour to him and faced the creature that, for now, was Lludd.

The resemblance between Gwyn and Lludd was strong. It was in the shared broadness of their shoulders, the angled strength of both their faces. Ash once forced Augus to look at a book of Roman and Greek busts of Olympians and other warriors – trying to convince Augus that humans were worthwhile due to their fascination with and devotion to the arts – and Augus had to admit he saw something of those sculptures in the faces of both. The straight noses with the notable bridge, the larger eyes fringed with thick lashes. Gwyn’s lips were fuller, wider, Lludd’s cheekbones more defined. They shared hair that looked almost the same, except that Lludd’s was shorter, jet black with a bluish sheen, and Gwyn’s was the colour of white beach sand and curled loosely beneath his ears, resting unevenly over his neck and forehead. But they both had the same thick, wide curls.

Augus felt cold when he realised that if he tugged one of Lludd’s curls, it would bounce back just the same as Gwyn’s did.

The other difference was that the Lludd-shapeshifter wore numerous bruises. His face mottled blue and violet, two of his fingers black and swollen.

‘How’s the resemblance?’ Augus said, looking at the way the Lludd-shapeshifter stood, wearing a suit, hands clasped before him.

‘Exceptional,’ Gwyn said. ‘You may enter and interrogate him whenever you wish.’

It was easy enough to slide into the role of interrogator, especially given that he still had his waterhorse mind close to the surface of his thoughts. He wanted to hunt, he wanted to break the truth from the shapeshifter and feed upon it. And shapeshifters were not inured to compulsions.

However, it was hard to yield the truth, since biologically, the shapeshifters Crielle had hired had to adhere to the truth of their character once they transformed. At first, all his questions only yielded answers pertaining to Lludd. Slowly, though, Augus dug deeper, and he knew he was making progress when the Lludd-shapeshifter fell to his knees, breaking into a flop sweat.

‘Now, now,’ Augus said softly, having lost track of time. He didn’t bother taking notes, knowing that Gwyn’s memory was sharp and would pick up everything of relevance. A part of him liked the fact that Gwyn was watching Augus break someone with the visage of his father, another part of him wanted to send Gwyn away, lock him in a room and tell him not to come out until the monster had been destroyed. ‘These plans of yours, of Crielle’s, what are they? You clearly didn’t expect to
‘To lure Gwyn and sequester him in a warded place. And there – torture and systemic breakdown over a period of weeks or months. But there isn’t another Augus, so that we may begin the plan again,’ the Lludd-shapeshifter groaned. ‘Our training is exact. We did not expect to fail. We did not expect the War Generals to know.’

‘Then why are you pursuing the plan?’

‘We were paid in full. We must implement the plan until we have succeeded in its execution, or until we are executed.’

Augus paused to gather his thoughts, and the Lludd-shapeshifter turned to face Gwyn, looking up at him.

‘Son,’ he bit out, and Augus fingers curled, claws brushed against the top of his palms. ‘You-’

‘You are not my father,’ Gwyn said calmly.

‘Am I not?’ the Lludd-shapeshifter said. ‘You would still dare question me? Still show me such insolence after all this time? You yourself know exactly where that insolence led? Tell me, if I was not your father, would I remember exactly how you begged before you sent that arrow through Mafydd’s heart? You may have been shaking, boy, but that first arrow was on target. Your tutors might have been proud if they’d not been disgusted by the pathetic wreck you’d become.’

Augus was about to punch the shapeshifter himself when Gwyn cleared his throat. Augus met Gwyn’s eyes, and forced himself to relax his fists.

‘Crielle may have fed you what she thought you needed to hear, but she was not there, and you have only vaguenesses,’ Gwyn said. ‘I don’t doubt that Lludd had to inform her of what had happened, but there is only so much you can say. Was this her play then? To have those of my past barrage me with recollections of events that occurred so long ago? If this is your most effective card, shapeshifter, then Crielle spent her last move on false assumptions.’

Augus knew Gwyn had retreated to the coldness he sometimes put around himself whenever he was disturbed, unhappy. He’d seen that coldness as a prisoner in the Seelie Court. He’d experienced it since. He didn’t like it, but he did like the fact that it meant that right now, before the shapeshifter that so perfectly resembled his father, he was able to stay both calm and composed.

‘I don’t need to see more of this,’ Gwyn said abruptly. ‘Break the truth out of him, then leave him for Gulvi to slaughter. I have more important things to do with my time than waste it on the dregs of a failed plan.’

Augus nodded an acknowledgement to Gwyn, who immediately turned and walked away. Augus wanted to follow him, but bloodlust still bubbled beneath his skin and he smiled widely at the Lludd-shapeshifter trembling upon the ground, eyes closed.

‘Oh, my little lost lamb, there’s nothing to be frightened of. I’ll take care of you.’

* * *

Blood on his hands, since he hadn’t been able to resist doing a little bit of damage before Gulvi finished the shapeshifter off. Truthfully, there hadn’t been much more to pull from the shapeshifter. He’d aggressively questioned him about the existence of another plan – he was
certain Crielle had one – but had to stop once the Lludd-shapeshifter was oozing blood from both of his nostrils, capillaries having broken in his eyes, his nose, his mouth. If Crielle had a second plan, she didn’t tell her shapeshifters of it. Not that one, anyway.

The doors to the rooms that Gwyn had intended them both to share were non-descript. Plain and wooden, only the fact that they were double doors indicated they might lead to anything important. Though Gwyn used the same kind of doors to lead to storage rooms, the treasury, map rooms, strategy rooms.

Augus pushed inside and entered the smaller room that held boots and coats. The trows had already put much of his clothing in place, but Augus was surprised to see some of Gwyn’s travelling coats, and a well-worn pair of soft leather boots leaning over themselves on the floor.

‘Gwyn?’ Augus said, walking to the left through an archway into the large – even grand – room that held a bed covered in sheets and blankets of rich, woodsy browns, deep olive greens. And there, under the blankets, curled up as tightly as ever, Gwyn lay. Augus could already see his breathing was deep and even, and for several moments he stopped, staring in shock.

Was he sleeping? But Gwyn hardly ever- How tired was he? Augus walked around to the other side of the bed quickly, crouching down, examining Gwyn’s face. Even asleep, he didn’t look as innocent and carefree as usual. Augus touched fingers to his chin and frowned.

‘Gwyn?’

Nothing. If Gwyn was dozing, he would have snapped awake. Even a heavy doze, he’d rouse to the sound of his name. He was sleeping. Augus felt a mixture of relief and concern. Gwyn didn’t voluntarily sleep unless he was pushed to it, and he doubted this was any different. But there wasn’t any point in waking him to find out, and Augus could join him in the meantime. He didn’t truly need sleep, as the waterhorse demanded about a week of it while he digested his human prey. But this was his and Gwyn’s bed, and he’d not slept in it yet. He wanted to indulge.

He cleaned up, showered in a bathroom more lavish than even his own. He could see little details that Gwyn had intended primarily for Augus. More than one ceramic shelf in the shower, because Gwyn knew of Augus’ attachment to different herbal products. A detachable showerhead made from a hollowed vine, the showerhead itself looked like it could be chrome. Vines with tiny, yellow flowers tangled up over a large bath, releasing their scent as steam rose in the tiled room. They were fragrant, smelling not of sweet nectar, but a spicy deep scent like cinnamon or nutmeg.

Augus wore nothing at all when he finally slunk under the blankets, having squeezed the excess water from his hair. He pushed up close to Gwyn and took advantage of the heat that rolled off his body. When Gwyn leaned unconsciously into him, murmuring something under his breath, Augus knew Gwyn was well and truly gone. There was no way Gwyn would do something so obviously affectionate while awake, or even dozing.

But these raw moments were ones he cherished – even if Gwyn was unaware he was part of them. They all pointed to a future when Augus might be able to draw such affections from a Gwyn that could consciously show how much he cared for someone in more than just vines that twisted up in a bathroom, or multiple ceramic shelves for haircare.

*

Augus snapped out of his doze to one of Gwyn’s nightmares.

It was one of the worst he’d witnessed. Maybe the worst. Gwyn made a sound like he was choking,
followed by horrible, rasping gasps. For a moment Augus assumed there was something wrong with his health, that he was choking; but Gwyn’s eyes moved rapidly, he was dreaming. His body strained off the bed, his back arched, his face twisted into a rictus of pain.

Augus straddled him, moved his fingers so that they rested over the pressure points at the back of Gwyn’s neck. He didn’t like to use them. They were excruciating, but they would wake someone up. It was dangerous. Gwyn could retaliate with his light, with violence, but Augus couldn’t watch him go through this, not knowing how long Gwyn’s nightmares could last.

‘Gwyn, wake up,’ Augus said, then exhaled hard when Gwyn’s eyes leaked tears behind closed lids. Gwyn mouthed half-swallowed protests, but Augus couldn’t make out any actual words. There was no indication as to what Gwyn was dreaming about, but... knowing the wealth of experiences that had traumatised him, it could have been anything. Augus didn’t doubt there were events in Gwyn’s past that Gwyn still hadn’t shared with him. He was certain that he knew some of the worst by Gwyn’s standards, but Gwyn’s standards were meaningless. He brushed off being tortured by his cousin as though it was nothing more than a minor irritant.

‘Gwyn,’ Augus said, curling his fingers further underneath Gwyn’s neck and pressing hesitantly down between the vertebrae, not yet agitating the pressure points.

A shriek; Gwyn's voice a sharp, wretched protest.

‘Gwyn!’ Augus shouted, shaking him, and then nearly fell off the bed when Gwyn lurched upright, shouting in desperation, trembling violently. His eyes were wide and unseeing. His pale face twisted with a pain that Augus rarely saw on his face. Gwyn didn’t even seem to be back in the room with him yet.

‘Gwyn, you’re in the Court, you’re fine. It was a nightmare. That’s all.’

He hardly seemed to hear him. His chest heaved. Augus thought Gwyn would be sick all over him, he hadn’t seen him so pale and clammy since he’d been underfae.

Gwyn’s chest heaved again, and he let out a sound that Augus was unused to hearing. He sobbed. It shook his whole frame. The next one that followed ripped out of him, strained through his lungs. And Augus shook his head rapidly, moved the hand from the back of his neck to curve around his face. He thumbed at Gwyn’s tears, frowning.

‘Gwyn, it was only a nightmare. Gwyn, it’s...’

But Gwyn – whatever he had been dreaming – was wrecked. His shoulders bowed, Gwyn flinching as he caused himself pain in the process. But after a handful of sobs, each more heart-breaking than the last, Gwyn fell back to the bed, threw a hand over his face, held his breath, tensed. He was holding it in.

Always with this, always.

Augus frowned, stroked his hand through Gwyn’s hair. He leaned forwards and felt the spasms in Gwyn’s chest. The sobs he wouldn’t let forth. There was a pain there that wanted to be expressed, and he wasn’t letting himself.

‘Gwyn, my dear heart, it’s safe. I promise you. Let it go.’

‘No,’ Gwyn said, his voice strained on the pressure of holding in whatever was sundering him apart. His body was racked with monumental shudders. He accepted Augus lying on top of him, but he seemed far away in his own mind. His eyes were squeezed shut, trying so hard not to cry.
Augus didn’t have any patience for that.

‘Gwyn,’ Augus said, pressing his palm firmly against Gwyn’s cheek, ‘Gwyn, let go.’

Gwyn stiffened, and Augus whispered it again, letting compulsion weave thick through his quiet voice. Gwyn struggled against it, struggled so much that Augus knew that whatever had happened in the dream had left Gwyn stripped down to his barest parts. He never struggled against compulsions unless something was wrong; the last time it had happened while Gwyn had been King, Tigbalan had tortured him for days. But Augus could use that. He would use it.

‘Let go, Gwyn.’

Gwyn pushed upright to throw Augus off, but Augus moved his other hand to the back of Gwyn’s neck. He threatened to activate the pressure points. Gwyn stilled, practically vibrated against him. Then he slumped back down to the bed. He turned sideways, forcing Augus to move with him. Gwyn’s legs jack-knifed to his gut, he pushed his palm over his face and keened.

Augus felt a chill move through his body. He’d never heard Gwyn make such a sound, didn’t know he could.

‘Gwyn,’ he whispered, ‘Gwyn, by the gods, it’s-

Gwyn sobbed in earnest. Huge, racking sounds that must have hurt his lungs, his throat. Each one ripped from a place that Augus couldn’t fathom, hadn’t seen before, had always suspected was there. Augus rubbed circles onto Gwyn’s back with one hand, drew blankets up over them with the other. They were already warm, but this felt private. It felt hideously private. He didn’t stop until the blankets were well up over their heads, and he pressed his face into Gwyn’s hair, closing his eyes as the horrible, ugly sobs continued.

He placed his hand over Gwyn’s where it rested on his face. Felt the burning heat of salt water already. Gwyn didn’t move his hand, clenched it harder over his face and Augus made a sound when he realised that Gwyn was digging his nails into his own skin.

‘Please, sweetness. I’m here. I’m right here. Things are so different now. So different.’

He tried to pull Gwyn’s hand up, tried to ease the pressure, but Gwyn was having none of it. He curled in on himself further, shaking like he was coming apart at the seams.

And then Augus saw it. A blink-and-miss-it moment. A flash of light spilled briefly from his skin. It didn’t hurt, didn’t destroy anything, but it was there. Augus blinked, shocked. The light was close. It was a sign of how deeply Gwyn had gone into himself, how far he’d been pushed.

‘Gods, Gwyn,’ Augus whispered. ‘Hang on. Hold on, it won’t last. I know it hurts. It won’t last.’

‘It never goes away,’ Gwyn cried, his voice mangled and breaking, far higher than usual. Augus took an involuntary breath. This was what Gwyn never let anyone see. He carried it around with him everywhere, in every moment. It touched everything. Even his sweet, innocent moments were scarred with this depth of pain.

‘Gwyn,’ Augus said, swallowing down the thickness of his own voice. He stroked fingers over Gwyn’s forehead, smoothed long strokes over his spine, leaned his weight down hard to remind him he was there. ‘Sweetness, just stay here with me. Hold onto your light.’

Gwyn didn’t respond, lost to strong, racking sobs that shook the bed. Augus stopped moving his arm and simply held on as hard as he could. This was a storm of emotion he wasn’t accustomed to,
and he had seen many people at their worst. But this radiated off Gwyn in waves, made all the more powerful by the fact that Augus knew that no matter how hard he’d pushed Gwyn for over a year, he’d never discovered this pit of grief, only ever glimpsed it.

*What did you dream?*

Minutes passed, time stretched away from them both. Every time Gwyn started to calm, he would stiffen and another wave of sobbing would come. Augus’ hand was soaked. His other hand was damp. A fine sheen of sweat covered Gwyn’s whole body.

Eventually Gwyn’s sobbing settled into something quieter; still desperate, still pained.

‘He told me,’ Gwyn managed.

Augus shook his head. ‘He told you what?’

‘He told me I didn’t love him but I did. I did.’

Gwyn began sobbing again, turning his head into the pillow. Augus furrowed his brow and then he closed his eyes.

*Mafydd.*

Augus had complicated feelings about Mafydd. He was almost certain that the reason Gwyn was so accepting of being wonderfully, pleasantly submissive with Augus, was because of Mafydd. And he knew that Mafydd had given Gwyn something he would never have accessed otherwise. Who else would have offered him a glimpse of how the world could have been, beyond that awful family? But he also knew how terribly young Gwyn was when it had happened, he knew that Gwyn saw nothing wrong with being so young and schooled to a harder form of sex before he’d even reached adulthood, and Augus had an idea of how Mafydd had died. He knew that wound went deep, and it had never healed over.

‘You did love him,’ Augus acknowledged. ‘Anyone can see that.’

‘He told me I didn’t, and then I- I-’

Gwyn gagged, jerked hard, and Augus shifted so that he could get a better grip on Gwyn’s upper body, holding him tighter.

‘Then you what?’ Augus said, and Gwyn shook his head over and over again.

‘You know,’ he said, his voice tear-streaked and small.

‘Tell me,’ Augus encouraged.

‘I can’t!’ Gwyn moaned, and Augus rode out the fresh wave of crying, pressing his forehead into Gwyn’s hair. Gwyn sounded as though he was young all over again. His voice thin and pleading. He’d always been prone to regression, and Augus wasn’t sure he was even that far out of his dream. If Gwyn had any true coherency about where he was, who was with him…Augus was sure Gwyn wouldn’t willingly show this side of himself to anyone. But he wasn’t going to let the opportunity go, either.

‘Tell me, Gwyn,’ Augus prompted. ‘My dear heart. Please.’

‘I did a bad thing,’ Gwyn whispered, voice trailing off into a moan. ‘Oh gods.’
Oh gods indeed, Augus thought, squeezing his own eyes shut.

‘Tell me,’ Augus said, and Gwyn shook his head. His hand shifted on his face, slightly, and Augus took advantage of the shift to slip his hand beneath. He replaced Gwyn’s palm with his own, holding his hand over Gwyn’s face, blocking his eyes from the light, feeling where Gwyn had dug his own fingers too hard into his skin.

Gwyn’s hand came back up, uncertain what to do, and Augus snagged it with his little finger, encouraged it to settle.

‘You loved him,’ Augus prompted.

Gwyn moaned again. ‘I didn’t mean to, father. It was an accident. I swear it. I swear.’

Augus stiffened. That was too far down the path to his past.

‘Gwyn, I’m here. It’s me, Augus. It’s okay, you’re safe in the Unseelie Court. You had a nightmare, remember?’

‘I didn’t mean to love him,’ Gwyn whispered, not acknowledging him. ‘It just happened. I didn’t even know I could. It just happened. I wasn’t supposed to be like that!’

Augus couldn’t find the detached perspective he usually used in moments like this. He was entwined too closely around the moment, though he wasn’t sure when that had happened. His eyes had begun to burn, though when that had started, he didn’t know. He laid his cheek on Gwyn’s shoulder and licked at dry lips.

‘Gwyn, tell me what you did,’ Augus said.

Gwyn shook his head, panicked. ‘No, no, no, I can’t. I can’t.’

‘It’s already happened,’ Augus reminded him.

Gwyn stilled, then: ‘No, please, Augus. Please.’

‘You dream about it,’ Augus said, shaking because Gwyn was shaking. ‘Please just say it. Just once.’

‘I’m a monster,’ Gwyn whispered.

Augus inhaled slowly. ‘Not that, sweetness. Tell me what you did.’

‘I l-loved him. A lot,’ Gwyn said, and he tried to bury his face in the sheets but Augus’ hand against his face wouldn’t let him. Every word that Gwyn spoke brushed lips against his palm. His mouth was wet with salt, with saliva. Gwyn was a wreck. Someone had left him in a pile thousands of years ago, and never told him that it wasn’t supposed to be like that.

‘What did you do?’ Augus repeated, insistent.

‘I didn’t mean to,’ Gwyn said, ‘I didn’t. He...father was there, he said...’

‘Tell me what you did.’

‘Stop,’ Gwyn said.

Augus shook his head. ‘Say it. Say the words.’
‘I...’

Augus’ ears strained, hardly able to believe it. He was pushing hard, but he didn’t think Gwyn was capable of actually admitting it. But there were poisonous, unspoken truths in everyone. Truths that needed to be lanced, to have the toxins drained.

‘I’m not angry with you,’ Augus said, and Gwyn whined. It was a sad, lonely sound. ‘I promise you I’m not, sweetness.’

‘You will be.’

‘No, I won’t. I assure you.’

‘But I...’ Gwyn sobbed again, he tore his hand out of Augus’ and struck at his own forehead with his fingers before Augus knew he was going to do it. The movement was vicious, calculated. It was a level of hatred that was so unconscious, so careless, that it twinged at something in Augus’ chest.

‘Sweetness, don’t do that. You don’t have to do that.’ He moved Gwyn’s hand back, winced when he saw that Gwyn had drawn blood with the single strike. ‘Tell me.’

‘I shot him,’ Gwyn said, his voice going strangely still. ‘I shot him. I murdered him with my favourite recurve bow. I didn’t deserve him. He didn’t deserve that.’

A pause, and then Gwyn dissolved into silent sobs, only the sound of him catching his breath audible. Augus took a deep breath. Another. He would see this through.

‘Your father made you,’ Augus said.

Gwyn jerked. ‘He only talked. I did it. I did it. I murdered him. I-’

‘You were his weapon, and he used you like one,’ Augus said, ignoring the way Gwyn shook his head in denial.

‘I couldn’t think properly,’ Gwyn moaned. ‘It hurt. It hurt. It wouldn’t stop. For months. Even now.’

‘What hurt?’ Augus said, unsure specifically of what pain Gwyn was referring to.

‘I broke the oath. I broke it. Mafydd told me that it wasn’t a real oath! He said father was lying to me. He told me that father would never have broken fae law like that and so I told him and oh, god, I didn’t mean to. I didn’t. It was just that he knew something was wrong, he could tell. And then, ah, it broke. I didn’t know what was happening to me, I didn’t, I didn’t want him upset, I-’

‘And it hurt?’ Augus said, and a part of him was curious. Gwyn was the only person he’d ever met who had broken a blood oath and survived the process.

‘It was like fire. It...I deserved it. And then I, and then father... I- I didn’t want to. If I’d been stronger, I wouldn’t have-’

‘Your father made you,’ Augus said. ‘If you had refused, what would he have done?’

‘Killed us both,’ Gwyn whispered, his voice going dead. Then, panic crept into his words once more. ‘I tried to get him to get it out of his system. I did try, you have to believe me!’

‘I believe you,’ Augus said absently, brow furrowing. ‘How did you try to get Lludd to get it out of
his system?’

‘I provoked him,’ Gwyn said. His voice still younger and higher, still lost in the past, in the dream. ‘I made him lose his temper. I thought if he hit me first, just a few times, it wouldn’t be so bad for Mafydd. And he did, he hit me, and it wasn’t that bad, and I thought that would be- But then he dragged me into the arena and Mafydd, gods, Mafydd was already tied up to the target and I tried, I tried. I told him to shoot me. I told him to just get it done. It’s what he wanted. You should have seen him- It’s all he ever wanted.’

Gwyn was sobbing again, his voice breaking on many of his words. Augus’ heart hammered in his chest.

‘I tried,’ Gwyn said. ‘I tried. I couldn’t fight him properly. I wasn’t strong enough. I was so weak.’

‘No. I don’t believe that for a second. No one who has met you could accuse you of weakness.’

‘You have,’ Gwyn said, and Augus closed his eyes to hear how abandoned and lost Gwyn sounded in that moment. So confused. He was so disoriented Augus couldn’t stand it.

‘I have. I’ve accused you of cowardice. And perhaps, in some ways, it’s been true. But if you think that at your root there is a core of weakness, you are wrong. A frightened boy, perhaps. But not a core of weakness.’

‘I hate him,’ Gwyn whispered. ‘Gods, I hate him. If I could kill him I would do it. I would destroy him.’

Something in Augus snapped when he realised that Gwyn wasn’t talking about his father, but the boy in Augus’ analogy. His whole body chilled. He removed his hand from Gwyn’s face and hooked it hard into his blonde hair, clenching his hand tightly. Gwyn whimpered, eyes clenched shut, but Augus was beyond caring.

‘Is that what you do? Carry your father around with you everywhere, to make sure that frightened boy stays frightened?’

‘You don’t understand,’ Gwyn said, voice thin.

‘I understand,’ Augus said darkly. ‘I understand very well. You do have to carry Lludd around with you everywhere. It’s the only way to keep a frightened but brave boy under his control.’

‘No,’ Gwyn cried. ‘I’m not like him. I’m nothing like Lludd. Mikkel is wrong. You’re wrong.’

*Mikkel is wrong.* Augus squinted. What were those two talking about, that it had come up in conversation? If Mikkel was the other informant of Albion’s, it sounded like he was in a rather good position to tear Gwyn down. Augus filed the information away for later.

‘In many ways you are not like him,’ Augus said. ‘But in some ways, in this way, I’m afraid you were taught too well how to mimic his sins. In this, you are downright cruel with yourself, Gwyn. Trust me, I know it when I see it.’

‘Not cruel enough,’ Gwyn said, and Augus closed his eyes. He was getting Gwyn’s shoulder wet. He wondered if Gwyn had even noticed.

‘No? Still deserve punishment then? Deserve to be hurt for being used by your father to kill someone you loved? Still love? Is that it? Is that what you want?’
He lowered his hands from Gwyn’s hair to the vertebrae at his neck, and dug his fingers in hard. Gwyn jerked, he strained for breath, his eyes flew wide open at the pain that Augus was causing.

‘Well?’ Augus said coldly. ‘Answer me. Is this what you want?’

_this is a gamble. You know this is a terrible gamble. What will you do if he says-

‘Yes!’ Gwyn cried out, face twisting at his own answer. ‘Yes. Augus. Punish me, please, I-’

‘How dare you,’ Augus growled, digging his fingers in harder, vindictively, gritting his teeth when Gwyn squirmed to get away. ‘How dare you try and involve me in this! If you think that’s what I’m interested in, you don’t understand me, you don’t know me at all. And if you think that’s what you deserve, you don’t know yourself. I am not going to punish a frightened boy for doing the only thing he could do in order to survive. I will not ever be implicated in that.’

Augus suddenly removed his fingers, grimacing. This wouldn’t do. There were things he was poor at tolerating. Gwyn’s deep, cruel self-destructive streak was one of them. He shifted again, stroked fingers through Gwyn’s scalp, trying gentleness instead. Gwyn shuddered and shook his head, but didn’t otherwise protest. Augus suspected it wasn’t the progress he wanted it to be. Gwyn was sinking deep into his own thoughts again; whatever mess was in there, it was convoluted, frustrating.

‘Tell me about the dream,’ Augus said.

Gwyn squeezed his eyes shut. ‘No.’

‘Mafydd was there,’ Augus supplied, and Gwyn’s whole body tensed. Augus braced himself, in case Gwyn attempted to throw him off the bed. But Gwyn stilled. He shook his head abruptly, trying to dislodge Augus’ hands.

‘I don’t want you here,’ Gwyn said, annoyed, pulling coldness around him like a shroud. Suddenly he was a commanding King, voice deep and resonant. ‘I don’t want you here. You shouldn’t have been there then, you shouldn’t be here now.’

Augus frowned, tilted his head. He puzzled it out carefully, followed every breadcrumb down the trail, back to its home.

‘I was in the dream, wasn’t I?’ Augus said, and Gwyn stared blankly ahead. Augus curved closer, beginning to use his weight to try and shift Gwyn onto his back. Gwyn wouldn’t go with it, but his good shoulder curved backwards. He wouldn’t make eye contact. Augus didn’t know if he could. ‘Why shouldn’t I have been there?’

‘He knew,’ Gwyn whispered, staring up at nothing. His voice was lost again, frail. ‘He knew how I felt about you. He knew. I had to.’

‘Sweetness,’ Augus whispered. Of course, this all made sense. Augus had died only recently. And he knew Gwyn hadn’t truly dealt with that either. ‘Did you kill me in the dream?’

Gwyn’s throat worked. His eyes closed. A fresh wave of tears came, and Augus pressed his face to them. They were hot against his skin. Gwyn was overheating. Augus couldn’t bring himself to move the cocoon of blankets away from them both.

‘Where are you?’ Augus said, and Gwyn shook his head. ‘Tell me where you are?’

Gwyn was becoming unresponsive, pushed too far in his own mind, unable to come back on his
own. Augus lowered his lips to Gwyn’s and brushed them carefully against his wet, closed mouth. He repeated the motion, over and over, until Gwyn sighed shakily.

‘What...?’ Gwyn said, and Augus was glad to hear his voice.

Augus wasn’t sure what to say. That panic when he’d woken, the terrible sobs that had ripped their way out of him, had he just killed Mafydd in his dream? Or Augus? In other circumstances, in earlier times, Augus would have felt pleased to know that Gwyn was so affected by Augus’ presence. But now, with more time having drifted past them both, he wanted Gwyn to be able to trust that Augus would remain in his life, not disappear.

Augus left his lips against Gwyn’s while he tried to summon his thoughts. Gwyn responded to intimacy, but even now, he was being carefully still. The dream had damaged something. Or, perhaps, it had highlighted something already damaged. This was not something he could fix in an evening. This was no random flash of a disturbed unconscious, this was a carefully placed nightmare. Gwyn would have it again. Perhaps he’d had it before and Augus hadn’t known.

Augus lifted his head up. ‘Gwyn, have you had this dream before?’

Gwyn’s face twisted in assent.

‘Why didn’t you come to me?’ Augus said.

‘I don’t like people seeing me like this.’

Augus finally managed to use his weight to shift Gwyn onto his back. He straightened the blankets around them, and then pushed one of his hands beneath Gwyn’s head, cradling it. With his other hand, he picked up Gwyn’s wrists and guided them around his back so that his arms were resting against him. Gwyn had drawn his knees up again, he didn’t tighten his arms around Augus, as though he didn’t dare.

Augus tucked his head down alongside Gwyn’s. They were cheek to cheek like this, his damp hair curling across the side of Gwyn’s face. It was one of his favourite positions, and he wanted the closeness for himself. He brushed his lips against Gwyn’s ear, surprised and pleased when Gwyn shivered.

‘I’m not ‘people,’’ Augus said, quietly. ‘Am I?’

‘Augus,’ Gwyn said on a breath, an agreement. But he didn’t seem capable of managing more than that. Augus placed his fingers against neck, searching unerringly for the pulse. It was faint and fast. For all that he was quiet and spaced out, there was still a wealth of fear lurking within.

‘Let me compel you,’ Augus said, and Gwyn’s focus drifted back slowly, then all at once. He swallowed hard.

‘I don’t think so.’

‘Don’t want me wandering around that head of yours?’

‘No.’

‘Because I would like to go wandering around that head of yours. I would like to know, very much, why you won’t just come to me when you have dreams like this.’

‘I don’t have them often,’ Gwyn said quickly.
Augus couldn’t help his smile. ‘That’s not my point, sweetness.’

‘Don’t call me that.’

‘Sweetness,’ Augus said again, directing it precisely into his ear on an exhale. Gwyn shuddered. ‘My dear heart, tell me why you won’t come to me with these things?’

The arms on Augus’ back shifted uncertainly. He still wasn’t willing to actually embrace Augus. There was a lack of faith here, even in reality. There were days, weeks, where Gwyn would suddenly – inexplicably – withdraw. He would talk less, he would make less eye contact, he would stop reaching out, he would treat Augus like a stranger; formal and more detached than even Augus could be at times. Augus wondered if some of those periods were triggered by these nightmares. It wouldn’t surprise him. But those times were often only fixed when Gwyn was tied up and forced to confront the fact that Augus was there, and real, and not going anywhere.

And Augus wasn’t interested in that, not now. Not in pain and restraint and force. If this was one of the raw causes of that mood, he wanted to understand it.

‘Tell me,’ Augus said, letting a faint thread of compulsion enter his voice. Strong enough that Gwyn could suppress it, but enough to let him know that Augus was serious. He wanted answers. In response to the compulsion, Gwyn’s pulse leapt under his fingers, it raced.

‘I can’t,’ Gwyn said. ‘I can’t come to you.’

‘Were you able to resist the compulsion?’ Augus checked quickly, concerned. He lifted up and looked down. Gwyn was somewhat clear-eyed, he nodded. He had intended the compulsion to be a hint, not a command. It was a relief to know that Gwyn had chosen to speak, even if his pulse was the pulse of a scared, cornered animal. Augus lowered his head again, sighing.

Gwyn’s pulse beat faster, and then faster again, and Augus’ eyes widened, even as he felt something change around him. Some deadening of Gwyn’s glamour, a withdrawal of something powerful.

‘Please,’ Gwyn whispered, voice high and lost, and then turned his head suddenly into Augus’, pressing hard.

‘Please, what?’ Augus asked, increasing the soothing pressure at the back of Gwyn’s head, feeling minute tremors shaking Gwyn’s body. His pulse was a shattered, wild thing, and Augus could feel Gwyn’s heartbeat through his own chest. Fear. He could smell it now, acrid, strong, like a thin veneer of oil coating the back of his throat.

‘Please,’ Gwyn said, voice turning thick and hoarse. There was a strange, vivid desperation in that word, and Augus had no idea what Gwyn was asking for.

‘Gwyn, I don’t understand. Tell me.’

‘Please, Augus, don’t...’ Gwyn curled in on himself. His arms tightened reflexively around Augus and then loosened again, as though Augus had burned him. It was confounding.

‘Don’t be dead,’ Gwyn whispered. And then he shook his head, vigorously, his chest began to shake again, sobs building once more.

Augus couldn’t move for a few seconds. Was Gwyn still lost in the dream? Did he think Augus wasn’t real? Worse, had he experienced this before, alone, and been too afraid to check if Augus was still there? Was this something he dreamed when he was underfae? How long ago did these
dreams start?

‘I collapsed,’ Gwyn said in a rush, responding to some unbidden prompt. ‘I collapsed after I shot him. I fell and I- Time didn’t move properly. I didn’t understand what was happening to me. It was all just a dream. Just a bad dream. It wasn’t the first time. I have nightmares about Papa all the time! It’s just a bad dream. Everything with Mafydd – a dream. I’m supposed to wake up. I’m supposed to wake up. I’m supposed to- And I can’t.’

Gwyn’s arms tightened convulsively over Augus’ back. Augus was reeling, it was the first time he’d ever heard Gwyn refer to his father as anything other than ‘father.’ The use of the informal was horrifying.

‘I thought it was just a dream,’ Gwyn whispered, his voice fractured. ‘I woke up and Papa was gone, and I...a note. A note. Papa left me a note, it said to clean up after myself. And he meant- he meant to get rid of Mafydd. And Mafydd, he didn’t move...I didn’t understand, it was meant to be a dream.’

Augus realised how disoriented Gwyn still was. Augus had several options, and – perhaps unsurprisingly – he decided to take the riskier one.

He slanted his open mouth over Gwyn’s and pushed his tongue inside, ignoring Gwyn’s sudden wave of tension and sliding his tongue along Gwyn’s. The inside of his mouth was a furnace. If he didn’t know better, he’d think Gwyn was coming down with something. But no. His light was running too close to the surface, and likely it was burning him. He’d learned enough about that light to know that it was a merciless, strange power. That – once – when Gwyn had claimed it would tear the world apart, he’d almost laughed. But now...

He had reasons to be glad for Gwyn’s ability to suppress just about anything he put his mind to.

Gwyn’s hand sunk into his hair and tightened, Augus thought he was going to be tugged away, but then Gwyn’s hand simply clasped at Augus’ scalp, fretfully. He was taking small, shallow breaths through his nose. It was taking Gwyn a surprisingly long time to participate in the kiss. Augus knew beyond a doubt that Gwyn still doubted if this was real, if Augus was even there.

Augus withdrew and bit Gwyn’s bottom lip until he grunted. And then slid his tongue easily back into Gwyn’s mouth, pushing deeper than normal, claiming a space for himself until Gwyn’s chest jerked and he moaned, broken.

That’s it. Come closer, sweetness. Come to me.

Augus flicked his tongue at the roof of Gwyn’s mouth, and Gwyn exhaled sharply. His tongue stirred against Augus’, and he opened his mouth further and changed the angle, increased the contact between them. Augus wanted to let him know that he was doing well, coming back to the present like this, and he murmured a sound of approval. Gwyn sobbed in response – less grief, and more desperation, relief – arms tightening further around Augus’ back.

Augus withdrew and Gwyn leaned up, chasing Augus’ mouth. Augus rewarded him by licking at his lips, but kept a small distance between them.

‘Does that feel like a dream to you?’ Augus said, and Gwyn hesitated, then shook his head.
‘Where’s that light of yours?’

‘Close,’ Gwyn said, voice breaking. ‘Not as bad as it was.’

‘Painful?’
'Yes,' Gwyn said, shaking. Augus grimaced.

'Will you let me compel you? In this? Just this?'

Augus gave Gwyn time to make up his mind. He wanted to offer his compulsions like this more often, but he knew for the most part, Gwyn would never say yes.

'Just this?' Gwyn said, checking.

'To help you relax,' Augus amended, and Gwyn swallowed. The compulsions disturbed him – as they should – and Augus knew he was asking for a lot.

When Gwyn nodded, reluctantly, Augus rewarded him with a deep, languorous kiss. By the time he drew back again, Gwyn’s mouth remained half-open, his eyes were closed. Augus waited, could tell the moment that Gwyn was beginning to clear a space in his mind for Augus.

'Relax,' Augus said. 'The pain is less.'

The first time he’d had to do this to settle Gwyn had been under very different circumstances, and yet Augus couldn’t help but feel that Gwyn was more broken this time around.

The barrier that Gwyn had in his mind that prevented compulsions from reaching him was down, but Gwyn still resisted. It was a novelty not to be able to compel Gwyn easily, to have to ask permission. It was probably for the best, really. If Gwyn couldn’t resist the compulsions, he would have been killed a long time ago, or – at the very least – Augus would have rummaged around in Gwyn’s mind, taken what he could use so he could turn it against him, back when he was prisoner in the Seelie Court.

Gwyn’s body relaxed in increments, and he licked his lips tiredly, blinking owlishly up at Augus. His cheeks were splotchy, eyes red-rimmed. Augus thumbed tears away, unable to prevent the small smile that came.

'I’m proud of you,' Augus said, taking a risk. Gwyn stiffened, started to fight the compulsion, and then at something he saw on Augus’ face, he simply closed his eyes and tilted his head back, accepting. A moment later, Gwyn made a low, distressed sound in his throat. Augus closed his mouth around Gwyn’s exposed neck, licking at the hot skin. Gwyn relaxed again, his muscles worked in a swallow beneath Augus’ tongue.

'I’m so tired,' Gwyn said plainly, weakly.

'You haven’t slept well. And this has been exhausting, for the both of us, I expect,' Augus said, licking his way up Gwyn’s jaw and biting his earlobe.

'I didn’t want to do it,' Gwyn said, his voice dazed. ‘I loved him, Augus.’

'I know,' Augus said softly. ‘I suspect even he knew. Your love is an earnest, sharp thing, so raw to look upon I’m not sure how he could miss it.’

Gwyn looked askance, even as Augus nuzzled into his cheek.

'Is it?' Gwyn said, finally. ‘Is that what it is?’

'Yes,' Augus said, marvelling at all the barriers that were down, all the barriers that Gwyn would painstakingly put back into place. But Augus would never forget this evening, and he suspected Gwyn wouldn’t either. And, covered beneath the blankets as they were, he felt that this was theirs
alone, it belonged to no one else.

‘You’re not angry?’ Gwyn said, and then cleared his throat, his voice deepening once more. ‘It is a foolish thing to dream of, I shouldn’t have.’

‘Hush,’ Augus said against his skin. ‘There is no foolishness in grieving lost love.’

‘Even if I was the one who destroyed it?’ His voice was cynical now, even bitter. Augus shook his head and lifted up, stared at the side of Gwyn’s face until Gwyn reluctantly met his gaze.

‘You were a vessel,’ Augus said. ‘You would not hold a victim of mine culpable, if I compelled him to kill another. I can no sooner do the same for you. Your father didn’t use compulsions, no, but he had the benefit of years of causing you direct harm. Believe me; compulsions can be broken by some – but a lifetime of torment? That is not easy, or even possible to break past, while you’re still in the worst of it.’

Gwyn stared at him, but Augus couldn’t read his gaze. Couldn’t tell if Gwyn was trying to figure out if Augus was telling the truth, or if Gwyn was doubting him. His glamour was still dampened down, though his body was less hot than before.

‘I would’ve let him kill me,’ Gwyn said, unblinking. ‘I begged him to.’

‘I know,’ Augus said, his voice even. ‘I can imagine. Do you not realise it gave him more pleasure to see you broken and begging, and still deny you? There was no way you could have won, that day, Gwyn.’

‘I should never have told Mafydd I was Unseelie,’ Gwyn said, and still Gwyn wouldn’t look away from him, something steely in that gaze, hiding the fragility that Augus had witnessed before. Was it a test? For if so, it would be dismayingly easy to pass.

‘Shouldn’t you?’ Augus said, raising his eyebrows. ‘Truly? You once told me, sweetness, that you liberated the lost. Did you not think, in that moment when Mafydd asked you to bare your secrets for him, when he showed you care, did you not hope that perhaps you were to be liberated?’

Gwyn’s faced screwed up, his eyes clenched shut. One of his hands dropped from Augus’ side and pressed over his face.

‘Did you not think,’ Augus whispered, pressing his lips to Gwyn’s knuckles where they rested over his eyes, ‘that it would be more bearable if someone knew? Just one person who would not use it against you?’

‘And he died,’ Gwyn said, voice tight.

‘I know,’ Augus said, lengthening the vowels, sighing. ‘I know, Gwyn. And it is a monstrous thing. But it is not your monstrous thing. You know I do not indulge you in these things. You know that I never let you off the hook for murdering Nwython or tormenting Cyledr. I have never once let you slip free when you’ve not wanted to accept responsibility for the harm in your actions. And I am not telling you to believe me, I am only stating a fact; the weight that you carry for Mafydd’s death, your guilt, it does not belong to you. It’s not yours to carry. You should give it back to the people it belongs to.’

‘Be quiet,’ Gwyn said, though his body sagged into the bed, and his fingers twitched. He moved his hand away from his eyes and blinked up at Augus again, eyes bright once more, but no tears spilling.
‘Hello,’ Augus said, lips quirking, and Gwyn made a face at him, and then sighed a huge, shuddering sound. ‘You’re still tired.’

‘Yes,’ Gwyn said. A second later, he yawned. Augus shook his head as his own body rose and fell on the giant movement of Gwyn’s chest.

‘Oaf,’ Augus muttered, poking him lightly, and Gwyn smiled. It was a simple, guileless expression, and Augus was surprised to see it. It sent a shiver through his whole body. Gwyn smiling like that – shy, earnest, it was a sharpness in Augus’ chest. It was still such a rare occurrence.

‘You’re not going to come and see me after those nightmares, are you?’ Augus said, and Gwyn’s smile faded. He shook his head. Augus closed his eyes to think of Gwyn dealing with the hugeness of all of this on his own. Just because it had always been that way, didn’t mean it should be that way in the future, did it?

‘I can’t tell when you’re going to have them,’ Augus said, frowning. ‘I know you so often have nightmares, but they aren’t often like this. I don’t like the idea of you dealing with this on your own.’

‘I have been alive for a very long time,’ Gwyn said, his voice soft, but deep once more. ‘It will be fine, Augus.’

‘Still,’ Augus said, shaking his head. ‘I know that you-’

‘Look at you,’ Gwyn said, reaching up and touching the gentlest fingers to the side of Augus’ face. Augus stared down in consternation.

‘What?’ he said.

‘Fretting,’ Gwyn said, smiling a crooked smile, shaking his head. ‘I have dealt with this all my life, Augus. And though I would not have chosen for you to have seen…that, it means something to me that you did, and did not flee from it. But I will not seek you out when I am like this. I forget, you see. I forget that other people exist. But I know you’re here, now. Can that not be enough for you?’

He stroked his fingers down Augus’ cheeks, and then in a single, large movement, rolled them over so that Augus was on his back and Gwyn over him. The blankets were snagged and Gwyn pressed his forehead to Augus’, breathing deeply, slowly. Augus wondered how much of that was the compulsion from earlier. It was so rare to see Gwyn like this. Augus was perturbed, a little wondering.

Gwyn’s lips pressed against his, a lingering, chaste kiss. His arms were on either side of Augus’ face. He repeated the kiss, and then licked his way into Augus’ mouth, his tongue a hot, wet, insistent weight. Augus closed his eyes, felt himself relax, and as he sagged back into the bed he felt Gwyn’s lips tighten on a repressed smile. Gwyn kept kissing him gently, stopping every now and then to simply touch his lips to Augus’.

Still, Augus felt a thread of worry, and he summoned it up. ‘Gwyn, I really think that-’

‘Be quiet, sweetness,’ Gwyn said, and Augus flushed. His eyes opened, and Gwyn pulled back, watching him with an odd mixture of trepidation and self-satisfaction.

‘Make up your own endearments,’ Augus said. ‘Don’t steal mine.’

‘I’m the King. I can take whatever I like, especially when it’s so freely given.’
Augus opened his mouth to protest, and Gwyn stroked a hand across Augus’ hair and leaned back in, kissing him again, humming deeply. Augus had a few seconds to think that he really should try and get the situation back under control, before he realised it hadn’t really ever been under his control in the first place. He curled his tongue around Gwyn’s and moaned faintly, dragging his fingernails lightly down Gwyn’s back.


‘Cut it out,’ Augus said, and Gwyn shook his head, blinking down at Augus, the apprehension fading to something far more confident. There was something very wild and leonine in that expression.

‘Come here,’ Augus said, smirking.

Gwyn returned, scraping his teeth over Augus’ bottom lip before humming once more in satisfaction, finding his way inside Augus’ mouth with a quiet, careful ease. The kisses were slow, sweet. And when Gwyn splayed fingers across Augus’ scalp, Augus moaned again in spite of himself, wondering at how quickly Gwyn was disarming him.

Halfway through kissing him, Gwyn stopped and leaned back, taking several breaths, before laughing ruefully.

‘What now?’ Augus said.

Gwyn shook his head. ‘I’m so tired.’

‘Then sleep, you idiot.’ Augus pushed Gwyn back over onto his side and kissed his way to Gwyn’s ear. He wondered how much of this confidence, this self-satisfaction, was a combination of compulsions, being cried out, and exhaustion. Whatever it was, it was welcome. ‘I can fuck you later.’

‘No,’ Gwyn complained, sleep-soft. ‘It’s my turn.’

‘Is it?’ Augus draped his weight back over Gwyn, then pulled the blankets down so that Gwyn could start to cool off.

‘Is,’ Gwyn said, voice already sinking into the deeper registers that meant he was drifting off.

‘It’s your turn if you get started in the next five minutes,’ Augus said.

Gwyn laughed behind a closed mouth, shaking his head.

‘Okay. Your turn,’ he slurred, and then he was out like a light.

Augus smoothed his hand over Gwyn’s brow and then chastely kissed Gwyn’s mouth. Augus didn’t fall asleep straight away, but instead pressed his hand to Gwyn’s chest and felt that steady beat, so much faster than his own. He shifted until he could press his ear to Gwyn’s chest and closed his eyes, listening to his heartbeat slow further and further as Gwyn sank deeper into a true sleep cycle. Augus hadn’t planned to fall asleep, but Gwyn’s heartbeat lulled him as steadily as his lake once used to.

Chapter End Notes
In our next chapter: 'Confrontation:'

‘I understand that you think this is a weak Court, Albion – and of course you’d be correct. You and I, my father, many others have been working to break it down for thousands of years. Yet we’re still here, tenacious as ever. I’m not going to gull you with a light show this time, Albion. I think we both know grandstanding when we see it. I’m only going to tell you that I have plenty more debts to collect, and you haven’t saved the lives of nearly as many Unseelie fae, as I have Seelie.’

Albion walked right up to the steps leading to the thrones, looking up at Gwyn, disgust writ large across his face, turning his sharp eyes to barbs, his mouth to a thin line.

‘Let’s pit numbers against numbers, shall we? You have a military of – at best – ten or twenty thousand. And I have a military of one hundred and fifty thousand land fae, and two hundred thousand sea fae. Have I got your attention, young man? Take our trebuchets. Disable whatever you can, Gwyn. Because I *like* war, and I *like* winning. Tenacious? No matter how tenacious the Unseelie Court may be, a piece of shit can still be scraped off a boot with enough persistence.’
Confrontation

Chapter Notes

No new tags! We're back with the Generals, and spending some time with Vane, and then you know, perhaps an irate Seelie King comes to visit. :D

Enjoy the chapter! Comments are love, and thank you so much for reading <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Gwyn

* 

‘So, you made a habit of saving their lives, did you?’ Ifir said, his deep voice droll, his black beard and moustache twitching with his wry, antagonistic smile. He tilted his horned head, catching the eye of several of the other Generals as he did so. ‘You could’ve worked from the inside to bring them down thousands of years ago, and instead you went around saving all the Seelie fae you could. I know it’s convenient now, but- Is it truly? They have the numbers to retaliate effectively. What then?’

Ifir aggravated Gwyn, but he also asked the same sort of questions that Gwyn used to ask his own Generals in private. And every War General needed at least one experienced fellow who would level with them, who would warn for potential unseen threats and possibilities before they eventuated. But he couldn’t read the sparks in Ifir’s gaze, the glower in those thickly lashed red-amber eyes. Ifir twirled a section of his black beard, then finally scratched once more at brown skin, pretending at nonchalance where there was none at all.

Gwyn and his other Generals sat in a makeshift circle beyond the protection of the Court. Vane had magicked a circle of makeshift toadstools for them to sit upon, and Gwyn kept his ability to sense other fae flooded outwards at all times. It pulled at his concentration, but he used the talent enough in battle that he could multitask and use it when he needed to.

‘Well, hang on though,’ Ocypete said. She stretched her broad, bat’s wings and then shrugged, raising manicured eyebrows on her dark olive face. Gwyn was often relieved whenever she spoke up; for a vicious, blood-thirsty harpy, she was even-tempered, and quick to see the wisdom in whatever Gwyn was doing. Did that make her more, or less likely to be a traitor? ‘It’s already effective. Aerial intelligence suggests the Seelie are training less often. They enter manoeuvres less frequently than they once did. Their cavalry and engineering sectors have reported lower earnings and lower activity.’

‘Nothing,’ Gwyn said, shaking his head, ‘erases the fact that numbers for numbers, they are much better positioned than us. And so it has always been. The Unseelie do better when they pull upon stealth in combat. Brute force in a unified military has never been our strong point.’

‘Speak for yourself,’ Zudanna said, laughing. Her wolf ears twitched, wolf paws splayed on her lap. ‘How long were you trying to get a handle on the kudlak army for?’

‘You have the benefit of being a pack animal,’ Gwyn said, lips lifting in a half-smile.
'We have the benefit of being kudlak,' Zudanna grinned toothily, winking at him, blue eyes bright. Two of her side Generals nodded quietly, always deferring to her wisdom. She carried herself with the cheerful, confident bearing of someone who was used to commanding large armies without question. He wondered how far her matriarch status extended. Did she rule the kudlaks? They were so secretive, he had no idea what sort of community system they utilised, except that they were private creatures, social amongst each other but very few other fae.

'As Albion replaces those he feels he cannot trust with increasing numbers of sea fae, there will be backlash amongst the Seelie,' Mu said evenly, fox eyes sharp on Gwyn’s. They shifted a crease out of their silk pants and then rested a clawed hand on their sword. 'If Albion brings sea fae militaries to land battles, what will you have us do? I can poison a single lake, even a section of river with the right poisons to disarm a military before a campaign even becomes its most effective. But I cannot poison the ocean. Sea fae – especially those shifters who shoal – they have the hive mind that we do not. What will you do once your debts run out?'

'He’s banking on dissent in the Seelie,' Vane said, keeping his eyes down to the ground. Even so, he still jingled slightly when he talked due to the amount of jewellery he was wearing.

'Also consider,' Gwyn said, turning over his most recent thoughts since having visited Marika, 'that we do have cousins across the river who are allies. Ifir, you said that your brother lives in an enclave with Seelie fae does he not? Afrit with Ambaros? There are those who occupy respected positions, who do not wish to see their families, their friends, annihilated. Those who are older, who lived during the idyllic periods of the Raven Prince’s reign, or the early years of the Oak King and the bulk of Titania’s reign, they all remember a time when Seelie and Unseelie mingled far more freely. I am not the only one seeking to sow dissent amongst the Seelie.'

'I am not my brother,' Ifir said. 'If they want to destroy us, they should watch out, for I am a destroyer.'

Smoke rose slowly from his fingertips, his irises appeared to crackle. He slapped his hand loudly against his circular shield where it rested against his shins. It rung out, bell-like, and several of the other Generals stiffened.

‘Though,’ Ifir said, pursing his lips, eyes narrowing, ‘if it is dissent you want, I can see what my brother has to say about allies, and how their enclave is doing. The Ambaros are well-respected Seelie fae, almost always Court status or higher. I suppose one can never have enough informants.’

Gwyn nodded. ‘I’d appreciate that.’

Ifir gave him a look that plainly said: I’m not doing this for you.

Luma – a brown-skinned angittay from the Philippines – cleared her throat. ‘Appeal to the classless. Since you are classless yourself, you may have grounds with them. Seek fae like my brother, Tigbalan. See how they can assist you. Classless stay out of wars, but they can be drawn forth to help during times of when there is an unusual magnitude of unrest, like now. Some say it’s why classless fae exist. The swell of power when all seems hopeless.’

A silence then, because Luma laid out what they all knew in their heart of hearts. Numbers for numbers, the Unseelie fae could be easily crushed if Albion decided to move against them. Gwyn knew that if he was still commanding the Seelie, if he truly believed in the Oak King’s vendetta against the Unseelie, he could have destroyed them as easily as lowering the pad of his thumb to the vulnerable body of an insect.

Gwyn held onto the tenuous hope that the enduring sacredness of Unseelie and Seelie, the
worldwide belief in the necessity of both alignments, was the last remaining tether that prevented Albion from doing just that. But it was a naïve hope, and one Gwyn paid little mind.

‘Our militaries will win the smaller wars,’ Gwyn said, meeting their eyes. ‘But it will be individuals who will do their best work for us. Albion expects me to keep fighting like a Seelie War General, but I am not one, and the Raven Prince managed individual, private militaries very well, partly because he had a very strong, interlinked network of assassins and other fae to do wetworks and more. I plan to do the same.’

‘All well and good,’ Mu said, ‘but we are not those individuals. We command militaries – large or small – and we are more vulnerable than we have ever been, especially now that you antagonise. I know we agreed to this plan, Gwyn, but we each walk an increasingly precarious path now.’

‘If someone dared think that you were still on the side of the Seelie, it seems like you’re doing a good job of driving us directly into someone’s warpath,’ Ifir said, and several Generals stared at him in a mix of apprehension and outrage. But Gwyn noted just as many who nodded without looking at Gwyn, expressing quiet solidarity with Ifir’s opinions.

‘Is that what you think?’ Gwyn said, staring at Ifir, meeting those fire-struck eyes.

‘It’s just a hypothetical scenario,’ Ifir said, not even pretending at mock innocence.

‘You should be suspicious,’ Gwyn said finally, looking at those other fae who had – it seemed – placed at least some of their loyalties with Ifir. Did they prefer him as War General? Gwyn needed to keep a closer eye on what was happening around him, but in a skeleton Court, there was only so much of his resources to go around. ‘A fae spends three thousand years with the Seelie, and suddenly changes alignments? Let’s not falsely step around something that should be in the open. I know many of you suspect me, and my motives. I’m not unaware. But if I am so threatening to you, if I am suggesting such awful things, then why are none of you stepping up and making better suggestions?’

Vane looked at Gwyn in shock, and Ifir swallowed like he’d tasted something sour.

‘The fact is,’ Gwyn continued, ‘there are no better suggestions. The Seelie military is in an exceptionally strong position, and the Unseelie militaries are fragmented, impoverished, weak. We have less trainers and tutors. Fae in positions of authority have been picked off for far longer than I can recall, long before I was in power when I worked with the Seelie. If you think you can do a better job, Ifir, then please, stop antagonising my plans with more than just words, and give all of us something to work with. You have their attention, but you still can’t back it up with the numbers needed to truly make a stand against the Seelie.’

‘You did this to us,’ Kyoufu said. He hardly ever spoke, but Gwyn had already marked his allegiance to Ifir in his silent assent. He managed a private army of undead fog-fae, being a boru boru from the fae side of Japan. His eyes were translucent, opalescent, milky. His gaze was intense for all the fuzzed borders of his skin and the fact that he carried fog with him wherever he went.

‘Yes,’ Gwyn said. ‘How else was I supposed to earn the Oak King’s trust? It wasn’t as though I could advocate for cooperation between the alignments, volunteer to assist in mediation, or actively speak against too much inequality for-’

‘But you did do that,’ Vane said, and then flushed red. ‘Oh, that’s…what you were saying.’

‘Soldiers under your command slaughtered my family,’ Kyoufu insisted. ‘We were nothing to the Seelie military. We were just in the way. Collateral damage. My family were part of no military. I
was part of no military at the time. I became a General for one reason; to stand against the poison that is the Seelie. They think they’re so righteous and upstanding, but they’re as ethically bankrupt as the worst of the Unseelie.’

‘Believe me, I know,’ Gwyn said, holding that gaze. He couldn’t sway Kyoufu to his side, he knew that, but he didn’t cringe before such honesty too. ‘I’m relying on it. Albion is petty, and his sense of righteousness is so overblown that he can be drawn into making easy mistakes. His Polemarch, Alysia, is a brilliant General. It may be only on her wisdom that he has not yet struck.’

‘Would any Seelie in positions of power speak up publically in favour for alignment cooperation, as you did?’ Luma said, her voice gentle, aged as she was. She was one of the few fae who, like Old Pete, had elected to stop her aging process at a much older appearance than most fae.

‘Perhaps,’ Gwyn said. He couldn’t see Marika risking herself in such a way. And Albion would kill anyone else who did – of that, he was certain. It was a dire time indeed when fae could not even speak up in favour for their cousins across the river. ‘I’ll check in with my contacts. There is something else you should know. I have decided to aggressively pursue reclaiming the An Fnwy estate. It has immense strategic value, as has been pointed out to me before.’

‘Good,’ Luma said, eyes twinkling. ‘Very good.’

Gwyn had no idea how Luma could seem so much like a kind old grandmother with horse ears, when Tigbalan still set his spine to crawling.

The conversation after that moved to specific campaigns, projects, and Gwyn was happy to observe, only advising when they turned to him for his thoughts. They were working together far more effectively than they did when he’d first called them together. There were clear alignments. Ifir had garnered a lot of favour, but it helped that the suggestions he made – while traditional and even sometimes outdated – were helpful, and often in line with what Gwyn would suggest. Ocypete, the harpy, was another who had drawn allies. Mu and Baw seemed to be happy to talk amongst themselves. Fae like Mu, Vane and several of the others worked independently, only attaching themselves to the fringe of other operations as needed.

Everything began to wind up two hours later, and Gwyn was filled with a nervous, agitated energy. He needed to train. He couldn’t be certain if he was losing some of his Generals to Ifir, or if they were already lost. The worst part, he didn’t even think Ifir was an informant to Albion. Just... someone who was powerful, effective, and didn’t come from the same dubious background that Gwyn did.

Ifir hung back as the other Generals teleported away. He moved closer, until he was sitting only one toadstool away from Gwyn. His black-clawed thumb traced the edge of his shield, and he looked into the distance, thinking something over. Finally, he drew his red-amber eyes back to Gwyn, face cold.

‘You need a proper set of plate armour,’ Ifir said. ‘You need armour and a good sword. A sword you can name. In those battles, you cannot keep wearing the cheap armour that you do. You know what you inspired in that armour and sword you once had when you fought for the Seelie. Make something new, frightening.’

There was a faint, background urge to cringe that Gwyn resisted.

‘I am still building musculature after my stint as underfae,’ Gwyn said. ‘Any plate armour that I commission will-’
‘No,’ Ifir cut across him. ‘No, from what I can tell, your build is similar to what it was before. It matters not, commission two sets if you need them. And you need them.’

‘Do I,’ Gwyn said, flatly.

‘Do you know what it did to us, to see that brilliant, pale armour? Hm? And you treat the Unseelie armour like it is meaningless to you. I don’t know what your true motives are, Lord Gwyn, but I do know that the Unseelie need something to rally behind.’

‘You wouldn’t rather it be you?’ Gwyn said, arching an eyebrow.

‘Ha,’ Ifir said. ‘I can’t help if they trust me more simply because I’ve been obviously Unseelie my entire life.’

‘Can’t you?’ Gwyn said.

‘I’m doing you a favour,’ Ifir said bluntly. ‘I don’t have to, and I don’t particularly want to. Give the Unseelie something to rally behind on the battlefield. Create a new symbol for yourself. A new sword. New armour. If you need suggestions for smiths, I can give you some. But I doubt you’ll trust them. The other fae, they talk about it when you’re not here. That you cared so much for your Seelie armour and care so little for Unseelie armour.’

Gwyn felt his body go cold, despite the gently warm air around them. He hadn’t even considered it, and he should have. He felt so cheated to have his old armour and sword taken away, he hadn’t thought of how it must look that he threw his Unseelie armour to the ground after every battle, leaving it there – poorly treated – for people to find.

‘Yes,’ Gwyn said finally. ‘You are correct.’

‘Of course I am,’ Ifir said, his body beginning to smoke as he drew his fire to him. ‘I’ve been at this for longer than you have, after all.’

He teleported away in a burst of vibrant, incandescent flame, and Gwyn was alone in a circle of toadstools, already starting to wither without Vane’s magic to sustain them.

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The Unseelie Court armour gleamed where he pulled it onto his body. The trows didn’t dust, but they did polish. Every piece he put on felt both familiar and alien at the same time. It wasn’t his armour, and even though he suspected that the trows had gotten some of it altered to fit him better, it still wasn’t the same as a proper plate armour fit. As always, fitting the left pauldron into place stole his breath as his shoulder flared with pain.

Was Ifir right? Was it time to commission a new set? He was thinner than he’d been as a Seelie fae, but he’d recovered a lot of his general musculature through sheer hard work. His shoulders were almost the breadth they used to be, his upper arms defined with muscle, his wrists sinewy. He touched the longsword at his side and walked into the semi-public training arena – this one open to his Generals, to Inner Court, but not the main Court population. He was alone. His mailed feet scuffing into the clean sands on the floor, seats for spectating empty.

He liked it that way. He wondered what had happened to the Mage orbs he’d commissioned – the ones that would bring him warriors that would innately match his strength, so that he could fight as hard as he needed to. Did Albion use them now? Someone else? Had they been destroyed?

The first drill was always the hardest, and he forced his bad shoulder through the movements that
would limber muscle and tendon, while still aggravating the nerves. In the first few weeks after he’d been in the Unseelie Court, he kept expecting Kabiri to turn up and claim his open debt. Now, he wasn’t sure what would happen. An open debt with a god. It wasn’t unheard of. And Aleutia has said Kabiri was becoming increasingly known for it.

Luma was right, the fae realm was in the middle of a period of unrest. The Season of Turning had brought with it much more than just healthy changes and shifts as the Oak King had predicted. The very structures they once depended on – the balance between the Seelie and Unseelie – were threatened. Gods were interfering with fae-kind once more, which meant they were worried, or that their problems were about to spill over into the fae world. He hoped not.

There were rumours of the sorts of things that had happened during the last time gods and demons had spilled across the borders between the realms, the last time the balance and structure of the realms had fallen away. A Chthonic time, a dark time and with hardly any coherent tales attached to it; the only ones remaining those of horror, death, worldwide destruction.

He settled into a rhythm with his drills, clenching his teeth at the flares of pain in his shoulder which were now predictable and easier to ride out than before. His thoughts fell towards the night he’d last shared with Augus. The incident. Not so much an incident, as Augus seeing him at a time when he’d never wanted anyone to see him.

It crept through him shamefully, made his mouth taste of oil and acid; but Augus hadn’t fled, hadn’t mocked him. But now Augus knew. Now he knew how terribly vulnerable Gwyn could become and it would only take one word, one sentence to mock him in public. Not so long ago, Augus had said ‘I trust you,’ but Gwyn wasn’t sure he could say the same. Not in the same way. He wanted to. And to a point, he did. But Augus was…casually cruel when he was upset, he was-

Gwyn couldn’t bear it if Augus brought up that nightmare, the content of that nightmare. He could almost imagine Augus crowing, ‘If you ever want Gwyn to cry like a little child, just…’

Just what?

Gwyn grit his teeth together as he jumped into a downthrust, the jar of it ringing up through his arms, then whirled away into a new, faster drill he’d been working on. They expected him to be slow. He was not slow.

Augus held so many secrets back from him, even as he plumbed Gwyn’s hidden darkneses and pulled out whatever he wanted. The worst parts of him. But Gwyn still didn’t know what had happened to the Raven Prince. He didn’t know how Augus had made himself King. He knew very little about the year Augus had spent with the Nightingale. And where Augus pushed relentlessly for secrets and vulnerabilities, Gwyn couldn’t do the same. Not without the shutters closing, the walls coming up. He wasn’t smart enough, good enough, to push at Augus the same way Augus pushed at him. He just wasn’t.

He shook sweat off his face, his curls clinging heavily to his forehead and cheek. His hair was getting shaggy again.

But Augus had been good about it, ultimately. Hadn’t he? Gwyn closed his eyes. He hadn’t meant to talk about it so much, but Augus hadn’t let off and then… He was starting to think he knew what Mikkel meant when he’d left so hurriedly in their last meeting. He was going to have words with him about it. But what would he say?

Can we please avoid subjects of conversation that leave me crying like a tiny child later? Gwyn snorted with self-disgust.
Besides, he couldn’t be as merciless towards Augus as Augus could be towards him. He couldn’t be. He was a rapist. He was a brutal, cruel creature deep down who had **hurt** Augus. They never talked about it. He was still shocked that Augus had asked to be sounded again. It had been delicious to have control again, deeply enjoyable, but in the back of his mind was a quaking terror that he’d cross a line, he’d do some great wrong.

If only he could be under those blankets again, Augus lying on top of him, the world theirs and private and no one else’s.

If only he could trust that Augus wouldn’t use it against him.

He lost track of time as he kept moving through the drills. It wasn’t only his bad shoulder that hurt now, but his whole body. It burnt with fatigue. From the arches of his feet threatening to cramp with every step he took, to the muscle spasms in his hip and neck. He knew he’d been at it for at least two or three hours.

Fae awareness let him know that someone had arrived, was watching him, and in a spinning motion, he caught Vane leaning over the railing. Gazing at him. Gwyn noted it and then shut it out. He wasn’t done yet. Time was when he could train intensively for six hours without stopping, but he wasn’t back to that old stamina. His muscles and tendons rebelled, his stomach burnt first with hunger, and then with a cold, hard knot of nausea.

His hair was soaked when he finally stopped another hour later. He was saturated with sweat, needed to replenish water. He met Vane’s eyes to indicate that he knew he was there, but then walked over to the water pump and tipped his head beneath it, water splashing over his overheated face, into his mouth. He gulped thirstily, could hear the rasp of his breathing, was glad to replace the rime of sweat on his face with fresh, cold water at least.

After, he shook his hair off like a dog might and walked to where Vane still rested – decked out in so much jewellery that Gwyn wondered if it was the equivalent of the wealth of a small fae nation. After all, the fie ellyllon wore their economy. They were experiencing good times indeed, if their prince and head economist could wear so much metal, so many gems and pearls.

‘Your Majesty,’ Vane said, smiling. He had a small knapsack over his shoulder, made of a blue leather that Gwyn hadn’t seen in some time. He blinked at it. An extinct fae animal? He couldn’t be certain. He wanted to shower and doze.

‘Vane,’ Gwyn said, scrutinising him. Could Vane be the second informant, if indeed there was one? Augus would interrogate them all soon enough.

‘I have some of the elfshot,’ Vane said, beaming, his freckles flushing darker, his red hair tangled and studded with rubies and diamonds. ‘It works. It’s only a trial amount, but it works very well.’

‘Well,’ Gwyn said, leaning over the railing himself. ‘That is good news. Why didn’t you share it before, with the other Generals?’

‘We don’t have enough to share beyond a small squad within the fie ellyllon. It is hard to make. But here, look.’

Vane opened the knapsack and gingerly drew out a pouch made of stiff black leather. It sat in the palm of his hand as he pulled the drawstring, bangles and bracelets sliding down his wrists towards his elbows. Slowly, he pushed the pouch up from the bottom to expose what was inside without touching it, and Gwyn saw many small arrowheads. They were a deep matt navy in colour, though clearly made of metal. The very tips were coated in silver. He blinked at them in amazement. If
that was truly elfshot…

He wasn’t sure he’d ever see it in his lifetime. It was the stuff of legends.

‘Is it a poison?’ Gwyn asked, resisting the urge to touch them.

Vane shook his head and carefully picked up one of the arrowheads by the base, holding it in
delicate fingers. ‘No, my Lord, it is not. Though I’m not sure how it’s made. The ones who made
these simply said ‘elf magic’ and left it at that. They are keeping their secrets, even from one such
as I.’

‘If they’re not willing to tell the prince of the fie ellyllon, then I doubt they’ll tell anyone else
either. May I?’

Gwyn reached out for the arrowhead and Vane handed it to him, making sure Gwyn took it by the
base.

All the legends said that if a person was shot with elfshot, the tip of the arrow would break away
immediately, falling even as the person who was shot fell – paralysed. No cure for the paralysis
except to find the exact same arrow tip in a mess of dirt and battlefield and touch it to the place
where the person was shot.

‘I wonder…’ Gwyn said. He brushed a spare patch of skin between wrist braces with the tip of the
arrow, even as Vane exclaimed in shock and horror.

It tickled over his skin – barely a scratch – but Gwyn’s spine locked up and he huffed a breath of
surprise as he fell hard, armour clanging and making his shoulder roar in pain. He blinked up at the
ceiling even as he summoned his strength to break through it. And he felt that he could break
through it, given enough time; he was the King after all. But he only managed the barest twitch of
his fingers.

Vane rooted around in the sand next to him, finding the arrow head, muttering disapproving, fear-
filled exclamations in his own language even as he grasped Gwyn’s wrist with a strong hand and
located the scratch, brushing the arrowhead against it once more.

Gwyn’s body unlocked, he pushed himself up into a sitting position, staring at the arrowhead in
wonder, even as Vane stared at him in shock.

‘Why would you do that?’ Vane said.

‘It’s a controlled environment, and I wanted to know if it worked. I’m surprised it worked on
myself, though I suspect I could have broken through it eventually.’

Also, Gwyn had been curious to see what Vane would do. There was no hesitation when Vane
went to fetch the arrowhead. No malicious glimmer in his eyes, nothing but a rushed, guileless
need to fix what Gwyn had done. Still, Gwyn thought, not an especially thought out plan. He
needed rest.

‘You are bold!’ Vane said finally, and Gwyn smiled grimly as he pushed himself upright, ignoring
the shrieking of his shoulder, ignoring how the words themselves reminded him of one of the first
things he’d ever said to Mafydd. Ever since that conversation with Mikkel, there were far more
reminders of the past floating nearby than there used to be. ‘My Lord, that was amazing. Still,
reckless too. But they say you’re like that in battle, don’t they? And even when you’re training, it’s
impressive. I don’t know if I could fight like you, I value my skin too much!’
‘I have the benefit of status,’ Gwyn said, ignoring the fact that he’d been fighting recklessly for as long as he could remember, regardless of status.

‘Anyway, these are for you,’ Vane said, putting the broken arrowhead back in the pouch and closing it up again. He turned and placed it carefully on a sturdy table nearby, and then came back, leaning on the railing once more. ‘I know you like the bow and arrow, and they will fit to thinner arrows, so I think…we thought you should have some.’

‘That’s very kind of you,’ Gwyn said, and Vane smiled in a pleased, cat-like way, his eyes slitting in pleasure. ‘Tell me, do the fie ellyllon want to install you in my inner court? Or are they planning on it being someone else?’

‘Me, probably,’ Vane said, looking at him sidelong. His face brightened and he winked. ‘You know I’m a good treasurer.’

He spread his arms wide, splayed his ringed, jewelled fingers. Crystals dangled from his ears, his hair glinted, his neck covered in a heavy gold torc shaped like a hound chasing its own tail.

‘The fie ellyllon can spare you?’ Gwyn said, and Vane shrugged.

‘Oh yes, well, I make my own way. You could do with more allies anyway, couldn’t you? You saw how it was out there with Ifir. I don’t know why you wouldn’t listen to me. Status shouldn’t preclude you from listening to good advice. He is turning some of the other Generals against you.’

‘He is right to be suspicious, Vane,’ Gwyn said.

‘You’re so strong and skilled,’ Vane said, looking at his armour, and then meeting his eyes. ‘Really. It’s quite something. You’re quite something. You should make them realise that. I don’t even know if you should have Ifir in the team.’

‘Are you questioning my judgement?’

Vane stilled and then shook his head rapidly. ‘Oh no, I meant no offence! Your Majesty, I wouldn’t seek to question, it’s only that…Ifir tries to destabilise you. He tries to make you look bad in front of the others. It’s rude.’

‘It’s his right,’ Gwyn repeated steadily.

‘Okay then,’ Vane said doubtfully. ‘I’ll stay out of it. It’s not really my problem, is it? Besides you’re more than capable, anyone can see that. How you managed to bring the Court out of the situation it was in, and make it what it is now, in less than a year really! We’re lucky to have you. If you’d had Unseelie parents, I bet they would’ve been really proud of you.’

Gwyn’s brow furrowed, and Vane laughed musically, then bounced on the balls of his feet.

‘I should take my leave then, Your Majesty! I just came to give you the elfshot really. And watch you train. It’s amazing.’

A heavily ringed hand rested on his bare hand where it curved around the railing, and Gwyn looked down, perturbed, and then met Vane’s blue eyes, his own expression blank.

‘Sorry,’ Vane said quickly, lifting his hand. ‘I think your hands are twice the size of mine! Anyway, by your leave, Your Majesty.’

Gwyn nodded silently and watched Vane walk off with a jaunty skip in his step, fingers twitching
as though he were playing some invisible instrument. He looked down at his hand where Vane had touched it and then shook his head slowly. The elf was like a puppy. The more he saw him, the more he became convinced of that. He could almost imagine him gambolling around as a child, and the thought made him smile.

He picked up the pouch of elfshot carefully and walked out of the training arena, thinking longingly of a brutally hot shower, water reddening his skin and loosening knots and tension from his bones.

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Gwyn was signing off on different accounts and paperwork when there was an urgent knock at the door. He looked up, frowning.

‘Enter,’ he called.

The door was shoved open, and one of the common fae servants looked in, eyes widening in relief.

‘Your Majesty, King Albion of the Seelie Kingdom is here.’

‘Is he?’ Gwyn said, holding back a slow smile. ‘So he’s deigned to come off his throne and pay us a visit, has he?’

‘He’s most displeased, Your Majesty.’

The poor woman looked downright terrified, and Gwyn stood, looking down at his simple peasant shirt and his canvas pants.

‘Account for my Inner Court,’ he ordered, and she nodded, blinked rapidly.

‘The Each Uisge is already in the throne room, upon his throne. The Glashtyn is absent and Gulvi is with her sister. Do you want me to fetch her?’

‘Yes,’ Gwyn said. ‘Fetch her and bring her to the throne room. Tell her Albion is here, and that I wish her to remain silent. Pass the message along to Augus. I shall be along in a minute. When we are all in the throne room together, you may see the King of the Seelie in at my command. Do you understand?’

‘Yes, Your Majesty,’ the common fae said, before teleporting away.

Gwyn did the same, teleporting into the room where the Unseelie crown was kept upon its marble dais. He picked up its frame of silvery twigs and leaves, always much heavier than it should be from its appearance alone, and settled it upon his head. He couldn’t be certain, but he thought the zahakhar always rang stronger through his blood whenever he put on the Unseelie crown. He was practiced at tuning out the artificial sense of home and belonging now, but he felt it was quite welcome in this instant.

He wore simple leather shoes, no other accessories. He didn’t need them. He’d almost expected Albion to wait longer before coming, but he was relieved to know that Albion’s temper was just as easily piqued as it used to be.

He teleported into the throne room and Gulvi was already there, sitting with her legs crossed upon her throne which had a narrow back designed to give her room for her large wings. Augus lounged in his throne, looking at his fingernails. He looked desultorily at Gwyn, before the corners of his lips quirked up in…solidarity? Appreciation? Gwyn couldn’t be sure, but he liked it all the same.
Gwyn walked to his own throne, off centre, and rested his hands on the armrests, crossed one leg over the other, resting his ankle on his knee.

‘Send him in,’ Gwyn called, his voice echoing through the almost empty, cavernous room.

A door flung open, clanging loudly. Gwyn heard the sharp steps of Albion and was surprised at the frisson of discomfort and fear that moved through him. Those steps had preceded his demotion, that face had judged him and found him unworthy. Gwyn took a long, slow breath and pushed all of it aside, calling coldness to him like a cloak and finding an inner well of ruthless calm that had served him well all his life.

Albion wore not armour, but a three piece suit of royal blue, silvery patterns of tiny swarming fish etched into the edges. He was immaculately coiffed, as usual. Not a hair out of place in the sharp points of his beard and moustache, nor on the black hair atop his head. He brought the scent and feel of the ocean into the throne room, walked towards Gwyn with no weapons at all. Though he wore the golden crown of the Seelie.

‘It’s been some time, Albion,’ Gwyn said quietly, trusting the acoustics of the room to carry his voice. ‘Weren’t you supposed to offer formal greetings to the Unseelie Court’s change of monarch some time ago?’

‘There have been so many changes of monarch,’ Albion snapped. ‘I cannot be expected to run back and forth between Courts simply because the Unseelie cannot decide on which ruler is best suited to a miserable attempt at preventing your inevitable slow descent into ruin.’

Gwyn smiled, he didn’t move or shift, offered nothing but confidence.

‘You seek to cripple me?’ Albion said, his voice cold. ‘Calling in your life debts? What will you do once you’ve run out, Gwyn? Yours is still a weak Court, and the Seelie Court is stronger than ever, thanks – in part – to you.’

‘I understand that you think this is a weak Court, Albion – and of course you’d be correct. You and I, my father, many others have been working to break it down for thousands of years. Yet we’re still here, tenacious as ever. I’m not going to gull you with a light show this time, Albion. I think we both know grandstanding when we see it. I’m only going to tell you that I have plenty more debts to collect, and you haven’t saved the lives of nearly as many Unseelie fae, as I have Seelie.’

Albion walked right up to the steps leading to the thrones, looking up at Gwyn, disgust writ large across his face, turning his sharp eyes to barbs, his mouth to a thin line.

‘Let’s pit numbers against numbers, shall we? You have a military of – at best – ten or twenty thousand. And I have a military of one hundred and fifty thousand land fae, and two hundred thousand sea fae. Have I got your attention, young man? Take our trebuchets. Disable whatever you can, Gwyn. Because I like war, and I like winning. Tenacious? No matter how tenacious the Unseelie Court may be, a piece of shit can still be scraped off a boot with enough persistence.’

‘It all sounds very threatening,’ Gwyn said lightly. And it did, since Albion’s estimates of the Unseelie military numbers weren’t that far off. ‘Except for the fact that you were roused enough in your anger to come pay us a visit. You might wish to exercise some more emotional self-control, old man. Or has a lifetime of looking after an ocean made you as unpredictable and unreliable as the sea?’

‘I was willing to give you a grace period,’ Albion snarled.
'I highly doubt that,' Gwyn said quietly. ‘You know as well as I do, Albion, how much you like to make the enemy stew in their juices before you strike. I did battle alongside you, after all. We discussed strategy enough times, didn’t we? Don’t look so out of sorts that someone turned one of your classic strategies against you. It was only a matter of time.’

‘The Unseelie’s days are numbered,’ Albion said, his voice smoothing. He didn’t smile, and he looked nothing but determined, a promise in his eyes that Gwyn had seen himself on the battlefield; one that meant that he was sure of his triumph.

‘It’s no secret anymore, is it?’ Gwyn said, keeping his voice easy. ‘There’s not even the merest hint at pretence that the Seelie wish to restore balance.’

‘You think we won’t have balance with an eliminated Unseelie Kingdom?’

‘No, I don’t,’ Gwyn said. ‘Think of all the families and enclaves you’d be tearing apart.’

‘It’s interesting that you never asked me to care about collateral damage in the past,’ Albion said, raising eyebrows. ‘Almost as though you wanted Seelie civilians to be caught in the crossfire.’

Gwyn’s expression didn’t change, he did nothing more than watch Albion calmly, even as his thoughts raced.

‘This whole ‘light balances dark’ philosophy is nothing more than Unseelie propaganda,’ Albion said, sounding as cold as the depths of the ocean he once presided over. ‘Propaganda designed to convince us that we need liars and thieves and rapists and murderers. That we need fae who feed upon sadness, death, murder, carrion. That we-’

‘I don’t recall that the Seelie fae were free of liars, thieves, rapists or murderers,’ Gwyn said softly. ‘And you, yourself, once said that you wished you could feed upon the deaths of your prey, because that would make it even more satisfying after a good battle. Is this projection, Albion? Are you jealous?’

Albion’s eyes widened in shock and insult, and Gwyn mentally braced himself. He couldn’t resist poking at him now that he was here, standing before him.

But Albion didn’t splutter as Gwyn had hoped, though it looked like it was a close thing – his cheeks had gone pale with rage, his eyes promised maelstroms. Instead, he mastered himself and took a slow breath, his nostrils flaring.

‘Do you think the classless Unseelie will stand for this?’ Gwyn said. ‘It takes a great deal to rouse them from their reclusive ways, yes. But this certainly will.’

‘You’re going to need them,’ Albion said, smiling stiffly.

‘I’m still trying to determine why you’re here,’ Gwyn said. ‘Was it to throw a tantrum or threaten me? So it seems I’m not the only one capable of grandstanding then. Surely you’ve got better things to do with your time, Albion.’

‘Yes, believe me, I do,’ Albion said, and turned on his heel, marching from the throne room. The door slammed behind him, the scent of the ocean clung to the air around them.

Gwyn waited five minutes and then looked over to Augus and Gulvi, who were already looking to him. Augus looked concerned, and Gulvi’s swan eyes were narrow, she looked as calculating as Gwyn felt.
‘I need to summon the Generals,’ Gwyn said quietly. ‘I suspect he’s planning a surprise attack. Not much of a surprise, to be honest.’

‘Are his number estimations correct?’ Gulvi said, and Gwyn shook his head.

‘With Zudanna’s kudlak’s, and Ifir’s afrit, along with several of the pledges, we’re at sixty thousand. He’s underestimating us. But we’re still at a great disadvantage. I’m going to need to contact both the School of the Staff and classless fae.’

‘Still, you stirred him to venting his anger,’ Augus said, sliding his fingers together and resting his chin upon them.

‘Albion’s strong enough that he could pull this off,’ Gwyn said, standing and straightening his shirt absently. ‘That’s the problem. He can throw as many tantrums as he likes and we are still the poorer for that Seelie military. There is no assurance that there will be an Unseelie Court within the year. Gulvi, I need you to implement the Red Path strategy that you and I discussed.’

Her hands went to her knives immediately, and she stood, wings flaring. ‘Darling, are you quite sure?’

‘Yes,’ Gwyn said. ‘Stay safe.’

‘Oui,’ she said, and disappeared in a whirl of feathers.

‘Red Path strategy?’ Augus said, pushing himself up and standing close enough to Gwyn that all Gwyn could smell for a few seconds was not the scent of ocean that Albion had left behind, but cool lakes, the green of lily pads and sedge.

‘Mm, you’ll find out soon enough I expect. Do you have a way to summon Ash?’

‘I…yes,’ Augus said, eyes widening.

‘Bring him within the protection of the Unseelie palace as soon as possible, Augus. He’s not safe. Albion will come at my Inner Court and the servants, I’m quite certain. Can you summon Ash without leaving the palace?’

‘Yes,’ Augus said, nodding. ‘I’ll do that now. And you? You seem to be holding up well.’

‘I wasn’t made to be King, Augus,’ Gwyn said. ‘But I was made for war, and that is something I can do.’

Augus touched his side gently, fingers pressing against his skin through his shirt. Gwyn looked down at the contact, then licked at his lips and met Augus’ green eyes. They didn’t hold pity or revulsion or any of the emotions he expected after that hideous night they’d shared together.

‘Besides,’ Gwyn said quietly. ‘He can’t amass his armies properly right now; not with so many key players missing. He’ll be reluctant to charge today. But I do think we should have a plan in place in case he decides to move in a week or two.’

‘What do we do in the meantime?’ Augus said, frowning.

‘We live,’ Gwyn said, reaching down and placing his palm carefully over Augus’ fingers. ‘We keep living. That is all we can do.’
In our next chapter, 'Listen:'

‘Did you know you were sick?’ Augus said, not ready to leave the subject just yet.

Ash’s face twisted. ‘Augus, I…I mean I told you that I was hunting more, now. I have to. I can’t…I can’t help it. I have to.’

‘Can’t you compensate with sex? As you usually do?’

Ash’s laughter was bleak, and he shifted his position so that he was sitting properly, feet on the floor and his hand raking through his hair, self-soothing without thinking about it. Augus got up quickly and sat on the long lounge chair next to Ash, placing a careful hand on his back. It had been so long since they’d talked about anything.

‘Augus,’ Ash said, drawing the words up from some dark, raw place. ‘Augus, I haven’t been able to fuck humans for a while. I mean a while. I got…I got too aggressive. I don’t- I don’t trust myself.’
Augus
*

Augus sat on a low ottoman, looking around the open plan of Ash’s loft, housed in one of the palace towers. There was a bar, complete with an array of alcohol – *poison*, Augus thought, as he frowned at it – and a selection of glasses; shot glasses, wine glasses, and goodness knew what else. There were overstuffed couches in warm, earthy tones and reds, the floors were covered in opulent rugs, the walls covered in paintings of landscapes; each featuring a lake.

Augus was most surprised at the quiet way that Ash poured Augus a glass of water, and then himself a generous amount of scotch. Ash hadn’t protested being called back to the palace. He’d checked, briefly, what was going on, and then he’d slipped into a pensive silence.

He handed Augus his water and then walked back to the bar, leaning back against it and sipping at the scotch. Finally, he lay the heavy glass down, and sighed. Augus let the silence stretch, trying to assess whether it was actually awkward.

‘Oh,’ Ash said, breaking the silence, ‘hey, you want to see something cool?’

Augus set down his glass and spread his fingers, and Ash smiled, his eyes brightening. He walked past Augus towards broad glass sliding doors that opened up onto a large, generous balcony. Augus looked around the room as he followed. Gwyn had been generous. He’d picked Ash’s tastes surprisingly well. From the colours, to the bar, to the balcony. He was sure Gwyn didn’t know that Ash preferred lofts in the human world, and that – from what Ash had told him – there was a balcony in nearly every one.

‘He hardly knows you, and yet he shaped the rooms well, I think,’ Augus said.

Ash paused at the glass door, turning back. ‘Huh?’

‘These rooms of yours. Gwyn shaped them well, yes?’

‘The *magic* did,’ Ash corrected him, laughing. ‘Of course the Unseelie palace would nail my tastes.’

Augus’ eyes narrowed and he shook his head. ‘Ash, take this from someone who has shaped an Unseelie palace before, everything here – the furniture, the architecture, the look of the place – it was all Gwyn’s doing. *Gwyn* made this for you.’
Ash’s hand hesitated on the door handle and he looked around the room again, and then shrugged as though it was of no matter and stepped outside. Augus followed, deciding that it was awkward between them once more. It used to be so easy.

Augus paused just on the inside of the stone balcony, staring at the planter boxes, the generous circular stone basin with a small pond within – lilies growing, blossoming in colours and shapes that Augus hadn’t seen before, darting gold and white and violet fish within. He wasn’t familiar with any of these plants. He looked around curiously at pots of every shape and size, healthy plants within, many of them flowering or showing signs of fruiting. They were often very pale green, like the waterweed in Ash’s hair, which was so much lighter than Augus’ own. But some were shockingly dark, almost black-green.

‘You made this?’ Augus said, staring in amazement.

‘Yeah,’ Ash said, scratching at the back of his head and looking around, smiling. ‘I’ve been meaning to show you for a while. I’ve…kind of needed a hobby lately to keep my mind off things, I guess. And I didn’t think it’d ever be this, but Gulvi suggested it. Like, she knows how often I go down to where you were defeated to see the living underground wetland you made. So I think she thought this would be good for me. I didn’t believe her for a while but I kind of…I like it. Look, there’s seats.’

‘What are these plants?’ Augus said, walking over to one with heavy, succulent leaves, and brilliant blue flowers. He touched his fingers to it carefully, feeling a rubbery texture. He was distracting himself. Distracting himself from the fear and rage that Albion’s visit had roused inside of him. He hadn’t realised until Albion had visited them, just how bare the Unseelie military was, how disadvantaged they were. If the Unseelie Kingdom was smashed down in a week, in a month, ultimately it would be because of his actions.

‘I dunno,’ Ash said, laughing. ‘I dunno what most of them are. I’m not like you. Some of them I know I’ve seen while travelling. Others? Who the fuck knows, man. They just…they just come. I hold my hands to the soil and think about things and then they come. I don’t know what they do. I thought maybe…maybe you could use some of them. You know how to test things for their healing properties, don’t you?’

‘It was easier when I was underfae,’ Augus said. ‘Back then, I could tell if something was poisonous. Now, I suspect I’d shake a lot of poisons off. Still, this is lovely, Ash. All of it.’

‘Yeah?’ Ash said, sounding abashed. ‘You think? I mean I know it’s nothing compared to like…the lakes you’ve made, or anything, but it’s-’

‘It’s more than I’ve done while I’ve been here,’ Augus said. ‘Frankly, it’s more than I’ve done in some time.’

‘Did you like…forget that you regenerated an entire lake from scratch? Or did that whole- did that whole dying thing mean that you forgot?’

Augus blinked, taken aback. He hadn’t even considered it. Ash opened his mouth to cut him off, to say something meaningful, and Augus didn’t want to hear it. ‘This is beautiful. I’m surprised you’re not here more often to enjoy it.’

‘I’m here a bit,’ Ash said, sliding into a wrought iron lounge chair and drawing one of his denim-clad legs up to his chest. ‘I’m here more than you think. I just keep to myself a bit. I stay up here a lot. Sometimes Gulvi comes to visit.’
Augus sat in the chair next to him, looking over at Ash in concern. His normally vivacious hazel eyes were dulled. And even though his hair was still a riotous, curly mess of colour – brown, red and blond together – there was something muted about him. From the darker red of his shirt, to the washed out blue-grey of his jeans.

The balcony was pleasant and jarring at the same time. It shimmered with Ash’s waterhorse energy. Augus had inadvertently discouraged this sort of activity from Ash when they were younger, sharing a lake together. A lake could only have one waterhorse nourishing it, and Augus could not tolerate it being anyone else but himself. Ash had handled that well enough, but it had meant that ever since, he’d never particularly cared for any lake at all. Even his own. It was pretty enough, pleasing enough, but it was obvious that Ash didn’t invest anything of himself into it.

The plants and ceramic basins of water on this balcony suggested things were shifting. Moving in ways that Augus couldn’t have predicted.

‘Fenwrel says it’s good for me,’ Ash said, reaching out and touching an almost black fern frond. ‘You know…that I’m doing this. She checks in on me sometimes. Since the whole- Since you died.’

‘And you,’ Augus said, closing his eyes briefly. ‘Ash, I owe you an apology. I didn’t know you would sicken as a result of- as a result of what I asked you to do when I returned from the underworlds.’

‘Oh, hey,’ Ash said, looking up and offering a weak smile. ‘You didn’t know. We both didn’t know. And Fenwrel says it’s like, a tiny iota of what you experienced. Which- Fucking hell, Augus. I mean, just…fuck.’

‘I would not have had anything sully that brilliant spirit of yours,’ Augus said, though he looked around at the plants and shrugged to himself. ‘Though it seems that nothing really can. But I’m still…I didn’t think of the impact it might have on you at the time.’

‘I didn’t think there was an impact, at first?’ Ash said. ‘You know, you might not remember, but you did tell me that if I didn’t like it, or couldn’t handle it, I didn’t have to do it. I didn’t have to contain those…those beings for you. And it’s not like I knew they were creatures from the underworlds, right?’

‘I knew,’ Augus said, looking away. ‘The slurchers…I knew at the time.’

‘Are you scared? With like, with Albion and everything? A lot of fae are scared, Augus. I talk to them, you know. Now that I’m paying for booze, ha. But there’s a lot of scared fae out there. They don’t know what to think about Gwyn, they know the Seelie military is really fucking strong.’

‘I am,’ Augus admitted.

‘Yeah,’ Ash said, his voice rough. ‘Gulvi’s the only one who doesn’t seem scared at all. She’s… she loves this kind of shit. She gets off on it. She just thums with life and so much more, she eats it up, you know?’

‘She has the heartsong for it,’ Augus observed.

Ash smiled. ‘Sure does. It’s good sometimes. She takes my mind off things.’

‘Did you know you were sick?’ Augus said, not ready to leave the subject just yet.

Ash’s face twisted. ‘Augus, I…I mean I told you that I was hunting more, now. I have to. I can’t…I
can’t help it. I have to.’

‘Can’t you compensate with sex? As you usually do?’

Ash’s laughter was bleak, and he shifted his position so that he was sitting properly, feet on the floor and his hand raking through his hair, self-soothing without thinking about it. Augus got up quickly and sat on the long lounge chair next to Ash, placing a careful hand on his back. It had been so long since they’d talked about anything.

‘Augus,’ Ash said, drawing the words up from some dark, raw place. ‘Augus, I haven’t been able to fuck humans for a while. I mean a while. I got…I got too aggressive. I don’t- I don’t trust myself.’

Augus’ hand stilled on Ash’s back, and he stared blankly down at the balcony floor for some seconds. A cold, night breeze wrapped around them both, chilling their skin where water from their scalp had dripped. Ash’s breathing was shallow, his glamour not nearly as engaging as it normally was.

‘Ash, did you hurt one of them?’

‘No,’ Ash said quickly. ‘Fuck, I don’t know. I don’t think so. It was close. It was a close call. It just got too close there, for a second. It was like I didn’t know myself. I think- I think if humans could arrest me, I think I could’ve been…I think I could’ve been arrested. Charged with something.’

‘Something?’ Augus said, mouth going dry.

‘Like…assault,’ Ash said, his voice roughening even as it went quieter still. ‘Maybe. I don’t know. I grabbed her, my glamour was too strong, too hungry, I was- it was like I was hunting, but for real. And I grabbed her pretty hard, sort of. I- She screamed and I realised I was…and I let her go like straight away but I must’ve- I didn’t break anything, but that would’ve been…Fuck, Augus, if I had seen some idiot doing that to someone I would’ve fucking decked them for it. I would’ve taken them out. And there was me, you know – me – and I was the one who…’

Ash laughed a broken sound and his head bowed. Augus rubbed slow circles into his back, his lips pursing.

‘I don’t know myself anymore, man,’ Ash said. ‘They say I’m a tiny amount of sick. A tiny amount. So I don’t even know if it’s like that or if I’m just…what if it’s me?’

‘It’s not you.’

‘But how would you even know?’ Ash said, turning and looking at him, mouth taut, brow furrowed. ‘How would you even know? You came back and I’m happy about that, but it’s like you’re never really here. And I just can’t stop thinking about everything you went through when I couldn’t help you. When the Nightingale had you. There, see?’

Augus had tensed automatically. He couldn’t stand to hear the name spoken aloud. He looked down at the hand that Ash placed on his knee.

‘I can’t stop thinking about it,’ Ash said again. ‘The thing is, Augus, the Nightingale told me like-Like, imagine this. There’s me, finally realising you’re not just travelling to trade herbs and shit. You know, it’s been a few months, I’m really fucking worried. I ask around – no one’s seen you. So I go to the Unseelie Court. Like, you know, me – of all people – and there I am at the Unseelie Court. Waiting in the Raven Prince’s throne room. And imagine like this tall, elegant man comes
up to me. This like, pale, aristocratic, birdlike man – the Nightingale – comes up to me, and he consoles me about it. He takes me aside and says I look sad, and he tells me it’s going to be okay. That it’s going to be okay.’

Augus stared at him, and Ash shook his head rapidly. ‘The Raven Prince didn’t want to see me and he only did because like, he knew I was related to you. But he wasn’t looking for you. He didn’t care. And it was the Nightingale who saw me out, telling me to trust in time, to trust that you’d come back soon. He told me that. He told me that and then he- he probably went back down to the underworlds where you were- where he was- and he told me it was okay and I believed him.’

Ash’s voice choked off into nothing and his shoulders shuddered violently.

‘I’m here now,’ Augus said quietly.

‘You’re not really,’ Ash said, his voice thick, wet. ‘You’re not, Augus. Maybe I need you, okay? And I’m trying not to be that guy. I’m really trying to- Because after everything you’ve been through, the last thing you need is your stupid brother like- I don’t even know who I am anymore and I know I make a mess of like, everything, but I never thought I’d be the kind of asshole I used to fucking rip down in bars and pubs when I came across them. I don’t know what’s happening to me. Gulvi says it could be my waterhorse instincts but it can’t be. It just can’t.’

Augus looked around the balcony at the greenery and thought quickly, his chest aching. He couldn’t afford to feel the twist of hurt and more inside of himself. Ash needed him to be more than that, right now.

‘How do you feel when you make the plants? Do you feel more like hunting? Or do you feel calmer?’

‘Calmer,’ Ash said, voice sure, even as it still cracked around the weight of his own feelings. ‘I do feel calmer.’

‘And if it was your waterhorse instincts coming to the surface?’ Augus said.

‘After three thousand years?’ Ash exclaimed on a sob. ‘Fucking no, Augus. I only started hunting more after those- after those things lived inside of me.’

‘Then you have your answer,’ Augus said quietly, not moving his hand away from Ash’s back. ‘There may be other things playing into this, but I think you can be certain – with the timeline you’ve presented to me – that at least some of this is, in part, the underworld poisoning.’

Ash turned into him, and Augus opened his arms as Ash’s head tucked into his shoulder and his shoulders shook with weak sobs. Ash felt like someone who was tired of crying. And Augus squeezed his eyes shut and clapsed Ash’s shoulders.

‘What do you need?’ Augus said, and Ash gripped Augus so hard that Augus was reminded that Ash was Inner Court too. It was a miracle he hadn’t broken that human’s arm. Or…had he? Ash lied far more frequently now than he used to.

‘I’m a mess,’ Ash said into his shoulder. ‘I don’t even know. I’m not made for all this high political bullshit. I’m not made for any of it, Augus. I’m just some dude, you know? Just some guy. I’ve been waiting for things to go back to normal ever since you went missing.’

‘Things will not return to the way they were,’ Augus said, grasping Ash’s shoulders and pushing him back so he could look into red-rimmed eyes. ‘They just can’t, Ash. You can’t go back. All those philosophy books, surely the miserable humans know that too?’
‘Fuck off,’ Ash muttered, wiping at his nose with the back of his hand. Augus smiled, wiping tears of Ash’s cheeks and pulling good-naturedly at his hair. ‘I don’t know if I want to go forward. It all looks pretty fucking awful. I’ve been…I used to- I mean I get depressed? Not often. Just sometimes. When it hits, it hits really hard. Like…but it’s worse now than it ever was. And I’m angrier. It’s all just so much more than I’m used to handling.’

Augus frowned. Ash’s heartsong would exacerbate all of those emotions, it turned everything to extremes, which was great when Ash felt genial, good-natured, compassionate…and would spiral out of control very quickly when he didn’t. He leaned forward until his forehead touched Ash’s.

‘Gulvi’s excited about it – the future,’ Ash whispered. ‘I don’t see how it’s gonna work out. I think this is it, Augus. The end of the Kingdom. And I can maybe…go live in the human world. But you can’t, and you’ll always be in danger. Always. And Gwyn, he acts like none of it bothers him, so I can’t help but wonder if like-’

‘It bothers him,’ Augus interjected.

‘Yeah,’ Ash said, reluctantly. ‘Okay. Okay. I just hate that I can’t do anything. I can’t fucking help out. I’m useless here. And if I’m not useless here, I’m hiding in the human world, where I’m a risk to everyone. There’s- It’s stupid. It’s stupid to have some kind of dumb existential crisis while there’s war and- But Jesus, Augus, what do I do?’

Ash’s face twisted and he pressed his face back into Augus’ shoulder once more. He said something so muffled that Augus couldn’t tell if he’d cried ‘I don’t want to die’ or ‘I don’t want you to die.’ Either way, it wrenched at Augus’ chest and he gathered Ash closer, looking at the desperate landscape that Ash had called to him on this balcony. The small contained ponds, the attempt Ash was making to somehow be useful to something.

What could he do? Augus closed his eyes.

‘I’ll help you,’ Augus said finally. ‘I don’t know how, but I’ll find a way. We’ll do it together, like the old days.’

It was a long time before Ash seemed well enough to draw back again, and when he did he rubbed at his eyes with the heels of his hands like he used to as a child.

‘Augus?’ Ash said. ‘What’s my heartsong?’

Augus’ lips slanted into a wry smile. Their old game, one he hadn’t been invited to be a part of for a long time. Ash didn’t know his own heartsong, and Augus would never tell him what it was.

‘Perseverance,’ Augus said, and Ash stuck his tongue out and then leaned heavily against Augus.

‘I’ll take it,’ Ash said. Augus feathered his fingers through Ash’s coarse, springy hair and looked around at the plants Ash had created and tended. They were healthy, watered, cared for. Whatever Ash was going through, there was still a nurturer within him, however stifled. He had to hope it would pull him through what he was going through now.

*

The next day, Augus didn’t see Gwyn at all. There was an uptick in activity throughout the Court, and when Augus ventured into the circles that other Unseelie fae could access, he found many fae there, could even scent a faint patina of fear in the background. Ash was right, fae were afraid. He looked at them all as he passed, but he didn’t stay there long. Many fae still thought ill towards him, still wanted him dead, and though none would kill him under the auspices of the Court itself –
where fae on fae violence was forbidden – it didn’t stop them from threatening to tear him apart, to molest him, to rain upon him years of torture and assault.

A second day passed, and still no sign of Gwyn, though the trows sometimes visited and gave Augus updates. They’d tell him that Gwyn was with his Generals one moment, visiting strategically important lands the next. Gwyn never used to get the trows to update Augus on anything, at all, so getting these visits was a novelty.

Late in the afternoon, he walked towards Fenwrel’s rooms, a background noise of discomfort twisting all the way through him. He realised that he’d never really visited Fenwrel’s rooms. He’d walked past a couple of times when she’d first visited, and he knew where she lived within the Court, but now he was going with purpose, and he wasn’t sure if he was making the right decision.

Plain wooden doors greeted him. He knocked quickly, sharply, and waited, clasping his hands behind his back. He wore more casual clothes than usual; long black pants that were form fitting and smart, but a more comfortable material than usual. His boots came to just under his knee and were black and buttery soft. His dove grey shirt was long-sleeved, buttoned, but had no collar. He’d left his rapier back in his and Gwyn’s room.

The door opened, Fenwrel pulling the double doors open herself. She looked surprised to see him, and then her face brightened into something that could have been warmth, friendliness. Augus wasn’t certain. He took in details at once – Aleutia sitting at a table behind Fenwrel, in the process of sipping tea, her cup raised halfway to her mouth. Judging from the platter of grains, small seed cakes and more on the table, and the small saucers with half-finished food upon them, they’d been talking for some time. Fenwrel wore a white sari, a dark red choli, both embroidered with gold thread. The colours suited her, but beyond that, Augus was already filtering out every other detail for the one that mattered most.

‘I see you have company,’ Augus said. ‘I’ll come back at a later time. Is there a better-’

‘Don’t be ridiculous,’ Fenwrel said. ‘Do come in, please. Share some tea with us.’

He walked into the room, his back prickling to have Fenwrel behind him, even though she was only closing the doors. Once that was done, she walked past him briskly and pulled out a chair at the four seater table for him to sit at. He walked over, looking around the room. It was an open plan guest-room, but in the time Fenwrel had stayed with them, she’d made it her own. Bouquets of bright flowers the colour of flames were held in elegant vases around the place. There was a woven tapestry by Fenwrel’s four-posted bed, depicting a battle between Mages. Augus didn’t recognise the scene, but he knew the School of the Staff had its own rich mythology, its own stories.

He looked at the cup of tea that Fenwrel set before him, and then between Aleutia and Fenwrel.

‘Truly, if I’m imposing, I-’

‘Nope,’ Aleutia said. ‘Actually we were gonna come see you in a bit anyway. So this works out nicely, doesn’t it Fenwrel?’

‘Mm,’ Fenwrel said, smiling secretively behind the rim of her teacup, before taking a sip.

‘Also,’ Aleutia said, breaking off a piece of seed cake between her fingers and nibbling on it, nose twitching. ‘You need to decide what you’re going to do about Julvia’s treatments. I haven’t come to you before now, but with you ambling off this mortal coil and all that, you’ve missed some time. I’ve stretched out what you made, but you’re technically behind on her treatments.’
Augus frowned, lowered his own teacup onto its saucer. He’d been attacked, then unconscious, then barred from leaving a room for some time. He was behind on Julvia’s treatments. Truthfully, he hadn’t even thought about it, and a curl of disappointment bloomed. His first foray back into using herbs to heal others, and he’d failed one of the most crucial tests – keep the client in mind, keep their treatments routine.

‘Is it too late to continue the regime I’d started?’ Augus said, and Aleutia shook her head, her bushy red hair further animating the movement.

‘The sooner you get on it, the better, I’d say. It’s not too late though. And you? How are you holding up after that whole dying thing?’

‘I’ve been meaning to…talk to you about that,’ Augus said, meeting Fenwrel’s eyes quickly. ‘What- What did you both do? How did you heal us?’

‘A lot of it was fucking timing,’ Aleutia said, sighing. ‘There was a small window in which you weren’t totally gone yet, even if your body had stopped functioning. But it was a small window. If you hadn’t managed to teleport back in time, or if we’d gotten to you about five or ten minutes later, if Gwyn hadn’t put your organs back in your body…if Fenwrel hadn’t been there – you’d be dead. A lot of it was timing and luck.’

‘And the rest?’ Augus said, moving his fingers away from the scalding heat of the ceramic of the teacup. They liked their tea hotter than he did.

Fenwrel and Aleutia shared a long look. Fenwrel’s face was composed, but Aleutia’s wrinkled with something that lurked between distaste and concern. Finally, she took a hasty sip of tea and set her cup back down, leaning back in her chair. Despite living in the Court environment, her clothing was as graceless as before – many layers of earthy and red fabrics, as though she’d leapt into a pile of cloth offcuts and whatever stuck was what she fashioned her clothing with.

‘You fought us,’ Aleutia said, glancing over to Fenwrel again. ‘I’ve healed a lot of fae out in the battlefield. I know the difference between a fae that doesn’t want to fucking make it, and one that does.’

‘What?’ Augus said, staring at her. ‘If you think that I wanted to die, to leave Ash to-’

‘It’s not about what you consciously want,’ Aleutia clipped off. ‘It’s not about that. And I’m not fucking attacking you, I’m just stating what was there. If you’d had a less adept healer handling your case, they would’ve let you go. As for what we did? Well, Fenwrel shaved about fifty years off her lifespan, and I think I gave about five. I’m way more reserved about that kind of stuff; but then I’m in the habit of healing way more people.’

Augus stared at Fenwrel and then realised he was being rude, and moved his gaze so that he wasn’t looking at either of them.

‘I’m Court status again,’ Fenwrel said, her voice warm and easy and calm, compared to the abrasive way Aleutia spoke. ‘Fifty years sounds like a lot, but it was willingly given.’

‘What…manner of debt will I owe?’ Augus said, looking at neither of them, unsure how he felt about this development.

‘If I had wanted you to owe me a debt, Augus, I would have stated as much,’ Fenwrel said. ‘Now, I have been thinking. Aleutia knows of your underworld poisoning.’

‘It’s pretty fucking unmissable,’ Aleutia muttered, eating more and scratching at her furred ears...
‘Would you be willing to let Aleutia help you?’ Fenwrel continued. ‘Her assistance would be valuable, and she is willing.’

Augus hesitated. He wasn’t sure how he felt about Aleutia. Yes, she’d saved his life, but it was also evident that she had made up her mind about him and she didn’t like him. He found her caustic, sharp. But if she was willing to help him, that was a coup, wasn’t it? She was one of the best Unseelie healers, and she had saved his life. He leaned back and looked between them.

‘What would it entail?’ Augus said, and he almost expected Aleutia to jump in, but Fenwrel seemed comfortable leading the conversation.

‘We could show you,’ Fenwrel said, her voice calm. ‘While I check your meridians, Aleutia’s energy will support any flares or unforeseen results. It is something I can do on my own, but it is also something Aleutia is adept at.’

Augus looked between the two of them. He couldn’t reject the offer outright, he had no clear reason to, and he couldn’t risk compromising whatever shreds of a connection he had with Aleutia, given that she was the one who had saved Ash’s life. If it weren’t for her…

‘All right,’ Augus said.

‘You don’t have to say yes,’ Fenwrel said, head tilting, and Augus shook his head in irritation. How did she do that? His ire rose, and he clamped it down.

‘I said all right,’ he said, his voice colder. He reeled the hostility back with some difficulty. ‘I would be grateful for any further assistance.’

There, that almost sounded believable. He sensed that Fenwrel didn’t buy it.

‘We might as well give it a shot now,’ Aleutia said, and Augus nodded quickly. Best to get it out of the way. Something didn’t feel entirely right, but Aleutia had saved his life. He was a client of hers, and she wasn’t going to do him any harm. He decided to strike off all his uneasiness as paranoia, and he disregarded it as best as he could when Fenwrel placed her hand flat on the table, palm up, so that he might put his hand in hers.

‘Like before?’ he said, and Fenwrel nodded.

Her energy, at least, was careful, even subtle. He might not even notice she was doing anything. With any luck, they could both do…whatever they were going to do and he wouldn’t even sense it. He placed his hand in hers and her fingers curled very lightly, just touching his skin. Augus focused on keeping his breathing slow and even. He did not like these incursions on his personal space. It was fine if it was Ash, it was welcome if it was Gwyn, but anyone else?

Aleutia pulled her chair closer and stretched her hand out, touching the inside of Augus’ wrist. He wanted to bare his teeth at her. He was having a ridiculous response. They were a mouse-maiden and rat-maiden together. He was Inner Court, this would be fine.

The energy that moved into his hand from Fenwrel was barely noticeable, and very gentle. She had a careful touch. It was nothing like Fluri’s heavier energy that bowled through someone. Had Fenwrel learned to be more measured because of her children? Or was that simply her nature?

‘This might feel odd,’ Fenwrel said softly.
Augus opened his mouth, a quip half-formed, when he was rocked with a sickening swoop of nausea. He pitched forwards, heard a rushing sound in his ears, and then there was something else – someone else there. Not Fenwrel’s energy but Aleutia’s, and he knew this, he knew all about what it was like to have foreign, alien energies inside of him.

Breath strangling, a heavy rush of water flowing past his ears, a deafening waterfall of sound. The room greyed away. He was locked within his fear as easily as the Nightingale had locked slurchers and more within his flesh. He couldn’t protest, couldn’t move. It was easier to leave. To leave.

The world greyed away completely and he fell into fog.

Muted sounds. A sense of weight once more. Textures filtered in slowly. Fingertips on his shoulder and a woman’s voice that sounded nothing like the Nightingale. But the voice couldn’t come through the muffled sound of the waterfall, which meant that Augus could hear again.

He blinked, dazed, and details gained clarity. The heavy, nauseating thump of his heart in his chest. His pulse points jangling out of sync. A mouse-maiden – Fenwrel – and otherwise he was alone in the room. He could hear his breathing and forced it under something that looked like control. He felt clammy with cold. The background noise receded, and he realised Fenwrel was speaking to him.

‘Augus? Do you know where you are?’

Augus looked around under his lashes and then nodded. ‘The Unseelie Court.’

His voice was hoarse, and he cleared his throat.

‘Good. I want you to have some of your tea.’ She pushed the cup closer to him, and he saw a small pool of it on the table. Had he spilled it? He couldn’t remember. ‘It’s cooled from before, I hope you don’t mind.’

‘I prefer it that way,’ Augus said, curling his fingers around the lukewarm ceramic and blinking at the cup. This was happening more often than it used to. That Aleutia had seen it, that Fenwrel had-His lips thinned and he raised the cup to his lips, grateful that his hands weren’t shaking. The tea was pleasant, though a bit too sweet for his tastes due to the rose petals in the infusion. But it was welcome to have something else to focus on. He stared at the tea in the cup once he lowered it.

‘Has this happened before?’ Fenwrel asked, her voice matter-of-fact.

‘Where is Aleutia?’ Augus said.

Fenwrel sighed. ‘She’s left to give you some space. It’s just you and I in this room, she’s not returning. Has this happened before, Augus?’

‘Yes,’ Augus said.

‘Do you remember anything from the past when it happens?’ Fenwrel said, and Augus didn’t like the questions, but didn’t have the heart to snarl at her or anyone in this moment. He was so weary.

‘Not often,’ Augus said. ‘Usually it’s…I just become absent for a time. Gwyn’s witnessed it more than once. But that Aleutia witnessed it…I’d rather she hadn’t.’

‘She’s a healer,’ Fenwrel said. ‘And she’s concerned for you. She will not use this against you.’

Augus snorted and raised the tea to his lips again. When Fenwrel didn’t reply for some time,
Augus looked over at her and Fenwrel was watching him with that direct gaze, that undivided attention.

‘She will not use this against you,’ Fenwrel stressed. ‘Now that she’s gone, will you give me your hand again?’

‘What did you do to me?’ Augus said, an edge finding his voice, one that he was grateful for. Fenwrel closed her eyes briefly, and then she frowned.

‘Honestly, Augus, not very much at all. It’s as I suspected. The underworld poisoning has soldered itself to your meridians. I cannot remove it. It is part of you.’

‘No,’ Augus said, shaking his head slowly. ‘It is not.’

‘Augus,’ Fenwrel said, like he was a child, ‘I am telling you that all I did was see if I could shift the smallest amount of underworld poisoning from your energy meridians. Your response was immediate.’

‘It was Aleutia’s energy,’ Augus said, realising that he did, perhaps, sound childish. His heart was beating harder again, and he forced himself to drink more of the tea. It was too sweet.

‘No,’ Fenwrel said calmly. ‘It was not. Don’t misunderstand me, Aleutia’s energy didn’t help, I think it’s too alien for you at this time. I think perhaps your body has had quite enough of intrusion.’

Augus pressed two fingers to his forehead and stared at the small spill of tea on the table.

‘Give me your hand,’ Fenwrel said, holding hers out. ‘Not because I want to try what I did before, I just want to see if I can settle you a little. And ask you some questions, if that might be all right? I don’t think we can work with this energy in your system at all until you can at least talk about some of it.’

‘I don’t want to,’ Augus said, smiling ruefully.

‘What about what you’ve told Gwyn and Ash, thus far?’

Augus laughed and lowered his hand, and could tell from Fenwrel’s horrified expression that she knew just how many people he’d voluntarily opened up to about it.

‘Could we talk around it?’ Fenwrel said, eyebrows furrowing. She looked pointedly down at her hand on the table, and Augus shook his head to himself as he placed his hand in hers. Her fingers curled, tiny mouse claws resting delicately on his skin as though he were fragile. Once more, he couldn’t feel her energy, couldn’t tell if she was sending anything into him.

‘In what sense?’ Augus said.

‘Hm,’ Fenwrel said, looking aside and then looking back. ‘Let’s try…all right, yes. I don’t imagine food grows in the underworlds as it does here. What did you eat while you were there?’

‘Nothing,’ Augus said, surprised that it was an easy enough question to answer. It had nothing to do with the Nightingale directly. A small amount of tension unwound from his shoulders. He needed to relax. It occurred to him that he barely took time to self-pleasure himself anymore, with massage or caressing his body or pleasuring himself; perhaps he should change that.

‘Nothing at all?’ Fenwrel said, not sounding surprised, her tone staying even and calm.
‘…Maybe.’

‘Maybe? What does maybe mean? You maybe ate?’

Augus shifted and his hand twitched. ‘I don’t remember.’

‘Augus, you had to have eaten something over that year, surely?’

‘Why?’ Augus said, smiling. ‘I went six months in the Seelie Court eating nothing at all, drinking nothing. Is it so implausible? I went even longer without hunting.’

‘You sound proud of that,’ Fenwrel said, her eyes narrowing.

‘Should I not be?’ Augus said. Six months without food or water, and he’d still been able to match his wits to Gwyn’s. He couldn’t match his physicality, no, but he’d done very well indeed.

‘Why though?’

‘Because I didn’t know I could survive so long without food or water.’

‘But you had a year in the underworlds, where it sounds as though you weren’t fed at all.’

‘I don’t remember,’ Augus said, tugging his hand out of Fenwrel’s grip and placing it in his lap. Memory eaters. He couldn’t talk about memory eaters, or losing his awareness, or being possessed. They were no longer talking around anything. ‘I’ve decided I don’t want to talk about this.’

‘All right,’ Fenwrel said easily, picking up her own tea and sipping at it. Augus stared at her, irritated, and his fingers curled, claws scratching hard at his own palms. Why did he let her do this?

‘Why do you want to know, hm? Did you know that there’s another traitor in this Court? Is it you?’

‘Is it?’ Fenwrel said, lowering the teacup. ‘Is that what you think I’m doing? I’m merely enquiring after your welfare, while you were held hostage. Because that is what happened, isn’t it? You were abducted and held hostage for a year in the underworlds, and if you were fed, it was likely under questionable circumstances.’

Augus had nothing to say. He stared at her, and then leaned back in his chair, pretending at a relaxation that he didn’t feel. He knew that Fenwrel wouldn’t believe it, but he needed the gesture for himself. More time passed, and Fenwrel tilted her head, one of her mouse ears twitching.

‘Do you ever wonder why the Nightingale targeted you?’

‘Wouldn’t anyone?’ Augus said.

‘Did he ever tell you?’

‘He told me a lot of things,’ Augus said, looking away. ‘They all sounded rather believable, and I knew from the outset not to trust any of them.’

‘Did you ever come to believe him anyway?’

‘I don’t want to talk about this,’ Augus said, looking at a vase filled with roses that changed colour very slowly. They had been yellow before, and were now orange and red, shifting to something on the pink spectrum.

‘Fluri told me that you were rising to prominence within the Unseelie Court. You had a reputation.
She told me that the Raven Prince himself had sought you out not for your skills, but simply for your *company.*

Augus’ teeth grit together, his hands clenched, the skin of his palms splitting under his claws. ‘I said *stop!*’

He froze. He hadn’t meant the compulsion. He hadn’t intended it at all. And she’d told him that if he ever compelled her again, she would- and he *knew* what that felt like now and there was no way that he could cope with compulsions today. There wasn’t. He could hear his breathing again and felt a fragmented wash of agitation, frustration, fear.

‘All right,’ Fenwrel said, after a long moment. ‘I apologise.’

‘Do not *think* to compel me again,’ Augus rasped, unable to help himself.

‘I wasn’t planning on it.’

Augus glared at her, unclenching his hands with difficulty. ‘Do you think I don’t know what you’re doing? If you truly mean well, then it’s in your best interests – everyone’s best interests – to subdue and stabilise the waterhorse. To make him even-tempered, even-*minded* once more. I know how you all think of me. The one that acts irrationally when it matters most. Who attacked Albion. Who massacred Gwyn’s family. Who took over the Unseelie Court and destroyed what he could. I’m aware, yes?’

‘Good,’ Fenwrel said, pressing both of her hands flat to the table and not looking away, ‘because that’s something you should be aware of. What you also need to be aware of is that I care about you. As does Gwyn. And Ash.’

‘Ash *adores* me,’ Augus drawled. ‘Gwyn feels emotions so intensely he can hardly act rationally regarding them, and you? I don’t know what you feel. But care? You hardly know me. All you are acting upon is the need to understand the person who was indirectly responsible for your grandmother being killed. You? You are simply seeking acquittal. Perhaps, you reason, if you can *fix* me, no one else need be killed that you actually care for.’

Fenwrel leaned against the back of her chair, and far from becoming defensive or even hostile as he half-expected, she smiled, the expression free of malice. ‘Is that what you think?’

‘Yes,’ Augus said.

‘It’s insightful,’ Fenwrel said, ‘and, yes, it’s partly true. I was fascinated with you long before I met you. I didn’t understand how Fluri could talk about you with such obvious affection, while the rest of the fae world wanted you dead. But I’ve met you now, and here’s what I know about you – you’re not the only one capable of insight, after all.

‘I think you’re a wounded, damaged creature. I think you were groomed by the Raven Prince to be a pet in the Court, because you’re quite lovely to look at, and the Raven Prince came to see the sharp mind behind that and appreciated you all the more. I think the Nightingale was covetous and *jealous,* since he has always been a collector of fine things – all the more to *break* them – and I think it’s telling that the Unseelie Court never looked for you while you were gone. I think you were someone who was kind towards the people who you thought deserved your kindness – enough that you considered working as a healer, which Aleutia has told me you’ve said. And I think you were someone who was sharp, insightful, fussy, proud and *content.* I think you found something that many fae still search for.
‘Now? Now I think you are suffering. You are no longer proud of yourself. The only thing you
have ever admitted any measure of pride towards – around me – is your ability to not eat and drink
for a long time while captive. Are you not proud of becoming King when no one has figured out
how? No. And are you not proud of the common work you are doing? The assistance you offer to
Gwyn and the others when you are struggling? No.’

Fenwrel stopped talking and Augus stared at her, unable to speak for several long seconds due to
mass of fury piqued within. Finally, he managed to sum up some sort of response.

‘I loathe you,’ Augus whispered.

‘I’m sorry, Augus,’ Fenwrel said, her expression twisting with a sympathy that Augus wanted to rip
off her face. He could, too. He was Inner Court, she was Court, he could.

‘I am sorry. I know you don’t want to hear any of this.’

‘Then why are you-’

‘I like you,’ Fenwrel said, smiling again, her eyes sad. ‘That’s why. And because I’m Unseelie, and
do you know what I feed on? Mistakes, misdirection, people moving the wrong way. And since
I’ve met you, I’ve had more than enough to feed on, and I find that discomfiting. I work with
energy meridians; setting them right again precisely because I innately feed upon those lives that
have gone awry. I know where to look. But, mostly, Augus, it’s because I like you. I think you are
strong-willed and self-possessed, and I think you are amusing and witty and wry. And far more
sensitive than you’d like other people to know.’

Augus vaguely recalled that he’d only come to visit her to ask how she’d healed him, and now this.
Fenwrel stood and shrugged, pushing in her chair, running a palm over her chignon as though
checking that every hair was still in place.

‘This is why I want to help you,’ Fenwrel said. ‘We could be friends. And I suspect you’ve never
had many friends. You and Gwyn – you are like two sides of a coin. I don’t think he sees it,
because you have positioned yourself in a role with him where he doesn’t know how to look –
though I think he looks far more now, since you died.’

‘Are you not doing the same?’ Augus said, standing, feeling weak and bled out and like she had
given him far too much to think about. ‘Are you not positioning yourself ‘just so,’ with me, so I do
not look closer? Do not scry into your vulnerabilities?’

‘Yes, I am,’ Fenwrel said, smiling as though Augus had said something particularly clever. ‘But
that’s because I have lived a lot of experiences in my life, and I am far more healed and whole than
you. I think you are the priority of the two of us. I am not unlike you, Augus. I like my privacy. But
also, Augus, I truly think you could simply do with some attention that does not come as loaded as
it does with Ash and Gwyn.’

‘You can’t possibly want me to become more ‘myself,’’ Augus said, tiredly.

‘No?’ Fenwrel said, stepping closer like she wanted to embrace him. He stepped back quickly, and
she raised her hands in a gesture of surrender. ‘I have told you what I want. Now, I think you
should leave. You’ve had quite enough of me for one day. Perhaps you could do something that
soothes you, given the unrest that has been leaving the Unseelie Court fraught of late.’

Augus nodded, his hand resting on the back of the chair. He looked around her rooms again and
walked away, not thinking to utter a farewell. When he closed the door behind him and faced the
corridor, he stood still for several long minutes. He only started moving when it occurred to him
that Fenwrel might leave her rooms and see him standing there like a fool, and that he’d humiliated himself quite enough for one day.

* 

For all that Fenwrel aggravated him, he saw the wisdom in doing something that soothed him. After spending time in Ash’s small balcony garden, he decided it was time to get back out into nature and look for the plants, roots and fungi that would assist Julvia.

He took his herbal kit where it rested in the room adjoining the main bedroom that he and Gwyn now shared. He looked through it closely, turning over Fenwrel’s words and hating that he did see wisdom in them. The worst part about assisting others was that he recognised good advice when he saw it, he just hated the form it came in.

The door to the room opened and Gwyn came in with a force clinging to him. He’d been with his Generals then, his glamour was still rattling around him, confident and authoritative. That very energy that Augus loved taming, making his own. He looked up from his herbal kit as Gwyn’s face brightened to see him. It was a balm that eased the tension in Augus’ body.

‘So, are we at war?’ Augus said.

‘Yes,’ Gwyn said lightly, as though it didn’t bother him at all. And, likely, it didn’t as much as it would others. Gwyn seemed to thrive off battle, even his eyes looked brighter. ‘Though not for a few weeks, I expect.’ He stood nearby as Augus started putting everything back into his herbal kit. ‘Where are you going?’

‘To find more herbs for Julvia’s treatment,’ Augus said, snapping the kit closed. ‘Though I must admit I’m not looking forward to using that invisibility again. If I even can.’

‘Then don’t go,’ Gwyn said, frowning at the herbal kit.

‘It’s important,’ Augus said, picking up the kit. When he stepped towards the door, Gwyn moved to block him. Augus stared at him, anger prickling through his body.

‘Augus,’ Gwyn said, huffing in a way that sounded just condescending enough that Augus had to resist the urge to slap him, ‘Aleutia has this well in hand.’

‘Aleutia uses different techniques to me, and she acknowledged that I might be able to help.’

‘Help?’ Gwyn said. ‘Augus, I know that you- Do you really think – after all you’ve experienced – you should be wasting your time on these petty distractions?’

All the repressed rage that had been coursing through Augus throughout the day warmed his blood, and he glared at Gwyn. Gwyn’s eyes widened, his pupils dilated. He stepped backwards and Augus stepped forwards, unable to even believe-

‘Excuse me?’ Augus snarled.

‘Julvia is fine in the care of Aleutia,’ Gwyn said, despite the fact that he was clearly nervous. ‘You’re not a trained healer, what can you do? You maintain you have no guilt over your actions that led to Julvia’s state, so why waste your time with these matters?’

Augus stared at him, too angry – for several seconds – to know how to react. Gwyn seemed to realise he’d made a misstep. He opened his mouth and Augus knew there would be apologies and he found he wasn’t interested, when it was obvious that Gwyn really had no idea how important
the herbal work was to him. Augus held up a hand to silence him, and Gwyn was shaking his head, looking horrified.

‘Augus, I only meant that- I only-’

‘Oh no,’ Augus said, his voice almost warm, walking towards him and cornering him against the bed. ‘Oh no, Gwyn. Remember how I said I would be more forthcoming with punishments should you lose your way?’

Gwyn swallowed, stared at him, the confident glamour of before shifting, almost crackling around them. Augus’ gripped the herbal kit so tightly that his fingers ached.

‘You don’t take anything I do seriously, do you?’ Augus said, thinking back, realising it was true. ‘My skill with the rapier, which you mock. My healing ability. Any of it. Gwyn, I was-’ How could they have the bond that they did, and Gwyn still not understand? ‘Gwyn, you treat me like a pet that you don’t want to let out of a kennel or stable. You don’t come to me for advice. I understand little of what is happening here. I don’t know what the Red Path Strategy is. Do you not understand that I was a trusted member of the Raven Prince’s Inner Court once? I was his diplomat. There were contingents of fae who asked for me, over him.’

Gwyn’s eyebrows rose in surprise and Augus felt a line of dismay creep in alongside his anger, his need to punish. He found himself wanting the control and precision of a scene. Not some impromptu sex that would feel good, provide release. He licked his lips. Fenwrel had said he had no pride in himself, but he was still proud of his ability to manage a scene when he created the time and space for one.

‘You don’t know me very well at all, do you?’ he said. ‘I think you should come to me two days from now, in the evening – clear your schedule for the entire night, and the day after. You know why.’

‘Augus, I can’t. You know very well that-’

‘It’s not optional,’ Augus said quietly. ‘Or are you only capable of clearing your schedule when I’m half-dead? Now, you told me that we were to go on living only a few days ago. So we shall do just that. Meet me at ten in the evening, Gwyn, two days hence. I think...in my old rooms. I think there I shall have the equipment necessary to teach you the folly of underestimating me.’

Gwyn said nothing, and Augus was just about to lash out with claws, find pressure points, make him respond when Gwyn – wide-eyed, delicious Gwyn – nodded quickly.

‘Yes?’ Augus said, smiling cruelly. ‘Wonderful. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have some important work to do. You’re not the only one with responsibilities, sweetness.’

Augus left the room and breathed more easily as he walked towards the night gardens. His heartsong wasn’t dominance anymore, but he still found it calmed him to exercise self-mastery and mastery over others, and it had been too long since he’d last put Gwyn through his paces.

Chapter End Notes

In our next chapter, ‘Heat:’
‘The tinctures will cause you no permanent harm,’ Augus said, after a long beat. ‘Nor will the ginger. Everything that happens in this room will not leave this room with you.’

That wasn’t the reassurance that Gwyn wanted it to be. Gwyn heard a lot of subtext in those responses, and he lowered his head carefully to the table, hissing as his body seemed to tune like a livewire.

‘A sensitising agent,’ Gwyn said, his voice humming through him.

‘Yes,’ Augus said. ‘One of them.’

‘And the other?’

‘You’ll see, soon enough. That one you won’t feel the effects of until later.’

‘That’s not very comforting,’ Gwyn said against the wood of the table.

‘It’s not supposed to be,’ Augus said, walking over to Gwyn’s table. ‘This isn’t about your comfort.’
*evil laughs*


Thanks to all who are reading, and special love going out to the folks who interact via leaving kudos, commenting, bookmarking (if it's something you want to revisit in the future!), chatting on Tumblr, and so on. *waves*

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

\[ \text{Gwyn} \]

* * *

There were very few rules. He was even allowed to speak: ‘As much as I can stand it, anyway.’ Augus had declared. But Gwyn had soon realised that rules were unnecessary. This felt too much like being roped to a cross many months ago, or being restrained in Augus’ old lake home, hundreds of years previously.

Currently, Gwyn was left to stew in his own frantic thoughts. He was in a room lit only by candlelight, and mostly dark. Before him was a long, thin table upon which sat four tall glass vials of liquid. One murky green, another translucent orange, one pearlescent white at the top and a smoky black at the bottom, and another a brilliant green of the delicate colour that might be found on new leaves. Behind that table, a comfortable chair intended for Augus.

Gwyn didn’t get the luxury of sitting. He was bent over a dark, wooden table that he’d guessed was made for whatever…purposes Augus had in mind. It was lower than normal, and very narrow, so that he could be bent over it and his arms roped to the two legs in front, and his legs to the legs in back. Open and naked and splayed. Chilled from a fine layer of sweat.

He’d decided to be very obedient. He’d angered Augus, and it was with the same thing he frequently seemed to overlook. He did underestimate Augus. Not as a villain, no. If anything, he’d overestimated Augus as a villain. But in almost all other ways, he didn’t pay attention. When he did pay attention, he dismissed, belittled or ignored. Augus had a right to his anger, so when Gwyn had turned up meekly in front of his door, two days later, he’d already decided to be – in a word – good.

Augus had asked him to strip, and Gwyn had. He’d asked him to bend over the table, a cruel, amused light in his eyes, and Gwyn had. All the while, Gwyn looked around the room, trying to guess at what the evening might have in store for him. It was obvious that the vials would be involved. And there was a cane wicker basket sitting atop an empty shelving unit, but Gwyn couldn’t see into it. He’d even moved his arms where Augus wanted them, letting them be lashed with thick, rough rope to the table legs. Spreading his legs had been harder. Then again, he’d almost expected Augus to fuck him straight away. If anything, Augus kept his touches minimal, and Gwyn was left with gooseflesh, knowing his heart was racing even before Augus placed a
careful palm between his shoulder blades and checked for himself.

The position into which he was roped was awkward. Augus had made him bend his right knee until he could practically rope Gwyn’s ankle to the underside of his buttock. It meant he had less leverage than before. He could only brace himself on one leg. He’d forgotten Augus’ predilection for bondage like this. It had been a long time since Augus had employed much creativity with what he was doing.

His arms were bound higher up on the table legs. If he wanted to, he could brace his wrists and elbows against the ropes and actually get his shoulders off the table. He’d tested it as soon as Augus left the room. But it created terrible strain in his injured shoulder, and the rope chafed at his skin. It was easier just to lay with his head half on the table, facing the side, the wood digging into his ear, looking into a dimly lit room, feeling the thud of his heart magnified against the table itself.

Augus had left soon after, not saying a word about when he’d return. Gwyn remembered this too. Once, a very long time ago, Gwyn had been tied in an even more precarious position that had quickly turned painful, and Augus hadn’t come back until Gwyn had begged him to. This time the position wasn’t immediately painful, and certainly not unbearable even when the leg bent behind him and roped into position began to ache. But he was on display, and alone, and he had no idea what to expect.

He could hear his breathing. Feel the breath moving in and out of his nostrils. Whatever was in the vials had different odours to them, green and astringent, or thick and murky and almost rancid. He stared at them, thinking that Augus would know what was in every single one of those vials, and that was the point. That Gwyn didn’t know, because he didn’t pay attention, because he didn’t respect Augus’ knowledge.

Gwyn couldn’t even clench his fists. Augus had roped individual fingers against the table leg. His hands were forced into a splayed position. He could grip the table leg, but that was it. Gwyn wondered if it was to curtail his light, in case he was pushed so far that it spilled.

Life had been hectic, but he liked it that way. He liked placing units of soldiers into position to protect strategically important Unseelie locations. He enjoyed discussing business with his Generals, or dealing with difficult situations. He didn’t like how heavily fate was weighed against him, and yet on another level, it was mildly freeing. Everyone expected to lose, no one really expected the Kingdom to survive; it meant people were more willing to take chances, it just meant he had to make sure those chances weren’t too reckless, or too stupid.

Gulvi’s Red Path strategy was a simple one. Before he’d accepted the post of Unseelie King, he’d consulted with her and given her the names of some of the most important Seelie folk – the big financial backers of the Seelie Court – who were often ignored during times of warfare. But the Seelie needed wealth to feed their huge numbers, to make sure they could afford healers, defensive and offensive magic, to pay their weapons manufacturers, to ensure they purchased the best stock and farmland and armour year after year. Crielle and Lludd had spent their entire lives wining and dining some of the most secretive and hidden creators of wealth on behalf of the Oak King, and Gwyn had no problems scratching them off the map and destroying their legacies.

Nor, as it turned out, did Gulvi.

He thought perhaps he should feel worse about it, guilty – they were people from his childhood. But they were also people who he’d stared at while wearing Lludd’s bruises underneath his clothing. They prattled on about interest rates and fae bankers and investors while Crielle placed inedible items or poisons into his food and expected him to force it down, knowing very well indeed that he would spend the next twelve hours bleeding from one orifice or another.
So he didn’t feel as guilty as he’d expected.

It was more complex scouting the trusted members of Albion’s underwater armies, and adding them to the hit list, since so many of them lived in the sea. Gwyn had no trusted sea-inhabiting fae on his side. He had acquaintances, yes, but allies? He knew no underwater fae well enough to trust them to pull off something like this.

Gwyn turned his head and clasped the table legs. His palms were already sweaty. The wood of the table was already damp. He wasn’t sure he even felt like a scene. He wasn’t ramped up with anything other than anxiety. He’d done the wrong thing. He was always doing the wrong thing. Perhaps if he just… went along with whatever Augus had in mind, it would all be over and done with soon enough and he could- he could… go back to treating Augus exactly the same way?

The thump was louder than he expected, when he lifted his head and dropped it to the table. More time passed, and Gwyn strained at the ties again, just to see how much give he had against the tight rope. He wasn’t relaxing at all. The bent leg was aching, and he strained muscles against the rope just to give other muscles a break. The room was warmer than usual. Candles giving off more heat than magelight or werelight, and there were no windows to give ventilation. He forced himself to take a deep breath. He’d been tortured in rooms like this before.

When Augus opened the door, Gwyn was forcing himself to concentrate on keeping his breathing slow and steady. His nostrils flared at the scent of Augus, his eyes opened, his head lifted off the table. He opened his mouth to say Augus’ name, and then decided not to.

Augus walked around the table without saying anything. He came to stand in front of the other table, behind the four vials. There was a hard, glittering light in his eyes, in the tight corners of his mouth. Gwyn held back the urge to apologise, but he could feel his heart beating harder again.

‘I made each one of these myself,’ Augus said quietly, looking down at the vials. ‘They all do something different. If you actually had any respect for my ability with herbs, perhaps I’d feel like you’d earned the right to know what they do, before you pick one to ingest. But since you don’t, I think you’ll just have to choose from your position of ignorance, don’t you? So, choose one please.’

Gwyn nodded, staring at the liquids. But he couldn’t choose. A sudden stab of memory. Crielle inviting Gwyn into her poisons laboratory and-

‘Augus,’ Gwyn said carefully, ‘since you know so very much about… about these things, why don’t you choose for me?’

Augus smirked and his lips lifted to reveal teeth in something that wasn’t quite a smile.

‘Very clever,’ Augus said, his voice measured. He pushed the translucent orange vial forwards and Gwyn stared at it, wondering what it would do. He was surprised, then, when Augus pushed the pearlescent white and black one forwards as well. He looked at Gwyn, considering, and Gwyn stared at the vials, waiting for Augus to narrow his choice.

Instead, Augus lifted them both and brought them over. Gwyn’s wrists shifted against the ropes.

‘But you said I only had to pick one.’

‘Yes,’ Augus said, ‘I didn’t say a thing about how many I could choose.’
Gwyn stared up at Augus in something like horror, because he’d have no idea what he’d be drinking, and he didn’t think Augus would give him something that would…cause too much pain. Did he?

A hand in his hair, and Gwyn’s head ducked. He could hear his breathing, saw the glint of herbal tinctures in the corner of his eye and turned away from them.

‘I like you like this,’ Augus said, petting Gwyn’s scalp softly. ‘Afraid. You know I’m going to work you hard, this evening, don’t you?’

Gwyn nodded, and Augus’ fingers slowly tightened until he could tilt Gwyn’s head backwards. Until Gwyn had to actually brace against the ropes and push himself up so that his shoulders lifted off the table.

‘Good,’ Augus said, lifting the first vial of clear orange fluid to his lips. ‘Drink for me, Gwyn. Imagine it’s my spill, if it makes it easier for you.’

Gwyn shivered, but didn’t open his mouth to the lip of cool glass that rested against his mouth. Augus’ eyes narrowed into a scowl of disapproval, the fingers tightened, and Gwyn closed his eyes to shut that out and opened his mouth.

A small amount of liquid at first, and Gwyn didn’t splutter, swallowed obediently. Augus drew the vial back and watched him, and Gwyn knew that only because he could feel Augus’ gaze. He refused to open his eyes. The liquid itself was strange. It didn’t seem to taste of anything, but it prickled down his throat. He imagined he could still feel it – minute pinpricks of sensation in his gut. But then it fizzled away to nothing and disappeared.

‘All right,’ Augus said, as though satisfied with something, the vial raising to Gwyn’s mouth again. ‘The rest now. Quickly, if you please.’

Augus didn’t give him much of a choice, tilting the vial faster than he truly wanted to swallow, resulting in him not being able to swallow fast enough. He went to splutter, and in a smooth movement, Augus slid the back of the hand holding the vial against Gwyn’s mouth.

‘All of it,’ Augus said, and Gwyn nodded, repressing the coughs, swallowing. ‘Now, the rest.’

Anticipation was skittering through Gwyn’s veins. The prickling in his throat and mouth, in his stomach, had turned into a low-key fizzing sensation that seemed to stretch underneath his skin. He stared at Augus, wanting to know what was happening, what it would do, but instead he just watched. The room felt more sweltering, his skin felt clammer than before. Augus watched him, even leaned close to stare at his pupils, and then he nodded once and took up the second vial.

The fluid in that one looked repulsive, and Gwyn’s lips thinned automatically. Augus’ smile was cruel when he lifted the vial to Gwyn’s lips, and he tipped it, and Gwyn got a whiff of the tincture inside and jerked his head away.

‘Come on, Gwyn,’ Augus said, faintly condescending, lightly cajoling. ‘I thought you were trying to appease me. Here you are just…making things harder on yourself.’

‘It’s rancid.’

‘How on earth could you possibly know that?’ Augus said, dipping his finger into the liquid and raising it to his tongue, licking it off and making a show of it. ‘Doesn’t taste rancid to me.’

Augus pushed the vial to Gwyn’s lips again, and slid fingers into his hair in the imitation of a
caress, before he tilted Gwyn’s head back once more. His eyes held a lazy cruelty, one that turned that fizzing sensation inside of him into sparks and a prickling layer of tension through his body. He blinked rapidly at that gaze and then tried to look at nothing at all when he struggled to take and swallow the first sip of tincture that tasted of rot and decay.

‘All of it,’ Augus said, his voice hardening. But Augus didn’t tip this vial as quickly, and Gwyn slurped at the thick, disgusting liquid until it changed in texture, like liquid charcoal, oddly dry and cloying in his mouth. He choked off, unable to stop himself from coughing, though he didn’t spit any out. He licked at the texture in his mouth and Augus waited for a few seconds, and then raised the vial back to his lips. ‘The rest.’

When Gwyn was finished, Augus gave an insincere pat to the top of his head and took the empty vials away, walking towards the edge of the room and settling them on the floor. He then took the other two, still full, and placed them on the ground as well. After that, he went to the cane wicker basket and drew it down, looking inside of it.

The table was becoming more uncomfortable. The ropes were chafing at his skin and he couldn’t tune it out as easily. His senses sharpened, and he closed his eyes to shut out visual stimulus even as his skin felt like feathers were stroking over it, or like sand was falling upon his body. He shook his head and felt dizzy, blinking his eyes open and staring fixedly ahead, catching the way Augus was watching him closely in the corner of his vision.

He thought Augus would say something, but instead he turned his head back down to the basket, pulling out a knife and something that looked like a gnarled, woody root. He thought he’d seen it in the kitchens before. In all kitchens, not just those of the trows.

‘Do you know what this is?’ Augus said, holding it up, turning it near the flame of a candle, so that Gwyn could see it better.

‘I…no,’ Gwyn said, feeling the exhale of his breath through his mouth more acutely than normal, hearing his own words vibrate through his skin. He blinked rapidly and tugged absently at the bonds around his wrists, and then winced at the rope. His skin was surely scraped raw, for him to suddenly be so sensitive. Gwyn took a huge gulp of breath – searing cold and uncomfortable – and felt a deep well of panic open up inside of him. ‘What have you done to me?’

‘This is ginger,’ Augus said, not answering, and beginning to whittle the outside of the root away, exposing pale flesh beneath. ‘There’s approximately one hundred and fifty variegations of ginger in the fae world. In the human world, it’s known as Zingiber officinale, but they only use one type under the name of ginger. Though the commonly named wild ginger is often from the Asarum genus, because of similarity in taste, though not in medicinal function. In the fae realm, it diversified. We have far more of it, and cultivate more of it. It’s popular in culinary dishes, and in medicine, and…other pursuits.’

Augus turned away as he shaped the ginger with the blade, bits of it flaking to the ground. Its scent was spicy, almost sweetish, but it made Gwyn’s eyes water and he blinked rapidly, turning away. One of the tinctures – the prickling one – was turning his skin so sensitive that he thought the air was sitting too heavily upon him. If the ginger already smelled so spicy, if it already pricked at the inside of his mouth, he didn’t know what it was going to be like to eat.

‘Augus…’ Gwyn said, and then couldn’t think of what to say. He was afraid, not yet in the midst of an anticipation which would carry him through the worst of the fear. He wanted to know more of what was happening to him. But when Augus looked over to him, his mouth went dry, and he shook his head wordlessly.
‘The tinctures will cause you no permanent harm,’ Augus said, after a long beat. ‘Nor will the ginger. Everything that happens in this room will not leave this room with you.’

That wasn’t the reassurance that Gwyn wanted it to be. Gwyn heard a lot of subtext in those responses, and he lowered his head carefully to the table, hissing as his body seemed to tune like a livewire.

‘A sensitising agent,’ Gwyn said, his voice humming through him.

‘Yes,’ Augus said. ‘One of them.’

‘And the other?’

‘You’ll see, soon enough. That one you won’t feel the effects of until later.’

‘That’s not very comforting,’ Gwyn said against the wood of the table.

‘It’s not supposed to be,’ Augus said, walking over to Gwyn’s table. ‘This isn’t about your comfort.’

Augus stood behind Gwyn, and when Augus’ pants brushed against Gwyn’s thigh, the curve of his ass, he gasped at the streak of sensation that flooded him. It was like Augus had struck him, and he jerked, clawing the table legs, eyes flying open. The candles seemed brighter than before, large white haloes around each of them. He didn’t like this. He’d never liked things like this. His breathing was spiralling out of control and his lungs felt colder and colder. When Augus placed the flat of his hand against Gwyn’s lower back, a firm pressure, Gwyn flinched and made an embarrassing sound.

But the weight of the hand was unrelenting, and instead of pricking at him like tiny needles, or racing through him like lightning, it anchored him, and his breathing moved away from hyperventilation into something a little calmer. Augus was giving him that. He closed his eyes with gratitude and turned his head to the side of the table, staring outwards.

‘I’ve gone easy on you since you were made underfae,’ Augus said. ‘And that was my error, because while I think you need that sometimes, I also know how much you need a harder scene, even if you are loathe to admit it. Even if you are afraid. There was a reason you came to me all those years ago, and a reason you broke before me in the Seelie Court, and there will be a reason why you’ll break for me tonight.’

Gwyn shuddered as Augus’ hand ground down into his lower back. He couldn’t think of anything to say. He didn’t want to admit it was true. He didn’t want it to be true. When a person encountered Augus in this mood, they were supposed to run in the opposite direction, weren’t they?

He didn’t know what he was expecting, but he wasn’t expecting Augus to lift his hand up from Gwyn’s back and then spread his ass cheeks. And then after that, after the prickling of air against exposed skin, he thought there would be fingers, or fucking, but what he did not expect was the cold press of something very obviously not a part of Augus’ body. And he thought of the ginger, and his eyes flew open. He stiffened.

‘Wait, Augus, you-’

‘Tch,’ Augus said, sliding the ginger in. Gwyn stared ahead, straining against the ropes, and it was ridiculous, wasn’t it? The ginger was small, it wasn’t long, not even as long as Augus’ finger. But he’d never liked foreign objects anywhere near his ass, and Augus was already walking away, walking around the table back towards the comfortable chair against the wall.
'Augus, please, take it out,' Gwyn said, as Augus sat down. And Augus only smiled at him and shook his head.

'You make such a fuss over such a small thing.' He looked at his fingernails. 'You don’t even realise what you should be making a fuss about.'

The words chilled him, and he went still, feeling the small root inside of him, locked in place, and he realised that Augus must have carved it into a shape that would hold it there.

He swallowed when he felt a sting building inside of him, where nothing should, and his eyes widened when it quickly got worse. He couldn’t stand the way Augus was watching him, like some experiment, or project, and looked down instead. But the stinging was turning into long loops of needle like sensations radiating through him, and they were skyrocketing to something very much like pain too quickly. And then suddenly it was nothing but pain, and he blew out a hard breath, his heart beat galloping.

‘Augus, something is wrong,’ Gwyn said, his voice hoarse, heavy in his lungs. ‘Augus, something–’

‘Nothing is wrong,’ Augus said calmly.

‘Augus, I tell you, something is–’

‘Everything that is meant to be happening, is happening. You just don’t respond well to pain when it’s not delivered directly by my hand.’

Gwyn yanked repeatedly at the bonds tying his wrists and forearms to the table leg, but he couldn’t get proper leverage to do much more than strain his arms. And even still, ripples of stinging and pain moved out in waves through his body. When he tried to clench against the ginger root to push it out, the sensations got worse, turned into burning low in his torso. Finally he choked on a small sound and breathed wetly against the table. He closed his eyes and thought that surely Augus didn’t mean things were supposed to feel like this. He was being flooded with sensation, and none of it good.

An unbidden yelp when he felt a finger trail down the centre of his spine. He hadn’t even realised that Augus had moved.

‘Shhh,’ Augus said, stirring those sensations ever higher, where they tipped firmly over into a level of pain that had Gwyn trying to push himself up and away from it. His shoulder blasted a klaxon of agony at him and he shouted and slumped forwards, shudder-breathing and trying not to move.

‘I can’t do this,’ Gwyn said abruptly. ‘I can’t. Augus, I’m sorry, I can’t do this. I can’t–’

‘You can, and you are,’ Augus said simply. ‘But you might wish to give your shoulder a break until the worst of the nervine stimulant wears off. You’re already quite sensitive, I imagine you’re wound up quite a lot, right now.’

‘Take it out,’ Gwyn said.

Augus trailed his fingers down Gwyn’s spine again, lightly enough that it felt like knife blades skimming his skin.

‘No,’ Augus said. ‘Not yet.’

‘Not yet’ meant that he would. At some point he would. Gwyn’s hands held onto the table legs as
hard as he tried to hold onto the ‘yet’ in Augus’ statement. None of this was permanent. Augus had told him that, hadn’t he? Gwyn was embarrassing himself.

He moaned, low, as he tried to pull himself together. If he was being tortured, he would have just made himself mentally absent. But in rooms like this, with Augus there, he ended up feeling far more than he normally would, because he wouldn’t let himself leave. But it was tempting. It was very tempting.

‘Better,’ Augus breathed, and Gwyn didn’t want to nod, didn’t want to do anything that might aggravate his shoulder again. And still he was being invaded by the ginger, the sensations of it, **burning.** He was sure- He was sure there was damage being done, he was- Gwyn stirred again and bit his top lip until he tasted copper.

‘Augus, something is wrong,’ Gwyn said, his voice rasping.

The presence of Augus in front of him, and then a face was in front of his, fingers touching to his bleeding lip and Gwyn jerking at the sensation of it. Fingers gently prised his eyelids apart and stared intently. Two fingers then rested beneath his jaw, against his neck, where his pulse thundered, **roared.** Surely Augus would realise that-

‘No,’ Augus said, finally. ‘Nothing is wrong. You are coming to no true harm. Wait it out.’

Augus walked away from him, walked back to the chair and sat down, crossing one leg over the other and leaning his elbow against the armrest, leaning his head against his hand and watching Gwyn quietly, lazily. Gwyn grit his teeth and yanked hard enough at the bonds that he knew he had drawn blood, and Augus only blinked at him and then raised a hand and waved it in Gwyn’s direction, as though inviting him to continue.

Minutes must have passed, Gwyn’s skin shrieking at him, his insides burning and unable to stop it. If he kept himself relaxed, the burning didn’t seem to peak, but he’d forget every few minutes – sometimes every few **seconds** – and the burning, painful scratchiness from the ginger seared across his thoughts, making him forget that he was supposed to be keeping himself collected, together.

He wasn’t sure how much time had passed when Augus got up again. He was focusing too much on small things. The sturdiness of the table. A piece of hair stuck to his forehead. Anything to take his mind away from the invasiveness of the ginger. He hated it. **Hated it.**

When Augus stood by the table, behind him, he breathed a minor sigh of relief. It meant that soon, surely, Augus was going to remove the ginger. He would-

Gwyn shouted when a line of fire splattered down the length of his spine, and then another, up by his shoulders. He hadn’t been this afraid since he was underfae. He didn’t understand why he was so scared.

‘Gwyn,’ Augus said firmly. His voice was closer. But his back was on **fire.** He didn’t want to be **burnt.**

‘You’re burning me,’ Gwyn moaned, helpless.

‘No,’ Augus said, voice far stronger than Gwyn was used to. ‘I’m not. Look at me.’

‘You **burned** me,’ Gwyn said, refusing to look. Augus growled and then jerked Gwyn’s head up.

‘Look at me.’
The compulsion didn’t truly affect him, but the hardness in Augus’ voice did. Gwyn blinked his eyes open and saw that Augus held a candle in his other hand, the flame guttering, fresh wax still dripping down the side of the candle.

‘Wax,’ Gwyn said, dumbly. ‘It’s wax?’

Augus tilted his head, examining Gwyn, calculating.

‘You’ve had an element of learned helplessness ever since you were made underfae,’ Augus observed, finally, letting go of Gwyn’s head and moving around the table again. Another splatter of burning that made him clench around the ginger, and for a moment everything was fire.

‘You’ve always had it. It makes you extraordinarily passive in some circumstances. I don’t think you would have allowed yourself to react like this twelve months ago. But then, twelve months ago you were more a master of your fear, than your fear was of you.’

Augus dripped wax slowly down Gwyn’s spine, moving ever lower, until he reached the globes of Gwyn’s ass and dripped wax over them too. Gwyn shook his head, could tell so easily the difference between a scene designed for his pleasure, and one designed for punishment.

‘You’re easier to read,’ Augus said. ‘I think I like that.’

A hand reached down between Gwyn’s legs and drew back his balls, his flaccid cock – far more sensitive than they should be – and Gwyn’s eyes flew wide. He opened his mouth to protest, his inhale strangling in the back of his throat. Instead of words, he cried out in pain between gritted teeth, lips pressing close together as Augus was merciless with his use of the hot, melted wax.

Everything became a roar of hurt and for several seconds – or minutes, he couldn’t tell – it was white noise in his head, static that he wouldn’t let himself surrender to. It was a river he didn’t want to jump in, a current that would take him too fast to a place he wasn’t sure he wanted to go.

When the noise in his head began to clear, Augus was leaning against the back of one of his thighs, still wearing all his clothing. A hand was curled loosely around his limp cock, almost protectively. He could feel wax drying on it. Gwyn didn’t know what to expect anymore, didn’t know how Augus would hurt him next.

‘I’m sorry, Augus,’ Gwyn said, voice hoarse, mouth too dry.

Augus sighed, his hand closing tighter around Gwyn’s cock. It wasn’t pleasure, though it wasn’t pain either. The sensations were too sharp for Gwyn to know what they were.

Wax dripped across his lower back, and Gwyn gasped, the fire resolving to something tight and zinging in his gut.

‘You’ve been spoiled,’ Augus said. ‘When I first met you, I didn’t go particularly easy on you, and though you were afraid, you handled it, and you grew from it. But for some time, I’ve spoiled you during scenes; I likely always will, a little. But I know you can handle this. Secondly, you hurt me, Gwyn. I’m getting tired of how careless you can be.’

Augus’ hand tightened around Gwyn’s cock, and Gwyn sucked in air and then coughed it out from the coldness of it in his lungs. The air felt solid, alive, his body sending him far more feedback than usual.

A thud, as the candle was set down beside him on the table, and then Gwyn felt Augus picking at something on his back, peeling it forth. It felt like his skin was ripping free and he grit his teeth together again and rolled his forehead on the table, trying to bear it. He knew that Augus wasn’t
actually ripping his skin off. It was the wax, and as soon as it was peeled, he didn’t feel blood trickling. But even so, it was uncanny. He knew what it was like to have skin removed, he knew, and thanks to the tincture, this was startlingly similar.

He wanted to complain, to struggle free, to run somewhere that Augus wouldn’t find him, or sink to his knees and beg forgiveness. But none of it was useful. None of it. Augus was making a point, and Gwyn’s job was...to heed it.

With an immense force of will, despite Augus’ grip on his too-sensitive cock, and the wax peeling off his good shoulder now, Gwyn tried to concentrate.

‘Augus, what...what sort of herbs go...go into the sensitising agent? Would you- Would you tell me?’

There was no hesitation in Augus’ movements. He kept on doing what he was doing, but Gwyn – not knowing if he was imagining it – sensed a slight decrease in the tension in the room.

‘It’s a single herb,’ Augus said, picking at wax and peeling what felt like a long line of the stuff. He could tell Augus had lifted the candle again and pressed his chest down to the table unwittingly. He still shouted when the wax burned him. No matter how much he told himself that it was just wax, that it wouldn’t truly burn him, that even if it did – he was King status; none of it worked. His skin told him it was fire, and his mind became convinced it was fire. Especially as Augus kept the candle tilted after that initial splatter, individual drops hitting his skin like tiny balls of flame.

‘Do you know, I’m running out of wax,’ Augus said to himself. He let go of Gwyn’s cock, walked to a corner of the room and returned, and Gwyn couldn’t stop himself from struggling when the points of heat that dripped generously across his back now came from two sources. One on his good shoulder, the other on his flank, dripping down onto the table. Gwyn’s mind was too far gone in the need to get away for him to really pay attention to anything at all then, and when his shoulder screeched at him, he slumped forwards, panting.

Augus continued for a long time, going through the wax of four, maybe five half-candles before he stopped and switched to running his fingernails along the back of Gwyn’s exposed thigh. Gwyn wasn’t sure when he’d last been able to draw a proper breath. He felt light-headed, dizzy.

He started to drift on a plateau of constant sensory overstimulation. The pain became fuzzy and so constant it was like it had always been there. One moment every new stimulus brought a new wave of fear with it, and the next he came to expect it, and then once he expected it, he floated. He still reacted, still struggled organically without thinking about it, but his breathing evened.

The second time Augus slid fingers around his cock, he moaned, and the sound wasn’t entirely pained. He hardened in Augus’ hand, clenched around the ginger which he didn’t think was burning quite as much anymore, but it still added a painful sting that skimmed the surface of his breath and made it harder to get enough air.

When Augus started peeling the wax off his cock, his balls, he yelped, and then bit down on the wood of the table, squeezing his eyes shut. He could hear his own tears dripping onto the table. Tried to distract himself with anything other than what Augus was doing to him and failing.

Gwyn moaned in relief when Augus seemed to be done, when he went back to picking it off Gwyn’s back. And after a few more minutes, the pain became complicated with other sensations, and Gwyn found that he almost liked it. Beneath the peeling, the sense of skin coming away when it wasn’t, was something else that felt oddly freeing. He groaned deeply, and the next time Augus
went to pick at a sheet of wax across his skin, he arched up into it instead of trying to press away.

Gwyn hissed when the ginger was removed, but felt nothing but relief. Maybe the worst was over.

‘It’s a single herb,’ Augus said quietly. Lube-slick fingers brushed over the crease of Gwyn’s ass, and Gwyn’s mouth was open, he breathed harshly against the wood, which was now damp beneath his face – sweat, tears, even drool, he thought. It was harder to monitor his reactions with the tinctures coursing through him. ‘It’s called evereaux, and I’ve always quite liked it. The leaf tips are a nerve stimulant. The base leaves – if they are six months old at least – are a nerve depressant. The roots are sweet, too sweet for me, and used in desserts sometimes. I hear they taste a little nutty, a little sharp.’

A single finger pushed inside of him and slid to the last knuckle straight away, but Augus didn’t move, didn’t curl, didn’t even set up any sort of rhythm before he slid the finger out and returned with two, pushing back in with that same single-mindedness.

His other hand slowly pumped Gwyn’s cock, and Gwyn couldn’t decide if the arousal felt good, or if it hurt. Augus’ fingers invading him felt far larger than normal, aggravating the stinging the ginger had left behind, and his body sent him exaggerated feedback that lied. He knew if he didn’t have the stupid tincture in his system, he’d love this.

But it wasn’t about loving this, and he knew that too.

‘Evereaux,’ Gwyn said, around the fullness of Augus’ fingers and the sharpness of arousal.

‘Have you ever been given it before?’ Augus said, slowly turning his fingers and then pressing down, prodding hard at Gwyn’s prostate gland. Too hard. Gwyn grunted and tried to pull himself up and away, but the leg bent and tied prevented him from doing anything of the sort, and Augus stabbed down with his fingers again, sending a flood of scorching pain through him.

‘Augus,’ Gwyn said, his voice far higher than usual.

‘Have you?’ Augus asked, and Gwyn nodded quickly.

‘Yes. Twice. I- Three times maybe.’

‘While you were tortured?’

Gwyn nodded and nodded again, and Augus eased up just a little, and the pain stretched into a huge wave of pleasure and he moaned thickly, overwhelmed. It was intense, he wanted to come, realised with shock that despite everything, he was close.

Fingers withdrew and Augus pushed into him after what had only been minimal stretching. Everything stung, and he knew – he knew he could take this, knew he would have normally revelled in it, but the evereaux tincture changed everything and it didn’t matter if he tried to stop his body from struggling, he couldn’t help himself.

Augus fucked into him firmly, sinking himself deep after only three thrusts, pressing his entire clothed body to Gwyn’s back and rasping fabric across his skin. Gwyn didn’t realise he was saying anything at all until his voice garbled and his begging turned to long, harsh moans as Augus’ fingers pressed his tongue down.

‘Shut up,’ Augus said. ‘Focus on coming.’

A wave of relief. Usually Augus would hold him back, would make him delay, and he never liked
that kind of edging; never. He understood why Augus did it, but-

He moaned thickly around Augus’ fingers as Augus started fucking him with a fast, undulating rhythm that seemed to touch on exposed nerve endings all the way through him. And already, he knew he was close, could feel it amongst the pain and the sharpness, the tightening of arousal in his balls, in his gut.

‘That’s good, Gwyn,’ Augus said, amusement in his voice. But the praise was too welcome for him to think about cringing away from it, and he went lax against the table, hungry for his release.

Except that five minutes later, when he was sure he’d been about to come, he was still hanging on a precipice and Augus was still fucking him. He didn’t understand. Confused, he moved his head away from Augus’ fingers in his mouth, vibrating with need, feeling the orgasm right there and just…

‘Why Gwyn,’ Augus said, sounding delighted, ‘it’s not like you to take this long.’

‘I know,’ Gwyn said, plaintive, his voice shaking from him and not sounding at all like his voice. ‘Augus, I-’

‘The second tincture,’ Augus said, sounding pleased and entirely unruffled despite the fact that his hips were slapping up against Gwyn’s ass with every thrust, ‘is constructed from three different items. The first a fungus, the second a herb, and the third stripped from the inner bark of a tree.’

Gwyn wasn’t focusing. He hoped he wouldn’t be asked about this later. He was so close. So close. He gasped, tried to will himself to orgasm; Augus had said he could. He wasn’t sure he’d survive it, he was sure the evereaux would make it almost unbearable, and yet he wanted that. He wanted his mind blasted free from thought, from everything but the demand to feel.

Augus laughed. ‘The second tincture stops you from coming.’

Gwyn’s body went cold, and for several seconds he stared ahead, unthinking.

‘You have to really want it, Gwyn,’ Augus said again, snapping his hips harder, shoving the breath out of Gwyn’s lungs.

More minutes passed and Gwyn was aching with it, the need to come, and he did want it. He had no idea what Augus was talking about. He wanted it. Perhaps there was something else to do or say to acquire an antidote. He couldn’t be left like this, his nerves screeching inside of him for some sort of peak that wasn’t coming, and Augus fucking him like he knew Gwyn was about to spill any second. And he felt that way, his balls tight against his cock, gut cramping.

Finally, Augus slowed and withdrew, and Gwyn hadn’t come, was shuddering hard into the table.

‘I guess you just don’t want it enough,’ Augus said, petting Gwyn lightly on his ass.

‘No!’ Gwyn shouted. It was hard to talk through the long gasps he couldn’t stop himself from making.

Augus came around to face him, and Gwyn opened his eyes, rolled his head enough to meet Augus’ cold, amused gaze. Gwyn’s brow furrowed when he felt a hand in his sweaty hair.

‘Shhh,’ Augus said, ‘you need a break. We’ll try again in half an hour.’

Gwyn stared at him, uncomprehending, and then shook his head, body still burning.
‘Just give me the antidote,’ Gwyn said, and Augus brushed fingers through his hair.

‘There is no antidote.’

Augus moved his hand away and walked back to the chair. He picked up the cane wicker basket and took out a small book and opened it to a bronze bookmark, and then without another glance at Gwyn, started to read. Gwyn stared at him, blinking, his body throbbing like he was seconds away from orgasm. His cock twitched between his legs. He leaked precome. He was so close.

_We’ll try again in half an hour._

Gwyn swallowed, his throat clicking from how dry it was.

‘Augus, I am _so_ sorry that I underestimated you and that I treated your care for herbs so callously and I truly, _truly_ see the error of my ways.’

Augus looked up from his book and smiled benignly. ‘That’s lovely, Gwyn. Thank you.’

He looked back down at the book and continued reading.

Apologising wasn’t going to help, Augus clearly had no patience for anything like begging, and so Gwyn tucked his head down onto the table and moaned once, feeling wrung out by sensation, and tried to surrender to that floating headspace he’d had before. It was harder to find, now that arousal was wound so tight inside of him, and he didn’t really find it. Time dragged, and Gwyn became aware of things like his fingers sticking to the table leg because of dried blood from struggling so much. That the bent leg roped to the table behind him was a constant background hum of pain.

It was twenty minutes before his erection even started to wilt, and by then, he was coming to crave other things – like the sound of Augus turning the pages of his book.

When Augus finally put the book down and got up again, Gwyn’s eyes were half-closed, he was dazed.

He grunted when Augus wrapped a hand around him and clinically worked his cock to hardness again, lust twisting up into knots inside of him. And he moaned when Augus thrust into him with no preamble, immediately starting up the merciless rhythm of before.

Now, Gwyn knew that just because he _felt_ like coming didn’t mean he would. He closed his eyes and tried to focus on the sensation of it, and immediately had to shove his light back down, feeling it flickering and glittering in his bones, hungry to devour something. But as soon as the light wasn’t as much of a risk, he focused on the pleasure, focused on the peak he needed to push through in order to spill.

Focused on it for seconds, then minutes, until he roared in frustration and pain and Augus kept moving behind him, like it was _easy._

But then eventually Augus slowed, and Gwyn’s words were stumbling over each other as he begged him not to stop, and Augus didn’t listen, didn’t _say_ anything. He withdrew and walked around to Gwyn’s front once more, and crouched before him, looking up into his face. Fingers came up and smoothed tears away that he hadn’t known he was shedding. He’d always been prone to getting teary during sensory overload, it wasn’t sadness, wasn’t grief, but frustration and his nerves being flayed raw.

‘_Please, Augus,_’ Gwyn said, his voice cracking.
‘You just don’t want it badly enough,’ Augus said, and Gwyn went to thump his head on the table in frustration and immediately found it caught in Augus’ hands, the movement aborted. ‘Don’t do that.’

‘Augus, I’m truly sorry,’ Gwyn said, trying to think what it might take to get an antidote. The apologies were worthless, but he couldn’t wrap his mind around anything else.

‘It sounds more to me like you’re desperate, and wound too tight. Let’s give you another ten or twenty minutes for the tincture to work its way through your system.’

Augus went and sat down once more, picked up his book, and began reading again.

Gwyn had no idea how much time had passed when Augus finally put his book down and stood up again. This time, Augus wasn’t hard, and he stroked himself back to hardness again, watching Gwyn with something pointed and dark in his eyes, lips curled into a smirk. When he walked back, Gwyn couldn’t tell if he looked forward to it, or dreaded it.

The same problem again; despite the deliciousness of the thrusting, despite being wound so tight he could hardly breathe or see, his release didn’t come. Augus occasionally whispered encouragement now. From, ‘You can do it, Gwyn, come on, now, try harder,’ to, ‘Just think, Gwyn, once you come, you’ll be able to rest. Doesn’t that sound lovely?’

And it did, and Gwyn strived for it, wanted to come so badly, and his body just wouldn’t listen. It was as though a disconnection had happened between his balls and the rest of him. Every time he thought he had it, every time he thought he was going to topple into it, it eluded him. He sobbed with frustration, and when Augus slowed down, Gwyn couldn’t stand it again – not for another half hour – he couldn’t.

‘No!’ Gwyn shouted. ‘I’m so close. I’m so close.’

Augus hummed his scepticism, but sped up again for another few minutes. And Gwyn wanted to claw at himself in anger, his body wasn’t listening to him and it was just some stupid herbs and Augus had told him all he had to do was want it. Surely Augus would take pity on him soon and give him an antidote. Something.

The movement inside of him stopped and Augus withdrew, leaving Gwyn hollow and empty as he made pitiful sounds of frustration.

‘Do you know,’ Augus said, as though they weren’t in the middle of some marathon fuck, ‘I think I may have overcompensated for how much someone of your size and status might need. Perhaps you would have been able to come by now, if I had spent more time with the ‘petty distraction’ – I think you called it – of healing medicine. Alas.’

Augus didn’t sound remotely sympathetic.

‘Augus, please,’ Gwyn said, unable to summon much more coherence than that. But once he said it, he couldn’t stop saying it, and Augus looked at him in disgust and reached into the cane wicker basket.

‘I don’t want to listen to this,’ Augus said, his voice turning cold. He walked over and pulled open Gwyn’s tired jaw, shoving fabric into it and looping it around his head. A gag. Gwyn made a muffled, desperate sound and then bit down to give himself something to do, even as Augus tied the knot tightly at the back of his head. He didn’t have the same problem with gags that Augus did, but he didn’t like them either.
It was getting harder to think straight. Maybe the tincture wouldn’t wear off. Or maybe Augus intended this to last for days. It would shatter Gwyn’s mind. He knew it would. And Augus was likely lying when he said that Gwyn would be able to rest after coming. Maybe he’d just make him come again. Maybe Augus wouldn’t stop in time, and it would be like the sounding, and he’d have to make himself disappear just to deal with it.

Time passing, and Gwyn only snapped to attention when Augus put his book down and got up again. Gwyn’s cock had stayed hard the entire time. He hurt, he ached. The room was sweltering from their body heat and the heat of the candles.

Augus unknotted the gag and picked it free from Gwyn’s mouth, Gwyn’s lips dry, sticking together, the gag damp where his tongue had moved against it. Gwyn couldn’t stop himself from moaning and almost wished he had the gag back again.

When Augus slid back into him, freshly lubed, Gwyn’s hips bucked forward for a friction against his cock that wasn’t there. Too quickly he spiralled back up to the peak, and too quickly he realised that he couldn’t push himself over, not even with Augus’ help. Rage was building alongside the frustration. Normally a scene this hard meant something more than just punishment, normally it meant that he had to learn something, or that Augus was trying to show him something. This? This was nothing more than Augus’ cruel whims, and he growled against the table, not sure how to appease him, agitated that the rules had changed and he couldn’t read them anymore.

‘Come on, Gwyn,’ Augus said, his voice commanding. ‘It’s only a tincture. And I can tell you’re close. I can feel it. Push harder.’

‘I’m trying,’ Gwyn groaned, and Augus rubbed at his spine. It didn’t feel as prickly, as intense as before, it was even a little soothing. But that only made things more confusing. ‘I’m trying.’

A hand around his cock and Gwyn sobbed in relief, because now he would be able to, now he would be able to-

Except he still couldn’t.

He was in the middle of roaring his stifled, thwarted frustration again when Augus withdrew.

‘Please,’ Gwyn gasped. ‘Please, please get me the antidote. Augus, please.’

Augus sighed, shifted Gwyn’s head so that he could look at him. There was something grim on his face, unforgiving.

‘Gwyn, there is no antidote. It has to work through your system.’

‘No!’ Gwyn shouted, as Augus walked away. He couldn’t do this. It was- It was unbearable. ‘No! You liar! You liar! I know you’re lying to me! That’s what you do, you- Unseelie monster, you’re all the same! You lie and you hurt people and you’re-’ His mind reached through the mire of his rage and he spat out the first thing that came to mind, even as Augus spun around, eyes glittering: ‘You shouldn’t have been born! Nobody wanted you! Nobody did! Why would they?! Why are you lying to me? Why?’

Augus stared at him, and then walked back to him, and instead of striking him, or doing any of the things Gwyn expected, he dragged his fingers firmly through Gwyn’s hair.

Gwyn could hardly believe what he’d said. Could hardly understand what he'd even meant by the words. If Augus wasn’t going to give him the antidote before, he certainly wouldn’t give it to him now. He closed his eyes, pained, and sagged to the table, Augus sliding a quick hand under his
Gwyn, tell me something. Are you listening?"

Gwyn nodded mechanically.

‘Good,’ Augus continued. ‘I want you to tell me something. If you don’t believe yourself to be worth anything; as you so frequently behave...If you loathe yourself so much, then why are you behaving as though I owe you pleasure? Surely, if life has taught you anything, it has taught you that you only deserve the meagre scraps that it gives to you?’

Gwyn stilled, even his breathing halted with a heavy shudder.

‘I know you don’t trust me,’ Augus said, his voice heavier. ‘I know that. But there is no antidote. And this night will be over, and it will end.’

‘No,’ Gwyn said, voice shaking. ‘All you do is lie.’

‘No,’ Augus replied. ‘And you will see that for yourself soon enough. Now answer my question. Why do you behave as though you are owed pleasure when you treat yourself so poorly?’

‘I don’t know,’ Gwyn shuddered. ‘Weakness.’

‘Mm,’ Augus said. ‘Not quite what I was looking for, but certainly not an unanticipated response. But you should think about it, sweetness. Think beyond the answers you parents gave to you. You can tell me – shout at me – that I am the things that they told you that you were, but that doesn’t hurt me, Gwyn. I am Unseelie. I like being Unseelie.’

‘Why won’t you just help me?’ Gwyn said, no longer caring how raw or pathetic he sounded. Augus could have it, could have all of it. Gwyn just wanted to make it out to the other side, even if he wasn’t sure it was there anymore.

Augus swore sharply. ‘Of all the times for you to learn- Gwyn, look at me.’ Gwyn opened his eyes, and Augus offered a smile that was sympathetic, and Gwyn craved it, wanted to reach up and take it in his hands, except he could hardly feel his fingers. ‘The tincture needs some more time to be metabolised, and you can wait another thirty minutes without it harming you, I promise.’

‘You promise?’ Gwyn said, staring at him. ‘Will you tell me more about the herbs? What are you reading?’

Augus laughed weakly. ‘Distractions? All right.’

The next half hour was agonising, despite the quiet lull of Augus’ voice as he read some exceedingly dry material on the harvesting differences when it came to varying species of oak tree, despite the fact that it did help. At one point, Gwyn broke off into several long, repeated moans, unable to help himself, needing to express the bevy of sensations clamouring inside his body somehow, and when he tapered off again, Augus went back to reading, and Gwyn clung to the dry words, some of which he didn’t know the meanings of.

Even so, despair was curling inside of him. He was exhausted. His mouth was dry. He knew he’d been in the room for at least three or four hours, depending on how long Augus had left him there initially, and despite gaining back so much of his fitness, he didn’t have the same stamina he had when he’d first met Augus. His physical endurance was not what it used to be.

When Augus stood again, Gwyn whimpered in something less like want, and more like dread.
'What if I can’t, Augus,’ Gwyn whispered, and Augus shook his head as though that wasn’t even an option.

‘Out of the two of us, who actually knows something about herbs and wortcunning?’

Augus breached him with fingers first this time, carefully, then slid that same lube-slick hand around his cock and encouraged him to harden. When Augus slid inside of him, Gwyn began to tremble, and couldn’t stop. He felt like he was going to fly apart, like his skin would split and he would just become light and fritter away, disappear, taking the castle down with him. He shoved his light down, but it didn’t stop the feeling from persisting. His heart tripped over itself, making him feel queasy.

‘You have to work with me, Gwyn,’ Augus said, his voice steady, though slightly rougher than before. ‘You have to really chase after it, focus on what you feel, and only that.’

Gwyn was rubbed raw inside, feeling swollen and sore, and he was sure it wasn’t only the first tincture responsible for the sensation. Augus’ cock managed to skate over his prostate every now and then, sending blooms of knife-sharp pleasure through his spine. When Augus shifted the cant of his hips, Gwyn whimpered and knew he would have come a hundred times over by now, if it wasn’t for that tincture coursing through his veins.

After a few minutes, his despair evaporated as he concentrated on sensation. He thought he might have been closer than before. A hair’s breadth away from it. But the pleasure was so sharp, and his mind was clouding. He blinked and saw spots in front of his eyes.

‘You’re going to pass out,’ Augus said, working his cock faster, and Gwyn could hardly process what Augus was saying for the movement and rhythm around him, all pushing him to an orgasm that felt…possibly – he didn’t know if he dared believe it – reachable. ‘Let it happen.’

The build went on and on, every time he thought he’d tip over, there was some higher precipice to reach, until he felt a scream building in his lungs and the rushing of blood in his ears silenced everything that Augus was saying to him.

Wanting it more than he was scared of it, Gwyn quested out towards that impossible peak and reached.

The band of sensation snapped inside of him, sent a vicious whiplash through him that turned his mind white with pleasure and pain and slammed through him too fast for him to hang onto himself. One moment he was adrift in a flood, the next he was dragged under, thrust into blackness with an unceremonious shove.

Chapter End Notes

In our next chapter, 'Clarity:

‘I want to, you know,’ Gwyn said, the tiles taking his deep voice and amplifying it. ‘I want to know more about you. I just don’t know what I can know.’

‘Hm?’ Augus said, and Gwyn fumbled over the words, trying to think of how best to say it.
‘I don’t…know how to ask. I- What can I know about you?’

‘What do you mean?’ Augus said, caressing his thumb on the inside of Gwyn’s elbow under the water, before wiping over it with the sponge.

‘What am I allowed to know?’

Augus didn’t still, exactly, but his strokes slowed down as though he was thinking. And then, finally, he laughed. ‘Gwyn, you kept me imprisoned, raped me, interrogated me or demanded answers to your questions and now you don’t know what you’re allowed to know?’

Gwyn’s legs drew up, he hunched. That was his point. Augus didn’t understand.

‘I raped you,’ Gwyn said. He hated saying it. Admitting it made him expect that Augus would get out of the bath, throw the sponge down, say something horrible and leave. It would be nothing less than Gwyn deserved.
Warmth and wetness, and Gwyn came to with a start, jerking awake in a full bath. Limbs and a body shifted behind him, and then a head tucked alongside his and whispered: ‘Shhh.’

Gwyn felt sore, groggy, dazed. He murmured something that almost sounded like a question, and Augus kept stroking his limbs in long, languorous lines. He realised Augus had a cloth in his hand, was cleaning him. The water was far hotter than Augus usually preferred it. He blinked his eyes open and saw vines twirling above him, smelled cinnamon, realised they were in their bathroom. He closed his eyes again, sagged.

‘Careful,’ Augus said, continuing to stroke him, like he was some oversized cat or dog. ‘It’s all right. It’s over.’

‘How long was I out?’ Gwyn managed.

‘A little while,’ Augus said, his voice very quiet. ‘Quite a while. Long enough that the water isn’t pink from the damage you did to your wrists. I think the evereaux would have worked its way out of your system almost completely by now. Don’t fret about the length of time you were unconscious, some of that was the tinctures working their way free.’

Gwyn groaned, feeling oddly fragile, out of sorts. He tried turning towards Augus, to face him, to...do something ridiculous like curl into him, but Augus held him still so that Gwyn was cradled between his legs, his back against Augus’ chest. Augus hushed him, then kept tracing those long lines down his body, hushed him again, staying close.

Shame crept through him. He vaguely remembered saying some awful things, behaving badly. He used to hold himself together far better in a scene. He felt, somehow, like he’d failed. Surely, someone like Augus would want a flavour of submission that was less...less whatever it was that Gwyn had offered to him. Less pathetic and overwrought. He closed his eyes, thinned his lips.

‘I’ll do better next time,’ he said, his voice still raw from the shouting and groaning of before.
Augus didn’t falter in his strokes, but his bent knees did capture Gwyn’s hips more tightly, he curled closer.

‘You don’t need to,’ Augus said. ‘Everything that happened was along the lines of what I expected.’

‘I said some awful things to you,’ Gwyn said.

‘You said some awful things, but I don’t really think you were saying them to me. Or, if you were, I don’t think you realised what you implicated when you said them.’

Gwyn could hardly remember. He recalled begging a great deal, and the endlessness of that awful peak.

‘It’s normal,’ Augus continued, his voice as even as ever, and calming because of it, ‘to feel shaken after a scene like that. Don’t overthink it, sweetness.’

Silence again. The sound of water shifting around them, and Gwyn’s skin tingling underneath Augus’ ministrations. He didn’t feel remotely aroused, but the stroking was nice, even comforting. His hair was thoroughly soaked, and he wondered if Augus had washed it, because it didn’t feel clammy like before, it felt clean.

‘I want to, you know,’ Gwyn said, the tiles taking his deep voice and amplifying it. ‘I want to know more about you. I just don’t know what I can know.’

‘Hm?’ Augus said, and Gwyn fumbled over the words, trying to think of how best to say it.

‘I don’t…know how to ask. I- What can I know about you?’

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‘This again? Gwyn, you-’

‘Perhaps you are fine with it, Augus,’ Gwyn said, turning awkwardly in the bath to meet his eyes. ‘Perhaps you have been violated so much, so often, by the Nightingale, that by the time I got to you it didn’t matter anymore. That still doesn’t reflect well on my behaviour. I treated you horrifically.’

‘Yes,’ Augus said, raising his eyebrows, ‘in the future, if you want to get to know someone better, I don’t recommend skewering them brutally on your cock. Go mea culpa somewhere else.’

Gwyn stared at him, unimpressed, and Augus offered a smirk, but it was insincere, crooked.

‘You weren’t fine with it,’ Gwyn insisted, and Augus scowled.
‘Of course not. It was unpleasant. It was painful and deeply humiliating. Though for which one of us more, at times, I can’t say. You weren’t just violating me when you did that, were you? And who planted that idea in your head, anyway? Who whispered to you that rape was the best way to break a prisoner?’

Gwyn shook his head. He’d heard it from several corners. Even Terho, sweet Terho, had urged him to do whatever he could to make sure Augus was rendered unable to hurt anyone, ever again. But Terho hadn’t meant that.

‘You’re taught,’ Gwyn said, his voice wooden. ‘You’re taught to do it.’

‘Yes,’ Augus said calmly. ‘It’s true. The Unseelie Court used to have fae trained specifically up to break people in the prisons with that sort of scutwork. There are fae who feed upon it, you see, who are often murdered by fellow Unseelie, or Seelie fae. But they can be hired, put to good use. The Raven Prince believed everyone had a purpose. And you don’t think – were I to have caught you myself, when I was King, that I wouldn’t have relentlessly assaulted you until you were nothing but a pathetic, shivering wreck? It is, I believe, what Courts are supposed to do to their most threatening prisoners; if they’re not going to kill them immediately, that is.’

Gwyn shuddered. He shook his head, and Augus laughed under his breath.

‘I would have,’ Augus said, smiling. ‘I would have enjoyed it, even. I think I daydreamed about it, once or twice, when the madness was worst upon me.’

‘But you didn’t,’ Gwyn said, staring at him. ‘I did. More than once. And more than that; I took and took from you, I know I did. And now- Now that you’re here, and still…unable to live the life that you truly want for yourself, how can I just barrage you with questions when you are- when you have so little to…to yourself?’

‘It wouldn’t be an interrogation,’ Augus said, eyes narrowing. ‘Just conversation.’

‘But I don’t know what to ask you,’ Gwyn said, feeling stupid. ‘You don’t like people to pry. I don’t want to hurt you anymore. I keep doing it, all the time, I know that. I don’t…know how not to.’

‘You do,’ Augus said, rubbing at Gwyn’s good shoulder. ‘Is this why you’ve been so much more passive since you’ve come to the Unseelie Court? It’s not all because you were underfae, is it? It’s this?’

‘I can’t just do what I did in the Seelie Court,’ Gwyn said. ‘I took you against your will, and even – even when you enjoyed it and you were out of the prison, I still did it. I ambushed you, I tied you up, I—’

‘Stop,’ Augus said. ‘You’re misremembering. I don’t consider anything that happened outside of that cell to be rape, and that’s that. This– We have to talk about this. We have a grey area of consent between us, and it’s always been there. But we have ways to make it extremely clear that we do not consent. From you invoking fae law to revoke my status when I sounded you, to me actually using my full strength against you to stop you. But – and listen to this closely, because I don’t like repeating myself on this matter – I like a measure of my control being taken away. I like fighting you, sometimes. I didn’t ask you to sound me because I hate it, I asked for it because I wanted it. Do you truly think, if I saw everything that had happened in that Seelie Court as reprehensible, I would have asked? Do you think I would even be here?’

‘I know about conditioning, Augus. I know about brainwashing. I know that a year of captivity
with the Nightingale, followed by six months in a prison can make a person want things they don’t really want.’

‘Ah, here we go. You’re as bad as Ash. You know better than me, do you? Let me tell you something. You were a terrible torturer. You protected me in a bizarre way almost from the beginning. All the things that triggered the clearest signs that you were successfully breaking me, became the things that you avoided. The gag worked, so you never used it again. You realised that I hated forced blowjobs, so you stopped making me give them to you.

‘Yes, you raped me, but I am desensitised to that. No, that doesn’t make what you did all right, but it does mean that you caused me no permanent damage to my mind that hadn’t already been done far more effectively by someone else, and it does mean that we can build a relationship from a very rocky beginning. We’re more than those months. We are much more than the months where I came after your psyche, and you went after me physically. Do you really think I’d ever let you treat me that way again? Do you really think you’d ever let me sound you again?’

Gwyn shuddered, looked away, and Augus’ wet fingers caught his chin and turned his face back again. Gwyn blinked at him, Augus’ gaze direct, unblinking.

‘I hurt you. A lot,’ Gwyn whispered.

‘You were supposed to,’ Augus said, his smile lopsided. ‘That was your job. Do you not recall, you daft oaf, what I had done that got me in that position in the first place? It was a miracle you didn’t execute me outright. It’s what I expected.’

‘I don’t know that I can forgive myself for it,’ Gwyn said, his cheeks flaming from more than the water. Augus sighed.

‘All right. But you need to realise that if you keep holding yourself back on my account...If you keep taking this passive role, too scared to operate on your own initiative unless I’ve just died, never asking me anything, never being who you were in that Seelie Court with me; it’s a one-sided relationship. I’m not telling you to forgive yourself, but I am saying that if you want this, you have to find a way to be less afraid of who you are and what you’re capable of, because believe me, I came to terms with it a long time ago. I might gripe about you being pushy, but you gripe in a scene, and it doesn’t mean we both don’t need…’

Augus made a sharp sound and then prodded Gwyn forward again. ‘I hate talking about this. I’m tired. Hours of fucking takes its toll on me too. Now shut up and let me look after you. I swear you’re determined to festoon every shred of aftercare with your guilt.’

The languid strokes over his body were very soothing, and soon Gwyn was breathing deeply again, his head lolling back on Augus’ shoulder, as Augus let the sponge sink down and started simply caressing him. Gwyn’s hair floated where it hit the water, and Augus’ hair curled around him, stuck to his skin. He didn’t want to leave. Sighing, he turned his face towards Augus’ chest and reached down with his other hand, cupping Augus’ thigh.

‘You’ve been dealing with a lot lately,’ Augus said, when Gwyn’s eyes were half open. ‘You might not see how much you’re growing, but I do. Anyway, I want to try something. For every question I ask you, that you answer; you have to ask one back. Yes? So I’ll start. Hm. Did you used to have a Welsh accent?’

Gwyn smiled faintly, shook his head. ‘No. When you’re born Court fae, in the Courtlands, you don’t learn Welsh first, you learn the common tongue. And I was so sheltered as a child, I didn’t even realise there was a Welsh language until I was maybe three or four years old.’
'That’s criminal,' Augus said, sounding genuinely disgusted.

'Are there any herbs you don’t enjoy harvesting?'

'Oh,’ Augus said, pleased, ‘yes. Actually, there are. There’s one particular kind of moss that’s very valuable, and it only grows in the scaly crevices of crackenylls. And it loses all efficacy if you kill the crackenyll first.’

‘You’re joking,’ Gwyn said, staring ahead. Crackenylls were a vicious, fast-moving, exaggerated form of the freshwater crocodiles that occupied the human world. They were far larger than their human-realm counterparts, even capable of bursts of magic and electricity, if pushed.

‘I wish that I were,’ Augus said. ‘And try as I might, I never quite managed any way of convincing them to trust me. When I was underfae, it was—’

‘That’s so dangerous,’ Gwyn breathed.

‘My compulsions worked to a limited degree. And if worst came to worst I could shift to my true-form. It was dangerous, but I managed. Now, my turn again. Given that you have a capacity for magic, why were you never trained? Or, why did you never seek training yourself?’

Gwyn squirmed, and Augus wrapped arms around him, one underneath his arm, the other loose around his neck.

‘I can’t stand it,’ Gwyn said finally. ‘I’ve heard from many Mages and lower level magicians that all of magic is about suppressing a flow of energy until it is needed, and then loosening it for something. All my life, with the light, I know what it is to suppress something. I know. I couldn’t… invite more of that upon myself willingly. I’d rather— I’d rather anything, but that.’

They were quite for a little while. Gwyn feeling uncomfortable, and Augus languidly stroking him with his fingers. After a while, Gwyn sighed and looked up at the tendrils of greenery on the ceiling.

‘You once said the Raven Prince enjoyed being flogged, did you—’

‘No,’ Augus said quietly. ‘I can’t betray his confidence any further than that, and I shouldn’t have told you that much. If you’re going to ask me about anything else that happened between us in that grain, I can’t answer.’

Gwyn went silent; that was exactly what he’d been about to ask. He was desperately curious to know more about them. To know what they’d had. He closed his eyes and cast around for something different.

‘Do you like…aftercare? Giving it? Or do you find it tedious?’

‘I quite enjoy it,’ Augus said, a smile in his voice. ‘It’s healthy. And what you need is always different, which keeps me on my toes. If you could do anything to me, what would you do?’

Gwyn cleared his throat, flushed with heat. The water of the bath was slowly cooling, but Gwyn was certain if he hadn’t been worked so hard previously, he’d be getting hard. He thought of the different experiences they’d had.

‘A lot, I suppose,’ Gwyn said finally. ‘I can’t pick one thing. I like…I like a lot of it.’

‘That’s hedging. You can do better than that.’
‘Going slow,’ Gwyn said, licking at his lips. ‘That time, I…took you apart with it. I didn’t know I could do that. I didn’t know you could be like that. I want to do it again. One day.’

Augus said nothing for long minutes and then on a slow exhale he said: ‘You can.’

‘Fucking you against the wall was nice,’ Gwyn said, and Augus snorted.

‘Ah, but of course. Shy one moment, soldier the next.’

‘You were so hesitant, but you liked it so much,’ Gwyn said, closing his eyes to think back on it. ‘But I like…a lot of it, Augus. Truly. I can’t pick one thing.’

Augus kissed the side of his neck and Gwyn felt relaxed, far more than before. He rubbed the outside of Augus’ thigh, marvelling at lean muscle, the strength in him.

‘What was healing the lake like?’

‘Ah,’ Augus said. ‘Strange. I don’t remember a lot of it. Given everything that happened after. But there was a lake spirit, and we had a chat. It was a relief when I saw the lake spirit wasn’t dead. I’m hoping the others are alive too. That they can be revived. And you? I know you became used to torture, but the first time…with Efnisien. What was it like?’

Gwyn shook his head. He didn’t think he could talk about it. He’d had nightmares and night terrors for weeks afterwards. Even threats of beatings and then actual beatings hadn’t stopped him, and eventually they’d made him sleep in the stables until the worst of it wore off. He sank deeper into the water, and Augus reached up and stroked around the outside of his face, his touch gentling.

‘How old-’ Gwyn cleared his throat. ‘How old were you when you knew that there were other Each Uisge, and legends associated with them?’

‘Not old,’ Augus said. ‘Ten, I think, or eleven? Young. It sounded like they were talking about a type of fae completely different to how I thought of myself back then. We’re born as herbivores, unable to eat anything but plant matter. I didn’t know I was the Each Uisge, when I learned about the Each Uisge. So I found out about these bloodthirsty creatures at a time when I didn’t know of my own capacity for bloodthirstiness.’

‘Was that frightening?’

‘It’s my turn,’ Augus said, poking him gently. ‘Before, you called me an Unseelie monster. You said I should never have been born. You said that nobody wanted me. How old were you, when you were first told those things?’

Gwyn couldn’t say anything at all. Fae were blessed with super-precocial abilities at birth, great clarity of mind, the ability to immediately start absorbing all knowledge, language, cultural nuance and more.

‘Gwyn, please tell me,’ Augus said against Gwyn’s skin.

‘That first day,’ Gwyn said, his voice rough. ‘The very first day. She tried to kill me. She screamed an awful lot more than that at me. Much more. Augus, I don’t want to do this anymore.’

Augus kissed the side of Gwyn’s face with lips that lingered, a tongue that stroked at his cheekbone. ‘We don’t have to.’

‘I shouldn’t have said those things to you. I didn’t mean them. You know that, don’t you?’
'Of course I do,' Augus said, gathering him closer. ‘Don’t think I was remotely offended by it. You’re just a little bit of a mess in that head of yours. It’s only logical that if I crack you open, some of that will come spilling out.’

‘Does that go both ways?’ Gwyn said, turning and looking up at Augus.

‘Yes, I imagine so,’ Augus said. ‘I’m a little bit of a mess in this head of mine as well.’

Augus sighed as Gwyn pressed his lips to the long line of Augus’ neck, and they fell into silence. It wasn’t awkward or pained, and they traded lazy kisses. Gwyn had words on his tongue, affectionate words that he wanted to say. But he wasn’t ready. Not yet. But like this he could imagine a day when it might be easier, when he could say the things that he wanted to say, give Augus the words of adoration that he wanted to.

*

In the next two days, three small battles between the Seelie and Unseelie forces occurred. Gwyn only had to be present at one, using his light and burning through his powers quickly to mow through the frontlines of two disorganised Seelie land and sea-fae units. The Seelie land and sea-fae didn’t communicate well with each other, which meant that they were easier to break down. Eventually, the Unseelie triumphed, with much looted from the opposing side.

The other two battles, however, didn’t fare so well. In the second, both sides retreated because loss of life had become too great. In the third, the common fae Unseelie military that had once been headed by their leader Dogwill Borough was soundly defeated. They hadn’t rallied around their new leader’s style soon enough, and one of the common fae Generals had spat on the ground before Gwyn, still soaked with blood, and simply declared: ‘It was a shit show, and that’s that.’

It marked a loss of three thousand, five hundred trained common fae troops. And there was now a massive dent in the security of the Unseelie Courtlands, which had never been strongly occupied or fortified to begin with.

In the evening, he sat in the throne room and looked over treasury documents and noted a slight increase in tithes from the fae that had pledged them at the Triumphal Entry. He wasn’t sure where Augus was, possibly training with his rapier on the piste, or tending to Julvia, or something else he didn’t know about. Aside from the tracking spell, which was frequently inactive, he deliberately tried not to shadow Augus’ movements too much.

A whirl of feathers, and a shriek from one of the servants in the throne room.

‘Darling, if you think this is the worst I’ve been through, you don’t know me very well.’

But Gulvi sagged to the ground, her wings and torso spattered with blood. Gwyn was off his throne, down to her side in an instant, while she coughed up blood and sprayed it all over his shirt. She still held both of her knives in a death grip.

‘You’re safe,’ he said. ‘Do you need Aleutia?’

‘Bitch, please,’ Gulvi said. ‘It’s just…a flesh wound. A few flesh wounds. The skin’s…knitting already. My lung isn’t even collapsed anymore!’

She toppled forwards and Gwyn got arms around her, picking her up, trying to get his head around her giant wings and thinking of where best to take her.

‘Va chier!’ Gulvi spat.
Gwyn snorted. He’d been sworn at before by injured warriors, many times. ‘Where do you want to be taken?’

‘I have white sheets, not my rooms. Oh, wherever, Gwyn. Do I look like I give a shit?’

She didn’t, blood was dribbling down her mouth, though most of it had dried. Her black eyes still glittered, and just before Gwyn teleported away, she started to laugh in pained, sharp rasps.

He took her to one of his small, private rooms. The ones he would have used if he’d been injured in battle himself. Where he could curl up like an injured hound and crawl to the shower if he needed it later. It was simple, rustic, the bedding wasn’t expensive and it was certainly a place one could bleed all over if they needed to.

Gulvi was still laughing when he laid her down, though she stopped and hissed for several seconds when he ripped lengths of coarse sheet with his bare hands and wadded them into at least three of the worst stab wounds.

‘Who was it?’ Gwyn said quietly.

‘I cannot get *close* to the Polemarch, it turns out,’ Gulvi said. ‘When she’s not in the Seelie Court she is very well protected. Most of this was her daughter, Mera-Alane. The plan’s blown, darling. They’ll know now. If they don’t already. But I got most of the rest. Get me some water, would you?’

Gwyn stood up, walked away from the smell of blood-wet feathers and the coppery tang of red. He drew a small wooden cup of water and brought it back, ignoring Gulvi’s trembling hands and holding it to her lips. She glared at him, and he glared back.

‘Now’s not the time for your pride, Gulvi,’ he said, and she growled at him, but sipped anyway. The first mouthful she gargled and spat over the side of the bed, and it was tinged red from her own blood. He helped her with the rest of the water.

Silence for a few minutes. Gulvi had her eyes screwed shut, hands resting over the lengths of sheet staunching her wounds. Her breathing was hoarse, pained. But they were Inner Court status, and like Gwyn, she was long-used to high status. This wasn’t an event that required healers. All they could do was speed up the process and provide pain relief. In a few hours, Gulvi wouldn’t need pain relief. And he could tell she wanted to tough it out on her own. He related to those instincts.

‘You got most of the rest?’ Gwyn said, when Gulvi opened her eyes and stared at him.

‘It was a terrible amount of fun,’ Gulvi said, her voice coming easier, even though she sounded wearier than before. ‘So much, my sweetling. I’ll give you all the names later, I think. But you can rest assured that the Seelie Court has taken a financial hit. My apprentices are scouring the safes and treasury rooms of our marks for wealth now, and depositing it…elsewhere.’

‘How many apprentices do you have, Gulvi?’

‘At any one time? Two or three usually. My third was knocked off a few months ago.’

‘I’m sorry to hear that,’ Gwyn said, and Gulvi rolled her eyes.

‘It’s the nature of the work, *oui*? You get killed. As far as I can tell, death during the apprenticeship is usually a sign you’ll be a shit assassin anyway. I heard of the battles. The defeat in the Courtlands.’
Gwyn was quiet for a while, and then he went and filled up the cup of water and brought it back. Gulvi was already starting to breathe easier, though she looked frustrated, and he knew she must have been seething that she couldn’t destroy the Polemarch.

‘Sometimes, darling, I think we’ll make it through this,’ Gulvi said, licking at the blood that had seeped into the cracks in her lips. ‘The Seelie live like fatling calves. So many have lost all sense of true wariness. I think you lulled them into thinking they were safe, while you were King, and while you were their War General. I think they all started to think that Gwyn ap Nudd would save them if anything went wrong, because you’d already defend them from countless Unseelie attacks, and then began to destroy the Unseelie military, and finally saved them from the Nightingale and then the Each Uisge.’

She closed her eyes. ‘But then I remember that we have a tiny military and a skeleton Court and then I just don’t know. My heartsong thrives on it. But I’d love it more were I not concerned for the future of my sister, the networks of friends and chosen family in my life. I think—’

There was a pounding at the door. They both jolted in shock. Gwyn walked over and opened it just a crack, only to see Fenwrel staring at him, her long black hair in disarray, her eyes wild with panic. Her staff was still out in her hands. She’d used her Mage staff to pound on the door. For a second, he thought some emergency had happened, but was interrupted before he could speak.

‘I know she’s in there, Your Majesty. I want to see her!’

‘Mon dieu,’ Gulvi groaned. ‘You’d best let her in.’

‘How did you know she was here?’ Gwyn asked, glaring down at her. Fenwrel tried to look past his bulk and he shifted so that she couldn’t see Gulvi. ‘How?’

‘A tracking spell,’ both Fenwrel and Gulvi said in unison.

‘It was my idea,’ Gulvi said. ‘It worked well enough with Augus. Let her in, damn it. She’ll only make a fuss if you don’t. Stupid mouse.’

Fenwrel shouldered past Gwyn, rapping at his elbow with her staff, and then paused when she saw Gulvi laid out on the bed, bleeding into the mattress. She turned and glared at Gwyn, and then pointed her staff at Gulvi, shaking it at her, mouse ears flattening against the back of her head.

‘Darling, it’s only blood,’ Gulvi laughed, and Fenwrel put her hands on her hips and shook her head.

Gwyn stared in shock. He wasn’t aware that Gulvi and Fenwrel had forged any sort of connection together; they didn’t like each other the first time they’d met. And now…he knew what it meant when someone was angry that another person had injured themselves. He’d experienced it with Augus. He stared between them.

Gulvi loved Ash, so perhaps this was just…a very strong friendship. But how?

‘I thought you didn’t like each other,’ Gwyn said, feeling stupid.

‘Ma douceur,’ Gulvi said sweetly, meeting his eyes, ‘I’ll tell you a very great deal about everything if you give us some space. I think Fenwrel is going to attempt to lecture me, and I’d like to save my strength to blast the fuck out of her for being such a fussing, interfering, mothering pain in my ass.’

Fenwrel just stared at Gulvi, quivering with anger, and Gwyn decided that he didn’t want to be here for this.
‘Are you sure, Gulvi?’ he added, as he walked to the door.

‘I’ll be fine, Gwyn,’ Gulvi said, smiling at him. ‘I’m high on life right now. It’s not every day you get to go on a days-long bender and kill a whole lot of people. This has been one of my favourite assignments. Do come up with another fun one.’

Gwyn excused himself from the room, feeling less like a King and more like an awkward teenager. He hadn’t even closed the door completely before Gulvi snapped: ‘I don’t want to hear it, Fenwrel!’

Followed by a: ‘You’re as bad as the rest of these idiots!’

Gwyn closed the door with a click and shut out the sound, staring at the wooden door, looking down at the blood that had smeared, oozed, and sprayed against him. He decided not to stick around. What they had to talk about wasn’t his business unless Gulvi made it his business, and he knew to trust her judgement on those things. He teleported away.

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He was in the middle of dressing once more when Augus walked into their rooms. Gwyn shivered. After a heavy scene like the one they’d had, he couldn’t look at Augus without thinking back to intense levels of pain and pleasure that he could barely handle. His body had a sense-memory association with Augus, and he couldn’t tell if he felt dread or lust or want. Perhaps all three.

Augus seemed completely unaware. He leaned into the large wardrobe – more two connected rooms really to make space for the varied types of clothing a King and an Inner Court member might require – to glance at Gwyn, and then walked back into the main room without saying a word.

When he walked across plush carpet to their bedroom, Augus was sitting on the bed, hands folded together in his lap.

‘If I want to heal another lake, do you inform Gulvi? Or do I?’

Gwyn’s body went cold. He looked away for several seconds, but his hands still managed to feel slimy with viscera, his fingers remembering what it was like to tangle in Augus’ intestinal tract. He remembered the smell of it all, the frittering away of blood oaths on his fingers.

‘Gwyn,’ Augus said, ‘it’s been some time now. I’m going to keep on doing this.’

‘I know,’ Gwyn said, looking back at him.

‘I’ve ceded to the wisdom of having Gulvi there. Even if it is Gulvi.’

‘She’s recovering from some injuries,’ Gwyn said. ‘You can ask her tomorrow. She knows that she’s bound and obligated to do it. If she has no more pressing plans for the Kingdom, she will help you.’

‘For a measure of the word ‘help,’’ Augus said, smiling ruefully.

‘I don’t want you out there,’ Gwyn said, pointing beyond the palace itself. ‘Albion is going to step up his offensive, especially now that Gulvi has just assassinated lynchpins in the Seelie system. It’s not safe.’

‘It’s not,’ Augus said, and for all that he sounded reasonable, Gwyn knew that Augus was going to
go anyway. Could hear it in the firmness of his voice. If he thought dropping to his knees and begging Augus not to go would work, he’d do it. But Augus had little patience for that sort of behaviour, and Gwyn couldn’t lock him in the palace. ‘I know it’s not safe. Gwyn, I’ll be careful. Gulvi will be there. I wouldn’t do this if I truly thought I was putting Ash’s life at serious risk again. But it’s important work, and I attacked important arteries of water within the Unseelie landscape when I was King. Gaining those landscapes back is important. You know it is.’

‘I didn’t say no!’ Gwyn snapped, a wave of irritation splitting through him. ‘I didn’t say no to you, so stop trying to reason with me. If you’re going to do it, you’re going to do it.’

Augus looked at him, and though his eyes weren’t wider, though his eyebrows hadn’t moved, Gwyn still thought he seemed taken aback at the outburst. Gwyn was certainly surprised at himself. He took a step backwards, and then walked over to a dresser and traced his fingers over the wood-grain.

‘I know I can’t stop you,’ Gwyn said, staring at the dresser.

‘Actually, you have proven more than once that you can.’

Gwyn shook his head and didn’t understand why this had become so difficult. He didn’t want Augus to go out there again, but he wouldn’t make Augus stay. Therefore, he simply had to live with the anxiety that came with worrying that Augus was going to get himself killed. That they might not get there in time…next time. A swooping sensation caught him in his gut and he tried to swallow it to non-existence. It didn’t work.

‘I’m coming back,’ Augus said, his voice a fraction softer. ‘That’s the whole point of Gulvi being there.’

‘Gulvi is currently recovering from multiple stab wounds and a fractured lung, and…gods only know what else,’ Gwyn said, his voice hard. ‘Even with her protection, there’s no guarantee-’

‘I can’t speak to what Gulvi does in her own time, but she is collectively known amongst the Unseelie as being one of the best bodyguards in existence. If she has agreed to help you, to protect me, I am in good hands despite our animosity. She won’t put herself in danger while she has me to guard.’

The words, *I don’t want you to go*, kept rattling around in Gwyn’s head. But Augus knew that Gwyn didn’t want him to go. And Gwyn knew it. So there was no point in saying it over and over again.

‘I could come with you,’ Gwyn said finally.

‘No,’ Augus said. ‘You go out onto those battlefields and put your life at great risk over and over again. Not only that, I know for a fact that you haven’t always been triumphant, and that at times you have been captured and badly tortured. You don’t see me telling you not to go, or insisting I be there with you, now, do you?’

Gwyn was arguing with himself as much as he wanted to argue with Augus. His head kept throwing up rebuttals that he knew were illogical. He could imagine, even before he said them, what Augus might say. So, in the end, he said nothing.

Augus sighed.

‘You’re not used to it,’ Augus said, and Gwyn looked over to catch Augus’ gaze. ‘You’re just not used to actually caring about someone. Not like this. Are you? You’re reacting like a child.’
‘I am not,’ Gwyn said, incredulous.

‘It’s not an insult,’ Augus said. ‘It’s just that the last time I had to deal with someone behaving like this, Ash hadn’t yet reached adulthood.’

‘I am not behaving like a child,’ Gwyn said again, and Augus stood up. He walked over and Gwyn refused to look at him.

‘Firstly, you’re fae, and we’re always a little childish. It comes with the territory. Secondly, it wasn’t an insult,’ Augus said, touching his hand gently to Gwyn’s back. ‘You’ve never learned how to deal with these responses as a child, because you didn’t really have them until Mafydd, which ended in the worst possible way. You don’t know how to let people go. It always ends so badly when they do.’

‘I am not behaving—’ Gwyn cut himself off. ‘I just don’t want you to go.’

‘I know,’ Augus said, the hand against his back rubbing against him like he was a small child. Gwyn made a sound of disgust and stepped away, and Augus followed him, until Gwyn ended up cornered against the wall and Augus was standing before him, something implacable in his gaze.

‘I haven’t said no,’ Gwyn said, staring at him. ‘Stop labouring the point.’

‘I don’t want you to feel this afraid while I’m gone,’ Augus said, pressing his hand to Gwyn’s chest. Gwyn knocked it away, and Augus’ lips thinned. ‘Is that the only way you can deal with it? Shutting me out? Pretending, now, as though you don’t care? As though you aren’t afraid?’

Gwyn stared at him, and realised he didn’t want to have any conversations like this. It had been a long time since he’d felt the need, but he called his light to him. He teleported away before Augus could stop him, his last impression of Augus’ face one of surprise and pity.

He spent the rest of the evening looking through paperwork, trying not to think of the taste of acid in the back of his throat and the knot of uneasiness in his gut.

Chapter End Notes

In our next chapter, 'Healing':

‘Make your case, Mikkel,’ Augus said quietly.

‘I can’t,’ Mikkel said, voice trembling. ‘I can’t, man. You can’t compel me, you have no reason to believe me. You think…I like working for Albion? You think I like him taking in fae like Marika, and having me there while he interrogates her? You think I like being the one that has to say like…yes, this world-famous, incredible fae is lying to him? And I’m not good at lying man. Seelie Readers – we can’t, we’re…stupidly candid. I can try and omit the truth but I can’t circumvent it. Look it up. You can’t- He won’t hear any dissent. He can’t listen to an opinion that is not his own. There are Seelie out there who don’t want the Unseelie Court to go away. You know? Albion is trying to find them. And now Gwyn’s just gone and gotten that swan-maiden to kill all those- all those people. God, it’s not a good place to live these days. That Court.’
Healing

Chapter Notes

No new warnings, but there is an incidence of Augus trying to use someone else's touch aversion against them, so you know...Augus being Augus basically.

Please enjoy! And thank you everyone for reading / commenting / interacting and being a charming bunch of folks who I'm lucky to have reading this fic. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Augus

*

The idea he’d had was a sound one, but he hadn’t thought Fenwrel would agree to it. Mostly because he didn’t know a great deal about meridians compared to Fenwrel and the deceased mouse-maiden Fluri, and because he’d gotten the idea from Gwyn’s shoulder, of all things.

‘When Kabiri harmed Gwyn’s shoulder,’ Augus said, Fenwrel sitting at her table and Augus sitting opposite, ‘the nerves in the shoulder changed. The pressure points aren’t where they’re supposed to be any longer. One, the Breath of Rika point, the one that helps form pain relief blocks, it’s three inches from where it should be.’

‘It happens,’ Fenwrel said, sighing. ‘The body adapts.’

‘But that’s my point,’ Augus said. ‘Would it not be possible to create a new system of healthy meridians alongside the poisoned ones? And I’m not saying to ignore the- ignore the pattern of sickness completely. But is that not possible?’

Fenwrel’s eyes had brightened, though she didn’t exhibit excitement in any other way. Finally, nose twitching, she looked off to the side, her hand touching her staff. ‘Something cannot be created from nothing, Augus. Even this, we would still need to anchor the cores of energy to those within you that have underworld pollution.’

‘But can it be done?’ Augus said, hating that he couldn’t keep the fervency out of his tone, that he couldn’t stay calm. He was grateful that Gwyn didn’t see this side of him, that Ash didn’t. Grateful, too, that Fenwrel did actually seem to care for keeping his confidences.

‘Creating new rivers alongside old ones? Yes, of course,’ Fenwrel said. ‘But Augus, this isn’t a new beginning. You cannot simply…ignore what you are.’

‘I know that,’ Augus said dismissively. ‘But I am first and foremost a lake creature. A creature that should be able to access deep wells of calm amongst the turbulence. I have none of it, and I require it. Whenever I return to the place that was once still and silent within, there is only noise, currents, movement.’

So Augus had reluctantly given Fenwrel his hand, shocked that he could be relatively comfortable with her after their last visit. She described everything that she was doing before she did it, and sometimes he asked her to stop, or wait, and other times they forged on ahead.
It was not easy work, and it took three hours to lay the faintest of groundwork within his body. He was sweating at the end of it, shedding water from his scalp far more rapidly than usual. The seat had splatters of lake water all over it.

He was too tired to even flick her hand away when she stroked his palm soothingly. He bristled at it, but he’d worked hard, and he felt the satisfaction that came when someone else also knew how hard he’d worked and appreciated the effort.

‘What are you thinking?’ Fenwrel said, and Augus curled his hand away from hers, rubbing at his forehead.

‘I go to attempt to heal another lake,’ Augus said, and Fenwrel stilled.

‘Augus…’

‘Don’t,’ Augus said, shaking his head. ‘It’s why I asked for this. Don’t talk me out of it. Gwyn has already tried. Gulvi will be coming with me. As bodyguard for once.’

‘You were desolate of all energy when you returned to us after healing that lake. Do you even know what you pull from yourself when you do it?’

‘I have an idea,’ Augus said, smoothing his shirt where creases had formed. ‘Of course I do. Do you know what I did to myself to damage them in the first place? They have to be healed, Fenwrel. I care little for the lives that were lost, but those lakes…’

Fenwrel’s mouse eyes widened with realisation, and her ears flattened. ‘You exacerbated your own illness when you damaged those lakes, didn’t you?’

‘I cannot strike a blow at a lake or river, without striking a blow at myself,’ Augus said, smiling. ‘What are you saying? That destroying those lakes was an act of self-’

Augus cleared his throat, held up a hand. ‘It’s not that simple.’

‘I’m not saying it was that simple. Your motives were always so difficult to understand and now…’ Fenwrel shook her head, ears twitching alertly, her busy fingers twirling her tea saucer. ‘And now? Healing them?’

‘I set out to prove something to myself,’ Augus said, standing up and pushing his chair in. ‘Though I do not yet know what it is.’

‘When you find out,’ Fenwrel said quietly. ‘Will you tell me?’

‘If I think you’ve earned it,’ Augus said, arching an eyebrow at her.

Fenwrel laughed, the sound deep, pleased, and Augus risked a smirk. If he said something like that to Gwyn, Gwyn would fret, wondering if he could earn it. And if he said it to Ash, well, Ash wouldn’t want him to go to the lake.

‘Gramercie,’ Augus said, once he was at the door.

‘Just make sure you come back with your viscera intact this time, hm?’ Fenwrel said, lifting the lid of her teapot and looking inside, while still smiling to herself.

*
‘La! Listen, pony, if you think you’re teleporting me to our destination, in the water, you are delusional,’ Gulvi spat, folding her arms.

Augus stared at her. ‘You’re a freshwater fae.’

‘I’m a bird, you fucking lunatic! I don’t turn to water when I teleport, I turn to air! I like water, yes. I require water, of course. But if you think I’m going to let you wrap your murdering, treacherous arms around me and turn me into water, we might as well call this off. We’ll teleport my way, or not at all.’

Augus couldn’t speak for a few seconds, and then shook his head. ‘Fetch me some maps, then. I do not know where the location is, offhand. I sense it out with my abilities. I don’t know…names and locations.’

‘Fetch them yourself,’ Gulvi said, scrunching up her face at him. ‘I’m not your servant. Out of the two of us, who is Gwyn’s Queen-in-Waiting? It’s not you.’

Augus growled in the back of his throat and summoned the trows. Once they’d come and Augus had detailed what he wanted, he and Gulvi waited side by side, silent.

The trows returned with a network of maps detailing waterways, and upon the maps, red crosses where Augus had rendered the landscape Blighted. He pored over it, looking between two lakes in particular. Finally, he chose the lake which wasn’t as close to a town as the other, and pointed to it.

‘Do you know where this is?’ he said to Gulvi, and Gulvi rolled his eyes.

‘Honestly, Augus,’ Gulvi said, digging her fingernails into his arms. ‘Bird. Remember? Aerial navigator.’

Augus grunted as his body became insubstantial – wisps of air – and then he was dragged on fast, whipping breezes, the scent of feathers in his nose and the atmosphere getting thinner around him. Gulvi’s grip was firm, sharp, the only anchor, and he held onto himself, unable to feel nervous about attempting to heal another lake, because the teleportation distracted him.

They landed on the bank of a lake that quietly lapped at a dead shore. He stared at carnage, all the Blighted lakes looked the same to him. It was hard to imagine these black and grey places ever held life.

Gulvi’s wings flared and she looked around, shading her eyes from the sun. ‘Mon dieu, it’s just like the Daugava.’

She withdrew her knives as she turned in a full circle, surveying the land. Then she looked at Augus, and her eyes were hard.

‘Bringing back memories?’ Augus said, trying to keep his voice light. ‘You weren’t there when it happened, were you?’

‘I searched up and down that wretched tributary, and nearby, looking for my sister – the one body I couldn’t find – in heaps and mounds of dead grasses, in the muck that you left behind. It’s very nice, really, that you’ve decided you can revive them now.’

Augus nodded, looking towards the water, the lack of life within it. He half-expected guilt to roll over him these days, especially since that family had…had reacted so badly to the revival of the lake.
It wasn’t the revival of the lake that they were reacting badly to, and you know that very well.

Still, it wasn’t guilt that found him now, but resolve.

‘I am unsure how long I’ll be gone,’ Augus said, unable to look away from the lake itself. ‘I will be tired when I return.’

Now that he was standing by a dead lake again, he was getting flashes of memory. A not-quite-otter spirit crushing him with claws, a childlike voice and the word ‘oops’ over and over again, the knowledge that he was so much smaller than what he was about to visit.

‘I’ll be here,’ Gulvi said. ‘Bored out of my mind, such a gorgeous landscape to feast my eyes upon.’

‘Hopefully it will look different when I return,’ Augus said quietly, and then turned and ran lightly, leaping into the lake, turning into currents and ripples and water quickly.

It was refreshing, somehow. Even though the lake was dead, even though he had to work harder, he felt lighter. Whatever work he’d done with Fenwrel, as tiring as it was, perhaps they were on the right track. Fenwrel would have known if they weren’t, anyway. Perhaps it was that he’d been successful once before at healing a lake, so he felt more confident now. He pushed down into the depths, spreading his awareness out, narrowing his thoughts with difficulty.

Augus thought of Gwyn during their last scene. Thought of how he struggled to surrender to the drift of sensations, and fought everything. His face had looked broken with betrayal when he’d screeched those hateful words at Augus, and all Augus could see in that moment was a child who didn’t know how to tell the world that he thought that everything that had happened within it was unfair. It hadn’t been offensive, no, he’d been pushing Gwyn hard and he expected intense abreaction as a result. But seeing the poison in his system bared, shouted from behind bared teeth, and then seeing the way Gwyn had cringed away from Augus when he’d walked over, expecting to be hit for speaking his mind…

And then, shockingly, a breakthrough when Augus couldn’t do anything about it. ‘Why won’t you just help me?’ Augus wanted to growl even now to think about it. Of all the times for Gwyn to learn how to say those crucial words, and he’d said them when they were both under the whims of the tinctures moving through Gwyn’s system. He hoped that the moment hadn’t done any damage. But knowing that Gwyn was capable of uttering them was something. It was something, wasn’t it?

He doesn’t trust you and he doesn’t trust himself around you. So, yes, keep reassuring yourself that it’s all ‘something.’

Clamping down on that cynical voice, Augus pressed deeper. This lake sprawled to several other lakes, and Augus wasn’t sure how far to push his awareness, or even where the spirit might be residing; if it was even still alive.

Indeed, some time later, Augus feeling the fatigue of staying in incorporeal form for too long, Augus hadn’t found any sort of entry point to a spirit’s chamber, and he was stretching himself too thin, too far. The underground system was far larger than the aboveground appeared, and every new tributary that stretched to another underground pool was also dead, no more life within it.

His consciousness began to fray at the edges, fatigue throbbed through his awareness. He realised that perhaps this was simply what it felt like when a lake was truly dead.

He pushed back up towards the surface, only then realising how far he’d pushed himself, how wide
an area his consciousness covered. Reeling himself back in, he turned into corporeal form and broke the surface, striking for the bank with a weak overarm stroke. When he felt Gulvi’s arms beneath his armpits, bodily dragging him upright, he growled.

‘It didn’t work,’ he said, staring at the landscape around him.

‘It’s been hours,’ Gulvi said.

‘It didn’t work,’ he repeated, staring at the lake around him, frustrated. He didn’t even find a spirit! What was the point in shoring up his energy system if he couldn’t even find a spirit to talk to? Better outright rejection, or to be able to see the comatose spirit himself, than this. What a warren of a lake, nothing like his own.

*It’s nothing like your own lake, perhaps... a different approach?*

Gulvi was dragging him from the shore, Augus’ legs not quite underneath him yet. His feet found the dead ground, though he still sagged in Gulvi’s grip, pushing to get his balance together. He still felt stretched too far, thinned out. And he stared at the lake in disgust.

‘This is unacceptable,’ Augus muttered to himself. ‘This isn’t...’

‘We should get you back,’ Gulvi said, sounding exasperated.

‘It’s just not good enough.’

A burst of energy got him out of Gulvi’s grip and he sprinted back to the lake, diving even as Gulvi shouted at him, swore at him to come back. He dove fluidly, breathing the water deep into his lungs and wincing at how deoxygenated it was. He struck for the base of the lake, grunting with tiredness as he went, kicking his way down, pressure clinging to his body, and then wrapping around him in an embrace that didn’t feel cloying or sickening, despite the fact that the lack of animation and life within the lake itself put him on edge, made his nerves jitter.

*Where are you, you elusive, damned thing?*

Finally, he was in the black at the bottom of the lake, his fingers hooking into silt and murk and the dead loops of bracken. He looked around, his eyes glowing, and felt the new meridians within him trembling weakly, but alive.

‘I’m tired and I don’t have time for this,’ he snarled in his true voice, and then pressed his forehead to the silt that swirled around him, drifted through his hair.

Carefully, he kept his awareness narrow this time. Spreading his etheric form across the breadth of the lake itself wasn’t successful, so perhaps a narrower focus would...

*There.*

The tiniest of openings. So tiny, hiding so far beneath the dirt, that Augus had missed it. But there was something there, a shift in energy, a faint hum in the deadness of the lake. Augus gravitated towards it.

He made himself incorporeal once more and funnelled himself down, and once more the world seemed to invert and he was in a glowing blue space, a bubble of water within water, and a water snake hung within it, as though suspended. This creature wasn’t quite as large as the almost-otter, but it occupied most of the bubble, and there was nowhere Augus could go without touching glowing coils once he became corporeal. The scales themselves gleamed.
Augus swam under a muscular coil, lifted another up, to finally find the head of the snake tucked within two bands of coils. He drew it forwards with both hands, feeling delicate but large jawbones underneath his fingers, looking upon the flat head of a creature that couldn’t crush him with claws, but would use its whole body, instead.

He rested his palm flat upon its nose, stared at it.

‘My dear,’ he said, hesitating, looking at the coils all around him. ‘I am tired. But not as tired as you, I am sure. Let me help you.’

All his life he’d known instinctively how to take something essential within himself, and brush it across plants and trees, across water and the land itself, and sing life forth. He’d used it to encourage ecosystems that would grow more edible food for Ash and himself when they’d been younger. He used it now, to brush across the snake’s great wedge of a head, to encourage deeper breaths and greater awareness.

Trembling, unaware of how much time passed, he almost missed it when the snake’s tongue flickered out, except that it brushed his shirt. The water around him began to move, the coils shifting, pressing closer, and Augus kept his touch light, kept offering that energy that the almost-otter had grabbed and ripped from him. This was more like pouring an urn carefully, letting life grow around him. If he gave too much of himself, there were always living lakes to take from; and so he had lived all his life, giving and taking equally, until he’d met the Nightingale.

The snake turned its head, the opalescent blue of its scales becoming – impossibly – more brilliant. An eye spun milky-white and arctic blue turned to him, moved over his body.

‘There was a home once. Here.’

A jumble of movement, coils lashing and then a mouth opening, a black maw, black tongue, and long fangs springing forwards. He tried to push away, when he felt the sharp tips of those bony teeth brushing his clothing, and then his skin. He breathed quickly, gasped, and then started to laugh.

‘Why do you laugh?’ the snake said, its voice not requiring a mouth, echoing around them.

‘It’s just occurred to me how stupid this endeavour is. Helping you all. Healing these lakes. I think…’ Augus’ laugh tapered off, and he winced when the fangs pressed deeper. ‘I’m trying to help you.’

‘With what?’ the snake said, his voice serious, as though it had never once had a sense of humour a day in its life. ‘With illness? With poison? With what?’

‘I didn’t rouse you with poison.’

‘You are tiny and pathetic,’ the snake said coldly, tongue flickering out over him. ‘What can you do?’

Augus bristled, not remotely compatible with the energy that this deva projected. He looked within himself, reaching up with his hands to hook fingers over the nose above his shoulder, even though it meant the fangs dug in deeper.

‘Here,’ Augus said, pulling deep from the well of himself and thrusting forth the energy that he knew the snake needed.

Augus grunted when the snake’s jaws snapped shut as though on a trigger, and though one fang
slipped free of his flesh, the other punctured the top of his shoulder, and Augus screamed as it skewed muscle and tendon and came out the other side.

‘I do need that,’ the snake said, as Augus’ blood bloomed around them both. ‘But I’m hungry for more than just that. I want blood. Even if it’s filthy, revolting blood. I will take it all.’

Colours flashed across Augus’ vision, as he felt an energy far greater than his reach around him and make him feel as though he was being turned inside out. His hands clutched at nothing, spasmodically, and his eyes rolled back in his head. The blaze of pain in his shoulder was nothing to the sense that something had suctioned onto his energy and was pulling too quickly. Far too quickly. This was very much like what the almost-otter had done, and his eyes burned hot from it.

Just as quickly, everything stopped, and the snake let him go. Augus floated, his hands twitching.

‘It’s a start,’ the snake said, shifting in the bubble, nudging Augus with his nose. ‘Why are you so sick? There is no calm inside of you.’

Augus groaned, his voice breaking. Why did they always insist on asking questions when he could hardly answer them anymore? The Nightingale had done that too.

You do it as well. To Gwyn.

Augus would have snarled at himself if he’d had the energy.

The snake’s head coasted over his body, far gentler, far more active. ‘But look at you,’ it said, sounding curious. ‘You’re nothing at all, a slip of a thing. Not even breakfast. There are wyrms in my lake again, you wouldn’t even be breakfast for them. You stunk up all their caves with your reek. Why are you so sick?’

The snake nudged Augus’ hands back to his own body. The fabric of his torn shirt floated up and off his body. His shoulder still poured blood. He could tell the creature hadn’t injected him with poison, but it was sore comfort.

‘Here,’ the snake said, ‘at least have this. It’s yours anyway.’

Augus’ eyes opened, he screamed when it felt like the creature was burrowing inside of him. It wasn’t. As his eyes rolled back a second time he caught the nose of the snake gently nudging his sternum. But the pain was immediate, visceral, invasive, and he struggled and struggled and-

Stopped. Everything seemed to stop. And instead of the glowing blue around him, he felt a still blackness, and when he opened his mind to it, everything became calm and easy. The pain was distant, and he could dam it away. His heart was beating too fast and he willed it to slow. And there, in that calm place, he felt as though he were at the centre of a lake that was nothing but uniquely his, down at the bottom where nothing could touch him.

‘You gave it to me,’ the snake said, voice echoing into the calm, no longer invasive, and not even that cold any longer. ‘I didn’t need it. I don’t need it now. Have it back.’

‘How did I give this to you?’

‘You gave it to all of us,’ the snake said, sounding amused. ‘This is just a bit of it.’

Augus had been without a true core of stillness for so long that the fragment felt whole, but even as the snake said the words, he realised it was true. Whatever stillness he’d found since destroying the lakes had always felt manufactured. There was just enough left that he could leech the worst of his
madness away in the Seelie Court cell, but not enough left compared to what he’d once had.

‘Come back,’ the snake said. ‘I’ll take you to where the air lies upon my back. But I don’t want to see you again.’

‘Yes,’ Augus said.

A mouth closed around him, no fangs this time, and Augus’ voice cracked when he ascended too quickly from a place too deep. When he was ripped from stillness and calm to ripples and currents and fish swimming past his face, wyrms nipping as his fingers, the roots of lotuses brushing over his cheeks.

He was dropped unceremoniously into the bank, and he heard the snake-wyrm diving back into the water. His shoulder burned. His eyes opened long enough to meet Gulvi’s stunned gaze, her open mouth. He couldn’t twist his mouth into the self-satisfied smile he suddenly wanted to make.

‘Told you…it wasn’t good enough,’ Augus rasped, before passing out.

* 

‘He was gone for the whole day! And now this!’ Gwyn shouted, and Augus winced at the sound of metal upon metal. Blades touching each other.

‘La! Don’t you start with me, Gwyn! I didn’t want to be there the whole day! You asked it of me, I did it. The rest is him. On him. I’m not in the mood to deal with your panic. I lost everything, and he brings it back? Could have brought it back before my sisters and mother died? I don’t feel sorry for him. Do you hear me, Augus? I don’t feel sorry for you!’

A whoosh of air, and Augus shifted painfully. His shoulder was still sore. He blinked awake to Gwyn standing by the bed in their bedroom, arms folded, glowering like he could combust objects if he set his mind to it. Current target for combustion: Augus.

‘Oh, but I’m fine,’ Augus said, laughing. ‘Look at me. Shoulder’s quite…shoulder’s seen better days. At least it will heal. Unlike…yours.’

Gwyn stepped over quickly, and then Augus was snapped to wakefulness at fingers that bit into his bandaged shoulder. He rolled on the towels that had been laid beneath him and Gwyn jerked him back into place, his glare making his normally cold blue eyes searing.

‘Going to…do it again,’ Augus said. ‘I have to. Apparently I’m a jigsaw puzzle.’

I think I sound delusional. No wonder he’s worried.

‘They have things I need. Like in the fairy tales,’ Augus said, and Gwyn shook him hard, stabs of pain shooting down his arm. Augus reached up with his other arm and tried to push Gwyn’s hand away. It was like trying to push a tree trunk. ‘Stop hurting me.’

‘Is this what you’ll be doing, Augus? Injuring yourself? You can use my battles as an analogy as much as you like, but I am fighting for something! I go to save lives!’

‘So do I!’ Augus snarled, piercing Gwyn’s wrist with his claws and drawing blood. ‘And I’m going again.’

‘And what happens when you meet a spirit that doesn’t accept you, Augus? What then?’
‘They need what I have to give them,’ Augus said, feeling weary and pathetically weak, only rage
galvanising him. He dug his claws deeper, scraped across a pressure point, and damn him, but
Gwyn was used to that now and he didn’t even jerk backwards anymore. ‘They need it. They don’t
like me, but there’s no one else who will do this work. I’m not even sure anyone else can.’

Gwyn’s breathing was heavy, coarse, and Augus stared at him, blinking tiredly. ‘Stop hurting me.’

The fingers let go of his shoulder and Gwyn spun away, near panic. Augus watched him, watched
the way he prowled the foot of the bed. Agitated energy coursed through him, and Augus was too
tired. He needed to sleep. He’d be fine once he’d healed, had something to eat.

‘Gwyn,’ Augus said. ‘Calm down. I’m alive. I’m Inner Court. I’m fine.’

Was it too much for him? Was Gwyn not ready to handle the emotional strain of actually caring
for someone? Augus found it all confounding. He’d never thought about it before. All the
responsibility that came with caring for Ash had seemed hard sometimes, but not impossible.
Gwyn, on the other hand, stalked the room like a caged animal. His old heartsong of wildness
coming through, revealing something feral.

‘Come here,’ Augus said, lifting a hand. ‘I only need some sleep, you overwrought creature.’

Gwyn paused and stared at him. Then shook his head, lips thinning.

‘If rest is what you need, than I shall leave you so that you may get it.’

And then he stormed from the room, slamming the door behind him. Augus rolled his head and
stared with mild surprise at the door.

*That, he thought, was a tantrum.*

Despite the pain in his shoulder, and vague background worry, he fell asleep soon after.

* He shivered himself awake, trapped in a dead, dank darkness, unable to get out. Not knowing if it
had been days or weeks, or longer. Not knowing what the Nightingale would have in store for him
if he opened his eyes – or even when he didn’t bother. The Nightingale didn’t always wait until he
was awake before starting to torture him.

Pushing himself upright with a gasp, Augus blinked awake to a dimly lit room. Bedroom. Unseelie
Court. The new one. Not the one where everything had gone so wrong.

His shoulder still twinged and he lifted his arm into his lap, then turned, surprised, to see Gwyn
watching him quietly, sitting cross-legged against the headboard and his whole body turned
towards Augus. A flash of spite that someone had seen him like this, but it lost its intensity at the
curious look on Gwyn’s face, the lack of pity. There was sympathy there too, he thought.

It took several minutes to recover his breathing, and he was shocked, sometimes, by Gwyn’s
sensitivity. If Gwyn were recovering from a nightmare of his own, he’d need words, constant
touch, more besides. Gwyn didn’t give that to Augus. He understood that Augus didn’t want it, not
now, anyway. It was space, engagement, quietude. Augus felt the blankets heavy on his legs, his
hair was damp and trickling down his spine. It itched faintly, but he was used to the sensation and
it was easy enough to ignore. He looked to the lamp lit with werelight and stared at it for long
moments.
There was light here. He sighed out a long exhale.

‘How long did I sleep?’ he said, in a voice perfectly even and smooth.

‘About a day,’ Gwyn said. ‘Are you hungry?’

‘No,’ Augus said. He shook his head for good measure.

‘Are you all right, Augus?’

‘Yes,’ Augus said, and Gwyn’s hands twitched where they rested in his lap. He extended one of his arms forward, the same way Fenwrel did, but he didn’t make contact. Eventually, he withdrew his arm again.

‘I don’t mean the nightmare,’ Gwyn said. ‘I mean- I do, but not only the nightmare. I…are you all right, Augus? Is there anything I can do for you?’

Augus felt split down the middle. Despite the fact that he had more calm at his disposal than he’d had before he’d destroyed those lakes, he was aware of a dichotomy within himself. On the one hand, the dominant in him recognised that Gwyn was making progress. He was asking about Augus, he was trying to engage himself. And the right thing to do would be to respond in kind – with engagement and honesty. To say that things weren’t all right. That…he wasn’t sure what he needed, but that he was aware, as much as anyone, that things hadn’t been all right for some time.

But then there was another part of him. The side that bristled to show vulnerability to anyone. The hostile waterhorse that would rather have died than let the Nightingale do what he did, and didn’t get the option of dying. The part that wouldn’t even have bared so much of himself to Ash, or Gwyn, or anyone. He’d just woken up from a nightmare, it was a miracle he wasn’t digging pressure points into Gwyn’s chest and watching him squirm to punish him just for seeing it.

‘I’m perfectly all right,’ Augus said.

‘Okay,’ Gwyn said.

‘I might get some more sleep,’ Augus said, turning away from Gwyn and facing the wall opposite. He felt disappointed in himself, in the situation. But he couldn’t bear to expose more of himself than necessary. His shoulder still hurt. Those spirits frightened him. At the time, he tried to push his fear away. But now, he shuddered to think of those heavy coils against his body, an open black maw against his shoulder.

‘Okay,’ Gwyn said.

Augus pretended that he didn’t hear the heaviness in Gwyn’s voice.

*There will be other times,* he told himself. *You can answer then.*

It felt like the lie that it was.

*  

Two days later, Augus was more than recovered, and looked up from distilling some herbs for Julvia when the trows popped into his room and waved frantic arms at him.

‘Is it Mikkel?’ Augus said, putting everything down and turning the heat of the flame to a slow, steady burn. He could leave that for a day, if he wanted to.
The trows nodded rapidly, ears flapping, fingers moving fast enough that he knew they’d done exactly as he’d demanded, and they were frightened because of it. Not that it was disobeying the King. Not exactly. Augus had only demanded that they waylay Mikkel the Reader temporarily. Take him to a different room, and contact Augus before they contacted Gwyn.

‘Take me there,’ Augus said, untying the black apron he wore while doing the heavier herbal work. He followed the trows through the palace, shaking the remnants of herbs off his fingers, and finally just licking them clean. It wouldn’t do to get his clothing dirty.

He could see the trows shaking, quivering at the thought of listening to Augus over Gwyn. But Augus had made acquaintances with a few of them, and every now and again he dipped into some of his funds – what little there was – and left silver coins sprinkled around his spaces. The trows knew he was buying favour with them, and they didn’t care. Their compulsion to steal silver. To be able to steal it, even when they were receiving remuneration for their jobs, was all that was needed to forge a connection with the clever creatures.

The trows paused by a door, and then pointed at it with sharp little fingernails.

‘Thank you. Do not notify Gwyn of his visitor until I’ve left, if you please,’ Augus said, rubbing his hands together and stepping into the room.

Mikkel stood in a small room, empty of furniture. It was almost a cell – but not within the prison itself. He had his arms folded, and his pale brown eyes widened at the sight of Augus. He snorted a laugh.

‘He decided to send his dogs in, did he?’

‘He doesn’t know I’m here,’ Augus said, quietly locking the door and standing before it.

Augus surveyed Mikkel quietly. He was a strangely coiffed creature. His clothing was always very well picked out, and Augus recognised someone who also cared about what they wore. But it was human clothing – a brick red t-shirt and cream jeans. Bright, brick-red boots that were very well tooled underneath their scuff marks. A leather cord around his neck, the same red as everything else, that looked worn enough to have sentimental value. The stupid tweed flat cap.

Compulsions were off the table, but he could scent Mikkel’s uneasiness and fear. Could see the way he clasped at one elbow, even though there was rebelliousness in his gaze.

‘I don’t need compulsions,’ Augus said softly, walking closer, ‘to make an impact.’

‘You’ve made quite enough of an impact, yeah? What with…like the fucking whole fae world.’

Augus smiled, showed his teeth, and Mikkel’s hand drifted down to the holster he wore. As soon as his fingers brushed the hilt of the gun, Augus’ waterweed shot from his wrists and snapped Mikkel’s wrist out of the way. The action was so violent that Mikkel staggered back against the wall.

Augus kept approaching until he could flick the holster open himself and slide the gun out, dropping it to the floor, gaze never leaving Mikkel’s, watching the movement of his pupils.

‘We have a problem,’ Augus said, feeding more waterweed around Mikkel’s wrists until he struggled, until they were bound in the rubbery stuff behind Mikkel’s back. ‘A slight problem.’

Mikkel was caged against the stone wall, and he was definitely shaking now. His eyes squinted as he stared at Augus, stared through him.
‘If you can, you’re welcome to Read me,’ Augus said, smirking. ‘If you think that will help.’

Augus touched his hand to Mikkel’s side, curved it intimately over his flank.

‘Get…the fuck off me,’ Mikkel said, his voice going far deeper than Augus knew it could. In response, Augus rubbed at his skin through his shirt, leaning in closer when Mikkel tried to move away.

‘You Seelie, you always break so quickly,’ Augus said. ‘But people like Gwyn…you wouldn’t think so to look at him sometimes, but he breaks quite quickly himself.’

‘Seriously, I know I made a mistake. I’m here to apologise!’

‘Albion is not unintelligent,’ Augus said, ducking his head and sniffing the pulse point underneath Mikkel’s jaw. *Definitely* fear. ‘And you seem to be in a fine position to wriggle through Gwyn’s defences, into his past and harm him. And I don’t like it when the Unseelie King is harmed. I’m his personal advisor. After your last visit, I have advised him not to see you again.’

Augus had done no such thing. But he’d certainly advised the trows to keep him informed of the very next time Mikkel visited. But Mikkel clearly didn’t know that. Whatever mixed signals blocked their powers from each other, meant that Augus could lie – at least sometimes – and Mikkel wouldn’t know about it.

‘Stop touching me,’ Mikkel said, and Augus raised his other hand and pinned it by Mikkel’s head.

‘No,’ Augus said, looking at the way Mikkel’s eyes kept snapping towards the door. ‘Concentrate, please.’

Augus pressed the fingers on Mikkel’s flank tighter, dug his fingernails in so that they were beginning to pierce flesh.

‘I’m not a spy!’ Mikkel squawked. ‘Not like that. Fucking hell, I’m not! I made a mistake last time! I just wanted to know about another Reader, that’s all, you fucking- That’s all!’

His voice cracked and he shrieked when Augus finally broke the shirt, broke Mikkel’s skin. The scent of blood filled the room, and Augus smiled faintly. Mikkel’s face crumpled, and he tried to shove Augus away.

‘I swear,’ he babbled, ‘I swear I’m not trying to hurt him. I swear. He’s a friend. He’s just a friend. I know it sounds stupid. I know it does. I didn’t mean to hurt him last time. I’m sorry. He’s doing fine isn’t he? He’s fighting in battles and shit? I didn’t really hurt him!’

‘Yes,’ Augus said, ‘you did.’

‘I’m not a spy,’ Mikkel said, voice breaking, the smell of salt sharp in the air as tears started to spill from Mikkel’s eyes. ‘I didn’t mean to do it. Fucking hell, fucking hell, you *asshole.*’

The words, the cadence, reminded him abruptly of Ash. Augus peered closer into Mikkel’s face – eyes now squeezed shut, mouth thinned, chin trembling. He was genuinely afraid, and it didn’t seem to be because he would be exposed in his lie. Augus’ nostrils flared and he tasted fear in the back of his throat.

What if Mikkel was like Ash? Another fae in a Court he really had no business being in. Wearing human clothing, preferring a different lifestyle. Readers didn’t get a choice, even if they didn’t want to be there.
Augus slowly slid his fingernails back, out of Mikkel’s flesh, and felt the way Mikkel swayed before him.

‘Make your case, Mikkel,’ Augus said quietly.

‘I can’t,’ Mikkel said, voice trembling. ‘I can’t, man. You can’t compel me, you have no reason to believe me. You think…I like working for Albion? You think I like him taking in fae like Marika, and having me there while he interrogates her? You think I like being the one that has to say like… yes, this world-famous, incredible fae is lying to him? And I’m not good at lying man. Seelie Readers – we can’t, we’re…stupidly candid. I can try and omit the truth but I can’t circumvent it. Look it up. You can’t- He won’t hear any dissent. He can’t listen to an opinion that is not his own. There are Seelie out there who don’t want the Unseelie Court to go away. You know? Albion is trying to find them. And now Gwyn’s just gone and gotten that swan-maiden to kill all those- all those people. God, it’s not a good place to live these days. That Court.’

Augus reached behind Mikkel, who whimpered and strained back against the wall. But Augus only sunk his claws into the waterweed around Mikkel’s wrists and snapped it. Mikkel’s eyes opened and he stared at Augus, stared like he could Read him through mixed signals.

‘Who are these fae that you speak of?’ Augus said calmly. ‘Has Albion killed or imprisoned them?’

‘Some,’ Mikkel said, his voice shaking. ‘I made a list. I made a list for Gwyn. I don’t remember names well, because…it’s better for my profession if I don’t really remember names. But I made a list.’

He reached into his pocket slowly, and drew out a crumpled piece of paper, thrusting it forwards. His fingers were clammy with sweat when Augus plucked up the list and opened it, scanning through the names. Eventually, he passed the list back to Mikkel, and tilted his head, frowning.

‘You cannot traipse through the King’s emotional state like a child,’ Augus said. ‘And if you ever leave him in that state again, without informing me, or finding a way to inform me immediately, I will torture you, and I will kill you myself. And I think you have heard enough rumours about me to know that I will deeply, deeply enjoy both.’

Mikkel shuddered. He stayed pressed against the wall even though his hands were free. There was a dark stain against Mikkel’s shirt, where blood had stuck to the claw marks in his flesh.

‘I didn’t know it would do that,’ Mikkel said, his voice rough. ‘I didn’t know.’

‘Now you do,’ Augus said, glaring at him. ‘Do not mistake me, Mikkel. You’ve forged a bond with him in a very short period of time. That can be for good or ill, and I see the merits of it. But if that bond is misused, you only need think of what I did to Gwyn’s poor family.’

‘Yeah, got it,’ Mikkel said, mouth twisting. ‘Loud and clear. So do I just…leave now?’

‘No,’ Augus said, stepping back and picking up the gun distastefully. He wrinkled his face at it and then removed the clip of bullets, handing the shell of the gun back to Mikkel, who fumbled it, before sliding it back in his holster. ‘I have not actually advised that Gwyn stop seeing you. You have offered a lot to this Court. But you have utilised your Reading on Gwyn’s emotional state unwisely. And you have drawn my attention.’

Mikkel nodded, and then he pressed his fist to his mouth and sobbed once. Augus felt not an ounce of pity for him, and he stared coldly, until Mikkel’s fist dropped and their eyes met again.
'If you find yourself pushing him that far again,' Augus said quietly, ‘you will tell me in advance. I will look upon it gracefully, if you warn me.’

‘I don’t like you,’ Mikkel said, eyes flashing.

‘Join a very, very long line,’ Augus said, lips quirking up. ‘What was it? Ah, that’s it. The ‘fucking…whole fae world?’

‘Why does he like you?’

‘Read it from him, if you like,’ Augus said, handing the clip of bullets to Mikkel and shrugging. ‘I’ll get the trows to take you to your regular meeting place now. Gwyn is actually here today, I believe, so you’ll get your audience with the King.’

‘Yeah,’ Mikkel said bitterly, as Augus unlocked the door and slid out of it. ‘Thanks.’

Augus turned and Mikkel backed up against the wall, cynicism turning to fear in seconds. ‘Watch your attitude with me,’ Augus said coldly. ‘That sarcasm and rudeness might serve you well with others, but I have not lived the life that I’ve lived, to have inexperienced, pathetic fae like yourself treat me with disrespect.’

‘Yeah,’ Mikkel said, nodding quickly. ‘Got it. Sorry.’

Augus left the room and closed the door behind him, signalling the trows over, unable to keep the smile off his face. All in all, he made the impression that he wanted to make, and hopefully Mikkel would think twice before clumsily making missteps with his lover’s emotional state again.

Chapter End Notes

In our next chapter, 'Solidarity:

‘My light,’ Gwyn said, looking at the chunks of raw metal all around him. The room smelled of stars. No, not stars; but the fragments of metal and rock and sediment and ice that would fall from the sky sometimes. His nostrils flared and he stared around the room. ‘My light, it burns through metal. It corrodes it. Since I’ve started using it in battle, I can no longer wear vambraces or gauntlets, or even the couter or vambrace guard. I don’t battle with a shield, and it leaves my hands…unprotected. But there is no metal that—'

‘You are made of soft and squishy flesh and blood. You are not the person to tell me what metal can or cannot do,’ the metalsmith said. ‘Tell me what you want, my lord. Your Majesty, tell me the dream, and then leave it to me to tell you what we can make reality.’
Solidarity

Chapter Notes

No new tags. :)

Hope everyone enjoys the chapter! And thank you so much for reading / commenting / kudosing and more. You all rock. :D There's also been some really cool fanart for Fae Tales lately, you can check all of that out here.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Gwyn
*

Gwyn sat on the ground in front of what was becoming their space. The space in the private night gardens, where Mikkel sat upon a stone statue and Gwyn could press his hands into the soil and pretend he wasn’t yearning for his old log cabins. Gwyn pretended he could feel a free breeze playing with his hair, imagine that he wasn’t caught within either Court.

Mikkel was crying. He’d been crying for five minutes. He hadn’t wanted Gwyn to see it, but his cheeks had flushed a blotchy red, and even though he wasn’t making any sound, and had a handkerchief to his face, it was easy to tell all the same. Gwyn pretended he hadn’t noticed. And now he pretended that the five minutes of silence hadn’t been strange or at all unusual.

‘Your lover is the worst,’ Mikkel said finally, and Gwyn pursed his lips.

The trows had informed him that Augus had seen Mikkel first. And Gwyn hadn’t been entirely surprised to see the blood on the side of Mikkel’s shirt, nor smell the salt of tears in the air. He wasn’t horrified, nor was he pleased. He knew what Augus’ motives were, and the idea that Augus didn’t think Gwyn could fight his own battles was insulting, but also not surprising. Augus was a waterhorse and at some point, Gwyn was going to come across his deep-seated protectiveness.

If only he’d direct it at Ash. But no, of course Ash is perfect.

‘Did he molest you?’ Gwyn said, when it seemed that Mikkel was breathing a little easier.

‘No,’ Mikkel said, glaring at him. ‘What, is that what it’d take? The blood and the…him being an asshole isn’t enough? What’s wrong with you?’

Gwyn kept watching him. Mikkel looked away, shifted on the bench, and finally sat on his hands. He sniffed loudly, and then cleared his throat.

‘So you really weren’t okay after last time,’ he said, his voice wet.

‘I suppose I wasn’t,’ Gwyn said.

‘Did you cry?’ Mikkel said, accusatory.

‘Are you annoyed at the fact that you didn’t get to see it?’ Gwyn said, and Mikkel’s shoulders
‘I’m not like that,’ Mikkel said. But then Mikkel turned back to him and his eyes were widening in shock. ‘Why aren’t you angry that- Other people would be mad as hell if they knew I wanted to see that. Most people, you know, if you want to see them cry; they get mad.’

Gwyn shrugged. He didn’t know what to say. It all seemed to make sense to him. Mikkel had lacked many experiences – including a measure of freedom – for a long time, and sometimes there was a sense of closeness with shared emotion, no matter what it was. For all that Augus became furious with Gwyn whenever he saw Augus at his most vulnerable, it always ended up with Gwyn feeling closer to him.

Sometimes, at least. Lately, he was becoming more and more aware of how Augus locked him out.

How am I supposed to ask him anything at all, when the simplest of questions result in being shut down?

‘Oh, trouble in paradise, huh?’ Mikkel drawled, and for a split second, Gwyn was vindictively pleased that Augus had reprimanded him. Sometimes it was easy to forget just how deliberately provocative Mikkel could be.

‘Are you glad?’ Gwyn asked, looking up.

‘Ah, look, not exactly. I’ve read you before, I know how you feel about him. I know probably better than you do. I know a person doesn’t feel the things you feel, without the other person sometimes giving you something good. At least sometimes. I know the difference between obsession and addiction and love. I’ve Read it enough times. Do you know the difference?’

‘It’s likely that I don’t,’ Gwyn said, reaching down and banding his own ankles with his fingers. His ankles had always been more delicate than the rest of his body, except perhaps his wrists. They were wiry with ligaments, but always seemed more vulnerable for not having the strength of his chest, even his thighs.

‘I’m sorry I upset you,’ Mikkel said, sighing. ‘I’m not that sorry, I mean- I’m sorry I- I dunno, I didn’t realise. You don’t seem like someone who’s that fragile. And I know you are. I mean I know it even in ways that you don’t yet. But…it’s easy to forget when you’re like, when you look like that.’ Mikkel waved his hand at Gwyn’s body. ‘And it’s easy to forget when you’re the Unseelie King fucking murdering everyone.’

‘Hm,’ Gwyn said. ‘Has there been much fallout?’

‘Has there ever,’ Mikkel said, rolling his eyes. He withdrew a list and handed it to Gwyn, who took it and unfolded it, and frowned when he saw Marika’s name on the list, and then several more, including Ondine’s.

‘What is this?’

‘It’s the list of people that’ve all been brought in for questioning. I had to- Dude, I’m a Reader. I had to- I can’t lie about- Marika’s under house arrest. She’s lucky she’s not dead. The only reason she’s not is that you know, it’s Marika.’

The depth of animosity in the glare that Mikkel gave him was startling, until Gwyn realised that it was directed at Albion. Gwyn shook his head slowly and folded the list up.

‘Thank you for this,’ Gwyn said, then held up a hand when Mikkel went to interrupt him. ‘You
hate this job. I don’t mean that you hate coming here. But working for Albion. Is there no recourse for you? No other Readers he could employ? Chances to escape?’

Mikkel’s laugh was bitter, and he wrapped a hand around his bloodied side. He opened his mouth to respond, and started to laugh again, raising the back of his hand to his mouth like he was crying all over again.

‘Chances to escape?’ Mikkel said, incredulously. ‘Yeah, what? I’ll come work for you? I’m Seelie, and I don’t want to live here. And I know – I know how it works. At some point, the most well-intentioned captor will just be like, ‘oh hey, but no offense, Mikkel, I have this person and I just can’t tell if they’re telling the truth.’ They won’t even be like a prisoner. Maybe even just a friend. And then it will be like, ‘oh hey, Mikkel, sorry to bother you, I’m so sorry, but we just…need to be sure this guy is a murderer.’ There’s no escaping this life. Well there’s one way to escape it, but I’m not sure I’m ready for that yet.’

They looked at each other. Gwyn knew he was being Read and he had no idea exactly what he was feeling. He didn’t think it was fair that Mikkel was made to betray his fellow Seelie, and yet he knew that if he were to get his hands on a Reader, he would…abuse the privilege. Would he have done the same with Mafydd? He grimaced.

Gwyn thought of the list in his pocket, of the tentative plans forming in his mind. Mikkel looked exhausted. He’d seen Terho with that expression. He didn’t think Terho had ever stopped wearing it.

‘Is there anything I can do for you, Mikkel?’ Gwyn said, and Mikkel’s lips tightened into something that couldn’t have been described as a smile.

‘Is there? The last time you did something for me, your boyfriend looked like he wanted to rip me a new one.’ Mikkel shuddered and then shrugged. ‘You know what I want.’

‘Not exactly,’ Gwyn said, rubbing at the back of his head. ‘You want to know about Mafydd. But I never knew him that well. I didn’t know him for longer than a week.’

‘I want to know about…’ Mikkel trailed off, looked up, frustrated. ‘Tell me about the good times.’

‘Some of those involve sex,’ Gwyn said, smiling ruefully. ‘I’m not sure you want to hear about those.’

‘Point taken. All right, then. Tell me…something else. But not if it’ll- look, Augus was pretty fucking clear, okay? I can’t- I can’t do what I did to you last time.’

‘I’m offering, Mikkel,’ Gwyn said. ‘And I don’t think it will be the same as last time. I’ve been thinking of Mafydd a lot lately, and I think some of the poison is…I think it’s different now. I can’t say that it’s better. But it’s different. Whatever reaction I have, it will be different.’

That was true enough. It hurt more now, than anything. But he could also say Mafydd’s name without feeling like his vital organs were going to drop right out of his body. He could think back to that time and feel splintered with guilt, but before, he couldn’t even think back to that time. Something would paralyse him, and his mind would never stray in that direction except when he was sleeping, and those nightmares were horrendous. So he didn’t know if it was better, exactly, but he sensed that Mikkel had cut open an infected wound, and it was easier to look at and assess the damage, now that the worst of the poison was seeping out.

‘Surely you had other good times where you two weren’t just rubbing your genitals together?’
Gwyn let go of his ankles and rested his forearms on his knees.

‘Yes,’ Gwyn said, nodding. ‘We did. They were always a little fraught. But Mafydd went out of his way to create fun moments from the beginning. From the very first. When we met, he showed up in my room – which wasn’t allowed – and told me I was cute, I think. He was very sweet, very complimentary and flattering.’

Not unlike Vane.

Gwyn hesitated, and then he stared at the ground in confusion.

‘Oh, what’s that?’ Mikkel said. ‘What’s that now? Someone’s flirting with you?’

‘No,’ Gwyn said slowly. ‘I don’t think so. It’s easy to mistake boldness with flirting for some people. But different people have different ways to express friendship or…eagerness. And Mafydd was- The very first time we had dinner together, it was a formal dinner. You know the kind, I expect. Where the food is fancier than the guests, and that they wouldn’t thank you to say so.’

‘Keep the snark coming, I like it,’ Mikkel said, grinning, and Gwyn found himself laughing unbidden.

‘Truly? I loathed those dinners. And Mafydd did too. He said so from the beginning. Not in front of our parents, no, that would have been…unconscionable.’

‘His father hit him too?’ Mikkel said, his eyes widening.

‘No! No, that’s not what I meant. I’m not sure if he would have, but judging from Mafydd’s reaction to…to what Lludd did to me a couple of days later, I sense that Mafydd and his father had a non-violent accord. But I’m not entirely surprised. Mafydd was a good son, I doubt he ever would have done anything to bring on his father’s wrath like I did, even with his sometimes aggravating ways.’

‘Huh,’ Mikkel said, lifting his chin and looking down at Gwyn like something had momentarily confused him. ‘Huh. Gwyn, you’re three thousand years old, yes? Give or take? You do know that you didn’t make your father like…hit you, right? How do you not know that?’

‘I know that,’ Gwyn said. They both knew he was lying.

‘Ah, yep, okay,’ Mikkel said, half-smiling. ‘Okay then. Sorry. I’m not touching that. Not with a ten foot pole and not today, with the memory of your sadistic shithead asshole lover all fresh. All right. Dinner. Pompous dinner filled with wankers. Do share.’

‘He contrived to drop a fork or knife onto the ground,’ Gwyn said, shaking his head. ‘And I went to get it, because that was…because I wanted to escape the dinner, and anything – even fetching a fork underneath the table – would have been a relief. And Mafydd was down there too, smiling at me, and I realised he was…he had created a moment for us. For us just to be alone and ourselves. Or, as much myself as I could be at the time. That’s what he was like, he made moments appear out of thin air. And they were always designed for…enjoyment.’

‘I used to do that for Angelica,’ Mikkel said, his eyes going distant. ‘All the time, actually. I used to stay up at night daydreaming about what I could do the next day. Like, would she like the beach, or the hillside? Did she want a joke, or would she want a really good sandwich? And then I’d…I mean if I had the day free, or even if I didn’t, I’d try and find a way to- I never thought of it like making moments.’
‘Do you think it’s a Reader trait?’ Gwyn said. ‘Does that not make you sad? If that’s a Reader trait, it means that somewhere, deep down, as fae – you exist to try and create…increased good feeling in others. It suggests perhaps that all that recklessness and joie de vivre is a way of spreading good will in others to perhaps create more within yourselves. And if that’s the case, then this assumption that Readers exist to be interrogators on behalf of the Courts is wrong.’

‘Of course it’s wrong,’ Mikkel spat, staring at him as though appalled. ‘And I don’t know if it’s a Reader trait. But it’s wrong. Do you not understand what it means that I was poached just about the day I left my family’s house? Sorry, the day I was kicked out? What do you think happened then? What would anyone do to a teenage Reader who didn’t want to Read for the Court? Hm? You have to make them do it. You have to force them to be suitable for the King or Queen. They don’t offer you a really high pay packet. They don’t bribe you with nice things. They take you away. To somewhere you can’t escape from. And then they make you ready. With whatever means they have at their disposal.’

Gwyn stared at him, and Mikkel shook his head abruptly, and then stood up and walked a short distance away from the bench. He faced away from Gwyn, had his hands on his hips, three of his fingers trailing over the holster that held his gun. He looked up at the stars as though there were answers there, and then shook his head again.

‘Stop it,’ Mikkel said. ‘I don’t want your fucking empathy, or compassion.’

‘I apologise,’ Gwyn said, looking at Mikkel’s back. ‘I can’t help it.’

‘I know,’ Mikkel snarled, staring at him over his shoulder. ‘But sometimes it helps me to tell you to stop.’

‘Did they rape you?’ Gwyn said, and Mikkel winced, and then shook his head.

‘Not exactly. They didn’t need to. They learned I was touch averse early.’

‘Ah,’ Gwyn said, shaking his head. ‘So, it might as well have been rape.’

‘Might as well have been,’ Mikkel said, dropping his hands to his sides, like he couldn’t even bear to have his own hands on his hips. ‘If I wasn’t touch averse before, I really, really was afterwards. But it worked. I’m a good little Reader. Sort of. Except how I want to fuck the King over. So not really that good of a Reader.’

‘Does Albion not suspect you?’

‘Does Albion suspect me? Nah,’ Mikkel said. ‘Not yet, anyway. I don’t push to know anything more, and I don’t try and like…get in his good graces. I act like a shitty little Reader. Like I don’t want to be there and he’s making me do everything. The only reason I have more information for you today is because there’s interrogations. I have to be there. And I do have information for you. A lot of it. Some of it I think you should be sitting down for.’ Mikkel gestured at Gwyn and rolled his eyes. ‘So that’s perfect.’

An hour passed, another, and Gwyn had to remind himself to blink sometimes, as Mikkel unravelled a whole knot of relevant, powerful information. Either Mikkel was trying harder to remember details, or they were easier to recall if he’d Read them in context. There weren’t names – that was why Gwyn had the messy, scrawled list – but there was a suggestion of a network of allies that stretched farther than he ever could have known.

‘Oh, you’re ticking away, you’re humming,’ Mikkel said, closing his eyes. ‘Busywork. All your
thoughts are taking over, and excitement? You’re excited? Well I hope you can use it all for something good. And I can’t believe I’m saying that to like, you, King of the Unseelie. All that. But then you’re not really one hundred percent either way, really. You’re kind of in the middle now. An island in the river.’

Gwyn exhaled slowly. That reminded him of Marika, who was – right now – under house arrest. He had to find a way to see her. But…were there wards on her property? Could he get a message to her?

‘You know,’ Mikkel said, rubbing at his eyes. ‘I figured out why everyone at the Court hates you. And it’s because – like, I was reading Marika, and it was clear she didn’t hate you. And suddenly I realised that the people who don’t hate you aren’t going to that Court, because they know that I’m there. I didn’t put two and two together until Albion started questioning fae and I started to realise all these fae felt like you weren’t…evil.’

‘I see,’ Gwyn said.

‘Which makes me think you should find a way to look at the Registry of fae to see who is coming to the Court every day, and who’s been notably absent since you were demoted. I can’t do it. Like, I can’t, because it’ll be recorded. But you could. Everyone has a right to look at the Registry.’

‘That’s good advice,’ Gwyn said. ‘But Albion has likely already done it, and that’s how he formulated this list that you gave me.’

‘Huh,’ Mikkel said. ‘That’s…actually probably true. Yeah, okay, probably don’t take suggestions about covert operations from me.’

‘That’s probably wise,’ Gwyn said, smiling, and Mikkel smiled back, shrugging. Gwyn thought he might be feeling something that almost looked like hope for the first time in some time. If the information was valid…

He remembered how he felt the first time he realised he would be able to defeat Augus, the first time he realised their plan to defeat the Nightingale a second time might work. And like all the other strategies he’d nudged into place, the most successful ones; they always started with a tentative tendril of feeling reaching up inside of him.

Mikkel’s head was tilted to the side, and he watched Gwyn with a small smile on his face.

‘So,’ Gwyn said, taking a deep breath. ‘Let me tell you about the time that Mafydd had me break out of my own home, and we went shooting with some bows at an ungodly time in the morning.’

* 

The assortment of metals in front of him didn’t bother him, exactly, but he didn’t feel the same sense of thrill he’d felt standing before the Glasera, being fitted for what he’d thought – at the time – would be his final suit of armour.

‘I know I’m not your first choice,’ the metalsmith said. He was a tall man, cobbled together from rock and stone, with eyelids that seemed to move like loose sand, and eyes chipped into a compound shape, like an insect’s. His stone eyes glittered, but no pupil expanded and contracted, and his scent was strange. His fingernails were metal, and they caused sparks to cascade off the table when he scraped them. ‘I know the Glasera would be your preference.’

‘Would they not be anyone’s?’ Gwyn said, and the metalsmith nodded. He’d not provided Gwyn with a name, and Gwyn had only found him via a warren of contacts. Secretive whisperings in the
dark of a solitary fae of stone, who worked with Mages and made fantastical creations of armour. Gwyn had seen his handiwork before, and assumed the armour of was of Glaseran make even though it was more fanciful than he’d normally attribute to the dwarves. The Glasera didn’t often solder so much magic to their metals.

‘They wouldn’t be mine,’ the man said, grinning and showing no teeth, but a maw of shadow and more stone. ‘But you’re the King. Can’t exactly say no to the King.’

‘If I told you that you could, would you?’ Gwyn said, his voice becoming cold.

‘Maybe,’ the metalsmith said. ‘But let’s see what you want first. I’m curious. Be specific. Tell me what you’ve dreamed of, in your wildest dreams. I want to know the things you want from metal, that you don’t think metal can give to you.’

Gwyn blinked at him. The Glasera hadn’t given him a great deal of choice over the armour he’d gotten. To be asked such a question…

‘My light,’ Gwyn said, looking at the chunks of raw metal all around him. The room smelled of stars. No, not stars; but the fragments of metal and rock and sediment and ice that would fall from the sky sometimes. His nostrils flared and he stared around the room. ‘My light, it burns through metal. It corrodes it. Since I’ve started using it in battle, I can no longer wear vambraces or gauntlets, or even the couter or vambrace guard. I don’t battle with a shield, and it leaves my hands…unprotected. But there is no metal that—’

‘You are made of soft and squishy flesh and blood. You are not the person to tell me what metal can or cannot do,’ the metalsmith said. ‘Tell me what you want, my lord. Your Majesty, tell me the dream, and then leave it to me to tell you what we can make reality.’

Gwyn stared at him. Stared at eyes that didn’t have any tells, and no eyebrows to fix expressions in place. He looked around the room again and felt uncomfortable. He wanted his old armour. The creamy lightness of it. He wanted—

‘I want it back,’ Gwyn said, and then shook his head and looked away. ‘I don’t want it back, and I do. A replica and something new all at once. In truth…’

He waited for the metalsmith to interrupt him, but the stone man didn’t, and Gwyn paced around the great, underground cavern, sunk hundreds of metres into the earth. He paced around plinths of metal, and then hunks of it just sitting on the ground. His fingers reached out and touched them sometimes. There were metals he was familiar with, and others that were rare or that he hadn’t seen before. One that was a dark red shot through with flecks of a white metal so brilliant that for a moment he thought them gemstones. Another metal was a dark, vibrant blue, with oily violet swirls throughout.

After a few minutes, Gwyn started talking. He talked of what he’d dreamed of when he was younger, before he was aware of the limitations of smiths. He talked of his old armour, and how he missed it, and how it was a part of him still. At first he said these words hesitantly, for the metalsmith was Unseelie and might not understand, but the metalsmith never interrupted, and in the end Gwyn found himself impassioned and stared at ores while lamenting that he shouldn’t need more armour because he had some, waiting for him, and—

‘It will no longer fit you,’ the metalsmith said, his voice neither kind nor unkind. ‘You do need new armour. But continue, I have ideas, and I cannot tell you what they are until I have heard your own thoughts.’
So Gwyn continued, for far longer than he thought possible. He talked of the impression he wanted to leave on the battlefield, and how he wanted others to remember him. Even if his desires were contradictory, he shared them. For here, under the earth, it felt like no one else could hear him, and it was naïve and perhaps immature of him to be so open, but there was something ancient and wise about this hidden man of stone, whose name was buried even deeper than they were.

After, when Gwyn had nothing left to say, the metalsmith folded his arms and nodded towards Gwyn.

‘Take off your clothing, so that I may see what I have to work with.’

Gwyn hesitated then. He knew he’d need to be measured, but he’d been very cautious about showing anyone his shoulder injury. Aleutia had seen it, Augus had seen it, some of the trows, but no one else. He wore pauldrons in battle, which did not expose the scarring. He avoided mirrors. Even Gulvi had never seen it, though she knew it was there.

Even when he sparred with shirts on, he made sure his shirts were not see-through when they were wet, and he forced himself to battle as though it wasn’t a weakness.

‘I have an injury,’ Gwyn said, and the metalsmith nodded, and said nothing. ‘It’s a permanent injury. You cannot…I cannot wear armour that suggests this to others.’

‘If I have gathered nothing else from your words, I have certainly gathered that much already,’ the metalsmith said.

Gwyn stripped off his shoes and pants first. There were little shards of metal on the ground and he could feel them pricking into the fleshy soles of his feet. He hesitated, then drew off his shirt, and instead of letting it fall to the ground, he draped it over his forearm.

‘Drop it,’ the metalsmith said, pointing to it, and Gwyn grimaced, but let it fall.

The metalsmith walked closer, stone feet grinding together, the sound of sand falling as though through an hourglass, even though no sand fell from his body. He touched very careful metal fingertips to Gwyn’s flesh, nudging his arms up and out, peering closely at the shoulder wound, and then touching it with the flat of his palm when he saw the back of his shoulder. Gwyn didn’t flinch away, but his skin crawled.

After some time, in which no tape measures appeared and the stone man even bent down to look at each of Gwyn’s toes, touching all the toenails individually, the metalsmith stood and walked away.

‘Dress your flesh, Your Majesty,’ the metalsmith said, and disappeared into a black cavern.

Gwyn dressed quickly. The metalsmith returned some time later, holding what looked like metal eggs. Each of them a slightly different colour or texture. All of them were set up on a long stone bench that was clear of other ores. When the metalsmith was done setting them up, he pointed to them.

‘Fire at will, Your Majesty. I cannot choose an ore, until I know which ore will cleave itself to you.’

Gwyn looked at the metalsmith, uncertain, but the fae only stretched a stone arm to the metal eggs again, and nodded twice.

The light split through him, cracking his palms, the wrinkles of his knuckles, even lacerating the skin beneath his fingernails. A single beam, and it sailed forth trying to devour the metal as though
it were life. And then Gwyn had to fist his hands and breathe deeply, feeling a sudden, bone-deep hunger that rumbled through him like a stampede. It wasn’t the same as attacking soldiers on a battlefield. His light knew that metal wasn’t the fae life it needed.

He wasn’t sure how long he needed to collect himself for, but when he returned to himself, the metalsmith was examining three different metals. All the other eggs had been knocked to the ground, either by Gwyn’s light, or the metalsmith himself.

‘Is cost an object to you?’ the metalsmith said.

‘Perhaps,’ Gwyn said. ‘Name your cost.’

The metalsmith grumbled out a sound that could have been discontent, until the rhythm of it reminded Gwyn of laughter.

‘Clever fleshy thing,’ the metalsmith said. ‘I will tell you several ways that you may pay me.’

Gwyn knew that the armour wouldn’t be cheap, as he listened to the list of payment options. It was not cheap, and Gwyn wondered if he was doing this prematurely. But after some thought, he agreed to what the metalsmith suggested, and they had an accord.

‘Return in three weeks and I will fit your armour to you,’ the metalsmith said. ‘If it fits well, you may leave with it. And the sword.’

‘The sword?’ Gwyn said, blinking at him.

The metalsmith stared at him with stone eyes and Gwyn shook his head slowly. He hadn’t even asked for a sword. He had someone else in mind for it, and the metalsmith took a scraping step forward, the sound of sand falling once more.

‘I promise you, if you do not like it, you do not need to take it. Nor will you need to pay for it. Call it an experiment of my skills, if you will.’

‘Hm. Okay. Thank you for your time.’

‘And yours, Your Majesty. Thank you for your patronage.’

The metalsmith bowed low, bending at the waist, even as Gwyn summoned his light to him and teleported away.

* 

Estori was the fae who now ran the Seelie Registry, and occupied an outer extension of the Seelie Court that was open to all. Which meant when Gwyn strode in, there were no soldiers barring his entrance. He joined a short line of Seelie fae, in a small, well-lit domed room filled with books and ledgers overflowing with pages. He smiled grimly as the fae slowly turned and looked at him over their shoulders and then hurriedly made their excuses and left.

He walked to the front of the line.

Estori was ancient – in both appearance and actual age. He looked up with sharp eyes, wrinkles folding and bunching into an expression of disapproval and discomfort.

‘Gwyn,’ Estori said.

‘So you’re the one who now runs the Registry,’ Gwyn said. ‘You used to live very comfortably on
the outskirts of the Courtlands.’

‘I still do,’ Estori said, folding his arms.

‘I recall that your house was annexed during sieges at least three times, was it not? A long time ago now. Well, a long time for me. It was at the beginning of my career. You were ever so grateful when I returned your home to you.’

The muscles of Estoris’ jaw shifted, and he folded his arms over the ledger.

‘Here’s what I’m thinking, Estori. I’m thinking that in the moment that my parents decided to keep me on and acknowledge me as their child, instead of adopting me out to the Unseelie Court in my infancy as they were obligated, they – in that moment – conferred upon me the name of Gwyn ap Nudd, and that became legally binding. Logical, isn’t it? By their own actions, they damned themselves.’

‘You don’t have a right to the name or the heritage associated with the name.’

‘I do,’ Gwyn said calmly, grateful for the fact that he was not actually Seelie in that moment, and that he could lie through his teeth. ‘I do have a right to that heritage. I have a right to their land. I am their last surviving heir. As Unseelie King, I’m rather disappointed that in his desperation the Seelie King and Court knowingly broke Seelie law to try and reject my rights to inheritance and heritage. I could hold you all accountable. But, wait, that’s not wise...is it? We only have a small military. Everyone knows that.’

Estori’s mouth lifted into a thin, vindictive smile.

‘Everyone knows that,’ Gwyn repeated, looking off into the distance. ‘Which is why I remain quite grateful for my long memory. So then, I even recall the name of that tiny village you cherish so much. You remember, it’s the one I protected for you. I even remember the hidden pathways through it and the best places to strike; because they were the places I once protected. You’ve devoted yourself to that place, haven’t you?’

The smile on Estori’s face vanished, and his fingers went to claw into the ledger, when he finally seemed to realise what he was doing and slammed the heavy tome shut, pushing it out of the way.

‘A tiny village could be crushed by no more than five hundred of my soldiers,’ Gwyn said quietly. ‘And, Estori, believe me when I say that my people will do anything that I ask of them. We will sack and loot more than just that village. And all of those fae that you have strong, solid bonds with. There’s no point in killing them all, is there? Best to leave survivors; or should I say reminders? Perhaps I can try and match the distasteful actions of the Seelie with distasteful actions of my own.’

‘You threaten my-‘

‘Yes,’ Gwyn said, staring at him. ‘Unless you do something for me.’

‘I don’t have the right to just give you back your name! And I certainly don’t have the right to give you back your land!’

Estori froze.

*Your name. Your land.*

An icy rage and disgust streaked through Gwyn, and for a moment he could hardly speak. They
knew. They’d known all along. What felt like bluffing, lying, wasn’t a bluff or lie at all. Everyone knew Gwyn had a right to that name, that land. He forced himself to take a long breath, and keep speaking.

‘But you are the one who determines the legalities of the Seelie Court, alongside Inner Court members like Old Pete. You will intercede on my behalf, and point out the illegality of the Seelie Court’s actions. You owe me at least three debts, Estori. And even if you didn’t, I am here to give you incentive. I have soldiers posted around your village. And should you call the Seelie military to defend it, they are under strict orders to ransack the place and the people, and retreat. The village is so small we could have it done in less than an hour.’

Gwyn folded his arms and leaned over the table, forced Estori to quail away from him.

‘I am the Unseelie King, Gwyn ap Nudd, owner of the An Fnwy Estate in the Seelie Courtlands. That is the fact of it, and if you do not make it legally binding, I will destroy everything you hold dear. If you don’t like it, perhaps you can find fault with the ones who publically declared my name, my heritage, my land, before all. While I was still an infant.’

There was an old, yawning horror in Gwyn’s chest. If Augus was here, hearing this, he’d be furious. And Gwyn didn’t know what he felt. Saying the words aloud – that his parents had claimed him as theirs, instead of adopting him into the Unseelie system – it made him more aware of just how…fractious his life had been. Why would they do that? Why didn’t they just kill him? Or adopt him out? And he knew, deep down, it had nothing to do with them wanting him, but there was still a part of him that wished...

‘You have one week to rectify your mistakes,’ Gwyn said, his voice going quiet. ‘And I want it declared, publically.’

‘Lord Albion will not see this through,’ Estori said, his voice now shaking.

‘Albion has broken his own laws,’ Gwyn said, scowling. ‘Are you telling me that the Seelie no longer care for them? Justice and virtue? It all gets forgotten in the wake of pettiness, doesn’t it? And you hold more power than you know, Estori. I have faith that you can make this happen.’

‘And if I can’t?’

‘You know what will happen if you can’t,’ Gwyn said, turning and walking away. ‘You can tell old Albion that if he has a problem with it, he can come throw a tantrum in my throne room again. It’s always deeply entertaining.’

Seelie fae hunched over by the entrance as Gwyn walked free of the small dome filled with a tiny ancient fae, and all those ledgers. Seelie soldiers had been deployed, and stood nearby with bows up and arrows drawn. He knew many of these people, and he laughed under his breath when he saw them, saw the hostility. It was a bitter laugh, but they didn’t need to know that.

‘At ease,’ Gwyn said, and almost smiled when three of the soldiers started to lower their bows and relax their stance.

As he teleported away, the bitterness faded to a cold, oily nausea that wouldn’t let him be. It crept up into his lungs, into his stomach, so that when he was finally ensconced within the safety of the Unseelie Court, the first thing he did was bend over and retch.

He placed a hand over his mouth, and then clumsily wiped at spit and bile. He ached with the need to see Augus, to just be in his presence. But Augus was hunting, and Gwyn had no one else he
could go to. He forced himself to straighten, and sought out one of the many training arenas, his heart beating like a bird in his throat.

Chapter End Notes

In our next chapter, 'Classless:'

Marika looked up through the canopy, as though searching for something and then considered Gwyn once more. ‘After tonight, we cannot meet like this again. It is too unsafe. But I can reach out to fellow Seelie. I cannot promise anything, Gwyn.’

‘I don’t need promises,’ Gwyn said. ‘But an attempt…’

‘Yes,’ Marika said. ‘Visit the Nain Rouge, see if she will assist in this. And now you must go. I have tarried. Do not return here. Do you understand?’
*wriggles helplessly* There are so many exciting things coming in the next few chapters I can't even. Like I really just want to put them all up at once but I cannot! So- Without any further ado, chapter 29. :) 

No new tags! Comments are love. And reading is love. It's all a whole bunch of love. :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Gwyn

*The magic of Mages defied the physics of the fae realms, and so their School of the Staff – open to both alignments – was a palace in the sky. The legends stated that the thirteen Deans and Principals had to constantly stream a steady, powerful magic to the School of the Staff to even keep it in the air. Should the Thirteen fragment, the palace would fall, the school would fail.

Gwyn stared up at it from a grassy meadow, replete with rare flowers blossoming out of season. Small wisps of stratus clouds hung low in the sky, and above it, what looked like fluffy cotton-wool puffs of cumulus, even though the palace was far too low for genuine cumulus cloud. All of it was illusion, manufactured, or artificial. The whole meadow rang with magic, and it jangled Gwyn’s nerves. In truth, he felt that he’d been dealing with a low-grade nausea for a week now, and unusually, he was missing Augus more acutely than usual.

Fenwrel had trained here. Fluri the mouse-maiden. Davix, a member of Albion’s Inner Court. True Mages were rare. And those who earned the designation had all trained in this illustrious place, refusing to name the details of their initiations, their lessons, taking on apprentices privately and maintaining the esoteric nature of their craft. The Raven Prince had trained here too, and never taken on an apprentice. Rumour went that he’d been one of their core Principals, but had to hand over the title when he became Unseelie King. Another rumour said he’d maintained his position as Principal, streaming his magic across to the School of the Staff even as he’d looked after the Unseelie Court.

The place intimidated Gwyn. He knew he should have come here months ago, but he didn’t like the feeling of magic on the surface of his skin, and nor did he like the way it thrummed at something inside of him. As though fingers were reaching within and playing with his tendons. He didn’t like its chaos, its playfulness, the capricious cruelty that could be magic, and the Mages who wielded it.

He swallowed as he looked up at the turrets that stretched up to the sun’s rays. They looked as though they were made of crystal. Perhaps they were. There was no way of knowing if it was the illusions of their illusionists, or the actual material of the palace itself.

At least three hours passed before a body bathed in light appeared in front of him. It looked so much like his own light; the light he used to teleport. Gwyn stared, shocked, and then stepped
backwards, even as the light resolved into a fae of brown skin, with dark green eyes, wearing a motley of white, yellow and gold. His hair curled black and thickly around his ears and the base of his neck, giving him a boyish look, even as he radiated wisdom and power. His nose was narrow, and looked all the more imperious by the way he tilted his head back and looked down the bridge of it at Gwyn. Never mind that he was a foot shorter, he managed to convey his strength and imperiousness well.

‘Greetings, Gwyn, King of the Unseelie. I am Taronis, the Principal of Light and its systems. What brings you to our School of the Staff?’

‘Is there somewhere private we may talk?’ Gwyn said.

Taronis smiled stiffly, then bowed. He reached out with fingers. His fingernails had been painted gold. No – when Gwyn felt their cool shape in his palm – he realised they were gold. Or some metal that looked almost identical to it. Taronis also wore heavy black eyeliner, and his lashes looked painted, and they were tipped with what looked like gold fragments. There was something about his face that reminded him of Augus, in the arched cheekbones, and that knowing, almost cruel expression.

Once Gwyn had settled his hand in Taronis’ there was a burst of light that felt familiar. It wasn’t his light, but he felt as though he’d just met a cousin to whatever lived inside of him.

They landed on a platform in the sky. It was completely open to the artificial clouds around them, and the platform itself was circular and made of what felt like thick, fired clay. It rang musically under their feet. There were runes and overlapping circles inscribed all the way across it. An alphabet he didn’t recognise worked its way across in collections of words and letters. He looked around to see towers that weren’t supported on any foundations, crystal clusters that floated with no moorings and occasionally clanged like bells.

He had a headache, winced.

‘So,’ Taronis said, walking over to a table made completely of glass – legs and all. He sat on a disk of glass that hovered in mid-air, and remained hovering when Taronis sat. ‘You are the one who has interfered with all the Old Lore.’

Gwyn walked over when Taronis beckoned him, unable to stop looking around at everything before him. It rang strangely in his blood. The magic poked and prodded at him, and a great deal of it clashed. Like a choir of many voices, singing different songs in discordant notes.

‘Have I?’ Gwyn said.

‘I know that you are a child,’ Taronis said, his lips thinning, ‘but do try not to act like one. The aithwick and the Soulbond, yes?’

‘The aithwick was sourced by my parents,’ Gwyn said quietly. ‘And the Soulbond was not acquired by me.’

‘I didn’t expect such a blunt instrument to play coy. A story then? A very short one. A long time ago, the Old Lore was determined to be too dangerous for Mages to have access to it, so it was locked away in a bridge between Kingdoms. Most of it, at least. But like sings to like, and the few fragments of Old Lore that were not locked in the bridge between Kingdoms could still speak of different wisdoms. And so I have a fragment of it myself, and know that you spoke to the Old Lore itself. So, here you are, wanting something from me while lying to me. How desperately, dreadfully Unseelie of you.’
‘I apologise if I’ve caused offense,’ Gwyn said, and Taronis inclined his head in acknowledgement.

‘You may ask me three questions, and no more.’

Gwyn resisted the urge to roll his eyes. Some fae took the task of being fae rather too seriously. Glamoured by their own fairytales. Or…perhaps this was the code of Mages. But he didn’t recall that Fenwrel had ever been so hostile.

‘Will the School of the Staff consider lending its assistance to restoring balance to both of the Kingdoms, in order to prevent the Seelie Court attempting to exterminate the Unseelie Court and Kingdom?’

Taronis rubbed at a spot on the table. ‘You have Fenwrel, don’t you? Don’t be greedy.’

‘Why will you not offer more assistance?’ Gwyn asked, his voice hardening, and Taronis’ head snapped up and a muscle pulsed in his jaw.

‘We are above the matters of the Unseelie and Seelie Kingdoms, and we do not answer to you. We are above Kings and Queens, and the Raven Prince himself was never more than a Principal here, and a student to his master forever more. We have mastered great power, and as a result, can influence the world’s fate too directly. We swear a pledge that we will not – hmm, let me put this in a way you might understand – we will not take sides. We answer to the magic only. In order to remain in the fae realms, we must act responsibly, and do not try and insinuate that taking sides – when we hold the power that we do – is acting responsibly.’

‘I fail to see how restoring balance is taking a side,’ Gwyn said, careful to not phrase it as a question.

Taronis’ eyes shifted to those of a cat – slit-pupilled and feral – and then shifted again to something reptilian and empty of all emotion. He was beautiful, Gwyn thought, but he was cold.

‘This is the Season of Turning, and you and your crude understanding of balance is not one that we answer to. Now, I am busy, and I have classes to teach. One more question, and that is all.’

Gwyn looked away at the fluffy wisps of cloud, hazy at the edges from water vapour. He looked down at the runes underneath his feet. The magic prickled underneath his skin and he knew that there was no way he’d elicit a more favourable response from the School of the Staff. It was more than just Taronis’ words; magic infected all of his actions, and Gwyn knew that there was nothing he could say to budge him on the matter.

‘Can you – I mean, if you are one – can you tell me more about celestial fae?’ Gwyn said, hesitantly.

Taronis smiled then, the expression the warmest one he’d offered so far. ‘Celestial fae. A lacking designation. Found in both the Seelie and Unseelie alignments, celestial fae are-’

‘Unseelie as well?’

‘You are permitted no more questions,’ Taronis said, face going cold again. ‘And do not interrupt me. You have not earned the right to it. Now, permit me to finish, or I will toss you off the side of this dais and you can leave when your bones knit.’

Gwyn pressed his lips together and Taronis’ lips quirked up in a stiff smile.
As I was saying – found in both Seelie and Unseelie alignments, celestial fae are uncommon on either side. Adult celestial fae are extraordinarily rare on the Unseelie side due to the fact that they are more likely to self-combust before the age of ten, due to the destructive manifestation of their power. Think – as a parallel – of the Unseelie ruamoko, who are usually dead before the age of five, along with their families if they don’t get out of the way fast enough. Since your question was ultimately self-focused, let me explain further: you were not discovered for what you were earlier, because of the aithwick. You were registered under the designation of celestial Seelie in the School of the Staff, where we register the powers of all fae that come under our notice, despite the fact that your light never behaved in a Seelie manner. You were designated anomalous. Now that we know the truth of you, there is nothing anomalous about you, except that you survived your childhood intact. Were I remotely interested, I could show you just how much you could do with that light of yours, but I’m not. There’s not many others who can teach you, so until you can learn something that looks like respect for one’s elders and betters, you’re – I think the saying goes – on your own.’

Gwyn stared at him, and Taronis stood and bowed deeply. When he smiled toothily, he showed very pointed canines, and his bottom teeth were jagged. Gwyn realised he had no idea what kind of fae Taronis was. And that did not happen to him often anymore, with all his travels.

‘If it assists you at all,’ Taronis said, taking Gwyn’s hand, ‘no one likes me when they first meet me. And not many like me once they get to know me.’

Light surrounded them both, and Gwyn ended up back in the meadow. Taronis let go of his hand and wiped it on his motley as though Gwyn was dirty or infectious.

‘Perhaps people would like you more if you didn’t act as though they were beneath you,’ Gwyn said, and Taronis raised a laconic brow.

‘But you are beneath me. Now, if you please, I have far more important things to do with my time. Farewell. I’m sure I’ll see you again someday. But hopefully not too soon.’

Taronis teleported away and Gwyn was so surprised by the whole exchange that he couldn’t bring himself to feel as offended as he knew he should. Instead, he felt a lurking disappointment and mild relief that the School of the Staff would – at the very least – be staying out of it, and therefore not supporting the Seelie Court in its goals.

* 

Estates like Marika’s had carts and carriages going into and out of it all the time. Food needed to be delivered. Waste had to be removed if it couldn’t be re-used. Gardeners that didn’t live on site came by daily.

Gwyn waited down the road, hiding himself in tree cover and drawing his glamour in tight, monitoring the activity of those who moved into and out of the estate for two days.

On the third day, he wrote a coded message and carefully tracked a carriage, finally teleporting directly inside the cluttered space and slipping the message into a crate of delicate opul-fruits that glowed as they rocked back and forth. Marika ate those herself. He hoped that Marika still used her old messaging system, and hoped also that the carriage wasn’t being monitored with magic. He was certain he couldn’t teleport into the estate without tripping some kind of magical alarm. He teleported out of the carriage and hid in the woods.

House arrest – could Marika even leave her estate? She knew magic, and he had faith in her skills, but he had no idea if she could move past the bounds of her estate without attracting Albion’s ire.
Gwyn kept himself still and silent as he crouched within the cover of a shrub. Eventually, he sent out his animal calling ability and ended up with two rabbits hiding underneath his haunches, and a squirrel perching on his good shoulder, brushy tail occasionally tickling across his neck. Deer foraged nearby. If anyone was looking for him, they’d see peacefully grazing animals and hopefully move along, thinking the area undisturbed.

It was surprisingly easy to stay quiet and unmoving. He felt his old heartsong of wildness move through him, familiar and ancient, the one he’d wanted to stay, and the one that had barely lasted any time at all. Augus had given him that heartsong, even though Augus would say he’d only exposed what was always there. Gwyn had gone to him with his corrupted heartsong of triumph and Augus had transformed him, made him more truly himself.

Only for Gwyn to ruin it a short time later.

Like this, he could almost pretend that his core energy didn’t sing at him to surrender, didn’t tell him to let go, let it be, give up. Here, he was a wary, wild creature.

The squirrel and the rabbits were long gone. Now, an owl perched overhead, and a black shuck snuffled nearby, leaving him alone. All the animals treated him like a fellow animal, not a King, not a fae of any consequence. So even though his memories tried to remind him of the horror of hiding from Efniisen in these woods, he only had to look around to bring himself back to the present, to feel and scent the trees and fungi and flora around him. To smell the many musks of animals and sense the myriad lives and deaths that flourished and faltered in this place.

It was nearly dawn. Either Marika hadn’t seen his message, or she didn’t want to see him, or she couldn’t leave the estate. He stood slowly and stretched, careful with his bad shoulder, and then froze when he spotted her.

She was several metres away, standing quietly by a tree. It looked like she’d been watching him for a little while.

‘So,’ she said, walking towards him, ‘I can still sneak up on you. It would be flattering, but I find myself resisting the urge to cuff you very hard and tell you to stop slacking on your training.’

‘Stealth training isn’t exactly a priority these days,’ Gwyn said, smiling.

‘Now I’m resisting the urge to cuff you twice,’ Marika said primly, resettling her translucent robes and looking around carefully.

‘Is it safe to talk here?’ Gwyn said.

‘Safe enough that I came. But you must be quick. I cannot be absent long.’

‘I apologise for drawing you into the line of fire,’ Gwyn said, and Marika held up a hand.

‘This is not actually about you, my student, for all that Albion assumes that it is. And I do not think you came here to apologise. I think you came here to tell me something. We do not have long. Speak, if you will.’

‘I want to form a Coalition,’ Gwyn said, his throat feeling dry. ‘One that I am not a member of. It was suggested to me that I appeal to the classless. I want to take it one step further. A Coalition of the classless – Seelie and Unseelie – who can, if they’re willing, mediate the affairs of the Courts to their satisfaction. I know they don’t normally like to intervene, I know, precisely because they’re so powerful, but—’
‘Gwyn, tell me what you need, and be clear.’

‘A Coalition – the islands in the middle of the river, the ones who will advocate for both sides, who understand that we need Seelie and Unseelie. I wish to form a Coalition, and I wish for you to gather the Seelie classless to you who you think can hear this plan. I will handle the Unseelie side. The classless are known to intervene during periods of great unrest. The only time when they feel their powers are justified in use. Why not an intervention that is well-represented by both alignments? That…joins only for periods like this?’

Marika did not move, but it was obvious that she was lost in thought.

‘Can it be done?’ Gwyn said, feeling like he was young all over again and asking her if it really was possible to shoot an arrow that far and it still be on target.

‘Perhaps,’ Marika said, still lost in a reverie. ‘You wish for it to be both Unseelie and Seelie together? Not two separate Coalitions? You do not think the latter would be easier to manage?’

‘What do you think?’

‘I think it is not a time for ease,’ Marika said. ‘Do you have a liaison in mind for the Unseelie side?’

‘The Nain Rouge.’

Marika made a clucking sound with her tongue and then hummed, the note pure and musical. ‘For all that she is chaos and hunger, she was the one who admitted her own adopted brother needed to be stopped. She saw sense and knew the Nightingale had to be recaptured and imprisoned. She knew the first time. She has a dark but accurate intuition. Gwyn, the classless have never sought to form any sort of Coalition themselves before, on either side. We notoriously do not work well with others.’

‘Yet you are trainer to the Seelie Kingdom, and I am a King working in close contact with others. Tell me that when the time comes, we do not serve the Kingdom?’

‘You are hardly classless yet, lad,’ Marika said, smiling. ‘Though I take your point.’

‘Tell me it’s a fool’s errand, and I’ll leave it.’

‘It’s a fool’s errand, and we need it,’ Marika said, laughing ruefully. ‘Imagine I spouted the cliché about desperate times and measures.’

‘Done,’ Gwyn said, smiling again.

‘The Seelie Court…Gwyn, I wish you could have seen it during Titania’s reign. Oh, what a lady she was. I find I miss her more and more. She would have loved your idea. A Coalition of Islands, of classless fae to meet in the middle. What made you think of it?’

‘The trows,’ Gwyn said. ‘They are…in close contact with one another, Seelie and Unseelie. They cohabit sometimes. The only reason I cannot also have the Seelie working in the Unseelie Court is that- well- no one would stand for it. And when I received the advice to appeal to the classless, I could not help myself. Some of the most valuable counsel I’ve been given since becoming Unseelie King, has come from the wisdom of both alignments.’

‘And what if this group decides they no longer want you as King? What if they decide you and Albion are both too controversial, and that you must both step aside?’
‘In all honesty, Marika, that would be something of a relief,’ Gwyn said, his voice hushed, and Marika looked like she wanted to laugh, raising her fingertips to her mouth, eyes sparkling.

‘And you will not join it? This Coalition? With your voice being one of the strongest for inter-alignment cooperation?’

‘Marika, no. I have been too destructive a force towards both sides and I will continue to be so. No, neither King can serve on this – if it even comes to fruition. We must be absent from it.’

‘You know, the Nightingale wanted a third Court as well,’ Marika said.

‘Yes, that’s exactly what I want,’ Gwyn said, rolling his eyes. ‘A third Court to rule over everyone and destroy everything.’

‘And if this does not come to pass? This…Coalition of classless? What is your alternative plan? And what is to stop me from going to Albion right now and telling him everything? Or worse? What if his Reader plucks it from my head? That creature…I do think that working with Readers is so dreadfully unprofessional.’

‘Didn’t Titania also employ Readers?’

‘Against criminals,’ Marika said. ‘Not against Seelie fae who are simply having different thoughts to the King. Albion is…I cannot believe he’s fallen so far, in such a short period of time. Was he like this as underwater King of the Atlantic, and we just never saw it? Or is his bigotry even more blatant now that he is forced to interact with land fae every day? I wish I could sit him down and shake him, but why would he ever listen to me? I am one of the fat, overbred cows that he disdains. ‘Land fed and overbred,’ he said once.’

Marika looked up through the canopy, as though searching for something and then considered Gwyn once more. ‘After tonight, we cannot meet like this again. It is too unsafe. But I can reach out to fellow Seelie. I cannot promise anything, Gwyn.’

‘I don’t need promises,’ Gwyn said. ‘But an attempt…’

‘Yes,’ Marika said. ‘Visit the Nain Rouge, see if she will assist in this. And now you must go. I have tarried. Do not return here. Do you understand?’

‘Yes,’ Gwyn said.

‘Be well, Gwyn ap Nudd. And gramercie, the gift of your trust is great.’

‘As is yours,’ Gwyn said, and Marika bowed once, and then shimmered away.

Gwyn lingered in the forest a little longer. The scent of the fresh woodsy loam in the soil, the feel of the stars upon his back, and he couldn’t help but press two of his hands against a pine and lean his forehead to the bark. This land had been his home once. If Estori returned the An Fnwy estate to him, he’d have land that bumped up next to Marika’s generous estate. He’d own land that touched the Ethallas forest, with a lake within it that had once belonged to the Each Uisge, now claimed by other fae.

It was land he associated with the elation of leaving on horseback for military campaigns before he knew how to teleport – when he felt the strange tingly hope of leaving the An Fnwy estate. The knocking fear and dread when Efniisen hunted him through forests, ill-content to leave him be. The despair that had found him after Mafydd’s death, when he’d roamed and wandered, learning the trees, learning that his need to explore went far beyond what he’d ever thought. There was a
time when he knew this land so well he could recognise the bucks and the stags each generation by the imperfections in their coats and antlers. A time when he knew every badger sett and bird’s nest.

He teleported away, and when the zahakhar lay upon him like a homecoming in the Unseelie Court, he felt himself lost in some pain greater than himself, that he could not name.

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The human world often smelled rank to Gwyn’s nose, but no place ever reeked quite as much as the Nain Rouge’s dilapidated, underground concrete carpark in Detroit. Level after abandoned level, bits of support pillars missing, chunks taken out, dried blood and blackness appearing in smeared handprints on the levels closest to the ground, becoming entire splattered and full-body imprints the further down Gwyn travelled.

There were old signs that humans had once commandeered the place, before the Nain Rouge had. Rotting pieces of clothing that could have been flannelette shirts, or bits of denim fraying at the edges. Stained newspapers and overturned trolleys. Cardboard boxes piled and sagging and flattened. The whole place a confection of acrid sweat, urine, decades of faeces, a patina of horror and fear, the semi-sweetness of long-term decay, turned to mildew and rust and a level of rot that attracted those who might feast upon carrion; rats and foxes, feral and domestic cats, wild dogs, even coyotes. The insects and arthropods that came attracted bats, which twittered and resided, clinging to the overhead grates that once protected fluorescent bulbs.

The Nain Rouge was a fetid, subterranean creature. More deity than fae, classless for so long her powers could not be estimated; staying out of the affairs of most because of it. The oldest of folklore said that she was born in the bowels of the greatest mountain, and that her hunger was so great when she was conceived, she ate the shadows, devoured the mountain, and then roamed the land looking for powers to feast upon.

Gwyn was quite sure that the Nain Rouge laughed off all her genesis myths, and that the truth of her origins was as rotten and decayed as her broken, chipped teeth, her dried-blood coloured eyes.

There was a saying, amongst the malicious fae with the more predatory appetites. There was Unseelie, and then there was Unseelie.

The Nain Rouge was firmly in the latter category. As frightening to her own alignment as she was to anyone else.

The air was dank and cloying, the light sources almost entirely gone, and he stepped down crumbling concrete into a level where he had to stop and let his eyes adjust, pupils dilating as his night vision kicked in. This reminded him of the cell in the Seelie Court, and his lips thinned, his nostrils flared as he sought out all the sensory markers to remind him that he was well and truly someplace different. That he wasn’t underfae.

‘It’s the King!’ a playful, childish voice whispered near Gwyn’s left ear.

He turned sharply and saw nothing at all, except broken pillars, concrete struts merging with the walls of the earth itself.

‘Fuck me, the King is here!’ The same voice again, and a flare of light in the corner that was so bright in the darkness it was nearly blinding. The voice had come from the opposite direction of the fire, which went out seconds later.

The Nain Rouge had always been able to throw her voice in the dark, and Gwyn folded his arms
and resisted the urge to roll his eyes.

A skittering small shape – like a scurrying animal – to the right, and Gwyn walked deeper into the Nain Rouge’s lair. He watched her disappear into shadow, and then caught the sound of movement behind him. He didn’t spin, though it was tempting. His skin crawled. His senses were raw, he let himself be open to all shifts and changes in air pressure, knowing that she could attack him at any second if she truly wanted.

‘Who wants to have some fun?’ she said, her voice warped with age then, crackling with the millennia of her true years. The voice came from above him, and he felt a whoosh of air as she dropped next to him, then disappeared and laughed in a distant corner, the earth swallowing up her voice.

A faint rumbling of the ground, an earthquake, bits of dirt and sediment and more falling from the ceiling, and Gwyn realised what she was doing too late.

The ground opened into a circular maw beneath his feet and he dropped. His arms slammed out, palms skidding and scraping in the vertical tunnel, legs coming out as he ground to a halt, skin raw. He clambered upwards quickly, scaling the hole, even as the ground continued shaking.

The hole began to close, the earth bunching up and roaring around him.

He bunched his muscles and leapt for the surface but the earth closed on his leg, and he jerked it free, losing a boot in the process. His foot lowered onto solid earth, and he felt the crunch and squish of bones and gristle mashing into his sole, clinging to his toes. Some dead, mauled body that the Nain Rouge had fed from.

‘Are you quite done?’ Gwyn said, impatient, out of breath. The ground had stopped shaking, at least.

A flare of fire in the distance, and it was guttering in a metal container, the tang of lighter fluid oily in the air.

‘How badly do you like the taste of oxygen, fucker?’ the Nain Rouge said from over his shoulder, and then a high pitched giggle sounded at least ten metres away.

Another fire blazed to life in another metal, cylindrical drum, and Gwyn sighed and walked to a half-rotted pillar and leaned against it. Waited.

‘Boo,’ the Nain Rouge said, walking out from behind the pillar in front of him. ‘Boring. Boring as hell. If you knew anything about horror movie tropes you’d be scared out of your mind by now. I’ve made people crap their pants.’

‘Humans,’ Gwyn observed, desultory.

The Nain Rouge smiled. ‘Fae too.’

‘I don’t scare easily.’

‘Pfft, you so do,’ the Nain Rouge said, her voice childlike and almost squeaking. She was tiny, no taller than an eight or nine year old child. Indeed, that’s how old she looked on the surface, with her spindly limbs generously cloaked in rotting animal pelts. Her eyes absorbed the light and did not glitter or reflect it back. Her hair was a tangle of snarls, her fingernails broken or claws. Gwyn could smell gun oil, and wondered how – given how decrepit her home and how disgusting her appearance – she could even clean the guns she used as her primary weapons. ‘You’re a big fat
scaredy cat. You’re the worst. My brother wasn’t even giving you that much of a hard time.’

‘Miss him, do you? The Nightingale?’

‘Nah,’ the Nain Rouge said. ‘He’s the kind of dick that’ll eat your leftovers and then stare at your plate like a puppy – if the puppy was a psychopath – before stealing the plate too, and then he’ll look at you and wonder what your bones taste like. I told him I tasted like come. He didn’t like that. He also didn’t believe me. But whatevs. Never understand why juices bothered him so much. Pus and rot and blood and spit and come and shit. My bread and butter!’

‘Not his,’ Gwyn said, and she spread her arms wide. Gwyn could see the glint of a rifle. It was nearly as tall as she was.

‘He’s not my brother really anyway. Adopted and all. Easy come, easy go. I feel him sometimes down there. In the dark. It’s a different kind of dark in that pit. But he’s there. I’m sure he thinks about us all the time. How romantic.’

Gwyn shuddered, and the Nain Rouge chuckled. ‘Don’t you know anything about movie tropes? You don’t kill a bad guy, they’re gonna come back one day. How many times you think that little rodent’s gonna put him back in his box for you?’

‘No one knows how to kill him,’ Gwyn said. ‘And I didn’t come here to talk about him.’

‘No one knows how to kill me either,’ the Nain Rouge said. ‘I’m like that jellyfish that lives forever. Or that sea sponge. Shove me through a sieve and I’ll still come back. So why are you here anyway? Did I tread on your toes somehow? Got tired of being a glow-in-the-dark vibrator for your pony?’

‘Have the classless ever formed a Coalition before to intercede on behalf of the alignments during times of conflict?’

‘Such big words! I’m only a child, man, I don’t know what the fuck you’re talking about. A… Coalition? Sounds dirty. All that fraternisation.’

Gwyn waited, and the Nain Rouge stepped even closer until she was less than a metre away. Gwyn held up his hand to halt her, and she bounced on the balls of her feet, but stopped moving forwards. She was close enough that she could leap for his throat anyway. He didn’t feel safe around her. It would be a fool who felt safe around her.

‘Welp, what if there had been one, once? You telling me you don’t already know? You got all that Old Lore in the palace? Ask that. Those talkative little parchment shits could do with some company anyway.’

He frowned, and the Nain Rouge made a sound of frustration. ‘You don’t even know what you fucking have, do you? Fucking clueless. I think the Raven Prince – stick-figure indie hipster yuppie twat that he is – is the last one who knew what he really had down there. God. Do you even know it’s there?’

It was the Old Lore in that strange room that had suggested the Soulbond. That had told him a plague was coming. The room that could be accessed from both the Seelie and Unseelie Court, even though neither alignment could use it to pass into the Court of another. It was the Old Lore that had suggested that Gwyn use Ash to save Augus.

‘What’s it feel like, anyway? To share that palace with a pony who betrayed the last King pretty fucking badly? You got eyes in the back of your head? You’d want them. Hope you’re not one of
those idiots who believes that true love wins out. It doesn’t. Love is the greatest folly. And you think I even want to help? If the Unseelie Kingdom is destroyed it’ll be anarchy. Oh no, not anarchy, it offends my delicate sensibilities!"

Gwyn had hardly heard the rest of what she’d said. Love is the greatest folly. He’d said that to the Old Lore once, and it had repeated it back to him. Those bits of animated parchment, telling him that the cost of liberating Augus was high. Was the end of the Unseelie Kingdom the price? Gwyn shook his head. He refused to believe that.

‘You don’t care what Albion is doing?’

‘Albion is just a rancid fish stick,’ the Nain Rouge said dismissively.

‘A destructive fish stick,’ Gwyn said, and then couldn’t stop the smile at the insult. The Nain Rouge’s teeth glittered as she grinned at him.

‘Oh no, and I hate destruction,’ she drawled. ‘It’s the worst. You’re the worst, you Seelie fucking goody two-shoes. Trying to do the right thing. You want your Coalition? I know the people to ask, but it’s gonna cost you.’

‘What will it cost me? I’m rather tired of favours where I don’t know the cost.’

‘Well, Jesus, don’t tell me you’re in a habit of doing that. I want a higher status. Gimme Court.’

‘Icturiel,’ Gwyn said flatly.

‘Outer Court.’

‘Capital,’ Gwyn ground out.

‘Capital, and let me have a sip of your power.’

‘I believe, Nain Rouge, that the only appropriate response to that is ‘fuck off.’’

‘I’ll taste you one day, King.’

‘Capital status only once you’ve assisted us to my satisfaction. If you ruin the Coalition, or invite the Unseelie Court’s destruction, I will-’

‘You’ll what? Make empty threats against me? What do you think you could really do to me? Do you have any idea how fucking powerful I am? You don’t think this whole world lives because I find it more entertaining for it to be here, than for it to be swallowed up in my empty, hungry, slavering gut? Listen, princess, if you-’

‘No,’ Gwyn said, his voice loud, strong. ‘You listen to me. The Nightingale is rumoured to have swallowed two gods, to have eaten spirits. It is said that his endless, eternal power over the fae realm is based on his own boundless appetite. And where is he now? He is in the bowels of another realm, locked in a single room, behind a hundred locked doors. Perhaps he’ll escape again one day, but I believe the imprisonment itself is so unpleasant it turns him quite mad. Do you know who engineered his first imprisonment? A league of Mages. And who managed it the second time? Me and a single mouse-lad. What do you think I need to shove you in the underworlds and leave you in a dark that even you don’t want anything to do with? I know that you refused to go into the underworlds, despite your immense curiosity. You should consider what I can do to you, and what I am willing to do to you, if you threaten my Kingdom.’
The Nain Rouge placed her hands on her hips and tilted her head.

‘There it is,’ she said. ‘There’s the Kinder surprise.’


‘A Coalition of classless will only be a stay at best,’ the Nain Rouge sighed. ‘It was only a stay last time. You know what it means when the world calls for a situation like this? Bad things. The shit hitting the fan. And it’s not even about you. Or me. A bunch of punks set a shitball in motion before you were born, and you know how things kind of snowball out of control. Then again, maybe you don’t. I bet the only snowballing you’ve experienced lately is the porn kind.’

‘And ‘bad things’ bother you, do they?’ Gwyn said, having no idea what she was talking about. Pop culture references went over his head at the best of times. ‘Don’t give me that.’

‘Believe it or not, dickhead, my brother and I are not the only world-hungry assholes in existence. Who do you think created the Old Lore in the first place? Huh? It was Mages. And who were the ones who wrote the secrets about getting into the underworld that my brother – that your mouse-lad – discovered in writing? Fucking Mages. And the Season of Turning combined with all these most recent clusterfucks means one thing, I reckon. It might be five years from now, it might be a hundred years from now, but the Mages are going to go to war again, and it’s going to have nothing to do with fucking alignments and it will ruin the fae realm. And I’m a selfish shit. I get first taste of all these little fae crawling the world. They don’t. Bad things bother me when it’s fucking dicks with a staff and a cloak of power.

‘Here’s the thing, glow-worm, the thing that should freak you out. The Coalition was forming before you asked. Right under your patrician nose. The classless are moving about. You don’t think the same thing that drove your classless little ass into my domain to ask me a favour, didn’t do the same thing to me? You don’t think I haven’t seen Tigbalan or Makara or others lately, scoping shit out? You don’t think the Ratcatcher of Hameln on the Seelie side hasn’t put out feelers to see which Seelie classless might join him for tea? And when the classless join together, it’s already too late. It’s a symptom, not a fucking cure.’

‘Will it buy the Unseelie Court time?’

‘Time to fight the real war? The one that’s got nothing to do with pitting a glow-worm against a fish stick? Maybe. I dunno. Maybe the Unseelie Court is meant to be dust by the time the Mages get going. Who the fuck knows. You’ll give me fucking Capital status. Underfae is balls, as you know. And you? I suppose you’ll want to run the fucking Coalition.’

‘No, I’ll not be on it. I’m too biased.’

‘Fucking hell. Oh god your Seelie sense of fairness is so disgusting. I think I just threw up in my mouth a little bit. Fuck. You’re revolting. Maybe you’re the reason why the Unseelie Court’s going to go to shit, because you’re just not what we need. Not bloodthirsty enough, not hungry enough, not mean enough. Just a little soldier with a stick up his ass and a martyr-complex bigger than my fucking appetite.’

Gwyn relaxed further into the pillar and raised his eyebrows at the Nain Rouge, until she threw back her head and laughed.

‘Not gonna take the bait?’

‘Not today,’ Gwyn said.
‘Whatevs. I’ve seen you on a battlefield. I know how dirty and mean you are deep down.’

Gwyn didn’t react to that either. His mind was turning over some of the other things she’d mentioned. He’d wanted to stay away from the Old Lore after the living parchment had suggested the SoulBond. The room itself set his skin to crawling. But if the classless were already assembling without his assistance, then something far greater was happening that he didn’t understand. Perhaps he was slower on the uptake because he was newly classless.

‘They tried it before, once,’ the Nain Rouge said, her voice quieter, and the more sinister for it. She sounded then like some primordial creature, one of the first fae, a voice that didn’t echo, that plucked at his nerves and tendons. ‘It is not the first time a Kingdom has tried to destroy another Kingdom. Obviously, they failed. This time? The Nightingale laid waste to the system you have all relied upon for so long. But it is deeper than that. The fae realm was touched and then poisoned by the underworlds. Everything we know is sickening, the poison has visited all of us. Some more than others. This is our cleansing. We will either survive it, or we will perish.’

The Nain Rouge looked off into the distance, into the blackness. ‘But even the Nightingale could never have done what he did, without the wisdom of Mages leading him there. Certain Mages, in particular. And you should be careful, young man, because one of those original Mages who gave the Nightingale secrets he should never have possessed, works on Albion’s Inner Court right now, as I speak. He’s doing a good job of staying in the background, don’t you think? You know what I fucking think? Never trust them if you don’t know what they’re doing. Go talk to that demure mouse that lives at your Court. Ask her if she knows that Davix shouldn’t be playing in the Court system, and then ask her if she’s only in your fucking palace to make sure someone is keeping an eye on him, because the foppish School of the Staff is pretending they don’t give a shit that Davix got away from them. Ten bucks she’ll try and deny it, and fifty that you’ll know she’s lying.’

‘How do you know so much about Mages?’

‘I make it my business to know about the organisations that will fuck up the world in an instant if they wanted to,’ the Nain Rouge said. ‘It’s not all shits and giggles, friend. You don’t live as long as I do without knowing something, yeah?’

She laughed suddenly, her voice going high and childish again. Then spread her arms wide.

‘You owe me Capital status, bucko. And I’m sick of looking at your light without you giving me just a teensy-weensy taste you selfish ass. Go on, sod off.’

The clap rang out loudly as she brought her hands together. Concrete and dirt opened beneath Gwyn’s feet and he leapt clear, but a vortex of dark, humid air sucked him down into the dark. Earth and dirt slammed shut on him and he cried out, crushed and claustrophobic, only to be spat out in front of the Gwylwyr Du.

He brushed loose bits of soil off his clothing, thoughts of Mages and magic swirling through his head as he walked towards the Unseelie palace.

Chapter End Notes

In our next chapter, ‘Gravity:’

‘My Prince,’ Augus said again. ‘I suppose you can humour me, if I keep calling you
that?’
‘It’s stronger, isn’t it?’ Augus said, looking down at his own forearm, even as Fenwrel curled her brown fingers around his pale wrist.

‘Yes,’ Fenwrel said. ‘Hunting is strengthening the new energy paths. Are you noticing any overspill? Any increased moments of mental absence? Nightmares?’

‘The nightmares are constant,’ Augus said, looking off at one of the tapestries on the wall. ‘I don’t suppose they are any worse than normal, nor any better. It is quite odd, though. Since dying, I sometimes notice that I feel better than usual. But then other times, I think I feel worse, or ill.’

Perhaps he should have seen Gwyn first, but when he finished digesting his prey and transformed back to human-form, the first thing he’d noticed was that the skeleton of energy he and Fenwrel had laid within him was pulsing like a tentative river system. There it was, patient and gentle, still frail, but growing in strength. Not only that, but since seeing that strange snake-wyrm spirit, he felt calmer, or at least felt as though he had greater capacity for calm. The idea that he’d shattered or splintered parts of his inner calm in order to destroy the lakes, it didn’t surprise him, but he didn’t recall it being intentional either.

The Nightingale was the one who had first sent rifts into his very being. Augus had continued the Nightingale’s work, and Augus wasn’t sure how he felt about that.

‘The stronger it gets, you may experience some worsening of your initial symptoms. The poison may try and exorcise itself – what can be exorcised – through the new system. It may not. I’ve never treated someone with your condition.’

‘It’s a logical leap. I know something of poisons and recovering from serious poisoning, so I can see the merits in what you say,’ Augus said.

‘You can? Good. I also wanted to let you know that we have the common work well in hand. I’m quite certain that you can choose your diplomacy schedule as you see fit.’

Augus picked up his cup of lukewarm tea and sipped it. Fenwrel now knew how he drank it and poured him a cup early, so that it would be the right temperature when she had her own. He wasn’t comfortable leaving the common work to someone else. It felt like giving up, somehow. Or worse, it felt like turning his back on the underfae, and they had so few true advocates. But then, his work in diplomatic relations used to allow him to intercede on behalf of the underfae so perhaps he could find a way to continue a form of common work anyway.
He settled his cup down and looked at Fenwrel’s fingers resting over his palm and wrist. ‘Are you actually doing anything at all, right now? I can’t tell.’

‘No, I’m just touching you,’ Fenwrel said, and Augus’ eyes narrowed. He slowly slid his hand out from beneath hers and she laughed, the sound generous and full. ‘I’m sorry, Augus.’

‘If you were sorry, you wouldn’t do it,’ Augus said, folding his hands in his lap. ‘I understand that you are naturally affectionate, and in certain contexts, so am I, but I do not appreciate that you simply assume that I somehow need that. I am not a child that needs to be correctly parented.’

Fenwrel’s smile faded from her face and she nodded once, decisively. ‘I am sorry. The touch is necessary for the energy work, but I’ll stop convincing myself that you need more of it. Is that fair?’

‘Mm,’ Augus said, sceptical.

‘You’re not the first one to have said that I have fallen into a maternal role while here.’

‘Oh?’ Augus said, and Fenwrel smiled at her teacup and then tapped her nails on the table quickly, a sharp, neat sound.

‘It’s nothing,’ Fenwrel said. ‘I am just not used to hearing my personality flaws from those who often insist on acting like children.’

‘Ah,’ Augus said. ‘If it helps, sometimes a great overbearing naïve King with so many deeply ingrained flaws of self-awareness I’m not sure how he functions, will tell me something about myself that is so insightful that I often want to slap the intelligence out of him.’

Fenwrel laughed, her eyes twinkled, and Augus lifted a graceful hand in something approximating a shrug and drank more of his tea.

‘That does help,’ Fenwrel said.

‘And the thorn in your side is…?’

Fenwrel shook her head in a minute movement and then Augus swore that her cheeks flushed darker. She really was very becoming, he realised. He tilted his head at her and let his mouth lift up in a small, encouraging smile. All deliberate. She kept her eyes down on her tea, and then she tapped the table again with her nails.

‘Gulvi,’ she said.

Augus forgot what expression he was supposed to be keeping on his face and stared at her. ‘But Gulvi is in love with Ash.’

‘Gulvi gave her heart to Ash,’ Fenwrel said, sighing. ‘And she seems to think that it means that’s that, life is done for her. I know some swan maidens have pined away after their lovers have died, but some haven’t, and some go on to find…but she won’t listen to me. Which would be fine, I suppose, except she also won’t leave me alone. She has a habit of just…turning up. Usually when I’m trying to sleep. She has no sleeping pattern, and I’m quite sure she finds the most aggravating times to turn up on my doorstep.’

‘Is there chemistry? Is it reciprocal?’ Augus said, trying to wrap his head around it. All his life, it had been Ash-and-Gulvi, they were a unit. They were best friends. Gulvi was in a tragic situation, certainly, but…at least they had each other. Not much could be done; once a swan maiden gave her
heart away, that was that, right? It had never occurred to him that the situation could alter or shift, and yet now – with Fenwrel flushing before him – he realised that he’d let himself accept Gulvi’s static viewpoint about the situation. As had Ash.

Augus was worried that it meant that Gulvi and Ash were drifting apart. But another part of him realised how closed off he was to the happenings in the palace in general, that he hadn’t noticed any of these developments. Once, in the Raven Prince’s Court, he’d been very observant of social and interpersonal shifts.

‘Chemistry,’ Fenwrel said quietly. ‘Chemistry is odd. I think you and I have chemistry.’

‘We do,’ Augus said, smiling unbidden. ‘Just not a kind I feel any burden to pursue.’

‘Exactly. Yes. So nothing will come of that chemistry except this healing connection that we have. So in that sense, I do have chemistry with Gulvi, but it might not mean anything at all.’

‘Fenwrel, I do believe you’re trying to tell me with what looks like…clumsy evasive manoeuvring, that you want her.’

‘Oh do be quiet,’ Fenwrel said, scratching at the underside of the table, lips thinning. ‘The last thing I expected to happen when I came to this Court, was to even be on conversational terms with someone like Gulvi. An assassin killed my grandmother. I’m not a fan of the industry of covertly killing people.’

‘That’s a shame, since she desperately loves the industry,’ Augus observed.

‘Does she? I hadn’t noticed,’ Fenwrel drawled, and then laughed. ‘Perhaps living with all of you has rubbed off on me and I’m regressing.’

‘Perhaps,’ Augus said, doubting that was the case at all. He laughed as well, and Fenwrel’s ears twitched, flattened, and then relaxed once more. ‘I have to say, it’s not often I meet an Unseelie fae who has such a problem with people killing other people.’

‘Then you’re not looking hard enough,’ Fenwrel said quietly. ‘Most of us don’t like it. There’s no…quota on Unseelie-ness, Augus. We are what we are because of our appetites, and not because of anything else. I know it’s been popularised that the worst of us are the most Unseelie of all, but by and large, I think that’s utter bullshit, to borrow from Gulvi’s crassness. Otherwise, how did swans and mice end up as Unseelie fae? People put too much stock in alignments.’

‘You say, as you live in the Unseelie Court.’

Augus swallowed down a sudden, strange nausea. Discomfort crept through his limbs and it seemed like the room dimmed. It didn’t grey out exactly, but he wasn’t quite in it anymore. The words that Fenwrel said rang through him, and he could hear a gentle, stern voice rebutting each of them. But it wasn’t Augus’ own voice, but one even more aristocratic, lazily patient, reminding Augus that alignments mattered, that staying true to one’s Unseelie core was crucial.

He blinked hard and felt some unwanted, awful feeling claw its way up from the depths of himself. Something tarry and dense, that clung to him like bile in the back of his throat.

‘Do you even know what it is to be Unseelie?’ the voice within him said, and Augus blinked hard when he realised he knew that voice, knew it very well.

‘Do you even know what it is to be Unseelie? How is it that you, the sixth Each Uisge and with all of those fine, evil counterparts – those past incarnations – to base your reign upon, you are the one
with the soft heart and the rotten soul? Do you know I wouldn’t even have been able to drag the other Each Uisge down here! They didn’t have brothers to threaten! They all would have been laughably difficult to feed upon, because what perceptions did they have of grief? Of sadness? Yet you, how utterly amusing, you truly think you’re a fine example of what it is to be Unseelie? You kill humans. What else do you do? Heal people? Love your brother? My desperate, darling pony, contemplate that your fate would not have taken this path if you had been what you were supposed to be, and not the mewling, tearful child that you became instead.’

‘Augus?’ Fenwrel said, and Augus stood, pushing the teacup backwards.

‘It’s time for me to take my leave.’

‘Augus, did I upset you?’

‘No, of course not,’ Augus said, and watched as Fenwrel went to place a hand on his arm, and then thought the better of it, and stopped. ‘No, it’s- People do not put too much stock in alignments. Being Unseelie is more than just appetite.’

Fenwrel stared at him shrewdly, and then her mouth thinned, her lips pursed. Augus could tell that she was seeing something more about it, wanted to talk about it, and he couldn’t possibly. It would never happen. Something about the subject- He couldn’t even think about it. He shoved it all away, ignored the voice, the threat of darkness.

‘Fenwrel, I cannot talk about this,’ he said, his voice harder than he intended.

Her expression softened. ‘Are you going to be okay?’

‘Your fussing is deeply aggravating,’ he said, as he walked towards the door.

‘I’m going to take that as a yes,’ she called after him.

Despite the sense that something had gone wrong inside of him, he smiled stiffly anyway, performing an attempt at fineness even though she couldn’t see it. He closed the door behind him and walked quickly away, the smile falling from his face as he walked down corridors that still – even now – reminded him of a darkness that would never leave him, that he would never truly escape from.

*

Augus let himself into Ash’s rooms that evening, wanting a place that – while not entirely familiar – still reminded him of home. He leaned over the wooden bar, staring at bottles of whisky, bourbon, other grain liquors, alongside different bottles of vodka; one that actually looked like it had flaked gold inside of it. Augus looked at that one in confusion, and then he frowned in distaste at the lingering smell of heavy alcohol.

He wandered through a corridor to the right, and peered through a door that was left cracked ajar. There, Ash slept, on his back and one arm thrown up onto the pillow, the other half-covering his head. Philosophy books were strewn everywhere, some closed, some with folded down pages, yet more with finely made bookmarks inside of them. On the bedside table, surprisingly, a heavy book on cultivating balcony gardens. Except the book looked like it had been published in the human world. Why on earth was Ash learning how to look after plants from humans? He was a waterhorse.

Augus shook his head at the conundrum that was his brother and left him to continue sleeping, moving quietly towards the balcony of greenery and tiny, contained lakes in pots. He slid back the
glass door and stayed close to the wall of the tower itself. He neither liked heights, nor the sense of a large open sky stretching away from him. When he’d been younger, he’d had a manageable phobia of the open sky, and though it had gotten increasingly mild over time, the balcony stirred those old feelings of unease. Especially when he didn’t have Ash’s steady conversation to distract him.

The flora against his fingers offered up different textures. Prickly, rubbery, sometimes soft with a fine coating of dust over the leaves, at other times glossy and smooth. He leaned close and sniffed deeply, touching the soil itself, the leaves, the stalks, flower buds, flower petals.

There was one particular plant he was very fond of, and instinctively he summoned his gentling, nurturing energy to bless it with, and then stopped himself. He swallowed, hesitating.

This wasn’t his space. It wasn’t his garden. What if Ash was learning how to do that himself? If Ash’s waterhorse instincts became more honed, he’d sense that Augus had done such a thing down the track. He doubted Ash would mind, but Augus became uneasily aware that this wasn’t his place to nurture.

If he wanted a lake to nurture, he had a perfectly good one that he digested his food in. Yet he avoided it at all other times. He didn’t look after its environment, he didn’t nurture the flora and fauna both within and without the lake. He had hardly occupied the house that Ash had found for him, that Gwyn kept warded for him.

He slipped back inside and heard Ash call out his name, and his brow furrowed as he walked back towards Ash’s room. Had Ash woken up already?

But when he poked his head inside, Ash was still asleep, eyes moving rapidly behind his eyelids, both hands curled into fists and sweat or water from his scalp smeared across his forehead.

‘Augus!’

‘Ash,’ Augus said firmly, walking over to the bed. ‘Ash, wake up.’

He didn’t hesitate as he moved onto the bed, nor did he hesitate when he rested his full weight upon Ash, laying chest to chest, drawing his waterhorse weight for good measure. He stared down at his brother, at the nightmare leaving its imprint upon his face. All his life, Ash had suffered night terrors, horrific nightmares, and the only way to wake him was the lie upon him and wait for it to be over. Calling his name didn’t work, shaking him and using compulsions didn’t help, and Augus couldn’t stand to inflict any more violence upon his brother when he was already going through so much in his mind.

Framing his brother’s face with his hands, he pressed his thumbs gently to his cheekbones and frowned. Waited. Listened to his name being called in a distressed, broken voice another four to five times.

He tried calling Ash’s name, hoped that Ash hadn’t grown out of this method of being roused.

Just when Augus was thinking of using pressure points, Ash jack-knifed upwards and Augus slid off him quickly, seeing how dilated Ash’s pupils were, hearing the panting gasps of his breath.

‘Augus?’ Ash said, blinking to see him there. His face crumpled, he pressed his palm to his eyes and he shook his head. ‘You’re…here? I’m not dreaming?’

‘No,’ Augus said, feeling something twinge in his chest. ‘You still have the nightmares?’
‘The dark, as always, yeah,’ Ash said, his voice rough, like he’d been screaming for hours, or like he was only just stopping himself from crying. That in itself was odd. Ash had never been one for stifling his emotions. Yet Augus was sure he was stifling something. ‘Now it’s just…now you’re always down in the dark. I can’t- You’d think it would be a comfort? It’s not comforting. I can’t get to you.’

‘How long have you had the dream?’ Augus said, staring at him.

‘When I realised you weren’t just…on some kind of travelling, wandering holiday. What, like, over a century ago? It was nearly two centuries since you joined the Raven Prince’s Court, wasn’t it? Fucking hell, it’s been an age. Too long. I’ve been having the dream for too fucking long.’

‘No good dreams, then?’ Augus said, reaching his hand out and cupping the back of Ash’s head carefully, feeling him jolt and then settle, and then finally sag into his touch. Ash’s breath shuddered out of him, and he dropped his palm from his eyes. There was wetness on his eyelashes.

‘I’ve never had good dreams, brother,’ Ash said, smiling ruefully. ‘Not once. Sometimes I don’t dream at all. That’s about as good as it gets. If I fuck and drink myself into a coma, I won’t dream. You know that.’

‘Forgive me for hoping it had changed.’

Ash gave a look that indicated he very much had hoped for the same, and got out of bed. He wore a dark red human shirt that was damp at the neckline where his hair had wept water into it. He walked around the room and picked up some shorts from the floor, pulling them on over his boxers. They were frayed at the hems. He scuffed his way, barefoot, into the open area of his quarters, and Augus followed quietly, watching him, sensing the agitated energy hanging in the room despite the slumping, roundedness of Ash’s shoulders or the way he leaned against the bar.

‘What are you doing here?’ Ash said, and Augus spread his fingers eloquently.

‘Is it a problem? Do you wish privacy?’

‘No, no, man, you always have an open invitation. You know that, yeah? Sorry, I just thought maybe you wanted something. I dunno. Maybe you were here to tell me we were going to war or something.’

But it was awkward once more, and Ash walked behind the bar, placing several bottles on the counter and then walked back around and stared at them all. When he lifted a hand to grip one by the neck, Augus realised that Ash’s hand was shaking.

‘Ash, do you-?’

‘It’s fine, hey,’ Ash said, his voice lower, more tense than usual. ‘I need to fucking hunt. But I only went a week ago. And I don’t want to hunt anyone, at all, ever. But I need to do it.’

He refused to look at Augus as he carefully levered the cork out of the neck of the bottle with only his hands. Then he tipped the bottle back easily, drinking easily, quickly, despite how caustic the liquor smelled to Augus' nose even standing metres away.

In a flash of movement, Ash spun and hurled the bottle at the wall, metres opposite, where it smashed apart in a cascade of glass and fermented alcohol.

‘Fuck!’ Ash shouted. His fists shook. He stared at the place where the bottle had hit the wall and then drew a breath that hissed through his throat. His teeth remained clenched, a muscle jumped in
Augus looked at the spray of glass that had gone everywhere, and then walked quickly to Ash, holding up his hands carefully, indicating that he meant no harm. His heart beat far faster than usual, but he wasn’t afraid of Ash, he was afraid for him. Ash looked at him furtively from under thick eyelashes, and then his lips thinned and he looked back at the remaining bottles of alcohol.

‘The trows clean everything up,’ Ash said hoarsely.

‘So you’ve done this before,’ Augus said, keeping his voice very even, very calm.

‘You ever just want to… I dunno, man. You ever just want to- You know that feeling you get, when you’re just about to really pounce? That-’ Ash gagged and then stepped away from Augus, folding his arms around himself. ‘I hate that feeling, I really fucking hate it. But you know that moment when you’re just about to sink your claws and teeth into someone? You know. When you know you’re about to tear your meal apart and it’s going to be amazing? And even though I hate it – or like, even though I hate the before of it and the aftermath... The during - all those chemicals and hormones that flood through my body, and tell me it’s gonna be the best thing ever, and it is. It feels like fucking heaven. Like a panacea. Like- like I’ve found some kind of home in the truth of myself. You know that, don’t you?’

‘Yes,’ Augus said carefully. Ash had always been very reticent regarding talking about how he felt about hunting, and hearing him bring it up now was disconcerting.

‘Do you ever just want to do it to everything around you? Just…sink your claws into every fucking thing in the immediate vicinity, or even fucking further afield, and just tear everything apart? And you think – how will it feel? Like, to do that? You’d be on top of the fucking world! Like an ultimate high. And I could just ruin everything. It’d almost be easy. And I think about it and my mouth starts to water because I want it so badly.’

‘It doesn’t work,’ Augus said, swallowing.

Ash stiffened, and then turned back to him, his face ashen. ‘What?’

‘It doesn’t work. It’s temporary, and it has far greater consequences than killing our prey as we are meant to.’

‘I didn’t mean- I wasn’t thinking that-’

‘And I think if you are experiencing that too, then it may be a consequence of... of the underworld poisoning. I’m uncertain. Look how it corrupted- He wanted to rule and destroy everything. He nearly- And I took over a successful reign and destroyed it, Ash. And you? What do you want to do?’

‘I’d destroy him for you,’ Ash said, the look in his expression so hard that it was almost as though he wasn’t himself, for a moment. ‘I would destroy him if you so much as whispered that it might be all right for me to do it.’

‘He’s captured again,’ Augus said, the words coming with difficulty. ‘No one can reach him now.’

‘Not the fucking Nightingale!’ Ash shouted. ‘Your fucking rapist. The one who ties you up and chains you and keeps you here. His fucking reign.’

‘And what then, Ash? Who would be King then? You don’t want it. I don’t want it. Gulvi doesn’t want it. Is there anyone else you trust enough to handle that mantle of responsibility? Or is that the
consequences that you’re not thinking through?’

‘Ifir could be King,’ Ash said, his voice low. ‘I’ve had drinks with him on and off for years, you know. Actually you probably don’t know. But whatever. I have. And he’s got support behind him, powerful players in the Unseelie Kingdom who would rally behind him, and- what?’

Augus realised he was just staring. He closed his mouth and wished that the whole room didn’t smell like poison, because it made it much harder to keep a level head. If he tried to take deep breaths, he practically scoured his lungs with the stuff. He still had no idea how Ash could stand it.

‘Just hear me out,’ Ash said, quickly.

‘Have you planned anything?’ Augus said quickly, remembering how quickly he’d insinuated himself into the Raven Prince’s Court once he’d been released by the Nightingale. Remembering just how fast he’d known exactly how he was going to destroy what he wanted to destroy.

‘What? No!’ Ash said, looking shocked. ‘I’m just saying- There are options.’

‘Are you even listening to yourself?’ Augus said, walking up to Ash again and grasping him by the shoulders. ‘You talk about wanting to hunt when the last time you hunted was a week ago. You’re telling me you want to destroy everything, starting with the current reign, and you don’t think that seems exactly like what- exactly the same as what he did, what I did? I can assure you, Ash, no matter how righteous it makes you feel to think about it, it is not righteousness causing this, it is poison. Do you talk to Gulvi about this?’

‘Sometimes,’ Ash said, and then sighed. ‘She doesn’t like it.’

‘Have you and Gulvi drifted apart lately?’ Augus asked, thinking back to Fenwrel mentioning that Gulvi dropped in on her all the time.

‘What? No,’ Ash said. ‘I mean, no more than usual? The thing is, Augus. It was hard to be… I mean you killed her family, man. And you were my family. It created a rift that’s never really gone away. So we’re as close as we have been lately. It’s not as close as we used to be but it’s not worse, yeah?’

‘Hm,’ Augus said, and then accidentally took a deep breath and coughed, wrinkling his face at the alcohol.

‘Jesus, look at you,’ Ash said, laughing. ‘I’ll call the trows. I’ll be fine.’

He reached up and returned the grip that Augus had on his shoulders, shaking him slightly. Then he pulled Augus closer into an embrace, his grip strong, Ash’s curly-haired head bumping into the side of his. Augus’ lips quirked up and he returned the hug, leaning into his brother.

‘I didn’t think you’d ever wake me up like that again,’ Ash said into his shoulder. ‘I thought those days were behind us, y’know? Like, I have to fend for myself now. And all that.’

Augus pressed his forehead into Ash’s shoulder and squeezed Ash closer, shaking his head. ‘I regret not being here for you more.’

‘Nah,’ Ash said. ‘No, I don’t- Sorry, typical of me, yeah? To ask for help, while offering you like, nothing.’

Ash stepped back and dragged fingers through his hair, self-soothing, looking around his rooms with something bleak on his face. But when he looked back at Augus, his expression cleared.
‘Thanks for waking me, hey.’

‘Do you want me to leave?’ Augus said, and Ash looked surprised and then gestured to the broken glass on the floor, the alcohol everywhere.

‘I just figured—’

‘Call the trows,’ Augus said, walking towards the balcony. While the heights and open sky put him on edge, he knew that Ash would find it a calming place. ‘And then if you don’t mind, I would like some water, or tea if you’ve got it.’

‘I, yeah,’ Ash said, sounding relieved. ‘Yeah, actually, that sounds really cool. Okay, we’ll do that then.’

‘All right,’ Augus said, closing the glass door behind him and filling his lungs with air that smelled richly of chlorophyll and plant oils. It cleared his head, but didn’t leave him feeling any less troubled about the state that his brother was in. He knew just how dangerous he’d become when he’d stumbled over that frame of mind after his time with the Nightingale, and he hoped that with Ash’s case of underworld poisoning being less severe, perhaps he’d be less likely to act on his thoughts and feelings. But it still didn’t stop Augus from feeling uncomfortable that he’d been the one to give Ash those underworld creatures, to ask Ash to let them reside in his flesh.

*Consequences indeed. The very least you can do is make sure he’s feeling a little better before you leave.*

Augus sat down on a low stool and looked at all the plants around him. Augus felt like he was a far more destructive force than he’d ever really known he could be, and he was uncertain how he felt about that. He was Unseelie, he was supposed to feel *good* about it, wasn’t he?

But Fenwrel’s earlier words kept echoing through his mind alongside much older words, those spoken by an aristocratic creature who’d kept him in the dark, who’d taught him a new way of thinking about what it meant to be Unseelie, a monster.

*In the morning, the measure of internal calm Augus had found also gave him an impetus to try searching out the Raven Prince again.*

His fingers moved through the bowl of rocks – the tracking charm on the stone the Raven Prince had given to him so weak now that Gwyn never seemed to know it was there – until he stumbled across it. He held it in his right fist and squeezed, sensed the faintest, resonating pulse. The magic was still there, but so much weaker than it had once been.

He locked the doors and sat in a chair near the bed, cradling the black stone in both of his hands. It was polished smooth by a river he’d likely never visited. His eyes closed and he sought calm.

Still, intrusive thoughts invaded, but it was easier than before to let them pass, or move around them, or even dam them off. He couldn’t find the stillness he used to be able to find, but there was something there which was calmer and more silent than before. A depth within himself that he hadn’t been able to reach for some time.

The stone’s message got louder and louder once he found that inner stillness. A fragile magic that felt alien and familiar, that smelled of a floor length cloak of raven feathers and the sharpness of piercing eyes, it trickled into him. At first, it showed him nothing more than a sense of the Raven Prince himself. The scent of him, the feel of the being who had once made this stone for Augus.
But Augus needed a location. He was getting too excited at the thought that he’d come further with this stone than he had the last time. He was making progress. He forced the excitement and trepidation away, returned to stillness.

First, then, the glimmers of a forest as though viewed through a blurred lens. He could see light and emerald greens – not a dense forest – and he could see the sun shining, a vivid blue sky. Not a single cloud above.

Slowly, an internal compass began to pull and shift inside of him, restless, trying to synchronise to the tracking spell in the stone. It was clumsy. Not the instant certainty of a location, but a shift and shiver of movement.

The Raven Prince was either moving about, or the tracking charm was too frail, or both.

Which meant Augus had to go now.

Augus clenched the stone in his left hand. Even as he stood and broke the tenuous connection with the magic, he still felt the location resonate weakly inside of him. He would know where to go once he got into the water. But he had to leave, he couldn’t afford days of waiting. Who knew if the magic was strong enough to show him the Raven Prince in a week, or even in a day; and who knew if the Raven Prince would even be in that location by the time Augus got there.

* 

The trows made him a small hamper of food that was watertight, for his travels underwater, unquestioningly. And then it was a matter of finding Gwyn.

Augus contemplated going without telling him, but he was sure that would go down worse.

Once Augus found the Raven Prince, he tended to spend days, even a week with him; he spent as much time as he could.

Agitation worked its way through him. There was dread at seeing his Prince again. Augus knew a malaise would follow – as it had with every visit – but he had to see him. And what if it was the last time? What if the stone was too weak to allow him to do it again? What then?

Then he will be well and truly lost to you, and to everyone.

Augus shuddered as he made his way to one of the many strategy rooms. He’d meant to see Gwyn as soon as he returned from hunting, but he’d been excited about the meridians he and Fenwrel had lain down inside of him. Then he’d needed to visit Ash to clear his mind – not that seeing Ash had been conducive to that.

He knocked quietly on the wooden door, a stone in his pocket, the hamper tucked near the bole of a tree in the Gwylwyr forest within the bounds of the Unseelie Court, by the lake he would use to teleport.

Gwyn opened the door and his face broke into a small smile. Augus returned it, but didn’t feel it, knowing that what he was about to do might not go down well. He walked into the room and looked at a ream of new papers stuck to the wall, these ones listing the names of many people he didn’t recognise, and one or two that he did – all Mages this time.

‘Working hard?’ Augus said.

‘We’ll see if it comes to anything,’ Gwyn sighed. ‘Are you well? You look…well.’
‘I am,’ Augus said, thinking of the stone in his pocket. ‘I have to- Gwyn, I have to do something, and I can’t tell you what it is I am going to do. But it may mean I am gone for a few days, possibly a week.’

If only he hadn’t just hunted, he could use that as the excuse. But the timing was what it was.

Gwyn’s face darkened, then became suspicious. ‘Are you going to heal another lake? Gulvi is-’

‘No,’ Augus said, shaking his head. ‘I have…it’s a sabbatical of sorts. I used to do it once a year before I was captured and placed into the Seelie prison. And it’s been- I’ve taken far too long, and I need to do it. Think of it like…how you should be finding more time to spend in cabins in the wilderness.’

‘You want to go alone, with no one to protect you?’ Gwyn said, staring at him. There was a hardness in his expression now, and Augus felt his own jaw tightening in response to it.

‘I’m not asking you,’ Augus said. ‘I’m doing it.’

Possibly the wrong response, judging by the way Gwyn folded his arms and stood straighter, making Augus feel every inch of his disapproving height.

*For someone with so many father issues, he certainly knows how to come across as a disappointed father.*

‘It’s only a week,’ Augus said, and Gwyn looked away, brow furrowing, and then looked back again, lips thin.

‘You won’t take anyone with you?’ he said.

‘It’s not much of a sabbatical if I have a protective detail, is it?’ Augus said, and Gwyn stared at him, and then something on his face went still, and his eyes flickered to Augus’ pocket, and back up to Augus’ face. He looked confused, then suspicious once more.

‘And if I told you that I need you here?’ Gwyn said, his voice careful, measured.

Augus maintained eye contact, though in that moment it was difficult. Gwyn’s glamour was unyielding, and never gentle; and right now he felt himself standing more before the King, than the vulnerable creature that lurked beneath. The stone was a heavy weight – far heavier than it should be given it was more of a pebble. Augus wanted to stay. He didn’t particularly want to engage in this outing that would be nothing at all like a sabbatical, and leech him of good feeling for some time.

‘I’ll see you soon,’ Augus said, and turned and walked away, resisting the urge to press his fingers to the stone snug in his pocket.

Gwyn said nothing at all, and Augus spared a moment to feel grateful that Gwyn had recently realised that he couldn’t just use his powers to force someone he cared for to do what he wanted. Still, as he walked back down the corridor, he could feel Gwyn’s gaze heavy and untrusting upon his back, and he wished he had the ability to instantaneously teleport as Gwyn did, and that he didn’t have to feel the Unseelie King’s reproval oozing through him.

* He half-expected Gwyn to follow him, to tell him not to go; but no one shadowed his steps as he made his way to the lake just outside the bounding wall around the Unseelie palace. This land was
still within the protection of the Unseelie Court itself, and Augus remembered spending a lot of time in these dark forests when he used to be a member of the Raven Prince’s Court. It gave him the illusion of being outdoors, during a time when he was frequently too frightened to move beyond the palace’s protection.

Once in the water, the hamper under his arm, he fixed the location in his mind and sent his awareness out over networks of rivers and lakes. And then, lungs already flooded with water and his nerves jangling; the Raven Prince had always made him nervous – he closed his eyes and became currents and bubbles, and teleported.

* 

The canopies above him let through shafts of sunlight. The place was beautiful. Grassed grounds, flowers blooming, hardly any other fae around. A small pocket of land clear from too much interference, possibly cursed, for land this beautiful frequently had more fae occupying it.

Augus crept through the forest and kept his eyes on the branches above him, his heart knocking against his chest in heavy, nauseating thumps.

Five minutes, then ten, then thirty, and Augus continued to walk, his neck aching, his clawed fingers coming up and finding his own pressure points to ease the ache in his muscles. He needled at them carefully, only ever looking down to make sure he wasn’t about to blunder into a shrub or tree.

A raucous caw rang out through the forest. A voice far louder than any raven should possess.

‘Shh,’ Augus said automatically, turning in a full circle and spotting a glimmer of black feathers hidden behind thicker leaf cover. ‘Shh, my Prince, it is only me. Don’t you remember me?’

Augus stayed still. He’d frightened the great bird away before in his eagerness. Instead, he went down to his knees and lowered the hamper, opening it and drawing out berries, dried meat and seeds. He lay a handful upon the ground, and then took several steps backwards before kneeling. It was a healthy distance, the kind that might encourage a wild bird’s confidence.

The Raven Prince took several steps along the branch, coming properly into view. He looked healthier than last time, Augus was relieved to see.

Like Julvia, the Raven Prince had no awareness of who Augus truly was. Only that by Augus’ shape and scent and appearance, he was the being who rarely visited him, and sometimes brought tasty food with him. Unlike Julvia, there was no hope of ethereal, amorphous consciousness to call back into the Raven Prince’s body. There was only the raw, raven form that right now eyed the food upon the forest floor with beady black eyes.

The Raven Prince was still beautiful. Glossy feathers that gleamed the full spectrum of the rainbow when the light hit them just right, an oily healthiness that proved that at least his Prince – even in this diminished form – could provide for himself, live a healthy life.

‘Have you found a mate, do you think?’ Augus said, swallowing, having to look away for several seconds.

His chest was fraying itself apart. He pressed his fist to his sternum, knuckled it in, and laughed under his breath. The Raven Prince might once have appreciated this suffering. Might even have felt that Augus deserved it for what he’d done. But the Raven Prince before him didn’t react.

The Raven Prince didn’t know Augus was his betrayer. The Raven Prince – the Word Smith – he
now knew no other language except his corvid tongue.

‘It’s all right,’ Augus said, keeping his voice soft and even. He’d had to coax the great raven to come forth before, and he hoped that something would resonate as familiar, encourage the Raven Prince down so that Augus might get a closer look at him before he flew away. ‘It’s all right. You can come down.’

Augus needed a week, because the Raven Prince would fly away. Because he wasn’t tame, but a wild bird, and he moved from place to place. Augus had no idea if he had a nest or a place of regular rest. All he’d learned was that the Raven Prince moved from forest to forest, never settling, and that he was as wild and wary as he’d been the night that Augus had done this to him.

‘My Prince,’ Augus said quietly, haplessly, as the raven stared down at the food, tilting his head this way and that, hackles bared and clearly curious – but not yet curious enough to come down and try the food.

Half an hour became an hour, and Augus stayed very still, until finally the Raven Prince flew down and snatched up a raspberry, tossing his head back so it fell straight into his throat. The bird then hesitated, tilted its head at Augus, before he seemed to realise that Augus didn’t intend to move, and kept eating.

Augus closed his eyes in relief and some other, heavier, nameless emotion that made him feel sick.

‘There is another like you, back in the Unseelie Court,’ Augus said finally, because the steady background talk sometimes helped to lull the Raven Prince into thinking there was nothing to fear. Right now, the bird greedily plucked up seed after seed, pecking into the ground for anything missed, before making a mess of another raspberry, flecks of red sticking to his strong beak. ‘But she is- She did not come to her state the same way that you did. There is the chance, the tiniest chance, that she may be healed. But you, my Prince... I suppose we both know that things are different, with you.’

Augus opened the hamper once more, and tossed another handful of food in the direction of the Raven Prince, who hopped a few frightened steps backwards. The bird cawed quietly, then dove towards a raspberry.

‘My Prince,’ Augus said again. ‘I suppose you can humour me, if I keep calling you that?’

A hoarse gasp behind him, a twig cracked.

Augus’ eyes flew wide and he turned quickly, even as the Raven Prince croaked a sound of hiccupped fear and flew with heavy wingbeats onto the branch he’d occupied before.

Gwyn stood by a tree, coldness on every inch of his face, even as his eyes showed a depth of fear and dread. Augus tried to swallow the lump in his throat, realised that he’d begun to shake.

No one was supposed to know about this.

No one, without exception.

‘Augus,’ Gwyn said, his voice hard, ‘what have you done?’
In our next chapter, 'Rupture:'

‘From this day hence, you are no longer permitted within the palace itself, and are admitted only into the Unseelie night gardens, the Gwylwyr Du, and the forests of Gwylwyr, like all other Unseelie fae. If, after a month, you have not told me what you did to the Raven Prince, in detail, to let me decide for myself if the Raven Prince might be returned to us or not, I will remove your status and demote you to underfae. I will end our accord, and I shall see you and Ash escorted and banished from the Unseelie Court, never permitted to return. No more of these games, Augus. I want the truth.’

‘I can tell you’re bluffing,’ Augus said, his voice poisonous. ‘You are the neediest person I have ever met, and if you think that you can run that Kingdom without-’

‘You overplay your hand,’ Gwyn said, staring him down. ‘I ran the Seelie Court with no one’s help, and I can do the same with the Unseelie. It grieves me to do this, Augus, truly, but do not question my intent. Unlike you, I will not trade in cowardice, and I mean what I say. The Kingdom comes first, Augus. It doesn’t matter how I, or even you, feel. The Kingdom comes first. I can no longer permit you to live within those walls until I know what you have done.’
Rupture

Chapter Notes

Oh boy, have I been looking forward to this upcoming sequence of chapters so much. Anyway, as far as I see it, Gwyn and Augus both feel super justified in terms of where they're coming from. And I feel bad for the both of them, some tough times are ahead.

Comments and feedback are all kinds of love, and thank you so much for reading. <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Gwyn

*

Gwyn couldn’t tear his eyes away from the blanched face of Augus, even as he kept wanting to look at the smudge of black perched on the tree in the corner of his vision.

The Raven Prince.

His whole body felt cold, as though it had been encased in ice. Splinters of it seemed to push through his skin, turning his shoulder to a blocky, menacing pain. All his suspicions, all of his paranoia roared back to life. Months of wondering, of being afraid of Augus, and here, right now, even as he felt sickened with himself and the situation, he felt like he’d been right to doubt, to worry, to fear. He’d always known it would come to this. He’d always known that one day, Augus would peel back a veil, and something would shatter inside of him in response.

All this time, the Raven Prince was alive.

‘How did you find me?’ Augus said, his voice weak.

Gwyn’s thoughts were like stray arrows. They flew past him. Everything seemed to happen as though from a distance. He felt shafts of friendly sunlight on his skin, yet it didn’t touch him. He could feel grass and a fertile, peaty ground beneath his feet, but it might as well have been concrete.

Only a little while ago, his main thought regarding Augus was that he’d felt slighted that Augus hadn’t come to see him immediately after hunting. A petty thing to think, especially now.

He’d thought Augus’ sabbatical was something like…gathering moss off crackenylls. Augus had only talked about it recently. Gwyn wanted to make sure he wasn’t doing anything dangerous. Even Fenwrel hadn’t been alarmed at Augus leaving, and he’d had to convince her and then eventually order her as King to activate the tracking spell. And even then, when Gwyn had felt the beacon of Augus’ location in his chest, his biggest concern as he’d teleported away from Fenwrel was wondering when and how he should confront her about the possible growing conflict between the Mages.

All of it swept away. A tiny realisation that he felt vindicated for having placed the tracking spell on Augus in the first place.

All this time, the Raven Prince was alive.
But he didn’t understand why it felt so awful to have been right all along. A brittle and fractured mass split apart inside of him. He couldn’t quite believe that he was standing in front of Augus, and the Raven Prince was metres away from them both.

‘A tracking spell,’ Augus said finally. ‘You dared to put a tracking spell on me. Yes?’

‘That is the Raven Prince,’ Gwyn said, pointing to the agitated hulk of a bird. Gwyn stared at the raven then, he couldn’t help himself. A larger-than-average raven, that beautiful oil-slick of colours gleaming glossy on his coat. ‘That’s the King. The rightful King.’

‘No,’ Augus said, his face twisting. ‘Yes, but no- Gwyn- you shouldn’t be here.’

‘Do not tell me where I should be!’ Gwyn shouted, and the Raven Prince cawed in fright.

‘Please don’t scare him away,’ Augus said urgently, keeping his voice low, paling further, something fraught on his face. ‘I’m not sure I’ll be able to find him again once he’s gone.’

‘What did you do?’

‘I can’t tell you,’ Augus said.

Whatever warmth Gwyn felt towards Augus trickled away until there was only hardness left. Because he did know this feeling. He’d known it in his childhood, and it felt so strange to know it now, before someone who he’d tried – so hard – to put in a different category to everyone else. Augus had his own category, and a voice attached to it that tried to remind Gwyn that Augus wasn’t like his family, and he wasn’t like Albion, and he wasn’t like the others. He was different.

But this went beyond lying. It went far beyond lying. This was betrayal. Augus had tricked him into becoming King to satisfy…what? What sick game was he playing? The Raven Prince was alive, and that meant there was a rightful King to the throne. One who could have kept the Kingdom stable all this time. One who Albion would actually heed, would listen to. And he was right there, in that tree.

Gwyn turned to the Raven Prince, and felt like he’d been made a part of the lie. All this time, they’d tried to make him see that he should have been Unseelie King and he was an impostor.

‘Your Majesty,’ Gwyn began, and Augus made a choked sound.

‘Don’t be an idiot,’ Augus said, but his voice became hard, bitter, reminding Gwyn of more difficult times long ago. When Augus was a villain. The kind of villain who could betray his King.

‘That is not the King. You’re the King.’

‘He’s the King! That’s the rightful King of the Unseelie! I thought- I thought you’d killed him! I don’t know what- But- And you mean to tell me that-’

‘Don’t act the fool now, Gwyn,’ Augus said, his voice clipped. ‘Do you think, for a second, that if the mind of the Raven Prince was intact, he wouldn’t have visited some sort of revenge upon me? That he wouldn’t have claimed his own throne back for himself?’

‘This isn’t about that,’ Gwyn said, and Augus scowled, ‘this is about the fact that the Raven Prince is still alive! Do you mean to say that all this time we could have had the Raven Prince as King? That you pressured me into taking on the throne, going on and on about how there was no one else, when all this time, you-’
‘No! He’s gone, Gwyn! He’s gone!’

‘You don’t know that!’ Gwyn roared, gaze shooting up to catch the Raven Prince jumping to a branch higher up, looking like he wanted to escape the loud noises. ‘If you had let go of your cowardice long enough to tell someone, perhaps we could have had Mages and other people working on this! Other healers! The height of your arrogance knows no-’

‘No!’ Augus said, looking afraid now, and angry, ‘No! No one can know. They’ll kill me, Gwyn, once they’ve learned what I’ve done.’

‘But the Raven Prince is here, his mind might be locked away but- but look at what you try with Julvia, look at-’

Augus closed his eyes for several seconds and Gwyn found himself trembling to a halt.

‘His mind is gone,’ Augus said, his voice rough, far deeper than usual. ‘It’s removed, and it’s gone.’

Gwyn swallowed nausea. The Raven Prince had one of the best minds of any fae. He was a Mage, a master of words, a diplomat, the fairest King of any Unseelie reign, despite his capricious and cruel ways. It was one thing to attack the Raven Prince’s body, to try and destroy the flesh. But Augus had loved the Raven Prince, and that hadn’t been enough to stop him from going after his mind.

Gwyn stared at the bird in the tree, the Raven Prince, and shook his head, his mouth dry, his limbs feeling far stiffer and heavier than usual. Augus, who had loved the Raven Prince, adored him, who still spoke of him with such reverence… As far as Gwyn could tell, there was absolutely nothing to stop Augus from doing what he did a second time. Because if he’d done it once, he could do it again. To someone he claimed he cared about. Especially if that person might also be Unseelie King.

‘What did you do to him?’ Gwyn said roughly.

‘I can’t tell you,’ Augus said, and then like a cloak, he drew an aloofness to himself and looked at Gwyn with a lazy, predatorial gaze. ‘Frightened I’ll do the same thing to you, are you?’

That aloofness, that confidence was sometimes a balm. But right now, it only meant that Augus wasn’t taking the situation seriously enough. And that, somehow, made things worse.

‘This isn’t a game, Augus,’ Gwyn said, ‘I am telling you to tell me what you did to the Raven Prince.’

‘Just like you,’ Augus said, rolling his eyes, affecting indifference. The whole act set Gwyn’s teeth on edge, and one of his hands clenched into a fist. ‘To interpret everything in terms of yourself. You’ve always had trust issues, after all, haven’t you?’

‘No,’ Gwyn said, shaking his head, ‘I’ve had enough of this. I should have done this a long time ago. As your King, I command that you tell me what you did, on penalty of treason, Augus!’

‘Well,’ Augus said, pointing up to the Raven Prince high above them, shifting nervously, ‘you can see that I’m treasonous, can’t you? Going to put me in a cell again?’

Gwyn wasn’t sure what did it, but the Raven Prince took off in a flurry of movement, and sped rapidly away. Augus watched, and his fingers went immediately to his pocket. Gwyn squinted at it. He thought he’d sensed something there before. Another tracking charm? That one for the Raven
Prince?

This went beyond anything he could imagine. Always, in the pit of him, the knowledge that Augus held himself apart and separate, that he had defeated the previous Unseelie King, that he had destroyed someone he’d loved. But Gwyn had managed to hold it at bay, managed to keep his paranoia under control. Until now.

‘No,’ Gwyn said, his voice shaking. ‘No, I will not put you in a cell again. You don’t see what I risk by having you in that Court with me. You have destroyed two Courts, Augus. You have possibly destroyed ours! I work every day to try and save this Kingdom, to try and make sure that the last thing the Unseelie fae think isn’t thoughts of destroying you in turn. You disrespect me, disrespect the goals I have, the goals you claim to have- No, this is treason, and eventually there are consequences to your actions, Augus.

‘From this day hence, you are no longer permitted within the palace itself, and are admitted only into the Unseelie night gardens, the Gwylwyr Du, and the forests of Gwylwyr, like all other Unseelie fae. If, after a month, you have not told me what you did to the Raven Prince, in detail, to let me decide for myself if the Raven Prince might be returned to us or not, I will remove your status and demote you to underfae. I will end our- end our accord, and I shall see you and Ash escorted and banished from the Unseelie Court, never permitted to return. No more of these games, Augus. I want the truth.’

‘I can tell you’re bluffing,’ Augus said, his voice poisonous. ‘You are the neediest person I have ever met, and if you think that you can run that Kingdom without-’

‘You overplay your hand,’ Gwyn said, staring him down. ‘I ran the Seelie Court with no one’s help, and I can do the same with the Unseelie. It grieves me to do this, Augus, truly, but do not question my intent. Unlike you, I will not trade in cowardice, and I mean what I say. The Kingdom comes first, Augus. It doesn’t matter how I, or even you, feel. The Kingdom comes first. I can no longer permit you to live within those walls until I know what you have done.’

‘You’re bluffing,’ Augus said again, something uncertain on his face.

‘I wish that I were,’ Gwyn said, and teleported away.

* *

His mind was hard with resolve. There had been enough times in his life where he’d been sickened with himself or a situation, and had been required to continue training, or even warring, so he could easily push through what he felt now. The first thing he did was lean against the palace entrance, both hands on the wall, and squeeze his eyes shut, summoning the energy that allowed him to change the permissions not just on one or two rooms, but the entire palace itself.

He did what he said, barring Augus from all but the night gardens, the Gwylwyr Du and neighbouring forest. Knowing that Augus would be unsafe, even as Inner Court, if other fae were to stumble across him, he permitted Augus into one of the night gardens that only Gwyn and the Inner Court would access. But Augus would have to figure out for himself that that was the only place that was truly safe. Because Gwyn knew that if he was to keep his resolve intact, he could not see Augus, could not look upon Augus, until Augus told him what he’d done to the Raven Prince, or until Gwyn had to demote him to underfae and send him from the Court once and for all.

* *

He called everyone who resided in the Court into the throne room, while sending everyone else
away. Ash, Gulvi, Fenwrel and Aleutia, the common fae servants, the trows. He stood before them all, trying to gather his words, trying to think of the right way to do this.

‘It has come to my attention that Augus may not be serious about protecting or looking after the Unseelie Court, and in a decision that I hope you realise reflects the gravity of the situation, I have changed the permissions and barred Augus from the Unseelie palace itself. He is now only able to occupy the night gardens, the Gwylwyr Du and neighbouring forests.’

Ash’s eyes narrowed, his brow furrowed, he frowned; and in that moment he looked like Augus, that same displeasure radiating from his face.

Gulvi looked unsurprised, as did Aleutia. Fenwrel, however, looked shocked, concerned.

‘What does this mean?’ Fenwrel said, her voice quiet.

‘You are permitted to visit him, as you wish,’ Gwyn said, looking at Ash specifically when he said it. ‘But you cannot bring him within the palace. And if, after a month, Augus does not part with a piece of information that he used to betray the Kingdom once before, he will be demoted.’

‘What?’ Ash shouted. ‘You can’t use your fucking powers for petty domestic arguments, you shithead!’

‘I think it’s quite obvious that this goes beyond domestic argument,’ Fenwrel interjected, her voice calm. ‘And of Augus’ health?’

‘He can shelter in one of the night gardens where other fae – barring us – cannot visit. His class is still Inner Court; which he will keep for one month. As to the matter this involves, all I can tell you is that I have discovered disturbing news regarding the matter of Augus’ ascendance to power and the removal of the Raven Prince from the Unseelie throne. I have reason to believe that Augus is capable of executing exactly the same plan again. He’s already committed treason once today, I saw no reason to give him more opportunities to do the same, without giving him a month to consider his motives and consider them well.’

Fenwrel looked off into the distance. Ash was fuming, his shoulders rising and falling with the force of his breaths. Gwyn knew that he and Ash would never have been friends, but this was the final nail in the coffin of them having anything like a civil accord. He wanted to reassure Ash, somehow, but he couldn’t.

He had a horrible feeling that in a month, he’d be demoting Augus, and an era of his life would be over.

One trow stepped forwards and signed quickly: Can we keep serving him?

‘Yes,’ Gwyn said, nodding. ‘Bring him whatever he wishes, and inform me when he returns to the boundaries of the Court.’

If he even returns to the Court.

Perhaps he should put guards on Augus’ lake, to keep an eye out there, too.

‘What are we to tell the rest of the fae?’ Gulvi said.

‘Nothing, as of now,’ Gwyn said, thinking quickly. ‘We were pushing in a direction of salvaging Augus’ reputation and placing him back into diplomacy. And if, before the month is up, the situation is resolved to my satisfaction, things shall resume just as they were going, and he shall
move into diplomacy as he wishes. Therefore it is best that others do not know of this matter.’

Ash smirked, his eyes glittered with malice. The expression was not cold like Augus’, but peppery with a heat that Gwyn could feel at a distance. It took him a little while to realise it was his glamour – agitated, prickly, hungry. Gwyn remembered how Ash was at the Triumphal Entry, and felt like he was already bracing himself for retaliation.

‘I have to leave again,’ Gwyn said. ‘There are still things I must chase up. Are we clear on the situation?’

‘Super clear,’ Ash said, his voice gritty.

Gulvi shrugged and then raised her eyebrows. ‘Darling, the only thing that surprises me is that he hasn’t done this sooner.’

Ash looked over at Gulvi, his jaw tightened, but he said nothing. Fenwrel kept a careful distance from all of them, Gwyn noticed. She looked between everyone, held her tongue. But her hand rested on the wrap of fabric around her waist that held her staff, and hers ears were pricked to alertness – far more than usual.

The trows looked mostly indifferent. There were those who personally served Augus who looked concerned, and were talking so quickly that their hands moved too fast for Gwyn to capture the essence of what they were saying.

‘You’re not going to tell us what he did?’ Fenwrel said, finally.

‘In the hopes that he will come to his senses, and to protect his confidence…’ Gwyn hesitated. Why was he still protecting Augus? Gwyn sighed.

‘I hope you know what you’re doing,’ Fenwrel said.

Gwyn smiled stiffly, bowed shallowly to all of them, and teleported away once more.

* 

He landed back in the sunny, cheerful woodland. Augus was gone, and Gwyn looked to the canopy, his heart beating quickly. How did one track the Raven Prince? Gwyn was practiced at looking for land-bound fae, but not birds.

The hamper that Augus had with him was still there. Gwyn walked over to it and saw berries and grains inside. He picked up a small handful and looked at them, sniffed them carefully, and then ate some of the sunflower seeds. They didn’t taste poisoned, or like they had any sedatives on them, and after several minutes he ate some more. So Augus wasn’t trying to drug the Raven Prince then, this was just…food.

If Augus was right, and the Raven Prince’s mind was truly gone – a thought that Gwyn could hardly parse – then this was just food to lure a bird.

Gwyn closed his eyes and sank his awareness into the land, spreading out his animal calling ability and trying to get a sense of what was around him. He tried to discard the information on mammals and reached further. If the Raven Prince was just a bird, then Gwyn would be able to sense him. And if he was still fae…Gwyn could sense that too.

But even after spreading out his awareness in a radius of several kilometres, sensing jays and ravens, none of them was that larger raven. None of them was the Raven Prince.
He was gone.

Gwyn looked around and shook his head. What if someone shot him out of the sky? What if he was caught? Did anyone know it was him?

The idea that the Raven Prince was out there somewhere, while Gwyn was bound to the throne and Unseelie Court…he shook his head and turned a full circle. Gwyn wasn’t supposed to be King. Instead of putting all his energy into getting Gwyn on the throne, Augus could have appealed to the School of the Staff, he could have located healers, he should have done something.

The Unseelie Court was in danger, Albion was no doubt trying to find ways to come at them, and now this.

Gwyn spent the next few hours teleporting to sections of land nearby, sending out his animal calling ability; but the Raven Prince was nowhere to be found, and just as the sun sank below the horizon, Gwyn realised it was a futile exercise.

He teleported back to the palace.

* 

The trows reported that Augus had returned to the outer boundary of the Unseelie Court, and that they’d guided him to the protected night garden themselves. Apparently Ash had visited him. And Fenwrel. Gwyn wanted to go to him. Wanted to talk reason and sense, wanted answers, but he knew he wouldn’t get them. His own resolve wavered, he could feel it falling apart and it had been less than a whole day. He forced himself to the training arena to take his mind off things.

That was the pattern of his days for the next week. He trained, he got regular reports on Augus from the trows, and he worked strategy with Gulvi. He signed off on treaties and other bits and pieces of paperwork, looked over the treasury, and refused to let himself sleep.

The nausea was so bad now, it felt like a constant background noise, there along with the anxiety of knowing that Augus was near him, in the outer edges of the Court, but that Gwyn couldn’t see him, and that he had a tough decision coming.

And after seven days had passed, Gwyn stopped training in the middle of a drill, dropping his sword and covering his face with his hands, finally realising that it was true – Augus might never tell him what he did to the Raven Prince. This was a gamble where Gwyn risked his future happiness. Because even though things were difficult with Augus, there was still…happiness. A quality that he’d never really experienced before, and certainly not enough to be familiar with it.

But he had to pay attention to his own words. The Kingdom comes first.

It had to come first. He didn’t care if that was an essentially Seelie philosophy, it was what he knew to be true. If they didn’t put the Unseelie Kingdom first now, then who else would? Gwyn knew all about sacrifice. He felt it when they voted him into Kingship in the Seelie Court, when he didn’t want it, was mortified to be voted in. He felt it when he loosed the arrow that would kill Mafydd. It rang through him so loudly he was surprised it had never been a heartsong of his.

Once more, he felt it.

He would sacrifice Augus, and his own future hope and happiness, to ensure the safety of the Kingdom.

*
A common fae messenger came to the Unseelie Court and delivered a piece of parchment rolled up in a canister. There was no attached message, and the canister looked old, knocked around, and so Gwyn wasn’t sure where it had come from.

When he popped the top open and drew out the parchment, he could smell a fine scent immediately, and the parchment was of such high quality it did not match the canister itself. It was smooth to his fingers, the kind of parchment well suited to holding the finest quality calligraphic ink. His old Master Ethwynn would have been very happy with it indeed.

He unrolled it, and there was a beautifully penned message in a glossy midnight blue ink:

Gwyn ap Nudd,

It has been a week, I am aware. Please be advised that Albion is shifting on the matter of your last name and the An Fnwy estate. I beg of you, to offer a stay to those who live within my village and give me another two weeks to make all of your requests official.

As of today, however, I can say that you are legally permitted to call yourself Gwyn ap Nudd, or Gwyn ap Lludd once more.

Releasing the An Fnwy estate presents more difficulties, and I do not like the chances of Albion announcing any of this publically. I ask you to present the Seelie Court and its people with understanding during this time.

With regards,
Estori – Seelie Records and Registry Keeper.

Gwyn sat down on the steps in the throne room, staring at the parchment.

Should he send his soldiers out to hurt Estori’s village anyway? In truth, he didn’t want to, and he was hoping for an excuse to avoid doing it. Just because it was an Unseelie tactic, didn’t mean it was one he had to like.

Was it wise to present mercy at this time? Gwyn sighed, he could spare another two weeks, surely.

He stared at the second name that Estori had presented him; Gwyn ap Lludd. In truth, that was supposed to be his last name all along. He hadn’t questioned the bequeathing of Gwyn ap Nudd, since Nudd was an old name his father sometimes went by, but as he’d aged, he’d started to realise that it was yet one more way that his family tried to keep him separate. Tried to make sure that he wasn’t one of them, even as they refused to give him over to the Unseelie.

Thoughts of Crielle came to him. He hardly let himself think on her, barely had the time for it, and was frankly afraid to appraise the memories he had of her. But now he couldn’t stop himself thinking on her, knowing there was no Augus here in this moment to be angry at him for contemplating her.

He felt guilty for missing her. That, after all her cruelties, he would betray himself by yearning for someone who hadn’t wanted him, and had certainly gone out of her way to harm him. But he couldn’t stop himself, and he lost hours to that aching feeling in his chest, wishing that it would go away, unable to banish it.

*  

A week and a half passed, and Gwyn was summoned to battle. Albion had managed to mass thirty thousand soldiers, and that meant the mobilisation of over half of the Unseelie Court military. It ended up being a campaign that lasted more than four days, with Zudanna and Ifir managing the
largest forces, while Gwyn teleported between the smaller micro-armies, directing them to areas of weakness in the Polemarch Alysia’s defences.

Albion himself didn’t show up on the battlefield, and the platoons themselves were mostly sea fae, which suggested that Gwyn’s work to both call in debts owed and remove certain people in the Seelie network had been working. But the sea fae were efficient fighters, showing a far higher level of cooperation than Seelie land fae; and Seelie land fae were always more cooperative and unitive than Unseelie fae. But the Unseelie had trebuchets now, and a great deal more thanks to the Seelie Kingdom. It was a fairly even playing field, at least.

The battle was messy, and Gwyn was repeatedly injured, relying on his healing to keep going without ceasing and sending his light out when he could. His hands never got a chance to heal from the cracks and ruptures in his skin. He shouldn’t have had any time to think of Augus, and yet as he watched the carnage around him, those few moments he swam out of bloodlust long enough to see just how high the death count had become, all he could think was that the Raven Prince would have found a way to avoid all of this. It left him angry and bitter, and he fought with a level of malicious cynicism that eventually had even Seelie sea fae trying to get out of his way.

On the third day, the Unseelie fae started to triumph. The kudlaks were absolutely tireless, and gave their all to Zudanna. They rallied around her war cries and directions like she was more than just their matriarch, and their gazes were adoring. Zudanna had once said that her wolves fought with love in their hearts and he hadn’t thought much of it, but now he could see how it was true.

On the fourth day, what looked like a formal retreat from the Seelie became an unexpected second rush of two small squadrons. A slew of kudlaks and afrit were destroyed before the Unseelie rallied and fought back.

Dripping with blood and gore after the Seelie had retreated and didn’t seem to be returning, Gwyn assessed the damages. He still wasn’t sure if Albion had set up the battle to simply reduce the Unseelie military’s numbers, or for some other reason. He’d thought perhaps it was intended as a distraction, but watchful eyes on the Seelie militaries indicated that, no, the land fae weren’t being mobilised and many of them weren’t even being actively trained, still under the debts that Gwyn had held them to.

Perhaps, then, it was information gathering. Send out a smaller military to see how Gwyn fought. He’d needed his best to make sure they won, and now the Seelie Polemarch Alysia would have an excellent sense of how Ifir and Zudanna ran their militaries. They would know to go for Zudanna first, to fragment the kudlaks. They would see how Ifir’s afrit fought with a dated style; effective, but not always responsive to newer forms of combat.

It wasn’t as though Gwyn had simply enough soldiers to rotate through combat styles.

Bruised, bleeding from superficial wounds and still aching from deeper ones that had started to heal through, he was famished. He didn’t eat nearly enough anymore to sustain this kind of battling and, light-headed, he sat within a party of the kudlaks and accepted the plate of meat and marrow they offered him. He went straight for the marrow, scooping it out of split bones with his fingers and sucking them clean, still not understanding why killing soldiers with his light didn’t feed him properly. It left him sated temporarily, but it never lasted.

Most of the loot would go to the afrit and the kudlaks, since they had turned the tide of the battle.

‘It’s not good though, is it?’ Zudanna said, coming over to him and standing by his side, looking out across the wreckage of bodies and land, the scent of blood and death and viscera in the air. ‘That wasn’t their full forces. And did you see Alysia? She fought less often than she watched.’
‘I thought as much,’ Gwyn said, sighing. ‘There’s not a great deal we can do.’

‘I am not versed in sabotage,’ Zudanna said. ‘We’re one of the few Unseelie species who are better suited to cooperative, en masse fighting. But I think we need to keep finding ways to circumvent these battles before they happen. My people have had too much of retreat over the past decades, and these small wins are rallying, but we’re all worried. We all know what we’re up against.’

‘I’m doing what I can, Zudanna,’ Gwyn said. ‘We all are.’

‘I know that,’ she said, her wolf ears turning slightly, before settling once more. ‘I just don’t like the idea that this was a test. Because we can’t spare thirty thousand for a test. A four day battle? They didn’t even have their best fighters. They didn’t even have Mages or magicians. And yet look at this. A sea of carnage. The dead fae stretch to the horizon. This land will be fed well. When the Seelie really come for us, Gwyn…’

Gwyn wanted to say something like ‘hopefully it won’t come to that,’ but it would. They all knew it would.

‘We’ve tried to take down Alysia,’ Gwyn said quietly, ‘but she’s very protected. She’s an effective Polemarch, and she hates land fae.’

‘I suppose it wouldn’t be very rallying if we just told everyone ‘we’re fucked,’ would it?’ she said, grinning toothily. ‘We are though. I’ll do anything to protect my pack. Most of us would. We might lack loyalty to the Kingdom, but I’d do anything for my family. And they’re all my family.’ She gestured towards the huge mass of wolves. Some had shifted into wolf form, playing and romping through churned up soil, ground up flesh. Others were leaning into each other, eating, polishing armour, looking after the wounded. ‘I’m not going to tell my family they’re fucked.’

‘They might not be,’ Gwyn said. ‘The Unseelie are tenacious. The logs show we’ve come back from difficult times in the past.’

‘I guess. I’m one of the younger ones like you. A lot of these old timers – like Ifir – they lived through the golden age. You know, the Raven Prince, Titania, the Oak King. You and me…I feel like we were made for a different kind of conflict. I feel like the great sky wolf is breathing down the back of my neck, telling me it might all be over soon. They didn’t bring their best against us, and we had to fight hard for our victory.’

Zudanna placed a paw on Gwyn’s shoulder and with her other paw, pointed in the direction of the biggest grouping of the kudlaks. She turned to him, smelling of muddy wolf musk, blood, sweat, as much of the war as he did.

‘Find a way to make it work for us,’ she said. ‘Get us through the next year and I will get you through many more.’

Gwyn smiled stiffly, and they shared a long, meaningful look. Even as Gwyn teleported away, he knew that Zudanna had also noticed that Ifir hadn’t come over, that he hadn’t decided to share in the victory with Gwyn and Zudanna. Ifir had communicated with Gwyn as little as possible.

Fragmentation in the ranks of the Generals, and the Unseelie weren’t cohesive to begin with.

He wanted to visit Augus so badly it was a physical ache. They were heading towards two weeks now, and still…nothing. Augus had given no sign he wanted to communicate anything at all.

Did it all matter so little to Augus? The security of the palace? His brother? The status he’d earned and the potential for a future where he could regain some of his reputation and good standing?
Beneath that, a deeper fear; all those ‘sweetnesses’ and ‘my dear hearts.’ Did they mean nothing?

How could a secret be more important than all of it? Gwyn found it easy enough to doubt Augus’ feelings for him, but for Ash? Gwyn had threatened Augus with his brother’s demotion as well as banishment, and yet almost two weeks were gone and it seemed like he was in a battle of wills with someone he felt like he hardly understood.

What had Augus done? What was so bad, that it was worth this? Gwyn couldn’t stop thinking about it. How did Augus – a waterhorse recovering from captivity at the hands of the Nightingale – manage to turn around decades later, and destroy the mind of the Raven Prince? And could it be restored to him?

* 

The Unseelie palace kitchens were multiple connected rooms, far more organised and formal than what he’d created in the Seelie Court years ago. The trows moved around him, ignoring him for the most part, after making sure that he had many plates of food in front of him. They were as concerned as Augus seemed to be that Gwyn wasn’t eating, and whenever he turned up for a snack, he invariably found himself plied with platters and more, until he waved the trows away and stared at the food with something like dismay.

But he was still hungry after those days of battle, and he sat with a still-warm roasting tray of marrow bones split open before him, and he worked the marrow out and ate it, half-distracted and not paying much mind to the flavour. He needed the sustenance, but he didn’t like to think about eating. The last time he really had to think about eating, he’d been starving to death.

He looked up when Fenwrel entered and nodded a greeting to her, before going back to what he was doing; namely, not concentrating and quietly denuding bones of their deep, blackish marrow cores.

So it was surprising when she sat down opposite him on the long trestle table. She plucked up a small seed bun, and started picking the rich crust – thickly covered in roasted grains – placing small shredded bits into her mouth one at a time, and chewing neatly.

‘Do you know what you’re doing?’ Fenwrel said, a question now, where she had made a statement two weeks before. ‘Do you know how you toy with him?’

‘I’m not toying with him, and this is not a game. I take it you’ve been to see him?’ Gwyn said, looking up at her.

‘If you would just talk to him, I think—’

‘Did he tell you what he did? What this concerns?’ Gwyn said, his voice sharp, and Fenwrel’s ears flattened.

‘No,’ she said, sighing. ‘He won’t talk with me about it. But Gwyn, it is plain that he can’t. Whatever the specifics of the subject, it causes him great distress.’

‘Fenwrel, I am glad he has an ally, but he has destroyed two Courts. The first after great deliberation, and the second…through much of the same.’

‘Do you not think, by his willingness to stay in the outer circle of the Court, instead of retreating to a lake, or leaving, that he shows his dedication? His loyalty?’

‘No,’ Gwyn said quietly. ‘I think he believes himself more stubborn than I, and I think he expects
that my will may falter. But he is wrong. In this, I am unwavering.’

‘I think he knows that, Gwyn,’ Fenwrel said, frowning. ‘I think he’s realised that. Do you know what I think?’

‘Can I stop you from telling me?’ Gwyn said, staring at her.

‘You’re so like him, sometimes,’ Fenwrel said, her smile swift, sharp, knowing. ‘I think that he believes you will banish him once you know what happened. And I think he believes you have given him no option but a trap. That you will eject him from the Court if he doesn’t tell you, and that you will eject him from the Court if he does.’

Gwyn went back to eating for a couple of minutes, turning the words over. No matter what she said, he felt firm and sure in what he’d decided. He looked up, lowered the bone and the marrow fork, frowning.

‘Are you in this Court to have a better vantage point from which to keep an eye on Davix?’

There it was, in the slight shift of her eyebrows and the way her face went carefully still, before drawing up into more of that inquisitive, thoughtful expression.

‘Why would you ask that?’ she said.

‘Are you worried of what he is capable of?’ Gwyn said. ‘I’ve received some interesting words of advice over the past few weeks. Your name has been mentioned. The affairs of Mages were mentioned.’

‘I know you went to visit the School of the Staff,’ Fenwrel said, squinting at him. ‘But I do not believe that Principal Taronis would—’

‘Taronis revealed nothing,’ Gwyn said, sucking his fingers clean before picking up a wedge of cheese and breaking it in two, biting straight into the larger half.

‘Then who?’ she said, her fingernails drumming briefly on the wooden trestle table. She noticed it as he did, and folded her hands underneath the table instead, where – presumably – she could fidget away without drawing as much attention to it.

‘Why are you here, Fenwrel?’ Gwyn said, smiling at her. ‘Why do you ingratiate yourself with Augus, and position yourself so, in my Court? I believed it, you know. Your story of gratitude when I returned your rightful status to you.’

‘But no longer,’ Fenwrel said. Her shoulder shifted, and Gwyn wondered if she had placed her hand on her staff, just in case she needed to use it.

‘You’ve done a great deal for this Court,’ Gwyn said, keeping his tone mostly gentle, though a touch of hardness still found its way into his voice.

‘I have,’ Fenwrel said. She smiled slowly. ‘I’ve done a great deal for this Court. And now you wonder if my ulterior motive is something different?’

‘I simply want to know why you are here.’

‘Why I’m here? That’s it?’ Fenwrel said, placing both of her palms flat upon the table again. ‘There is more than one reason. Court status for myself and my children. To do my grandmother – also a great Mage – proud. And, yes, to keep an eye on Davix, because I cannot do it from Kerala,
and because I am concerned. I’m here because I don’t want a war. Davix has…not quite defected from the Thirteen. He still streams magic to the School of the Staff. But in the world tapestry, there is an unravelling, and it is Davix who stands at the apex of that unravelling, pretending that he does not.’

‘Why does this concern you, when you are not one of the Thirteen?’

‘Do you believe that there are only the Thirteen Deans and Principals, and that no other Mage is of any consequence to the School?’ Fenwrel smiled and managed to make Gwyn feel like he was six years old all over again. ‘Gwyn, I am valuable to the School of the Staff. Because I can sense when things are going awry. Because that is what I feed upon. I know when the world trips down a dangerous path, because I become more powerful.’

‘Feeling powerful lately?’ Gwyn said, placing his elbow on the table and resting his chin in his palm. ‘Doing well for yourself?’

‘Very,’ Fenwrel said, her smile graceful and pleased.

‘Is it not in your best interest to create discord? To ensure your continued health?’

‘I have always been powerful, and I have never lacked for nourishment, because where there is imperfection, there is food for me. Perhaps you’ll just have to trust that I’m not trying to tip the world further into disharmony.’

‘I have to say, you did quite a job of installing yourself in the Unseelie palace. Asking for asylum.’

‘No one expects a short mouse-maiden – even one who carries a staff – to be…what I am,’ Fenwrel said, picking up her bread roll once more and peeling off a piece, eating it fastidiously.

‘Would you blood oath that you are not here to tip the Unseelie Court further into the path of ruin?’

‘Yes,’ Fenwrel said, easily enough that she was either very good at dissemination, or she meant it. He picked up one of the unused knives and handed it to her, and without hesitating, she took it.

In a single, fluid movement she turned the blade of the knife and slammed it down into the table, so that it stood upright, still quivering, when she moved her hand away. Gwyn could feel the force of the thud in his body. He sat straighter, but she went straight back to her bread bun, ignoring him for a length of time that stretched until impatience bloomed through him.

‘We’re not done talking,’ Fenwrel said, looking up at him through her painted lashes. ‘And if you think I will give you an ill-considered blood oath without thinking it over first, you are mistaken. You can throw your ultimatums down at the feet of Augus; but not me, young man. First, I want to know your informant. Mages keep their confidences well.’

‘It was not a Mage who informed me,’ Gwyn said. ‘Of that I assure you.’

‘Really? You assure me? Will you blood oath such assurance to me?’ Fenwrel said, rolling her eyes. ‘Is that what we are now? Blood oaths only?’

‘You clearly still serve the School of the Staff,’ Gwyn said. ‘They who say they are obligated to stay out of the matters of the Courts.’

‘The Principals and the Deans, yes,’ Fenwrel said. ‘None of the other Mages, no. A problem we have at the School, is that Davix is a Principal, and he pledged an oath to stay out of the Courts.’
‘So he’s an oathbreaker.’

‘He is,’ Fenwrel said, staring at Gwyn, displeasure radiating through her. ‘He is an oathbreaker, and we don’t know why. Either he knows something that we don’t – entirely possible, given his provenance. Or he wishes to start something he shouldn’t. Also possible. Albion is erratic and irrational, the Seelie Court poisoned, and it’s as vulnerable in some ways as the Unseelie Court. What things does Davix whisper into the ear of the King? And why? To what end? All I know is that I feed well in this era. And I also know that in this Court, living in this Court, with you, with Augus, I feel my powers muting. Just slightly. Just enough to tell me that this is the place I am meant to be. The right place. I don’t know why. There are a lot of things I don’t know. This world is too vast for me to have more than a thimbleful of knowledge in my hands. So there, that is what I do know.’

‘You’re telling me I’m doing the right thing?’

‘No,’ Fenwrel said, laughing softly. ‘I can’t tell you that. It’s not that simple. I know this place tells me that the right thing is happening somewhere here. But right doesn’t always mean good, or pleasant, or even healthy. Sometimes something has to die before it can be reborn. Sometimes we must suffer before there can be pleasure. Sometimes we must sicken before we can value what it is to be healthy. So I cannot tell you what it means that it feels right to be here. You seek assurances I cannot give you. Just as I seek assurances you cannot give me.’

‘You do?’

‘Augus,’ Fenwrel said, by way of explanation. Gwyn couldn’t stop the flush on his cheeks, and he sighed after several seconds and pushed his plate away. He’d thoroughly lost his appetite.

‘I do what I must, with Augus,’ Gwyn said finally.

‘He suffers,’ Fenwrel said, standing as Gwyn stood.

‘The Court has suffered,’ Gwyn said crisply. He looked at the knife still stuck in the wood of the table, and Fenwrel looked down to it as well. When she met his gaze once more, she grimaced.

‘Do you know that it is the Seelie, I believe, who talk about putting one’s country and Kingdom before loved ones? Do you feel in your heart that the Kingdom comes first?’

‘Yes,’ Gwyn said, staring down at her, daring her to make something of it.

‘You are a strange Unseelie King,’ Fenwrel said after a pause, smiling with something that could have been sympathy. ‘I do believe that despite my doubts, you might actually know what you’re doing. And that surprises me. All right then, I’ll stay out of this matter between you and Augus. It’s clear that’s what you wish. And I shall think over a blood oath. And wonder at what informant you have, to tell you exactly what to ask me.’

‘Do you wish to silence them?’

Fenwrel laughed, and then shook her head. ‘It only intrigues me that apparently we are scrutinised just as closely as we scrutinise the rest of the world.’

She bowed, then teleported away in a flare of bright, massed colour. It left a sear across his eyes.

Gwyn sat heavily and then reached over and pulled the knife out of the table, using some force to get it free. He spun the blade in his hands and sighed, heartsick, too tired of politics to want to give them another thought. He ached for Augus. If he chose, he could walk to Augus right now. Augus
was only in one of the night gardens, and they were close to the kitchens. He doubted that was a coincidence.

But he didn’t walk to the night gardens. He nursed a headache, and went to the room he used to share with Augus. He lay on the large bed and stared up at the ceiling, knowing he was doing the right thing; hating it all the same.

Chapter End Notes

In our next chapter, 'Limbo:'

‘Fenwrel thinks you are not as base as I think you are,’ Gulvi said. Augus had to bite his tongue to make sure that he didn’t make some quip about Gulvi and Fenwrel’s apparent sympatico. Now was really not the time. ‘Gwyn, evidently, sees some worth in you. If he did not, he would not be giving you this chance. Prove yourself to him, Augus.’

‘I already have,’ Augus said.

‘You think you have,’ Gulvi said, rolling her eyes. ‘But why should any of us trust you? Listen to you? See the merits in what you do and who you are? You should have been killed a thousand times over for all that you have done, and yet you are lucky enough to be alive. Where, might I add, a lot of worthy people are not. If he asks you to prove yourself to him again, you should do it. Especially if it concerns the destruction you have wrought in the past. Do you not understand that we all fear it could happen again? We don’t have some manual that tells us exactly when you’re going to do something terribly destructive, and there are no clear signs that make you predictable before it happens. The very things that bring you comfort – that you are separate, aloof, mercurial, unpredictable – are the things that deter trust.’
Augus

It took time to get back to the Unseelie Court after Gwyn teleported away. Augus felt numb as he went back to the lake that would get him back to the Court. He walked quickly, couldn’t quite feel his fingers or hands. No one was ever supposed to- But it had happened, Gwyn had seen, and…

But Gwyn was bluffing, and the sooner he explained to Gwyn that he simply couldn’t talk about it, the better. After all, he wasn’t about to go destroy the Unseelie Court. Not again. That was what he had his Soulbond for, wasn’t it?

Augus scratched at it absently.

When he reached the lake, he looked behind him, then up into the canopy. It was far too cheerful and warm a day for the coldness he felt inside of his limbs. None of his muscles were working properly, they all felt far too stiff. Even so, he dived into the lake and sluggishly turned to water, seeking the haven of the Unseelie Court.

Drawing himself up in human-form once more, he stepped onto the lake bank and looked at the giant walls surrounding the Unseelie palace. He squeezed excess water out of his hair, and then absently smoothed at it, settling it over his shoulders. His lips quirked up, a smile for no one else but himself. At some point, he knew he would start thinking again, but in the moment, he could only function.

He walked towards the wall and placed his hand on the doorknob that led into one of the side entrances.

It wouldn’t turn for him.

He stared at his fingers on the doorknob, and then called his waterhorse strength and tried to turn the doorknob once more. It had always responded smoothly to his touch in the past. Now, it didn’t budge.

Augus blew out an exhale and stared up the wall, to the distant turrets of the actual palace. He placed his hands on the wall and shook his head slowly.

Gwyn was bluffing. He had to be. There was no way he would leave Augus to be unprotected in
the outer circle of the Unseelie Court. Absolutely *no* way. Gwyn was far too much of a
sentimentalist, far too protective, to allow Augus to fall to such danger. After all, many of the
Unseelie wanted Augus dead more than the Seelie did.

Augus looked around warily, and then walked along the outer wall of the Court, his fingers trailing
along the rough stone, claws wearing on it.

Another door, this one made of wrought iron. He could see through it to a shadowed meadow with
a single tree upon it bathed in a single shaft of light – the illusion of the Unseelie Court. He tried
the handle, and the gate wouldn’t budge. Didn’t even creak.

He took a deep breath and shoved his waterhorse weight at it.

‘Gwyn,’ Augus whispered, pushing at the gate. ‘Gwyn.’

*He’s done it. He’s gone and done it. How well did you think you knew him, again?*

Augus laughed softly. Then he leaned his back against the palace wall and stared out into the forest
of trees with their black trunks and black-violet leaves. He had none of his clothing, none of his
food. If he went to the lake that Ash had gotten him – did he even still have access to it? – he could
find food and more. But he felt like this was a matter of principal.

He wasn’t going to leave.

Gwyn would come and see him in a few hours, and they’d have a *talk*. Maybe Augus wouldn’t like
it, but he was certain Gwyn would like it even less. If Gwyn thought he could manipulate Augus
into telling him about the Raven Prince, he was sorely mistaken.

* *

Hours had passed before he heard a crackling sound in the undergrowth. Augus looked up from
where he was sitting, back to the palace wall and hands resting on the leaf litter. Many spiders and
other creatures had investigated his hands, and even though they were poisonous or venomous, it
didn’t bother him. Currently, a large centipede was curled underneath his palm, and he provided
shelter for it.

Two trows were walking over, the two who most frequently served him. He blinked to see them.
They waved at him and he lifted his hand slowly, so as not to overly disturb the centipede, and
waved back.

One signed: *Come with us. There is a place for you that is safer.*

‘In the palace?’ Augus said, standing, staring at them.

The trows looked at each other, and then shook their heads.

*No. The King has told us that-*

‘Told you?’ Augus said, feeling faint. ‘What did he tell you? *Who* did he tell?’

*He summoned all of the servants and the Inner Court into the room of thrones,* signed the one on
the right, with larger ears, darker eyes, *and he told us that you are barred from the palace. We are
permitted to still serve you. He spoke of your being a traitor, he said you will be barred in a month
if you do not comply with his wishes.*
Augus stared at the palace walls themselves in shock. ‘He told…Ash? Gulvi?’

_And the mouse and rat maidens_, the trow signed.

Augus felt stupid, just standing there, but he couldn’t think of what to do for several seconds. They all _knew_? Gwyn had changed the permissions and then told everyone. Perhaps it was still a bluff, Gwyn would have to cave. There was no way he’d last more than a few days, with Augus just outside the palace, in reach.

_Ah, yes, of course. Keep telling yourself that._

*

Augus followed the trows around the circumference of the Unseelie palace to a night garden which wasn’t accessible by other Unseelie fae, barring Gwyn and the Inner Court itself. It was one of a few private night gardens, but Augus found out quickly he didn’t have access to any of those, either. Invisible barriers that reminded him acutely of the one in his Seelie cell, stopped him from stepping into other night gardens. He came to realise that the only other night gardens he could access were the ones publically available to all. And they were often occupied, so he daren’t go there.

The night garden he was allowed was large enough. It comprised of some forest, some garden beds of herbs, shrubs and flowers. There were sculptures. There was a bench. But there was no bed, no lake, no place to teleport. If he wanted to leave the grounds, he’d have to walk along the walls back to the lake of Gwynwy.

Sighing, he watched the trows leave to fetch him something to eat. He wasn’t all that hungry, but he wasn’t sure how often the trows would come back to him once they were within the Court once more.

As more hours passed he realised more clearly that he had no access to his books, his clothing. The things that were rightfully _his_. There were herbal treatments for Julvia that he couldn’t get to.

_You had best arrive quickly if you want to avoid my wrath_, he caught himself thinking towards the palace itself.

The trows brought him a light salad of greens plucked fresh from lakes, and he ate slowly, looking towards the turrets as though he could will Gwyn to see him, to notice him.

Telling Gwyn what he did to the Raven Prince wasn’t an option. But having his brother be demoted and expelled from the palace wasn’t an option either. But he didn’t believe Gwyn was capable of that. Gwyn, who had put his life on the line to release Augus from the Seelie Court. Who had sought the Soulbond in the first place. Who had taken great steps to ensure Augus’ safety so often, to the point that Augus felt over-protected, even smothered.

‘He’ll come around,’ Augus said to himself, looking around the night gardens and wondering what on earth he was going to _do._

*

‘Augus?’

Augus turned immediately, saw Ash walking towards him and stood immediately, brushing off his pants.
‘You’re a sight for sore eyes,’ Augus said, smiling, and Ash shook his head rapidly, fury on his face.

‘He’s gone too far,’ Ash said, grasping Augus by the shoulders and looking at him, examining him, as though for bruises or marks. ‘He’s gone way too far. If he thinks he can get away with this. I told him he couldn’t just use his powers for domestic arguments, and fucking Fenwrel thought-’

‘Ash,’ Augus said, reaching up and placing two hands on his chest. ‘Ash, this is…private. It’s a private matter.’

‘Did you hear what he’d threatened to do you? Banish you? Demote you? Come on, man. Don’t let him treat you like this.’

‘Ash, I would really rather not do this right now,’ Augus said, closing his eyes.

A hesitation, and Ash’s grip lightening on his shoulders, as though he’d only just realised how rough he was being. Augus didn’t open his eyes again, because he wasn’t entirely certain what to say, and he hated being caught in a position where he was lost for words precisely when he needed them. He was outside, in the dark of the Unseelie Court. The Nightingale had haunted him through these spaces, once literally, and now in the shadows of Augus’ own mind.

Ash’s hands gentled, and he lifted one hand and slid it around the back of Augus’ head, splaying his fingers. His other hand shifted until it was on top of Augus’ shoulder, but it wasn’t Ash’s full weight, and his thumb was smoothing over Augus’ shirt.

‘Okay, yeah,’ Ash said, his voice rumbling and softer. ‘Sorry, brother. I got ahead of myself there. Do you need anything from me?’

‘I’m uncertain,’ Augus said, opening his eyes and meeting Ash’s hazel gaze. ‘This is not a predicament I expected to find myself in, when the day started.’

‘Yeah,’ Ash said, smiling at him. The expression was slightly off, but given the stress Augus was under, he chalked it up to the situation they both found themselves in. Besides, Ash’s hands on him were gentle, and Augus – loathe as he was to admit it – needed that. ‘I can’t take you back into the palace.’

‘I gathered as much,’ Augus said, grimacing.

‘But food? Or…clothing? I could probably get the trows to bring you a chest of some of your things. And since this place is private, no one would bother it. Not sure what to do about a bed though.’

‘I’m hoping to not be here long enough to need it,’ Augus said. Ash started rubbing his upper arms and Augus was torn between wanting to break away, and still being too dazed to know entirely what to do.

‘You won’t go back to that lake I picked out for you? There’s a home there, a bed, clothing...’

‘No,’ Augus said, as Ash squeezed his arms somewhere above his elbows, a constant, warm presence. ‘I have to stay here.’

‘Seriously, Augus, why not just go to the lake? The home? It’d be more comfortable, and it’s obvious you’re kind of having a rough time at the moment.’

Everything about Ash’s voice was soft, soothing. Augus blinked when he realised that at some
point, Ash had wrapped him up in a practical blanket of glamour, which was as warm and close as his hands on Augus’ arms. Augus swallowed, was tempted to step away, but as petty and embarrassing as it felt, he wanted that glamour. It was strange that Ash was using it on purpose though. Usually it just spilled out of him, every which way. But the reassuring nature of it was definitely at odds with how furious Ash had seemed minutes before.

‘How’s your balcony garden?’ Augus said, and Ash nodded like Augus had said something else entirely, and pulled him closer until he could sling one arm around Augus’ back.

‘It’s fine, bro,’ Ash said. ‘Totally fine. I think I have a frog? I have no idea how it got there. I didn’t make it, so maybe it was just really determined to get there. I’m calling him Croaky.’

‘Original,’ Augus said, his forehead on his brother’s shoulder, the world smelling of wetland, silt, the faintest hint of alcohol weeping from Ash’s pores.

‘It was either that or Jumpy.’

‘I’m starting to see a pattern in how you name your pets. They all have to end with a Y.’

‘Yeah,’ Ash said, his voice getting rougher. ‘Remember Lucky?’

‘I never had the misfortune of meeting Lucky, I just remember your reaction when Lucky died.’

‘Fuck me, I cried for like weeks. That dog was so great. They just don’t live long enough. At least some of the fae species last longer. But even they don’t make it past what, fifty? Sixty?’

‘Black shucks live a while,’ Augus said, as Ash slung his other arm around Augus’ back. It was turning into a very long hug, and Augus didn’t mind in the least.

‘I didn’t name Lucky anyway, Pascha – the homeless guy – had already named him. And black shucks can’t really be tamed as pets. Like I’ve heard of it happening once. But the rest of the time they just do their own thing. As for the rest, it’s just not long enough.’

‘Maybe you wouldn’t value them as much if they lived longer,’ Augus said.

Ash laughed. ‘That’s bullshit. You’re gonna live forever, and you’re my favourite.’

Augus’ hands had crossed between Ash’s shoulder blades, and he squeezed him closer, and then stepped back. There was a faint smile on his face, a sigh in his lungs. He felt achy, which was absurd. He’d hunted not that long ago. He was in the peak of health. He didn’t want his eyes to move towards the palace behind Ash’s back, but he couldn’t help himself, it was like an itch in his vision. He looked, wondered what Gwyn was doing, made himself look away. Ash noticed, his lips pursed, but he didn’t say anything.

‘A chest,’ Augus said finally. ‘Clothing, perhaps some cushions, maybe some books on plant life. I’m not sure what Gwyn will give you access to. But the trows will be able to get everything.’

‘Yep,’ Ash said, nodding. His eyes had gone distant again at the mention of Gwyn’s name, and Augus didn’t like how uneasy it made him. Ash’s glamour was still rolling out calm and soothing, as though nothing at all was wrong.

‘Don’t do anything rash,’ Augus said, stepping towards Ash again and placing a hand on the flat of his chest. ‘Please? I know you have been through a lot, but-’

‘Oh, man, don’t worry about that,’ Ash said, beaming at him. ‘You shouldn’t be worrying about
that. I’ll come visit a lot, if it’ll help you feel better about me. I don’t have much else to do here and Gulvi doesn’t want me leaving the palace much anyway. I think the most foolish thing I’ve got planned is to get drunk a few times. Business as usual.’

Ash stayed for another hour, but the conversation dwindled away to nothing. Augus didn’t feel like talking, and though Ash started to talk about different subjects, it was obvious his heart wasn’t really in it. Perhaps, Augus surmised, he was also floored by the absurdity of their situation. That two waterhorses who never used to have a single interest in the Court, or the Court life, were now dependent on it in different ways, for different reasons. Augus reached up and touched the Soulbond at his chest on the odd occasion. He wished he’d never agreed to it.

When he was younger, he used to believe in living free of regrets.

Now that he was older, he’d come to learn that if you spent long enough living, regrets would become the hounds nipping at your heels, never letting up, the pack always growing. Looking sidelong at Ash’s quiet, sober expression, he wondered if his brother was learning the same thing.

* 

Augus paced the night garden, learning its boundaries. It butted up against three private gardens, before blending into the forest of the Gwylwyr, which curved along the back end of the palace wall, all the way to the Gwylwyr Du, the lake he needed to teleport anywhere. He learned that the garden was large, but not large enough for his territorial instincts. There were some herbs and night-fruiting trees, but nothing like the actual herbal garden that Gwyn had created – that he and Gulvi used to get herbs for Julvia’s care. There was a very small creek hidden well behind rocks and shrubs, the trickling water no wider than the length of his palm at the widest point. It sprung up from a small spring, and disappeared again two metres later. The water was fresh and invigorating, but there were no fish living in its depths, nothing that truly communicated anything of home to Augus.

He felt weighed down by the Unseelie constellations slowly revolving around him. He wasn’t sure what the constellations were meant to represent – though the Raven Prince had tried to teach him many times, the Raven Prince always changed their meanings and that led Augus to think they meant whatever one wanted them to mean. They were the same constellations that had watched him when he joined the Raven Prince’s Court, and they were the very same ones that felt like they were smothering him even as the Nightingale did the same.

Augus hated those stars, and he tried not to look at the slowly darkening sky that only ever brightened to twilight, before darkening once more.

The trows brought two chests to him, and left them under the shade of a large hawthorn tree that had been shaped to form a secluded space within its low sprawling branches. One chest was filled with blankets and cushions, and the other was filled with food, bottles of water and tea, as well as some of his best leather bound books, and – surprisingly, given he hadn’t asked for it – his herbal kit.

Seeing that, somehow, made things worse. Everything felt a great deal more official. As though he was already cast out, and this was just a holding period before he had to make his way to something new. He tried not to think of that. It hadn’t even been a full day. Gwyn would cave. He had to cave.

Augus had lost the Raven Prince, and the stone in his pocket didn’t respond to him anymore. The magic was wasted, gone.
He wondered if the Raven Prince had intended that when he’d made it for Augus. If the Raven Prince just couldn’t stand the idea of someone constantly knowing where he was, due to a charm.

* 

It was Fenwrel who visited him next.

He saw her coming, and she walked straight towards him. Augus sat with his legs drawn lazily towards his chest, his back against the trunk of the hawthorn. He lifted a hand in greeting, and she did the same. He wondered how she knew exactly where he was. Did she follow scent? Energy? Something else?

‘I don’t have much to offer you by the way of tea,’ Augus said, as she knelt before him, placing her hands in her lap after she settled her clothing and staff. ‘But the trows did bring me this bottle of ever-warmed Elodea tea, if you’d like? I have no cups.’

‘Gwyn said you’d committed treason once today already,’ Fenwrel said, waving away the bottle he showed her. ‘What did he mean?’

Augus sighed and looked away from her. He should have known that this was more the sort of questioning he would receive from the others. ‘How should I know what he meant?’

‘Augus, I am not here as your enemy. I am here as your friend.’

‘You’re here as many things,’ Augus said, pointing to the staff at her side. ‘The King commanded that I confide something in him, on penalty of treason. I did not confide in him. I am treasonous.’

As I have ever been.

‘He said it concerned the defeat of the Raven Prince?’ Fenwrel said, her words delicate and soft. Augus knew she was trying not to drive him away. What she didn’t know was that his malaise was too heavy upon him, he had no room left for bitter, spitting rage. Not now. There was nowhere he wanted to go, in case he missed Gwyn coming from the palace and letting him back into his home.

‘I’ll not talking about this,’ Augus said, when it was obvious she was waiting for a response.

‘Augus, I’m not sure if you understand-’

‘I will not!’ Augus said firmly. ‘And he knows that, has always known that. Knew it when I was in a cell for six months in the Seelie Court. Has known it since. That he expects it now, when I have done nothing but serve him… I will wait this out.’

Fenwrel sighed and looked up into the branches of the hawthorn. Her hair was perfectly in place, as always; a shining bun decorated with small gilt pins. Make up applied well, paint on her lashes and her lips. Even now, he found her intriguing. He smiled wryly, he was willing to admit he was looking for any distraction from what was happening.

‘Three days,’ Augus said, ‘and I can almost guarantee that Gwyn will be here, unable to wait this out.’

‘He has announced to all of us his intentions with you,’ Fenwrel said, still looking up at the branches. ‘He was very serious. His glamour was far stronger than usual. I’m not even sure he was aware of it. But he talked to us as King. I know a King’s mandate when I hear one.’

‘He is more than just his glamour,’ Augus said, raising his eyebrows. ‘I know that better than
anyone. Believe me when I say you do not know him as I do.’

‘That may be true,’ Fenwrel said, and then she reached out with her hand and left it palm up. ‘May I check your meridians?’

Augus shifted tiredly and handed her his wrist, almost liking the way her warm hand closed around his skin. The touch was, oddly, welcome. He could tell her faint energy signature when she sent it within him, she was being far gentler than usual. He wanted to tell her that he didn’t need to be coddled, but he kept his mouth closed, because even he could hear how weary he sounded.

‘The new meridians are holding,’ Fenwrel said, nodding to herself. ‘That’s something.’

‘Yes, I suppose that it is,’ Augus said, hardly caring.

‘Do you need anything?’

‘Nothing you can provide, that you aren’t already providing,’ Augus said, nodding towards her touch.

She smiled at him, and they lapsed into silence.

*

Ash kept visiting, but every time it was the same; reassurance, a rolling constant glamour, small talk. Augus couldn’t recall ever feeling so distant from him, and all his attempts to scry out how Ash was really doing ended with rebuffs that were surprisingly sophisticated. No matter how adeptly he tried to read Ash’s condition, his emotional state, Ash just as cleverly turned the questions around.

They spoke in circles, and each time Ash left, a melancholy stole over Augus’ body, turning his limbs heavy.

At the end of the third day, Augus realised that Gwyn might not cave as he’d first suspected. Had Gwyn retreated to the coldness he relied upon to get him through difficult situations?

Augus’ claws found the trees he’d been absently sending nurturing energy to ever since this had become the place that he refused to leave. Not quite a home, not quite a cell. He dug into the soft inner bark, scratched the trunks to pieces as he moved from tree to tree. The piquant scent of different oozing saps mingled in the air as Augus vented a frustrated, limited expression of what felt like years of rage.

Three days and nothing.

Hadn’t he earned more than that? Hadn’t he done more than that? He’d proven himself over and over again, for Gwyn to find some absurd high horse about Augus’ past actions now?

His growl was a deep throb that shook into the ground. It surrounded him, took away his dazed state and left him with a palpable, desperate fury.

He would not be manipulated. He would not!

*

Three days became four, then five, then a week. Augus oscillated between an impotent frustration that led to sap and splinters beneath his claws, and an idle need to reverse the damage he’d done.
He leaned against weeping trees and funnelled nurturing energy into their boles and branches, into smaller herbs and squat shrubs.

He let himself doze to pass the time. He asked the trows for a manicure kit, because he’d shredded his claws, split two of them, and had to file them back down to his fingertips so that they might grow out neatly again.

The concentration to get through books he’d read many times before didn’t present itself to him. Books lay opened to random pages, and then he’d snap them closed and shove them all back into the wooden chest, before pulling them out an hour later, bored.

This was wasteful. What Gwyn was doing was wasteful. Augus had diplomatic work he could be attending to. At the very least he could be doing common work.

For some reason, the almost-torpor he’d sought for himself in the Seelie cell wouldn’t avail itself to him now. But he wasn’t only recently dropped down to underfae, he wasn’t so exhausted he was sure he would die alone in the Seelie Court. Things were different now.

Augus’ heart ached.

*

It wasn’t any of Gwyn’s business, anyway.

Augus had sworn, he’d vowed on Ash’s life that he wouldn’t bring harm to the Unseelie Court. Except…

Except Gwyn had allowed him that one caveat. If Augus truly thought his life, or the life of his loved ones were in danger, then – then he could act against the Kingdom, both Kingdoms, if he so wished.

Augus was almost certain that Gwyn knew that gave full reign to Augus’ madness when it came upon him, the predatorial madness that they all now knew was underworld poisoning. It was that very predatorial sickness that made him think it wise to massacre the entire An Fnwy estate. Truly, he’d only meant to kill Crielle.

It wasn’t until the next night that he realised he’d scratched the Soulbond to shallow bleeding. He spent the next half hour picking dried blood out from under his fingernails, until he finally gave in and simply bathed his hands in the sharply flowing creek. It was a little runnel of water that sang a tiny high-pitched song that was a shrill bell to the deep bass hum of his lake. His lakes. He’d had more than one now.

Now Gwyn had barred him from this home too.

Augus laughed. Was he destined to spend the rest of his life being barred from every new home he sought?

*

‘You don’t look exactly well,’ Fenwrel said, and Augus startled from his doze, a pulse of fear sluggishly moving through him. His mental guard had been so low. She was kneeling beside him. Right beside him.

Absently but quickly, he pushed himself away, gave himself a metre of space between his body and hers. But that meant he no longer had the tree trunk supporting him, it also meant one of his hips
was painfully balanced on a tree root. He shifted, trying to bring some measure of calm repose to himself. It was useless.

‘I don’t feel exactly well,’ Augus said.

‘What did you do to the Raven Prince?’ Fenwrel said, her eyes mouse-bright. ‘We’ve all wondered, you understand. Can you imagine the treasure that some fae is going to win one day, if they discover they guessed it a-right?’

‘I will no sooner tell you, than the King,’ Augus said, shifting his hair. He’d not had a shower in… how long had it been now? Nearly two weeks? It didn’t matter, his body was self-cleaning – a convenience of upper class fae was that they didn’t have to worry about such things as the bacteria of body odour; not unless they wished it, at any rate. Still, he wanted to feel water sluicing over his body, the pounding of a waterfall, or the shelter of some lake. ‘And Gwyn? How is he?’

‘I don’t know,’ Fenwrel said. ‘The battle has stretched into its fourth day, and it is my understanding that Unseelie forces are beginning to flag, and that- Wait, you did not know?’

‘He’s been in battle for four days?’

Fenwrel’s ears flickered in shock, her eyes went wide. She frowned. ‘The trows did not tell you?’

‘No,’ Augus said, mouth feeling dry. ‘Is he well?’

‘They should have told you,’ Fenwrel said, sounding disapproving.

Augus laughed. ‘I expect that if Gwyn has told them not to tell me, they will not tell me. They cannot circumvent his direct orders unless I offer them a roundabout way to do so. And it did not occur to me to ask if we had gone to war.’

_Stupid, of course we’re going to war. We’re at war. What is he doing in a battle for so long? Taking his mind off things?

‘Is he well?’ Augus said again.

‘Minor injuries, certainly the kind that Gwyn has suffered before and fought through.’

Augus nodded dumbly. Gwyn wasn’t even here at the palace. For some reason that smarted, and he shifted on the ground, looking up through branches at those Unseelie constellations, before determinedly looking away again. Augus still had a stone in his pocket, and he was quite certain that it was nothing more than a stone now. His Raven Prince gone in every sense of the word. Some giant raven fluttering about the world.

Perhaps one day it would be brought down by a hunter’s arrow.

_Look at you, referring to your Prince as an ‘it’ already. Perhaps this is why Gwyn has you out here, instead of in there. You know what you are.

‘May I sit with you?’ Fenwrel said, her voice intruding on the tumbling of his thoughts. ‘May I try and strengthen your meridians?’

‘So polite, given I am on the verge of banishment and demotion.’

‘Politeness is not determined nor predicated on class,’ Fenwrel said crisply. ‘Nor is it earned through another person’s actions. It is a way I choose to conduct myself. But for what it is worth,
Augus, I want to be here. I can just sit here quietly, if you wish. You don’t look up for much by the way of conversation.’

‘Don’t I?’ Augus said, his lips twisting.

He handed her his wrist unthinking, and she took it and then turned his hand. It took him a second before he realised that he’d likely scratched at his Soulbond again, or had he destroyed some more tree bark? It didn’t matter. His claws were not what they should be. But Fenwrel did not comment, and eventually settled his wrist in her hand. Fenwrel smelled of baked grains and honey, the warmth of sheaves of wheat at harvest and a liquid fire beneath that, the hearth smoke in a long-used oven. She smelled of what she was – a mouse-maiden.

‘Am I on the wrong path?’ Augus said, his voice harder than he’d intended, but weak, too. ‘Are you feeding off me, right now?’

‘Hush,’ Fenwrel said, bringing her other hand to his forearm and petting it. ‘If you think I’m that base, you’re mistaken.’

‘I can be that base,’ Augus said, feeling on the edge of delirium. Why was he so tired? He hadn’t done anything.

‘Hush,’ Fenwrel said again, and Augus closed his eyes when he felt the fresh green tendril of her magic slide beneath his skin.

‘Shouldn’t Aleutia be doing this?’

‘No,’ Fenwrel said. ‘You are far too fragile for her style of healing. Hers is the rough and tumble of battlefield.’

Augus’ forehead furrowed that she’d called him fragile, he was the strongest Each Uisge that had ever existed.

Really? A mocking voice said inside his head. Augus shuddered. He couldn’t quite recall when the Nightingale’s voice had taken up residence once more, but there it was, a lilting song reminding him that it didn’t matter how strong or powerful he was in the flesh. His heart was weak. So weak, that Gwyn was trying to exploit it, trying to trick him into talking about something he didn’t want to talk about.

‘You called me fragile,’ Augus said.

Fenwrel smiled, even as she looked down at his hand. ‘Haven’t you yet realised, Augus? Like speaks to like. I know what you are, because I know what I am in myself.’

Augus watched her for a little longer, but she didn’t seem inclined to share any more thoughts, and Augus didn’t feel like talking. But the words, they soothed at something rough in him. Not enough to make him feel comforted, but it was still something, and in that moment, he was grateful that she was there by his side.

*

After three weeks, he definitely wasn’t in the mood to deal with Gulvi. Especially the way she was walking towards him as he paced backwards and forwards. There was a set look to her face, and he thought perhaps that Gwyn might be hurt or… but then, no, if that had happened, someone else would have informed him, someone who-
‘Is Gwyn all right?’ Augus said, unable to stop himself from blurting the words.

‘Your blood-oaths to him would be gone, wouldn’t they? You would have felt them go. La! Unless you didn’t re-make them, and then I suppose you’d just have to guess, wouldn’t you?’

‘He’s fine then,’ Augus deadpanned, and Gulvi grinned at him.

He very much wasn’t in the mood for her, and the more he thought about it, the more irate he felt. He didn’t have his rapier. He couldn’t defend himself. She’d seen him have those confounded flashbacks, and he just didn’t want to deal with whatever she was going to present to him. Whatever interrogation or questions she had to ask.

Gulvi stopped a couple of metres away, her wings giving her a breadth that always made her seem so much larger, taller than what she was. She was shorter than Gwyn and Augus, taller than Ash. But her wings rose above her shoulder blades, even above her head, and consequently she was just imposing, especially when she had her ivory swan’s wings partially relaxed and spread, as they were now.

He met her liquid black eyes, noted the thinness in her already thin lips, and waited.

‘You’ve stopped treating Julvia,’ she said.

Augus’ teeth slammed together. ‘I can’t very well access my treatments here, can I?’

‘I know,’ Gulvi said, lifting a hand, her eyebrows lifting in surprise. ‘I know. I wanted to ask if you could make them here or show me what to do. Aleutia has your notes, but I think- Gods help all of us but I think your treatments are doing something. I want you to make them.’

‘Maybe you should take it up with Gwyn, and see if he’ll let me back in the palace to do it.’

‘Nice try,’ Gulvi said, showing her teeth. ‘But you forget that I loved the Raven Prince, adored him, and as far as I can tell from Gwyn’s behaviour, you did something far worse than what I have previously suspected. I may be giving you more rope, Augus, but I’d dearly like you not to hang yourself with it!’

‘That’s new,’ Augus said, unable to keep the aloofness out of his voice. ‘I was sure you’d be looking forward to the hanging part.’

‘I prefer knives,’ Gulvi said, gesturing to the hilts of her blades.

‘Gulvi, everyone in the fae realm knows you prefer knives.’

‘Will you help me or not?’ she snapped.

Augus winced, looked away into the darkness of the forest. What was he supposed to do? He didn’t want to miss out on Julvia’s treatments, he’d already missed them once before. He didn’t even understand how Julvia could be making progress.

‘What kind of progress?’ Augus said, looking back to Gulvi.

‘La! I don’t fucking know! It’s hard to explain. I feel as though sometimes she is there, like a ghost. It is only in moments. Like a flicker. A wisp of down in the wind. I do not know if I wish it to be true or if it is true, and Aleutia does not know, she senses no changes in Julvia’s overall health. On
the very off-chance that you are helping, I wish that help to continue.’

‘You miss her so much?’ Augus said, and Gulvi opened her mouth as though to snarl at him, and then her anger bleached away.

‘Non,’ she said, smiling as though to herself. ‘It is not quite that. Julvia and I never saw eye to eye on anything. Of all my family, I think I would have preferred her to survive the least. I left my family for a reason. They did not want to count a swan-maiden assassin amongst their number. I was – to them – aberrant, even for an Unseelie fae, and Julvia was one of the loudest in protesting the choices I’ve made. I don’t want her back for me, I want her back for herself. She is all that remains of my family.’

‘I don’t have access to all the equipment I need here, and I don’t trust this environment not to contaminate my supplies. I can make some of her treatments, and some you can make yourself, and the rest will…’

...Will have to wait.

That was only if Gwyn allowed him back into the palace, and that was only going to happen if Augus talked about what had happened between he and the Raven Prince, and that was not going to happen.

What then? Would Gwyn let him keep the lake? It was prime Unseelie land. Maybe he wouldn’t. Augus would be underfae once more. Vulnerable. He likely wouldn’t even survive a week, and then Ash would-

‘Augus?’ Gulvi prompted.

‘I need paper,’ Augus said, his throat working around the oddness of the words. He wasn’t sure why, but talking suddenly seemed too much of a burden. He resisted the urge to touch or resettle his hair. ‘Parchment. A pen. And Aleutia has my complete notes, so she can do this herself. But in the interim I can… I can do what I can.

‘What did you do to him?’ Gulvi said. ‘The Raven Prince? Our King?’

Augus just stared at her, and Gulvi eventually smiled, the slant of it as harsh as her knives.

‘Gwyn is not Ash, darling. You could really lose him. Out of the two of you, do you know, I have come to see that he is the one that could leave.’

Augus made a faint scoffing noise before he’d even intended to.

Gulvi shrugged her wings. There was pity in the cant of her eyebrows. ‘Augus, from what I have learned – the little that I know – he has never known what a stable love is. You have. You know how to be loyal. I understand what you have done for Ash, even as I do not understand you. But Gwyn? He could run. He already doubts.’

It was as though she had seen into his heart and pulled out his greatest fear. Gwyn had never experienced anything consistently real and tangible in terms of affection or love, and he had no reason to believe in it now. Augus had seen the betrayal on his face when Gwyn had witnessed the Raven Prince’s true-form, and he’d heard the terrible coldness in his words, worse than hearing the vulnerability behind them, knowing what they hid.

‘Why do you care?’ Augus said.
'Fenwrel thinks you are not as base as I think you are,' Gulvi said. Augus had to bite his tongue to make sure that he didn’t make some quip about Gulvi and Fenwrel’s apparent sympatico. Now was really not the time. ‘Gwyn, evidently, sees some worth in you. If he did not, he would not be giving you this chance. Prove yourself to him, Augus.’

‘I already have,’ Augus said.

‘You think you have,’ Gulvi said, rolling her eyes. ‘But why should any of us trust you? Listen to you? See the merits in what you do and who you are? You should have been killed a thousand times over for all that you have done, and yet you are lucky enough to be alive. Where, might I add, a lot of worthy people are not. If he asks you to prove yourself to him again, you should do it. Especially if it concerns the destruction you have wrought in the past. Do you not understand that we all fear it could happen again? We don’t have some manual that tells us exactly when you’re going to do something terribly destructive, and there are no clear signs that make you predictable before it happens. The very things that bring you comfort – that you are separate, aloof, mercurial, unpredictable – are the things that deter trust.’

‘You trusted the Raven Prince. And he was all of those things.’

‘I said I loved him, and that I adored him, but anyone would be foolish to trust him.’

The worst part was that her words rang true, and stung all the more for it. That she had to be the one to deliver them, to see the expressions that he couldn’t quite keep off his face because he didn’t have the energy to do it.

But Gulvi did not laugh at him, and after about two minutes of silence, she only sighed.

‘Paper and something to write with?’ she said. ‘That’s all you need?’

‘For now,’ he said, nodding.

She turned to walk away, and he cleared his throat.

‘For what it’s worth,’ he said, ‘I hope the treatments are working.’

‘I don’t understand you at all,’ Gulvi said, as she continued to walk out of the gardens. ‘And I hope I never do.’

*

The remaining days in the night garden passed too quickly and too slowly at the same time. Gwyn never visited, making it the longest time Augus had gone without seeing Gwyn since Gwyn had been underfae and Augus couldn’t find him.

Augus alternatively plotted revenge, or sank into melancholies so deep that his limbs felt too heavy to lift. He knew his reaction was entirely uncalled for, unwarranted, but he often could only summon the strength to pretend at normalcy when Gulvi arrived, or Ash, or Fenwrel. Ash had been coming less often, and a part of Augus wondered if Ash was angry at him somehow, for the Soulbond, for everything. Fenwrel was very often silent, but it was a supportive silence, and he wished he could give her something back because he’d become aware that he only ever seemed to take from her, and it was bizarre, and it wasn’t any kind of exchange that he was used to or comfortable with.

Gulvi was now coming every day. At first he’d thought it was out of concern for her sister, since she was always asking questions about the herbs, Julvia’s treatment; but now he wasn’t sure. Gulvi
came *every* day, and though she still jibed at him and many of her words were barbed... He wondered if it was the burden of her swan’s heart, seeing his loyalty to Gwyn and not knowing what to do with it. More the fool her.

One evening he was taken with a slow-building rage. A dirty, angry thing, like a wound that refused to settle. He stalked the perimeter of the night garden, he growled intermittently, and nothing helped. He kicked dirt and stones into the tiny stream and finally found a heavy boulder and dropped it on top of the wellspring, killing the small wending water’s current and making it stop. He breathed heavily, watching as the stifled spring fought against the rock, dampening the ground all around it, until finally starting to send a new trickle of water in a different direction.

He went to his knees to stop that, smashing his hand into it, feeling the sodden ground underneath his fingers and the water building in the tiny pieces of dirt and soil. He could smell freshness everywhere, the spring was a good one, and he wondered if some old fae King or Queen had created it, or if it had been here all this time and no one had ever noticed. It was in the Unseelie Court boundaries, it likely had some magical properties that no one recalled.

He blocked a new trickle of water, pushing forth from underneath the rock, with his other hand. His knees and shins were wet.

It was laughter that rang out when he realised that he was on all fours, on the ground, like a madman. Not even like a *waterhorse*.

Eyes closing, he summoned his concentration, thinking about the spring itself. It was tiny. But it was constant. He sent his awareness into it, following the water that clung to his hands and the material of his pants, until it spiralled further and further into the deep of the earth. It was a narrow spring, bottlenecked by solid stone only half a metre into the ground. And – Augus realised – it was a stone that refused to give ground, refused to allow the spring to be more than what it was. Perhaps then, this had once been a well of some kind. Did Gwyn shape it when he shaped the night gardens? Or did his awareness not extend deep into the earth like this?

The stone funnel became something larger, opened into a cavern impossibly deep that revealed a network of watery caves and tunnels. Augus could now feel places where his awareness was *barred* because Gwyn had changed the permissions. Which meant that these tunnels ran underneath the palace.

He thought, abruptly, of the place where he was defeated. *Just* beyond the boundaries of the Unseelie Court, by that stupid, pathetic mouse and the then-King of the Seelie and his own damned brot-

Augus made a soft sound, upset and anger too choked off to be as large as it felt in his lungs.

The ground shook beneath his palms. First shallowly, then in increasingly violent jerks. The stone funnel limiting the spring cracked and Augus drew and reshaped the ground beneath him using the water to do it. Water that could erode and reform and change its environment; Augus could do it too, accelerate a process that would normally take thousands – hundreds of thousands of years.

He was snarling, growling when the lake appeared underneath him, when the stone he’d used to block the spring sank quickly into the water. He unconsciously used his waterhorse buoyancy to keep himself atop the water, his fingers still digging into it like they had gripped the ground, his hair dripping so rapidly it sounded like it was lightly raining around him.

No one came. Even Gwyn didn’t come.
Augus closed his eyes, tired and wrung out, and let himself drop as heavily as the stone had into the depths of the lake.

*

The trows came to visit him on the last day. If they were shocked by the new lake that had formed, they didn’t show it. They brought him a new, warmly pressed clothing, a salad that Augus didn’t think he could stomach, and took his dirty, damp clothing away.

Augus had stayed in the lake for an hour, but he had no desire to explore it, and afterwards he sat on the rim of the lake and stared broodingly into its depths. Where, before, the spring had been no wider than his palm, the lake was now four metres across, an almost perfect circle.

He was cleanly clothed when he caught his first glimpse of Gwyn walking towards him instead of teleporting. The excess water was squeezed from Augus’ hair and he felt as presentable as he could possibly be, in this moment.

But it was hard to feel as steady as he wanted to, due to the terrible coldness on Gwyn’s face. His expression did not brighten at all, not his eyes, nor his mouth, all of it drawn with a determination that made Augus’ heart pound a heavier, sickening beat.

Gwyn looked askance at the lake and didn’t express surprise, his entire body remained warily tense, but no more so than before.

‘Come with me,’ Gwyn said, walking straight past Augus into the depths of the forest. Augus followed, his anger building again, tasting of bile, winding itself up inside of him. He dug his claws into his palms.

Gwyn stopped far enough away from the lake and the night garden that neither could be seen. He pressed his palm to a tree and Augus knew he was changing the permissions, could tell by the way Gwyn turned his focus inwards, could tell by a slight shift in the energy of the space.

‘Now, no one will interrupt us while you tell me what you did,’ Gwyn said, turning to him. ‘You’ve had a month, Augus. Speak.’

Augus had spent a month trying to think of a way to play this to his advantage, and ultimately, he had come up with nothing at all. Now, listening to the way Gwyn spoke, feeling that glamour he’d rolled out to the rest of the fae during the Triumphal Entry, Augus wasn’t sure he would even get a chance to encounter the softness he usually associated with Gwyn, ever again.

It was untenable.

Augus began with: ‘If you think-’

‘I’m not asking you,’ Gwyn said, folding his arms. ‘I’m commanding you as your King. I will not let this treason go. You will account for your actions, and you will account for them now, until I am satisfied.’

Retorts piled upon Augus’ tongue until they collapsed upon themselves and Augus was left with the desperate sense that he was trapped. This was a trap far finer, and far worse than any Seelie cell Gwyn had shoved him into.

‘After everything we’ve had together,’ Augus said, attempting to smile and failing.

Gwyn’s face darkened, and his eyebrows drew together. ‘Augus Each Uisge, I, Unseelie King,
Gwyn ap Nudd, henceforth remove your status of Inner C-

‘All right!’ Augus shouted, his voice so hard it shocked him. Not Gwyn though. He stood, arms folded, that still, empty expression on his face.

Augus laughed, one of his arms was slung around his ribcage, and he hadn’t even noticed it. He took several steps backwards.

It occurred to Augus that he was only breath and bone, the sharp armour of a spine and the soft innards that lurked within. He was waterhorse and human-form both. He had always been a complete being, he had never needed – never believed – that there would be someone else to complete him. In truth, he still couldn’t bring himself to believe it.

But what he also knew was this: his life was once a calm, peaceful place. It was as steady and reliable as the lake of his birth on a balmy summer’s day. The turbulence was at the very top, the very depths, and everything between had been cold currents and utter, watery perfection. And he’d lost all of it. It was all destroyed, piece by piece, until even the physical manifestation of his lake was taken from him too.

What he knew was this: Gwyn introduced light into his life again.

Gwyn didn’t complete him, no. But Augus was too afraid of the dark to ever let him go.

*

And what Augus knew was this: Gwyn wouldn’t want him, once he knew the truth.

Chapter End Notes

In our next chapter, 'Confession:'

"'I asked the Raven Prince to join me for a walk within a secluded forest away from the Unseelie Court. I met him there. I had located many…weapons, and many items to weaken him. There are things that will weaken a raven shapeshifter, even one like the Raven Prince. I knew what some of them were, because there was a protected list of items that were damaging to him, that he ordered a small group of us to constantly make sure weren’t available to other fae. Anything that could hurt him, in object form, was taken or stolen and secreted away in the Unseelie treasury. I had access to that too. The Raven Prince indirectly gave me almost everything I needed, and I thought him such a fool. Look at me, less than three thousand years old at the time, and I thought he was the fool.’

Augus’ eyes were starting to burn.

He remembered this all far too clearly. Too clearly for having spent so long trying not to think about it at all."
Confession

Chapter Notes

I caved. I feel like I’ve been holding onto this moment - knowing what it is while others don't - for so long, that I really just can't wait any longer.

Here we go, Augus' full accounting of his defeat of the Nightingale.

(Feedback is definitely love, and thanks to everyone for reading).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Augus

*

The expression on Gwyn’s face was awful. It was already over, Augus was certain. It didn’t matter now. He could say whatever he wanted, he’d be underfae and banished soon enough either way. Gwyn would hear the truth of it, and that would be that. Perhaps he’d made his decision the moment he saw the Raven Prince, alive but…not alive.

Augus turned away from the expression on Gwyn’s face, knowing that – for once – he couldn’t just scratch it away, couldn’t rely on his voice to erase it. That very strength and stubbornness he admired when Gwyn turned it upon other people, was frightening when turned upon himself.

The forest was dark, cloying. There were shadows everywhere. The Nightingale would have loved it.

‘I suppose you’ll want a full accounting,’ Augus said, though he couldn’t look at Gwyn when he said it.

These were things he didn’t let himself think about. Whole stories that rose and fell in his own mind, so that he didn’t ever have to contemplate them. They chased him down in nightmares and he blocked them out as quickly as he was able. Consequently, he didn’t even know where to start. This was not a story that had a clear timeline for him, and yet…it did have a clear timeline. It did. Even though telling it chronologically seemed wrong somehow.

‘I knew,’ Augus said, the arm around his ribcage dropping, fingers spreading as he walked one step left, and then two right, trying to think about how to cobble the words together, knowing that he would ruin himself by talking about this. ‘I knew I wanted to destroy the Raven King and his Court before I even joined it. After my time with- with him, with,’ Augus took a breath, ‘the Nightingale. I had started formulating the plan when I was down in the dark.’

He’d been broken only a handful of months into his captivity, and everything after that was spent broken, or begging, or devising ways to escape and failing, only to be punished over and over and over, and eventually he’d come to realise he would die there, he would, and he might as well be nice to the Nightingale, because it was admirable really, how strong the Nightingale was, how magnificent. There was a time when Augus both loathed him and would have done anything for him.
‘I said that I would get him the Court if he’d release me,’ Augus said, listening out for any shift in Gwyn’s breathing. He risked looking sidelong at him, and Gwyn’s expression hadn’t changed. There wasn’t even a glimmer of sympathy regarding the subject of Augus’ captivity, which made Augus realise how often Gwyn offered it the rest of the time the subject came up. The rare times it came up.

Augus took a breath, tried not to laugh at the absurdity of confessing this before being ejected from the Court anyway.

‘He didn’t believe me, and he didn’t release me,’ Augus said, his voice flat.

‘I can do it. I swear. The Raven Prince has confessed that he is fond of me, and he has promised me Court status if I only- if I only visit. I am- I can play a long-game for you and- Think, how glorious it would be!’

‘How glorious what would be?’ the Nightingale said, his red eyes gleaming in the total darkness. Sometimes the Nightingale deigned to give Augus light, but just as often he didn’t. But his red eyes took on a faint glow, and Augus had become dependent on that, it was sometimes the only source of light he’d see for weeks. ‘What are you talking about? Are you so delirious? Ah, but…I can taste it, even after all this time, you’d do anything to survive wouldn’t you? How sad you’d be, to die down here in the dark.’

‘Yes,’ Augus blurted, absently digging his fingers into the stony floor and crying out. His fingernails had fallen out months ago and they’d never healed, and yet he couldn’t stop the instinct that constantly curled his fingers into an attack position, a defensive position, around the Nightingale. ‘But not only that. I know you crave power, and you could- I could do… I’m sure that if you just let me-’

‘Desperation is pathetic,’ the Nightingale said softly. ‘And it is an unbecoming look on you. As it is, I do not need your assistance, nor anyone’s, to gain the things that I want from the world. The worlds. These babblings of yours are nothing more than the negotiations a dying man tries to beg from the death that comes for him. But please, don’t stop on my account, young thing, your voice still retains some of its sweetness, and I have always enjoyed a sweet voice, no matter how ugly the soul behind it.’

Something soft oozed over Augus’ wrists and he jerked his arms back into his chest. The oozing continued. Slurchers then. He couldn’t hear them approach. They were like oil taking form, leaving clinging bits of black residue on his skin. Augus imagined that after they had filled him, his entire being was filled with that black residue. When he vomited bile, he could almost never see it, and became convinced he was vomiting the shredded sloughs of skin and vileness they left inside of him.

He couldn’t do it again, not today. Just not today.

‘Please, Sir, it’s not- Could you not just-’

‘They miss you,’ the Nightingale laughed. ‘They like you. They say you taste of fresh water even after all this time. I am not sure how it is possible, but I like to indulge them. They are so very, very hungry after all, aren’t they?’

‘I can’t do this again,’ Augus rasped. For once, his throat not entirely dry. He’d been licking the walls. He wondered if the Nightingale ever watched him silently, amused at how Augus debased himself.
He only wanted to see Ash again. That was all.

He no longer shrieked in horror when he felt the first slurcher force itself into the bloodied places his claws used to be, when he felt the painful slide of it along his cells, but he always retched, and his stomach always heaved, as though his body was convinced it could remove the invasion.

‘I’ll get you a- a K-Kingdom,’ Augus said, hating the hitches in his breathing that ate away at his voice.

‘My decrepit, wasted thing, you cannot even get up off the floor.’

The Nightingale was laughing when oily fingers pushed into his mind, and there was nothing but the black.

‘I’d gotten the idea in the underworld,’ Augus said, already shaking, already cold. ‘It seemed like…a good idea at the time. I’m beginning to realise that craving that sort of power or conquest seems to come with- It seems to be part of the underworld poisoning. I’m unsure, but- I am quite sure, quite certain, that I would not have wanted that if I had been myself.’

Augus looked ahead at tree branches and felt queasy. Gwyn was such a solid presence nearby, but this time it was not an anchor nor safety; it was a cliff that towered over him, that threatened to crush him with its force.

‘And so he got bored, as you know,’ Augus said, ‘and released me. I went to Ash only to realise that I wasn’t safe there. I had these nightmares that are nothing like…what I have now. I was tired. I needed rest. I didn’t know if the Nightingale would return. I was-’

Augus shook his head.

‘I thought I would be fine,’ Augus said. ‘But I already knew exactly what I’d do. I went to that Unseelie Court – I hated the Unseelie Court, and I hated it more after being released – knowing what my plan was. I had to organise different components, but the plan itself was simple. Earn the trust of the Raven Prince. Lure him somewhere secluded. Destroy him. There. A simple plan. I take it that isn’t enough for you?’

Augus turned to look at Gwyn, who simply gestured for Augus to keep on talking. His expression was the same. It was like he’d been carved of stone. Augus’ jaw clenched, and he looked away again.

‘The Raven Prince had always wanted me in his Court as some kind of decorative bauble. Apparently, with my longer hair, my features, I possess a measure of androgyny that he admires. When I went back to his Court, after that year, I had planned to be charming and warm, but I already felt hostile towards the entire system. A system which has never cared about anyone if they are underfae.

‘But I went, and I was absorbed into the Court life. At first as only a regular visitor to the throne room, and then – over time – as someone the Raven Prince drew aside, wished to converse with. He was…not exactly kind, no, but he opened the resources of the Court towards me in ways I could never have predicted. I was taught about meridians from Fluri, I was given access to the Unseelie libraries, I was taught a Courtier’s habits, the Raven Prince himself took time out of his schedule to teach me – an utter beginner – the rapier.’

‘So I hold it like this, Your Majesty?’ Augus said, frowning at the Raven Prince’s grip on his rapier. It didn’t look very comfortable.
'Not quite,' the Raven Prince said, smiling, looking Augus’ grip over. ‘Don’t hold it like me. I moved away from foundational work some time ago, but that doesn’t mean you shouldn’t still use it. Try curving your thumb a little more, and settle that ridge there into one of the natural ridges of your palm. Yes. Exactly like that. How does it feel?’

‘It feels, Your Majesty, as though I should stick to compulsions and waterweed,’ Augus said, frowning at the long piece of metal and unable to imagine how he might ever learn to wield it properly. He looked around the sparring room and shook his head. ‘I am no soldier.’

‘How delightful, for this is no soldier’s weapon, but a Courtier’s.’

Augus didn’t like the sound of that either. The metal wasn’t even that strong. If he placed his fingers on the tip, he could bend it slightly. What was the point? But then…the Raven Prince saw a point to everything that he did, so if he thought the rapier was worth his time, it likely was.

‘Are you troubled, Each Uisge?’ the Raven Prince said.

‘It’s Augus, if you please, Your Majesty.’

How many times would he have to remind him? How many-

‘Ah, I am so used to your ancestors. I confess I like the way it sounds on my tongue. Each Uisge. Of course with a name like mine, I am accustomed to less informal methods of address. Now, step over here, and we’ll see if we can make something of you.’

Augus watched him, the grace in his movements, the confidence on his face. The Raven Prince was tall and thin, his face composed of angles, his eyes a little too wild and wide to ever cause him to be mistaken for a human. His uneven hanks of black hair grew feathers intermittently, shining and glossy. His lips were thin, his lashes thick, and his skin very pale. He was always dressed in fine, fashionable clothing, leading trends with his mixes of the kempt and unkempt. He frequently wore silver and crystal charms about his neck, and despite only looking as though he was in his late twenties, physically, he radiated an ancient playful wisdom that reflected his true age.

Augus envied him, admired him. He could feel, with every passing day, the way the Raven Prince’s charm and glamour wrapped around him and clouded his ambition. He only had to resist it.

‘It took me a long time to win something like his trust,’ Augus said, sighing. ‘A very long time, and the Raven Prince demanded the same in turn. He wished to know my secrets. He knew of my nightmares and asked about them – idly, he never persisted, but he did ask. There was a way he talked, sometimes, that made me think he knew of my plans. But I always assumed he couldn’t, for there was no way a King of the Unseelie would allow me in his Court and then his Inner Court, if he knew of my plans.

‘But as time went by, decades piled upon decades, he made it very clear that he expected me to try and do something…rash. He also made it clear that he intended for me to replace him when he was done with the throne. He said he only wanted it for another thousand years, maybe another two thousand, but that he was bored. That was the thing about the Raven Prince. He was so bored, so apathetic, and I didn’t see the truth and depth of it for such a very long time. I was obsessed with my own plans, I was-’

Augus trailed off, rubbed at his face with his hands. They were approaching something he’d never talked about. Something that no one else had witnessed in its entirety. He didn’t think he could talk about it. His hands were shaking. His arms were shaking. His knees felt weak.
‘There were times I changed my mind,’ Augus said, quietly. ‘I argued with myself. The more time I spent with him, but then one day—’

‘You’ve met the Nightingale, haven’t you, Augus?’ the Raven Prince said, his voice smooth, a bright, intelligent light in his eyes.

Augus stumbled to a halt, scrolls and parchments in his arms on the way to another diplomacy meeting. After all, if those two factions wanted to talk land divisions, he’d show them the official land divisions and see what would come of it.

The Nightingale was standing right there, impeccably dressed as always. He had a tendency to wear black or grey, with gloves and boots of white or red. He liked to cover all of his skin except for his pale grey face. In all the time Augus had known him, he’d never seen his bare hands, had only ever captured the glimpse of a wrist, and only once. The Nightingale wore a floor length coat with a popped collar, his grey-white hair spiked back over his head, the sides shaved. His eyes were a red, hungry gleam. When he smiled at Augus, all Augus saw was the shadows of slurchers all around him. Augus blinked rapidly and they disappeared. It was his imagination.

‘Yes,’ Augus said, something horrible clasping at his heart. The Raven Prince would dare bring him back here, invite him back here! The Nightingale was obviously not a prisoner, and yet everyone knew that the Nightingale was trying to defeat the Kingdoms. So why would the Raven Prince— Why—

‘Delightful to see you again,’ the Nightingale said, lips twisting upwards. ‘How’s your brother? Is he well?’

Is he well? When was the last time I saw him? Could the Nightingale have—?

Augus looked sidelong at the Raven Prince. He couldn’t stay here. Couldn’t stand to be in this situation. ‘I’m terribly sorry, Your Majesty, but I was on the way to a diplomatic mediation, and—’

‘Of course,’ the Raven Prince said indulgently. ‘The Nightingale is only here to have a little chat about the potential future of the fae realms, and that’s far above you anyway, isn’t it?’

‘It’s quite all right,’ the Nightingale said to the Raven Prince. ‘He’s young. Remember the Each Uisge before him?’

‘Oh goodness me, yes,’ the Raven Prince said, laughing as though it were an in-joke.

Augus felt trapped between them.

‘Run along then,’ the Raven Prince said, nodding a dismissal at Augus. ‘May your mediation go well.’

‘Gramercie,’ Augus said, the breadth of gratitude in his lungs and chest great as he bowed a quick farewell to the Nightingale and the King.

He hurried down the corridor, turned left down another corridor and realised how hard his heart was beating. He felt a coil of black around his ankle and jolted so hard that he dropped all his parchments and scrolls to the floor. When he looked down he saw a tiny slurcher clinging to him, but even as he saw it, the thing let go and slithered away, assuming a snake-like form.

Augus picked up his scrolls and parchments and tried to think, but there was nothing more than white noise in his head.
'The Raven Prince invited him to the Court increasingly, in the years before the Raven Prince’s defeat. I had - The Raven Prince and I had done things that were very intimate, very intimate, and I loved him, and then he invited the Nightingale into that Court to have tea, to dine, to - They were friendly. Even as the Nightingale was doing things to the world to corrupt it. The Raven Prince told me he was only trying to understand the creature, but I don’t think he ever truly intended to stop the Nightingale. He indulged him. The Nightingale wanted land, and the Raven Prince sectioned off land for him. I don’t think the Raven Prince truly wanted the destruction of his Court, but nor do I think he particularly cared what happened to it, and boredom can drive a creature so powerful to do things that, at the time, made me blind with rage.'

Augus stared blankly ahead. He should just say it. That was the only way this would be over. If he just...

'I befriended some of the slurchers, as you know,' Augus said. ‘As you saw, when I gave them to the Nain Rouge. I- They liked the taste of me. They knew me inside and out better than anyone ever would, ever will, and mindless creatures that they were, I was able to split off a section from the Nightingale’s hive. The first time I tried it, the Nightingale, he-’

‘You see, Augus, I know exactly when they betray me, because they are part of the hive mind that is connected to my every thought. So I knew of your plans. I just wanted to see what would happen when you tried to turn them against me. What did you really think the outcome would be?'

The Nightingale never hurt him directly, never kicked him or slapped him, never placed boots on his chest or pulled his hair. But the slurchers were inside of him, and it wasn’t possession this time, where they slithered into his blood. This was slurchers taking on corporeal form and renting him apart, drawing blood, lacerating delicate inner flesh, shredding places that weren’t designed to be ripped apart.

Augus wasn’t one to pray for death, exactly, but nor did he want to live through this.

His teeth were blood-stained, his throat so raw from screaming.

The place was flooded with light, too much, his eyes burned, his body violently rocked by the actions of the slurchers and not at all soothed by the cadence of the Nightingale’s voice.

‘You’ll heal from this,’ the Nightingale said, a smile in his voice. ‘You heal from everything down here. If I will it, it occurs.’

Two days later when it was finally over, and Augus, by rights, should have died many times over, Augus pretended that he wanted to live. He couldn’t stand to hear himself beg again.

‘There were very clear repercussions,’ Augus rasped. ‘There were other creatures in the underworlds, including memoryeaters. They are like ticks. They start off tiny when they are born, living in the crevices of skin and scales, attached to demons and other monsters. When they have fed off enough memories, they drop off and become their own semi-sentient creatures. Some become gigantic, behemoths in their own right, having glutted on enough creatures to become too big to even function.

‘They are not part of a hive mind. The Nightingale can control them because he promises them food, but they have a large appetite and if you promised them more they’d…they’re not loyal. But they are also repugnant and you cannot know the wet slickness of their teeth or how they sift through your memories looking for the ones that, to them, will be the tastiest. You cannot know the poison of it, or the desperate reaching for a blank space once they are done, something removed, a void in the tapestry of your thoughts. I…hated them.’
Augus had to stop for a minute, focusing on his breathing. He kept it silent, but he couldn’t keep it steady.

‘When the Nightingale released me, I stole one,’ Augus said, pressing his thumb and forefinger over his forehead and pushing down to force himself to continue. ‘It was small; offspring. It had crawled into the shell of my ear, and – it wasn’t the first time they’d done that and I picked the small ones off, but then later I thought I…later I thought it didn’t matter anymore. I kept one.’

Augus looked back at Gwyn and wished he hadn’t. Zero empathy in his expression. That was, in a way, even harder than the words he was wrestling to find. He turned away and decided he wouldn’t look at Gwyn again.

‘I put it in a wooden box. It was too small to fight me, too small to release itself. Unlike the slurchers, it couldn’t change its form at will. It was just a–stolen thing.’

There was a faint breeze in the forest. Augus wondered where it came from, what stories it carried upon it, if any were as repellent as what he was about to say.

‘I asked the Raven Prince to join me for a walk within a secluded forest away from the Unseelie Court. I met him there. I had located many…weapons, and many items to weaken him. There are things that will weaken a raven shapeshifter, even one like the Raven Prince. I knew what some of them were, because there was a protected list of items that were damaging to him, that he ordered a small group of us to constantly make sure weren’t available to other fae. Anything that could hurt him, in object form, was taken or stolen and secreted away in the Unseelie treasury. I had access to that too. The Raven Prince indirectly gave me almost everything I needed, and I thought him such a fool. Look at me, less than three thousand years old at the time, and I thought he was the fool.’

Augus’ eyes were starting to burn.

He remembered this all far too clearly. Too clearly for having spent so long trying not to think about it at all.

_The Raven Prince looked tired, almost sad, but he also looked amused, and he looked like he understood everything about what was going to happen. He leaned against a tree and sighed, then yawned behind his hand._

‘So here we are,’ the Raven Prince said. ‘I suppose this is where it was always going to lead, between us.’

‘You’ll stay there, and not move,’ Augus said, using compulsions as he had always tried to avoid with the Raven Prince. The Raven Prince was far more susceptible to them than most, being a bird shifter, who had always been weak to compulsions. And Augus was Inner Court status, he thrummed with innate power.

_The Raven Prince’s body locked in place, but no worry appeared in the Raven Prince’s eyes. In fact, the Raven Prince blinked at him lazily. It somehow made everything worse. Augus expected a fight. Augus expected to have to put everything on the line for this, and the Raven Prince just watched him._

‘I was going to make you King,’ the Raven Prince said. ‘You couldn’t wait long enough?’

‘Do you know what the Nightingale did to me?’ Augus said, his voice hard. ‘Do you have any idea? You invite him into that Court over and over again, and it’s painfully clear now that you have no intention to defeat him or remove his poison from our realms.’
'Of course not,' the Raven Prince said. 'He intrigues me. Things had been quite repetitive until he came along. I have been alive such a very long time.'

'He was the reason I was absent a year! He was! You, with your Court and all those resources at your disposal, would dare to say that you wanted me in your Court and yet did nothing to look for me. Nothing at all. Your Court is a place of hypocrisy. You care not at all for underfae. You never have. You are one of the greatest perpetuators of disdain and therefore discord amongst the underfae. You use them in your wars, and never give back. My brother came to visit you, and you still wouldn’t help him, even to help me.'

The Raven Prince’s mouth twitched into a sad, wry smile. ‘My dear, young boy. Do you honestly think that I could be as old and as wise and as powerful as I am, and not have known where you were?’

Augus felt like he’d been struck. He stared at the Raven Prince, but couldn’t quite see him. Everything had blurred into a white-grey haze.

‘Do you honestly believe,’ the Raven Prince said, lifting his arms and folding them as the compulsions wore off, ‘that I am so very, very stupid?’

Augus’ breathing was loud. He’d been in the Raven Prince’s Court for over a century, trying to win his trust, trying to-

Had it all been a game?

‘I have tried to tell you before, Augus, but I have been alive for a very long time, and I have lived just about everything there is to live. You’re all very entertaining, but even that’s not quite enough for me anymore.’

‘A year I spent down there,’ Augus said, the words rusty and broken, as though it had been weeks in silence in the dark and the Nightingale had only just come to visit. ‘A year. And you knew. You knew?’

‘Yes.’

‘And you did nothing,’ Augus said, his voice shaking. ‘You didn’t even try?’

‘It was a matter of diplomacy,’ the Raven Prince said. ‘You understand diplomacy, don’t you?’

‘Were you even going to make me King?’

‘I don’t know,’ the Raven Prince said simply. ‘Perhaps I would have changed my mind. You’re obviously not well-suited to a throne.’

‘Obviously,’ Augus echoed. Everything felt disconnected, there was a loud roaring in his head, a huge, undeniable sound. It was as though he was being scoured out.

‘Are you so very upset?’ the Raven Prince said, his face softening. ‘Did you really come to care for me so much? Are you going to use all that betrayal to fuel your fire? I can see it, you realise. How righteous you feel in this decision of yours. I confess I am somewhat surprised that you are so surprised. Why do you keep giving me your trust? It’s flattering, of course, but…I don’t quite understand it.’

A dry sob, and Augus was still just staring at him. All he could hear in his mind was the words: ‘he knew, he knew, he knew.’
Augus didn’t have to go through any of what the Nightingale had done. At any point, the Raven Prince could have stopped it.

Or could he?

‘Could you have stopped it?’ Augus said. ‘Are you only- You didn’t do anything because you couldn’t?’

‘Of course I could,’ the Raven Prince said, sighing in irritation, as though Augus had said something too immature and juvenile to even consider.

‘I’m going to...destroy you,’ Augus said. ‘I will take your Kingship from you, and I will-’

‘If you’re going to do it, you should do it. But I’ll make it easier for you, because truly I’ve had no desire to be King for some time. But I do love power, and it’s hard to give it up voluntarily.’

Why isn’t he fighting me? This was supposed to go differently. This was supposed to be-

The Raven Prince already looked defeated, and yet even so, he carried himself with a calmness that was infuriating. Augus felt anything but calm. He wanted to stop this. He could sense a horrific pressure inside of himself and he only wanted-

‘Augus Each Uisge,’ the Raven Prince said, ‘I, the Raven Prince, King of the Unseelie Court and its Kingdom, having served the Unseelie Kingdom for a length of time deemed more than sufficient, name you my inheritor of the throne, that you may become King the instant that I am unfit to serve. I assume that, with the many things you have in that bag of tricks, I am about to become unfit to serve?’

‘You’ll not fight me?’ Augus said, staring at him.

Just tell me not to do it. Tell me that you didn’t mean to leave me down there with that, and that you didn’t understand all that was happening and we can go back to the Court and I will-

‘You’ll not fight me?’ Augus said again, outraged. Compulsion found his voice and turned it hard and powerful. ‘Fight me!’

The Raven Prince stunned him by not moving. Resisting his compulsions like he could all along. Augus hadn’t known. He stared in shock.

The Raven Prince laughed. ‘Do you honestly think I could be Mage and King, and not know how to resist the compulsions of one obscure, lower class waterhorse? No matter how powerful, how beautiful you are, Augus, let us not forget your humble beginnings.’

‘You see…’ Augus said, his voice breaking. He cleared his throat, but he suspected it wouldn’t help. That Gwyn had to pick a forest, that it had to be night, exactly like it was when he’d defeated the Raven Prince.

When he’d been defeated in turn.

‘You see, I think we’d all underestimated his…apathy. The strength of it.’

Augus had been narrating all of the memories in broken sentences. He had no idea how much of the story Gwyn was even piecing together. But Gwyn was a strategist. He was intelligent when he wanted to be. Perhaps he would see what Augus hadn’t seen for so long.
‘I was supposed to be the most powerful Each Uisge to ever walk the realms, but the Nightingale pointed out flaws in my…being. It was important to me, to be able to defeat the Raven Prince, for more than one reason. I had not counted on the Raven Prince knowing what had happened to me, nor had I counted on his going along with what I’d desired. I hadn’t- Can you imagine, me standing there, given permission to defeat him, and practically waiting for him to call a halt…’

Augus was a weight of rage and shock, and the Raven Prince still stood there, leaning against the tree like he was tired.

‘I loathe your Court,’ Augus breathed. ‘I have always loathed it. And you, the puppeteer in the background, playing games with all of us to suit your whims. No more, my Prince. No more.’

‘I have always found it tedious, when those who wish to thwart me feel the need to tell me, down to the smallest detail, how they will defeat me. Augus, if I truly wanted to stop you, I would have.’

‘So, what is this supposed to be? I’m just the tool of your undoing? You’re too lazy to do it for yourself?’

‘You’re angry enough, aren’t you? Bitter enough. Damaged enough. I can see it in your eyes, Augus. You haven’t been stable for some time, have you? I have often wondered what lay beyond my Kingship. I am curious to see what the world might bring me, were things to be different. The Thirteen no longer need me, at the School of the Staff. There are others now, ready to step up and take my mantle. The world doesn’t need me, anymore, Augus.’

Augus stared at him. For so long now, Augus had come to look forward to seeing him on an irregular basis, had come to enjoy his presence. Ash had hardly been a part of his life since the Nightingale returned him, but the Raven Prince? They had shared meals together, lounged on blankets under wintry suns and picked at prepared picnics. They had walked corridors and shared gossip and Augus knew his body, the sighs and gasps that he would make, the flushed, perturbed expression whenever his physical pleasure started to get the best of him.

‘You don’t need me, either, Augus,’ the Raven Prince said, sounding bored now. ‘I expected a lot of things this evening. I didn’t expect you to hesitate like this. Where’s that vicious Each Uisge that all the tales talk of? Hm? I miss him.’

‘Do you.’ Augus said, his voice flat.

Augus was shaking when he withdrew the wooden box from the bag. Shaking with rage, with determination, with something else he couldn’t name that made his chest feel tighter than he’d expected. The memory eater would be small now, but it would grow quickly, for it had been starved for over a century. Augus checked, sometimes, that it was still alive. But underworld creatures didn’t seem to die as fae or humans died. They could be killed, but they didn’t seem to expire on their own. They just became hungrier.

The Raven Prince watched him with an idle curiosity. At no point did he show the slightest expression of fear.

‘I’m shocked that you can just stand there,’ Augus said, wanting to walk over to the Raven Prince and just snap him out of it. Wanting the fight of it. He couldn’t do this to an unarmed, defenceless fae, could he? He wasn’t hunting, after all. This was vengeance, not a…not a mercy killing.

‘I have enjoyed having you in my Court. I think you enjoyed it too, sometimes.’

‘When you asked me to tell you the source of my nightmares, you knew all along, didn’t you?’
‘Yes,’ the Raven Prince said. ‘I let you have the illusion of your secrets, I could practically scent your shame.’

‘And now? No more time for illusions?’

‘I only believe you are more likely to see this through once you realise just how many strings of yours I pulled, young Augus. I can be the instrument of my own death, but I am far more curious to see how another might do it. What do you have in that box?’

‘Oh, omniscient one, you can’t just tell?’ Augus snarled.

The Raven Prince smiled tiredly. ‘I do so like it when you’re petty.’

‘I didn’t have to use half the things at my disposal. Not three quarters of them,’ Augus said, standing with his knees locked, with his side facing Gwyn so that he could see his tall, broad figure in the corner of his eye. ‘Imagine, there I stand, about to become one of the most feared Unseelie fae, a pariah and more, and all I could think of was how the Nightingale had railed at me for the weakness that I held in me, the sickness before I truly became sick. For what other Each Uisge loved anyone enough to be blackmailed into the dark like that? None of them. And I saw myself again, as though from a distance, too weak to want to go through with my plan. A plan I’d nursed for over one hundred and fifty years! Unconscionable.’

Augus wiped at a sly trickle of water on his face, and was surprised when it wasn’t water from his scalp, but from his own eyes. He’d felt too numb to notice his tears, but they were silent, and he could talk through them easily, so he kept on talking.

‘You are too young to be a wise King,’ the Raven Prince said.

‘Do you think I want to be a wise King?’ Augus shouted, having had enough of all of it. ‘Do you think, with the contempt I feel for this Court, your Court, that I want anything for it other than its ruin? Will you fight me now? Knowing that?’

‘No,’ the Raven Prince said, looking – if anything – even more intrigued at the idea that Augus wanted to ruin the Court.

‘No? You care so little for your people?’

‘They can look after themselves,’ the Raven Prince said, and then blandly added; ‘and if they cannot, then perhaps they should not be spared after all, should they?’

Augus approached the Raven Prince warily, holding the box tightly in his palms, which were sweating, the carved wood slick in his fingers. Not once did the Raven Prince make any sudden movements, nor did the lazy expression leave his face. Augus kept feeling angrier, surely something would snap him out of it. Something would make him fight back, would make him care.

‘I expected more from you,’ Augus said.

The Raven Prince tilted his head at the box, consideringly. ‘I’m only a raven, young man. What can you expect from a raven?’

‘How many memories do you have, do you think?’ Augus said, his voice rough. ‘How many years have you lived? How many memories have you stolen from others in the form of language and culture?’

The Raven Prince’s lips thinned, but then broadened into a tense smile. But otherwise he said
nothing. He looked up from the box once to meet Augus’ livid gaze, and then looked at the box once more.

Augus was now so close to the Raven Prince that he was in his personal space, an act so rarely permitted, that often came with tension. Now, the Raven Prince simply sighed, even as Augus pressed the box to the Raven Prince’s neck, getting closer than he’d ever dared without his King’s permission.

‘Your Majesty,’ Augus said, staring at what he was doing.

‘It’s the first time you’ve called me that since we’ve come here, this evening,’ the Raven Prince said. ‘You’d best savour it, because I suspect you’ll not be able to call me that again, very soon.’

‘Why won’t you fight me?’

‘Why do you need me to?’ the Raven Prince didn’t even look at him now. ‘Aren’t you angry enough yet? Are you so soft, truly? I would have thought you’d be pleased that this would be so easy.’

Augus clicked open the box and shuddered as he heard the thing skittering around inside, and then no skittering at all as the memoryeater’s tiny body, a globule of flesh, met the Raven Prince’s neck.

The box fell to the ground with a soft thud, and Augus stared at the tick, even as the Raven Prince’s eyes widened.

‘Ah,’ the Raven Prince said, quietly surprised. ‘I don’t think I’ve had the pleasure of acquainting myself with-’

His voice trailed off and his eyes grew wide. His gaze flew to Augus’ then, bewildered, even as his fingers came up and fumbled with the rapidly expanding memoryeater, now the size of an orange on the Raven Prince’s shoulder. It was black and grey and matt in texture, reflecting light dully, its tiny black eyes – many of them – seeming to wink in the dim forest.

‘Will you fight me now?’ Augus said, his voice thready.

The Raven Prince coughed suddenly, and Augus nodded to himself, even as he kept backing away. He had to be quick, the memoryeater was growing faster than he’d thought, even being left to starve for one hundred and fifty years. He took a dagger and a stone from his bag, fumbling the blade and cutting his own palm. He felt clammy and ill and like this wasn’t going how it was supposed to go at all, when it was going better than he could have imagined.

A heavy thudding sound and Augus looked up hurriedly. The Raven Prince had dropped to his knees, something perplexed in the cant of his eyebrows, the way his lips had parted. The memoryeater growing and growing, sagging against the Raven Prince’s shoulders, its segmented legs shifting and getting a better grip, now digging into the Raven Prince’s chest and upper arm. Augus had never known memoryeaters could feast this quickly; perhaps the Nightingale had such tight control of how his underworld creatures fed, because he’d shared his time with them for so long.

Which made the next part of this even more important. But he was shaking, and there was a growing blankness in the Raven Prince’s eyes, even as the memoryeater had to now brace itself on the floor, now four feet tall and round with memories and wisdom, the sucking sound of its maw attached to the Raven Prince’s neck sickening to hear.

There was no final glance between them after that. The Raven Prince’s eyes rolled back in his head.
and his fingers twitched, and the memoryeater kept eating, more and more, until it was six feet tall and truly monstrous.

The Nightingale had once told Augus that memoryeaters typically took millennia to grow to such a size. That they needed thousands, hundreds of thousands of kills behind them. They were easiest to kill when the size of one’s palm, and even underworld denizens did not like them.

This one was feasting, and quickly. Augus’ hands were shaking so badly he dropped the stone and had to crouch and pick it up again.

He couldn’t look away. This was what the Nightingale had watched and enjoyed when he’d done it to Augus, watched like it was a spectator sport, and Augus was horrified with himself that he wasn’t enjoying it. This was supposed to be vindication. It was supposed to feel good!

The memoryeater detached from the Raven Prince’s neck, its fangs many, sharp and long. It took a clumsy step sideways, too fat to even manage its wieldy, glistening body.

The Raven Prince was unconscious, his mind stolen from him.

Maybe, if you subdue the creature, and talk to the School of the Staff, they can intervene and find a way to – the Raven Prince’s body is still breathing, and they might know how to heal-

‘No!’ Augus shouted, terrified at the path his mind had suddenly taken.

‘I shouldn’t have shouted,’ Augus said, his voice cracking. ‘I shouldn’t have- Maybe you were right. Maybe the School of the Staff could have done something. They likely would have enjoyed having an underworld creature to poke and prod, especially one with all the Raven Prince’s knowledge inside of it. But I drew its attention. They’re attracted to noise, and I- It turned on me. So fast. It shouldn’t have been that fast, but it was so big and when it lunged…’

Augus gasped hugely for breath, staggering several steps away from Gwyn, seeing only the scene that he’d described before him.

‘The knife was so sharp. It was part of the plan. But at that moment, I had changed my mind, I had already decided that I couldn’t go through with it. How utterly, utterly revolting then, that I called its attention and I was- You can’t know what those things are like, Gwyn. To see one coming at you, once you know what they are capable of, you cannot help your reaction. I had a knife in my hand, and for the first time since the Nightingale I could defend myself and no one would stop me or punish me for it and so I-’

The knife pushed through the memoryeater’s maw into its head, and the thing gave an almighty twitch, shrieking a sound so high that it felt like it scored the lining of Augus’ ears.

Augus scrambled backwards from where the memoryeater had knocked him down. He was sobbing in fear, staring at the black blood now oozing from the creature’s mouth as it staggered sideways to the floor and fell still.

It had been easy, then. That part of the plan, the one he’d worried about – the Nightingale had been right – they were easy enough to kill. Couldn’t die of natural causes, but a knife through the mouth and angled upwards, and it wouldn’t move.

But that meant-

If it was dead, that meant-
Augus pushed himself upright and forced himself to the creature’s side. Maybe it wasn’t dead, not completely. Its back legs were still twitching. He could get someone. He could-

His hands went around the knife hilt and he pulled on it, trying to dislodge it from bone and cartilage and more. It crunched messily, and even as Augus hoped that the thing might be saved, it shivered into a total stillness.

‘No,’ Augus breathed, staring between the memoryeater and the Raven Prince. ‘No, no, this can’t be-’

And then he felt it, the-

‘-King’s powers, moving into me as my status changed. The Raven Prince had- he’d bequeathed it after all, hadn’t he? If he was unfit to rule, then it would pass to me. I would inherit his Kingship. He made it so easy. Do you see now? How weak I am? How I couldn’t even do that the way I was supposed to?’

Augus raked fingers down his scalp so hard he drew blood, but he couldn’t feel it and it didn’t matter. His other arm was wrapped hard around himself.

But he couldn’t hold himself together then, and he couldn’t do it now.

‘Do you want to hear about how I cried over the memoryeater and how I begged it not to be dead? Can you imagine how the Nightingale would have laughed to see me? If only he’d been there to feed off of it! Maybe he was! Can you imagine how- And you, I can already tell you’ve made your decision. So let me help you with it, shall I? After gods only know how long, pathetic and disgusting and crying over my Prince, my Prince, I forced the stone into the Raven Prince’s mouth and he changed into a raven.

‘I stayed for…I stayed until well after dawn. The memoryeater’s body had already half-rotted away – they decay…rather quickly in the fae realms – and with it, all those memories, those languages, those dead and dying cultures, and more besides. The Raven Prince woke up as a bird, he didn’t recognise me. I’m sure of it. If he did, I wouldn’t have been King of the Unseelie Court. So…’

Augus turned to stare at Gwyn, growling when Gwyn’s expression still hadn’t changed. Didn’t even depict the horror that he knew Gwyn should feel.

‘Why won’t you say anything?’ Augus shouted at him. ‘Do you want me to do it to you too? You shouldn’t trust me, you know. I am treasonous. I have never – once – since then asked anyone to trust me and meant it. Not Ash. Not you. I’m not a fool. I know what I’m capable of, I know how weak I am, I know that I could do it again. I can’t promise you I wouldn’t.’

Augus stumbled backwards and kept his knees locked again, laughing, tears dripping, so angry at himself.

‘I would do it again,’ Augus said. ‘I was always surprised when you didn’t kill me the first time. But I am defective, and I didn’t believe that, until I was taught it, over and over and over and over. The Nightingale has a very persuasive song, you see. Do you know how angry it makes me, that I believe him?’

There was a crunch in the leaf litter and Augus’ head snapped up, feeling that old terror surfacing, fearing that the memoryeater had somehow come back.

It was Gwyn, walking towards him, something having shifted in his expression.
Augus stepped backwards, raising his hand,pointing. ‘You shouldn’t trust me. Not…ever. I like to think that I can be an Advisor, but you-

‘Augus,’ Gwyn said quietly, still walking towards him, Augus still stumbling backwards.

‘You shouldn’t trust me,’ Augus said again. ‘I’ve betrayed everyone who’s ever gotten close to me. The Each Uisge, the Each Uisge isn’t supposed to have…we’re not supposed to be like this, and I corrupt- Look at Ash, look at–

‘Augus,’ Gwyn said again, the word soft and awful because of it.

‘Fenwrel only made true what I always knew, I was poisoned and I’ll never be the same again. Ever. I lost…I had…’ the noise he made was pathetic. ‘That lake, I loved it so, and my Prince, him also, and Ash, look at what I’ve done to all of it.’

Gwyn was close enough now that when Augus tried to step backwards and Gwyn reached for him, Gwyn could catch him and stop him from moving away. Augus could only feel now how badly he was shaking, through Gwyn’s steadiness. He reverberated against that grip.

‘I wasn’t supposed to be able to feel regret,’ Augus rasped.

‘Shh,’ Gwyn said, pressing Augus closer. The tone of it at odds with what Augus expected.

He was even more surprised, then, when he felt warm light suffuse him, when he felt Gwyn’s grip firm so that he wouldn’t be lost during teleportation.

They landed, of all places, back in the room they’d shared together. Not the throne room. Not a cell.

‘What are you doing?’ Augus said, confused.

Gwyn said nothing for a few seconds, and then kissed Augus’ forehead, his lips closed. Augus’ forehead was cold, and Gwyn’s lips burned him.

Augus looked up, dazed. ‘What are you doing?’

‘Shh,’ Gwyn said, and Augus could only watch, trembling, as Gwyn pressed a closed-mouthed kiss to Augus’ slightly open mouth. ‘I thought you’d recognise it, since you’ve bestowed it on so many others. This is your absolution, Augus. It’s not a sin to be yourself.’

Chapter End Notes

In our next chapter, 'Absolution:"

‘Okay,’ Gwyn said, offering something that might have been a grimace of agreement. ‘You thought I would abandon you, once I’d learned the story. I don’t understand why. Because what you did was so terrible?’

‘I’m weak.’ Augus closed his eyes. ‘I can’t tell what it is. That I did it. That I didn’t want to do it. They both seem- I don’t know what…happened, but somewhere along the way, I became…weaker. I care too much. I-’
‘Aleutia has the heart of a healer, she’s Unseelie, I don’t see the issue,’ Gwyn said.

‘You wouldn’t, would you?’ Augus spat, a sharp, awful anger cresting through him. ‘Of course you wouldn’t. You weren’t dealing with the Nightingale for months, while he was creatively finding new ways to show you how weak you were. I know it’s irrational, all right? I know it is. I hate that I can know it and still not shake it off me. I hate that I have this poison and that knowing isn’t enough to remove it. No one ever tells you that knowing something isn’t enough to heal it. You can know – very well indeed – that you have been brainwashed and half-destroyed by someone and still…still believe that you are the very soul of weakness. And I cannot look past it sometimes. I cannot look past it and then I think others will not be able to look past it either. As the Nightingale couldn’t.’
Absolution

Chapter Notes

No new tags, but we are revisiting some old ones (like for example, bondage, or Gwyn's ability to top the hell out of someone when he needs to. Oh wait that isn't a tag. It should be!)

The Confession-Absolution chapters in particular are a pair, and I just thought it would work best to have them come close together. Hence two chapters in one week! Enjoy! :) Thanks to everyone who's reading, comment if you'd like to, and hope you all have great weekends. (We're back to once a week COFT posting after this update!)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Augus

*

It’s not a sin to be yourself.

Augus’ entire world rocked, but all he managed was an airless: ‘You seem to have…this habit…of stealing my lines.’

‘Shh,’ Gwyn said. His arms came up and Augus tensed, unthinking, feeling like the entire room was grey and black around the edges and even Gwyn was blurry. Palms pressed feather light against the side of his face, and then fingertips settled in his hair.

‘You weren’t supposed to react like this,’ Augus said, and his voice seemed to come from a great distance. Gwyn peered at him closely, and then frowned, fingertips shifting individual strands of Augus’ hair.

‘Don’t disappear, Augus,’ Gwyn said. ‘Don’t do that thing where you go away. Stay.’

Augus reached out and dug claws which had grown back to sharp points, into Gwyn’s abdomen, puncturing skin. His nose prickled with the piquant smell of Gwyn’s blood, carbon and lightning in the back of his throat. Gwyn didn’t even flinch, watching Augus closely, but hardly seeming bothered by Augus’ actions. Which didn’t make any sense. After everything Augus had just said. It wasn’t supposed to go this way.

‘Shh,’ Gwyn said again, and Augus bared his teeth, growled, and when he tried to step back, Gwyn’s hands tightened on the side of his face. Augus stopped moving, because he could sense the strength in Gwyn’s touch, and Gwyn was King, and stronger, and Augus was too exhausted to fight him. ‘What you are might frighten you, Augus. As it did once frighten me. But you scare me no longer. And you belong to me.’

Pale blue eyes were fixed on his, even though Augus had only just lifted his gaze to Gwyn’s face. A mild stirring of hostility. If he’d had the energy, if he didn’t feel so wrung out, Augus knew he’d be hurting him for that. Augus didn’t belong to anyone. He didn’t want to. Everything that Gwyn was saying to him, Augus had said versions of those words to Gwyn in the past.
It wasn’t supposed to work that way.

‘I trust you, Augus,’ Gwyn said.

Augus felt that like a pain in his chest. He lifted the hand still clinging bloodily to Gwyn’s abdomen and slashed at him.

Still, Gwyn’s hands remained on his face, and Gwyn didn’t flinch. He smiled.

Augus hissed. ‘You shouldn’t trust me. You are an idiot. I have never truly believed that you would trust me.’

‘I am making a choice, Augus. I choose to trust you.’

‘Then you are stupider than the Raven Prince, who knew better.’

Gwyn made a sound of disbelief, shaking his head, looking down at Augus and biting his lower lip for a few seconds before finally saying. ‘Who knew better? The one who betrayed you?’

What is he talking about?

‘No,’ Augus said, his brow furrowing.

‘Well,’ Gwyn said, ‘too bad he’s not here to defend himself, because he used you to escape, because he was too cowardly to stay and fight the Nightingale.’

Augus tried to step backwards, a sluggish anger finding him, and Gwyn wouldn’t let him go. Augus growled faintly as he fumbled for words, until he finally landed on: ‘Don’t talk about him that way!’

Gwyn shook him, stared at him, his gaze so unrelenting it was like a drill powering into Augus’ head. ‘I don’t believe for one second that he took any sort of high road with you, Augus. He knew of the poison you were bringing into the Kingdom. He knew the destruction you could bring. He had countless opportunities to intervene. Perhaps he shouldn’t have been King after all, if that was his attitude to those of the Kingdom that needed his assistance.’

Augus reached up with his arms and dug claws into Gwyn’s forearm, raking them down. Blood oozed, dripped, and Gwyn had the audacity to smile at him. That smile. Augus hated it. His chest ached and it felt like there were things inside of him scratching at the wall of his sternum. It was a dirty, awful pain.

‘Stop talking about him that way.’

‘I don’t need to place him on a pedestal,’ Gwyn said, pressing his forehead to Augus’ and sighing. ‘They’re not the ones standing here, Augus. Not the Oak King, nor the Raven Prince. They left the equivalent of children – as they think of us – to do the hard work for them. If they wanted my respect, they should have stuck around to earn it.’

‘He was the greatest King to ever-’

‘Augus,’ Gwyn said, his voice heavy, too heavy for Augus to interrupt him again. ‘Augus, haven’t you realised? A King like that…who knows that much about how the world works, who already knew the Nightingale, who already knew you existed and wanted you in his Court only for you to tell him ‘no’ – who famously did not like to be thwarted and responded pettily to such things. Augus, tell me you know that in all likelihood, he led the Nightingale right to you. Haven’t you
always wondered why the Nightingale chose you? When you thought of yourself as nothing more than underfae? And hadn’t you already told the Raven Prince ‘no’ by then, and rejected his Court?’

Augus felt like all breath deserted him, and Gwyn’s hands went quickly from Augus’ face to his upper arms, holding him upright when he swayed. There were no thoughts then, but a vacuum of darkness, and Gwyn’s forehead pressing once more to Augus’, so warm, almost burning him.

‘That’s not…possible,’ Augus said, his voice rough.

‘I don’t know if it’s true,’ Gwyn said. ‘But the Raven Prince was a master strategist, and he would have won several things if he had placed you in the Nightingale’s line of sight. The first was that he would distract the Nightingale for some time. The second was that he’d get to humble you indirectly. And the third – perhaps unforeseen result – was that you went immediately to his Court afterwards and begged to be by his side.’

‘You-

‘You’re not a strategist in that way,’ Gwyn whispered. ‘Thank all the gods that you’re not. It takes…a certain kind of mind to think of people in the way that the Raven Prince and I can think of them. And I am certain that if this sort of manoeuvring has occurred to me, then it definitely occurred to him. You were his pawn, Augus. ’

Augus could hear his own breathing, and Gwyn was hushing him again, and Augus hated that it was helping to hear that tender sound from Gwyn’s mouth. Gwyn of all people, who had left him a month, and hadn’t come to see him. Augus couldn’t tell if he was furious, because he was too exhausted for any of his emotions to do much more than flicker into view and fade away quickly afterwards.

He couldn’t stand this, couldn’t stand Gwyn holding all the cards, and he tried to step backwards, his growl gaining strength.

Gwyn wouldn’t let him go. When Augus pitted his strength, expecting Gwyn to succumb, Gwyn only dug fingers into his arms to the point of bruising, and pushed him back to the bed.

Augus’ back hit the mattress, and his eyes widened.

‘No,’ Gwyn said to him, his voice low. ‘You don’t get to take control back. Not yet.’

Augus blinked at him even as Gwyn bodily propelled Augus up the bed, so that his head was resting on pillows. Gwyn took one of Augus’ wrists, and then the second, and raised them both slowly above Augus’ head, pinning them in a single grip. He looked down on Augus with something fierce in his gaze.

‘Trust me,’ Gwyn said.

‘You don’t ask an Unseelie fae to trust you,’ Augus said, even though he’d done it in the past.

‘I’m asking,’ Gwyn said. ‘Not as an Unseelie fae, and not as your King. I want you to try, Augus.’

‘After the month I’ve had?’

‘I’m sorry,’ Gwyn said, and then lowered his head and pressed his lips to Augus’. They were a little chapped, but mostly soft and dry, held in place, Gwyn holding his weight aloft easily, balancing himself where he anchored Augus’ wrists into the pillow above his head. ‘I apologise,
Augus. I had to know the truth. That secret was poisoning you. And I know why now.’

Gwyn’s forearms were still bleeding. Blood dripped infrequently onto the pillow by Augus’ head.

‘I don’t like ultimatums,’ Augus heard himself say.

‘I try not to give them,’ Gwyn said.

Something about the situation was elusive, and Augus’ mind reached for it, even as Gwyn lowered his lips to Augus’ once more. There, in the corner of his mind, it felt like he turned over a rock and instead of finding worms, he found a truth that had hidden from him, until now. He blinked hard, backed into the pillow to get away from Gwyn’s mouth, to get his attention.

Gwyn stared down at him, something heavy and wanting in his gaze.

‘You…’ Augus said, hardly able to believe what he was thinking. ‘You gave me an ultimatum. Did you really think I’d tell you?’

‘You had to tell someone. I believe that even more now that I know the truth. I knew I was doing the right thing,’ Gwyn said, face twisting.

‘Gwyn, you do realise what you did? You leveraged my care for you. You…assumed I cared about you enough, that I would talk about this thing, rather than lose you.’

Gwyn’s eyes widened, and after several seconds, he shook his head. ‘No, I assumed you cared about Ash and—’

‘No,’ Augus said, his mouth going dry. ‘No, don’t give me that. You assumed I cared about you enough, if you truly thought that giving me an ultimatum based on me losing you, losing…this, was the right thing. Which means that deep down, somewhere, some part of you knows it’s true. You actually believe that I care for you.’

It was, perhaps, a little satisfying to watch the stunned look come over Gwyn’s face. It was like he’d been hit in the side of the head with a rock. He blinked down at Augus, his mouth slightly open, and then he shook his head again. But the more Augus thought about it, the more he realised that it was true. After months of being certain that Gwyn would never truly know how Augus felt for him, he had the most bizarre and infuriating evidence in front of him that Gwyn did know. Even if he couldn’t truly acknowledge it, there was a part of him that had internalised the truth.

‘I thought you’d save yourself,’ Gwyn said, but there was a tremor in his voice, as though he was uncertain.

‘One of your conditions in the ultimatum was that you would end our accord. You said that it didn’t matter how you or I felt, and I know you meant how we felt about each other. You believe what we have means enough to me, to be worth putting down as leverage. You…I can’t decide whether I’m furious at you, or amazed that you’ve done something I didn’t think you could do.’

‘Be quiet,’ Gwyn said, his gaze moving off into the distance. Finally, he gave Augus’ wrists a squeeze and then lifted his hands. ‘Keep them there. Don’t move.’

‘And if I move?’ Augus said, as Gwyn slid off the bed.

‘I’ll put you back,’ Gwyn said. ‘Stay there.’

Gwyn padded off quietly towards the rooms where Augus kept his assortment of toys and items
that could turn sex into a scene. Augus closed his eyes. Truthfully, he was exhausted. His muscles ached like he’d just been in a battle for his life. He knew he was still in shock. He was colder than he should be, felt blurred around the edges.

Gwyn, telling him that it wasn’t a sin for Augus to be himself, telling him that Augus belonged to him. It was the opposite of how he was supposed to react. No one was supposed to accept Augus after hearing those events. They still crawled like nausea in Augus’ throat, the truth of it all clinging in images against the back of his eyes. He couldn’t quite rid the silhouette of the Raven Prince leaning against the tree from his vision.

The idea that the Raven Prince had engineered all of it, even the parts Augus hadn’t foreseen until Gwyn had stated them so baldly…

It made him feel too sick to contemplate.

The foundations of so much he had come to believe over centuries were cracking apart, water was flooding through the gaps. If he thought about it too hard, he started to feel like he was drowning, which was impossible; waterhorses couldn’t drown.

Gwyn returned with a length of rope in his hands, and Augus stiffened. Gwyn came to him, sat on the edge of the bed, placed a hand on Augus’ abdomen. It was gentle, but it was possessive.

‘Let me,’ Gwyn said, his voice soft, but still strong. Augus knew an order when he heard one, he was used to giving them. ‘Let me, Augus.’

Gwyn leaned over and pressed his lips to Augus’ jaw, opening his mouth and skating his tongue along skin that thinly covered a ridge of bone. Augus’ eyes drifted shut, Gwyn’s hand was rubbing very slow motions into Augus’ belly. Slow, firm, insistent.

‘You’re going to let me,’ Gwyn said.

Gwyn came onto the bed fully, straddling Augus’ waist, reaching up with the rope and a look in his eyes that Augus couldn’t bring himself to fight back against. He was curious, he was exhausted, and though he didn’t like the idea of his wrists being tied, it meant that he wouldn’t have to think. Just a little longer, without thinking. He tilted his head back to watch Gwyn secure Augus’ wrists first to each other, and then to the headboard of the bed. He had a deft hand with knots, which Augus knew came from years of military training, but came in handy during moments like this.

The knots were tight, though not so tight that Augus was immediately worried about circulation. His wrists were not tied to each other as closely as Augus had first thought. But they were secured very tightly to the headboard. He pulled several times, testing the bonds, fingers curling around the rope.

Gwyn looked down at him, eyes roving Augus’ clothed chest. He slipped a hand beneath Augus’ shirt and grazed his fingers over Augus’ skin, moving first quickly, as though mapping him, and then repeating the motion with a level of slowness that was surprising, and then offered up nothing but prickling sensation. Augus watched Gwyn’s concentration. As though Gwyn sensed Augus’ gaze, he looked up. There was an odd expression on his face. Gwyn leaned forwards, and where Augus expected to be kissed, Gwyn’s other hand came down lightly on Augus’ face and pressed thumb and forefinger delicately to his eyelids.

‘Close them,’ Gwyn said, and Augus pursed his lips. ‘Close them, Augus.’

‘I want to watch you,’ Augus said, his fingers curling into the rope. ‘I can’t believe I’m letting you
do this.’

‘Close them,’ Gwyn said again, applying a minute amount of pressure.

Augus shivered, his eyes closed. He could still see the dimmed light of their bedroom underneath his eyelids, so he wasn’t truly in the dark. He could feel Gwyn’s weight over him. It was all far too confusing, and his fingers twisted against the ropes, clinging to them. He felt that sensation of drowning again. He made a faint sound when Gwyn’s forehead pressed to his.

‘You should not…see me like this,’ Augus said, and then his lips thinned.

Gwyn’s hands fit themselves around Augus’ ribs, his thumbs smoothing over the material of his shirt. The movements weren’t fast or fretful, but long and measured.

‘Perhaps you should demote me,’ Augus whispered.

‘I would not have wished any of it on you,’ Gwyn said. ‘From the beginning to the end, you were used.’

‘Are you telling me I’m not culpable?’ Augus said, his voice cracking.

‘When I killed Nwython, when I fed Nwython’s son, Cyledr, his father’s heart, and watched the light of hope and innocence dull from his eyes as his sanity was driven from him, as I drove it from him, I didn’t think I would survive it. I didn’t plan to survive it. It was you, Augus, who taught me that we are what we are. We do monstrous things, and sometimes we regret them. We are weak in moments, but that does not mean that the core of us is weakness. The Nightingale dragged you into a trap, and he never truly released you from it. Everything since…and you still feel him everywhere. In this Court. In yourself. It is amazing to me that you have been able to treat me with the…care that you have, with so much evil around you.’

Lips pressed against his, and those thumbs were still moving. They were lulling, as though Gwyn had found that scratchy pain inside of Augus’ chest and knew how to soothe it. Every rough edge that Augus had was blurring away, and he shifted beneath Gwyn’s weight, opening his mouth to Gwyn’s, wanting to forget everything. If Gwyn hated his penchant for catatonia so much, Gwyn could give Augus this instead. It was clear he wanted to.

Gwyn’s tongue was soft against his mouth, nothing like the coldness or frightening hardness that Gwyn had displayed while Augus was telling him that awful story. Now Augus suspected – through his quietening disbelief – that Gwyn had to make himself stand like that. Not because he intended to reject Augus, but because he didn’t know how to make himself bear Augus’ pain otherwise. Gwyn had always sought to ameliorate it, to soothe Augus’ emotional anguish whenever he saw it. To force himself to stand still through that story…

The thought made Augus’ eyes burn.

‘Would you ever have sent me away?’ Augus whispered against Gwyn’s open mouth.

‘Do you think that I could?’ Gwyn said, taking Augus’ lower lip between his and licking it. Moving up and rubbing his lips against Augus’, his nose bumping into Augus’, his skin flushed with heat and so close he felt tangible, permanent. It didn’t matter then, that Augus couldn’t move his hands to touch Gwyn’s back or his sides, and Augus felt something sigh out of him.

‘You were frightened,’ Gwyn said against Augus’ cheek. ‘The Nightingale punished you for daring to have vulnerability, or anything like compassion in your heart. The Raven Prince slighted you for daring to trust you, rewarded you with betrayal. No wonder you hate it, Augus. No wonder you
cannot stand to have us see you like this. But you have to let me. I…”

Gwyn ducked his head and pressed his face into the crook of Augus’ neck and took several breaths, like he was steadying himself. Augus opened his eyes and blinked up at the ceiling, and then realised he preferred not being able to see. His eyes drifted shut again, even as Gwyn’s face lifted.

‘I destroyed him,’ Augus said. ‘And I knew how I would do it, all along. You do not worry I’ll do the same to you?’

‘No,’ Gwyn said, sliding his hands beneath Augus’ shirt and splaying broad hands over his ribs, smoothing them up towards Augus’ chest, where he fit his palms over his pectorals, like they belonged there. ‘And if you ever did it, Augus- If you ever tried…it’s obvious that you would give me so many opportunities to stop you. That, now, tells me something about you that I’m not sure I knew before tonight.’

‘Tells you what?’ Augus said. Maybe, if he didn’t feel so drained, if Gwyn’s hands on his chest weren’t so compelling, he’d be able to think about what was happening. He couldn’t.

‘It doesn’t matter,’ Gwyn said, nuzzling at the side of Augus’ neck and then kissing it carefully. The amount of tenderness in all of Gwyn’s motions would have been infuriating, if Augus had any shred of his dignity remaining. He felt flayed. He couldn’t hold back a small breath of laughter when he realised that Gwyn wasn’t the only one who knew that sensation. The Nightingale could be so creative with his slurchers, there was very little that he couldn’t do to Augus, in the end, without their assistance.

But Augus didn’t want to think about that.

‘Do you not think…I am wearing too much clothing?’ Augus said.

‘Entirely too much,’ Gwyn agreed, his voice humming over Augus’ neck. ‘But I’ll not be made to rush. I have been a month without you, and I do not think you should have to think tonight. I’m hoping…I’m hoping perhaps that you might sleep, once I’m done with you.’

Gwyn’s hands turned on Augus’ chest so that his fingers were digging between the spaces of his buttoned up shirt, and then Gwyn brought his strength to bear and the shirt split open. Gwyn made it look so easy, and though Augus couldn’t see the expression on Gwyn’s face, he knew that Gwyn didn’t even need to tense his features to do something like break a shirt. So it was a small matter then when Gwyn leaned down and bit little tears into the cuffs at Augus’ wrists and then used his hands to tear the sleeves apart, all so that he could take Augus’ shirt off without undoing the ropes.

Augus had things he wanted to say. Questions. He still didn’t fully understand how he’d ended up here after talking about something that had been so repulsive to him…how could it not be to others?

But then, once, Gwyn had told him a lifelong secret and had expected Augus to destroy him with it. Had been so scared that Augus needed to give him a blood-oath, and even then, he knew that Gwyn hadn’t truly been reassured.

Now everyone knew Gwyn was Unseelie, and here he was, still alive.

But that sort of thing wasn’t supposed to apply to Augus. He’d spent his entire life in service of other’s secrets, leeching them of their poison, he had more than enough knowledge to know if he needed the same. He knew what he’d done wasn’t the same as what other people had done. Didn’t he? Wasn’t that the point?
Gwyn slid down between Augus’ legs, all the way to his feet, taking Augus’ boots and unbuckling them easily. He slid them off Augus’ feet, dropped them to the floor carelessly. When the second boot was removed, Gwyn’s fingers rubbed at Augus’ ankle, then stroked the bridge of his foot. Augus arched his foot, indicated that he was still there, still present, and Gwyn rubbed at Augus’ toes in response. Augus almost cringed. It was intimate, even friendly.

Augus had no idea what he wanted. But he wouldn’t be able to forget, if Gwyn did things like that.

Gwyn tugged at the material on Augus’ pants experimentally, as though testing to see how hard they’d be to pull off. Augus lifted his hips when Gwyn’s fingers came to the hem, undoing the fly, the button, removing the belt. Every movement was methodical, and Augus was too busy noting all the ways that Gwyn was shifting – moving his hands, turning his fingers – to notice that his pants were being removed, until they were bunched around his ankles and the sound of them being pulled free was the loudest thing in the room.

Lips pressed to the inside of his knee, where the skin was sensitive. A hot, wet tongue tasted him, lingering, and Augus moved his other leg and slid it closer to Gwyn, feeling the shape of him. Gwyn was still clothed, and a frisson of discomfort moved through Augus to think of the power imbalance between them. Gwyn, the King, able to demote Augus without a second thought, and Augus roped to the bed, naked.

But of the two of them, Gwyn was the one who smelled of blood.

Besides, Gwyn was currently mouthing his way softly along Augus’ inner thigh, and Augus’ fingers curled because what he suspected what Gwyn was leading to, and that would be a very good way to forget. It had been entirely too long, after all.

How could there be a small warmth in his heart, like a hot spring, after everything that had happened? But there it was. Augus thought of the expression on Gwyn’s face when Augus stated that Gwyn had leveraged Augus’ care. Which meant that Gwyn knew Augus cared for him. Somewhere, beneath or perhaps resting on top of all of those decades of condition and torture and brutalisation, a part of Gwyn had squirreled away the truth. Some part of Gwyn still had the strength and courage to believe it was possible, when so little of life had taught him that it was. Was it like a trickle of water across a desert? Was it a small spring bubbling in those desolate wastelands that Gwyn’s light left behind? Or was it also a small warmth in Gwyn’s chest too?

Gwyn’s hand came up and pressed Augus’ chest down into the bed. His other arm slid underneath Augus’ knee, wrapped around it so that his hand was holding Augus’ thigh. Gwyn’s hair was soft, sliding against Augus’ skin. It was mildly ticklish, but counterbalanced by the heat of Gwyn’s mouth.

Gwyn trailed his hand down Augus’ chest, over his belly, until he could rest his thumb in Augus’ pelt of pubic hair. There, he played with it idly, each movement sure and patient, Augus’ cock still quiescent between his legs.

When Gwyn’s mouth reached the crease where thigh met crotch, Gwyn breathed into it, inhaling deeply with an infectious eagerness. Lust curled in Augus’ gut. So far he was only enjoying the sensuality of all of the touch, detached from needing anything like sex. Now, with Gwyn so close to his cock and ignoring it, now licking into the crease of his thigh, his bare cheek bumping up against Augus’ cock, Augus felt his heart increase in speed again. Gwyn still held Augus’ thigh close to his shoulder, he still moved his fingers tenderly against his pubic hair.

The slowness of it was deliberate, Augus knew that much. What seemed an age ago now, Gwyn had admitted that he’d liked seeing Augus undone by those slow, patient touches.
Gwyn pressed his nose to the underside of Augus’ cock, and then licked with the flat of his tongue, a stripe of sensation that went so slowly that Augus thought he could feel Gwyn’s tastebuds. Augus shifted, the leg that Gwyn wasn’t holding spread outwards.

The hand that Gwyn had on Augus’ pelvis shifted, and then two fingers braced the top of Augus’ cock so that it was easy to manoeuvre while it was still soft. And then Gwyn was breathing over the tip of him, before pressing his lips to the tip. Augus made a faint sound, not so much of unbridled lust, but appreciation. With his eyes closed, he couldn’t tell if Gwyn was looking at him, or what he was doing. He couldn’t see the expression on Gwyn’s face, but he thought maybe he could imagine it.

Augus’ toes curled when wetness surrounded the head of him. Gwyn sank down slowly, but it wasn’t hesitation. There were no pauses as Gwyn took Augus into his mouth, and Augus was aware of the details; Gwyn breathing through his nose, and every exhale unsettling the hair around the base of his cock, the way Gwyn’s fingernails were blunt, but one was slightly uneven, and he could feel it – not hurting, but ragged – against the skin at the top of his cock. The hand on Augus’ thigh tightened imperceptibly, and Augus licked at his bottom lip and tilted his head back, because…yes…this could be what helped him to not think about the last month, the words he’d just spilled.

He was so tired.

‘More,’ Augus breathed.

In response, Gwyn lifted his head up and lowered it to Augus’ abdomen, kissing the lithe plane of his skin, and Augus growled. Knocked at Gwyn with his knee. He felt Gwyn’s lips pulling taut into a smile and tugged at the ropes. If he had it his way, he’d have his hands in Gwyn’s hair to make him do what he wanted.

‘That’s not what I meant, and you know it,’ Augus said, as Gwyn licked spirals onto the surface of his skin. Each one started off wet, and the outer edges of the spiral were dry as the saliva ran out. When Gwyn blew on them, Augus felt his muscles twitch, his nostrils flare.

Gwyn kissed his way up over Augus’ ribs, nudging at those that pressed as bumps through his skin with his nose, licking the length of them with his tongue.

*I must admit, being worshipped by someone with an oral fixation is not entirely a bad thing.*

Augus pressed his lips together when Gwyn scraped his bottom teeth over Augus’ right nipple, then slowly did the same to his left. Augus could have sworn that even with his eyes closed, he could feel the shadow of Gwyn on his body, warm where it shouldn’t have been, holding him down even though Gwyn was supporting his own weight.

‘You were in battle,’ Augus said, hardly thinking as Gwyn nosed with infinite slowness at Augus’ collarbone. Gwyn was moving at a pace that was arousing, and Augus squirmed, licked at his bottom lip as Gwyn rubbed a circle into his chest, directly over the Soulbond.

‘You’ve hurt yourself,’ Gwyn said. ‘This Soulbond…I don’t think it can be removed, being old lore. But I’ll look for you.’

Augus almost opened his eyes then, but Gwyn’s lips pressed to Augus’ eyelids, one, then the other.

‘You’d do that?’ Augus said.

‘I don’t want you to get your hopes up,’ Gwyn whispered against his eyelashes. ‘But yes. I’ll look.'
But I wish you would consider keeping it.’

Fingers skated over the grazes on Augus’ chest, and Augus sighed, because it felt so different when Gwyn did it. The marks felt not so hideous, not so much like a stain. Gwyn found something of sensation beneath, made it soft, warm, pleasant. And Augus didn’t have to look at what Gwyn was touching, so he could almost pretend it was normal skin.

‘I think you could have demoted me,’ Augus said, his voice deepening as Gwyn mouthed at the top of Augus’ shoulder. ‘You believed I’d give in.’

‘There are some truths, Augus, that poison us, the longer they are kept inside. You taught me that. And you taught me that in certain circumstances, those truths will out.’

‘I still can’t decide whether I’m furious with you, or amazed that you leveraged my care for you against me. You know that I care for you. Somewhere. Amongst…all that doubt, all that fear.’

Gwyn said nothing at all. His breathing came a little faster against Augus’ skin. It could have been for many reasons, but it was soon covered by Gwyn moving back down Augus’ body.

When Gwyn placed his mouth on Augus’ cock the second time, he gripped the base of it with his fingers and then sank down, lips meeting his own hand, and Augus felt heat and wetness and let himself get hard faster than he normally would have, because he liked the sensation of Gwyn’s mouth around him, liked the suction of it, the shift of Gwyn’s tongue. And, for once, Gwyn was going to get his wish of being able to take things at his own pace. Augus loved forcing Gwyn down, but he was curious now to see how Gwyn would operate without hands resting on the top of his head, without orders to push himself.

A shudder moved through Augus at the long, slow suction Gwyn applied. It was almost painful, as Gwyn drew up and focused it on the head of his cock. But then Gwyn sank down again and Augus hummed, his pelvis tilting upwards even as Gwyn’s hands kept his hips in place.

Augus opened his mouth to direct Gwyn, but it was all too much effort. Instead he hung onto Gwyn’s movements. The slow bobbing motion of his head, and the way that he removed the fingers fisted around the base of Augus’ cock, first one, so that he could sink deeper, then another, so that he could sink deeper still. When the head of Augus’ cock was sandwiched in the back of Gwyn’s throat, there was the faintest of choking noises followed immediately by a strong swallow.

Augus inhaled sharply, gripped at rope, squeezed his eyes shut.

Gwyn removed his hand, and Augus’ mouth opened as Gwyn took him all the way down, until his lips were pressed to the base of him and his throat worked around him. The sounds of it – wet, messy, delicious – were all hypnotic, so Augus hardly paid attention as Gwyn slid both of his hands beneath Augus’ ass.

Gwyn pushed Augus’ hips up, and Augus gasped when Gwyn took him even deeper, using his strength to shove Augus’ cock into his throat, swallowing hard. It was heat and pressure and an ache in Augus’ cock that went to his balls, slunk down his thighs, tightened up in his belly.

A wet sound as Gwyn moved up and gasped for breath, and then Gwyn sank straight back down and did it all over again.

Well…fuck.

When Gwyn slowed his pace even more, Augus couldn’t stop himself from moaning in response. He thought he wanted that, and then Gwyn shifted pace and started moving his head up and down
quickly once his throat was open and relaxed, and the pace of it, the suction, the feel of the roof of Gwyn’s mouth rasping over the length of his cock, it was a crest of heat that bubbled inside of him. One of Gwyn’s hands gripped hard at one of Augus’ ass cheeks, the other splayed on his ribs, as though Gwyn wanted to be up near Augus’ face but couldn’t do more than reach for him.

He was rapidly getting lost in sensation when Gwyn quickly pulled up off him, and Augus made a sound of protest that was muffled by Gwyn’s mouth pressing heavily over his, tongue thrusting in, lips wet and slick from deepthroating Augus’ cock. Augus hungrily pressed his tongue upwards, stroking it along Gwyn’s, tasting himself on Gwyn’s tongue, in his mouth. He scraped his teeth over the top of Gwyn’s tongue.

Gwyn’s breathing was fast, small puffs of breath rapidly pattering over Augus’ face as Gwyn slanted his mouth on an angle and only leaned back to inhale deeply and then bite at Augus’ lower lip. It was messy, not nearly the graceful sort of motions that Augus preferred, but he craved this sign of Gwyn’s need, craved it after a month of thinking it might be easy after all, for Gwyn to just let him go. To know that Gwyn was making hungry noises against his mouth, accidentally snagging Augus’ lip on his canine and then having to lick it better when Augus inhaled sharply, to know that Gwyn’s hands were trailing his body out of a desperation to just have him close…it was a balm.

Augus’ hands weakly struggled against the ropes for no other reason than he wanted to be able to sink hands into Gwyn’s hair. The words Gwyn had said, ‘you don’t get to take control back. Not yet,’ reverberated through his mind. He didn’t want it anyway. There was too much responsibility, too much he’d have to contemplate. For too long he’d had to hold himself together as best as he could after everything that had happened, but perhaps he could leave that at the door, and see if he came through to the other side unscathed.

Wasn’t that what he asked of Gwyn?

Other people weren’t like this, with him. No one had ever cared for him as messily and desperately as Gwyn did. Ash’s love was assured and constant. And other than Ash, who else had there been?

Augus squeezed his eyes shut and licked gently against Gwyn’s open mouth, and then grunted when Gwyn sucked at his tongue as hungrily as he’d sucked at his cock.

Gwyn trailed off Augus’ mouth, down his neck, biting as he went. The bites weren’t too hard, but they stung all the same, brought little individual aches to the surface of his skin, which were nothing to the ache of his still hard cock, cooling as the air touched Gwyn’s saliva, twitching for want of attention.

When Gwyn’s mouth found it again, Augus sighed in relief. When Gwyn sunk all the way to the bottom of Augus’ cock like it was easy, Augus groaned, chafing the skin of his palms on the ropes, absentmly clawing at the headboard.

Pleasure swirled. It gathered in the small of his back. It ran in streams down his legs towards his feet, flowed into his fingers where they stretched back and then dug forwards again. It pooled in his lungs so that breathing steadily became harder. After all, he didn’t have to try and control everything now, he didn’t have to make sure that his breathing was measured or even. There was no obligation here, even his heartsong didn’t chafe to allow this.

Gwyn’s mouth on his cock was rough finesse. It was fast, hungry sucks followed by slowness that was so studied, lights pinged behind Augus’ eyes. It was also relentless. Gwyn knew what he wanted, and he worked for it.
Augus’ release came to him in waves. First in muscular sensations, everything tensing in preparation, his body so tired from the emotional strain of the month preceding that there was no fast tipping over into spilling. His palms grazed at ropes, his wrists ached, and he was panting, because Gwyn was pushing Augus’ pelvis up into his mouth again, swallowing deliberately, compressing the head of Augus’ cock in his throat, small hungry noises turning Augus’ body to a wound-tight heat.

Finally, he tipped over. Felt his cock twitch and then jerk hard in Gwyn’s mouth, heard the sound Gwyn made when he had to swallow to keep up with Augus’ release, swallowing less for Augus’ pleasure and now because he had to. Augus’ hips strained up with Gwyn’s hands, his arms tightened, his mouth was open, cold air scouring at his tongue as he gulped it down.

At the last moment he opened his eyes and saw the headboard, the rope, his own wrists; his head was tilted so far back. He was locked in a space where everything was – for long, slow minutes – Gwyn’s mouth still around him, strong arms supporting the lower half of his body, ropes above him.

He blinked at the ties around his wrists and his heart skipped an uncomfortable beat. When Gwyn drew his mouth away from Augus’ cock, kissing it tenderly, Augus didn’t feel comforted. The gentle space had disappeared so quickly Augus was stunned. Breathing roughly, he came to see that it wasn’t pleasure anymore, but something else. He tugged on the ropes, staring at them.

‘Gwyn,’ Augus said, and his voice was rough.

Gwyn was up and over him quickly, looking down at him, one arm bracing himself so that his weight, even now, wouldn’t crush Augus. Distantly, Augus realised that Gwyn had to be painfully aroused. He could smell it, he thought.

‘Augus,’ Gwyn said, something sad in his voice, even as it was broken, his throat swollen from all that he’d done.

‘I had it, and now it’s gone,’ Augus said, unable to look at Gwyn.

He meant the emptiness of it. The surrender. That gift that he’d given to so many other fae. He couldn’t seem to have it for longer than mere minutes. He winced at himself. It sounded, for a moment, like he was talking of something else; some other, greater loss.

‘You should hate me, for all that I’ve done,’ Augus said. ‘Do you not realise that the reaction of all those other fae who want me dead is the appropriate one?’

‘It’s not,’ Gwyn said, reaching up with his free hand and sliding it behind Augus’ tilted head. His fingers slid between strands of hair, his palm was comforting. Augus’ breath was still rolling from his lungs. He couldn’t meet Gwyn’s eyes. He couldn’t look away from the ropes on his wrists. Had the Nightingale ever done anything like this? No, he would have used his slurchers. They were shape-changing, and were suited to becoming perverse living bondage.

‘I think I’m losing my mind,’ Augus said. ‘I haven’t done justice to that wonderful blowjob you just gave me.’

‘You’re not catatonic, and you’re talking to me. Keep talking to me, Augus. How are you feeling?’

Augus’ breath caught, and then started again, faster than before. Gwyn was gently massaging the back of Augus’ head, reminding him he was there. Augus’ eyes drifted to the headboard, the
wooden strength of it, and then he had to close his eyes again, some horrible weight on his chest.

‘I’m not the one meant to be in this position,’ Augus said, finally.

‘I know,’ Gwyn said. ‘And I won’t tell anyone else that you can be like this, I promise. It’s just me, Augus. You’ve seen me at more than my worst. Remember?’

Augus nodded, even though his eyes were burning again. If his heartsong had been dominance – like it had once been – he’d have control over himself, he’d at least be able to tie all these parts of himself down. Now, his heartsong striving to remain in place, balance wanting to assert itself, he couldn’t grasp at his pinwheel reactions. He only knew that he wasn’t supposed to be reacting like this.

‘I prefer to be the one in control,’ Augus said.

‘I prefer it too,’ Gwyn said. ‘Though you’ll forgive me if I like you like this as well. Well, not exactly like this. Not so distressed. Augus, keep talking to me. What’s happening? You’ve had such a difficult night.’

‘It’s not the night that’s been difficult,’ Augus said, his voice straining on the force of keeping some huge emotion at bay. It was painful, scratchy. ‘It’s everything else. I wanted to destroy him,’ Augus said, his voice straining on the force of keeping some huge emotion at bay. It was painful, scratchy. ‘It’s everything else. I wanted to destroy him, Gwyn.’

‘The Raven Prince didn’t come for you,’ Gwyn said. ‘He should have. And the most salient point of all, he could have prevented all of it. You wanted to destroy him?’ Gwyn laughed darkly. ‘I want to destroy him.’

Augus’ eyes met Gwyn’s then, for the first time. He had to blink the blur of tears away. He felt shocked, and a kind of relief too, that someone else finally understood it. Everyone – everyone Augus had ever met adored the Raven Prince. But no, that wasn’t quite true. The Raven Prince had victims too. Servants who hadn’t treated him well enough, who’d had their voices permanently stolen, entire nations that faded into nothingness once their language was taken away from them.

‘I can’t tolerate you talking like that about him,’ Augus said, and then laughed at what he’d just said. ‘Despite everything. I know that’s irrational. I know. But I cannot, Gwyn.’

‘Okay,’ Gwyn said, offering something that might have been a grimace of agreement. ‘You thought I would abandon you, once I’d learned the story. I don’t understand why. Because what you did was so terrible?’

‘I’m weak.’ Augus closed his eyes. ‘I can’t tell what it is. That I did it. That I didn’t want to do it. They both seem- I don’t know what…happened, but somewhere along the way, I became… weaker. I care too much. I-’

‘Aleutia has the heart of a healer, she’s Unseelie, I don’t see the issue,’ Gwyn said.

‘You wouldn’t, would you?’ Augus spat, a sharp, awful anger cresting through him. ‘Of course you wouldn’t. You weren’t dealing with the Nightingale for months, while he was creatively finding new ways to show you how weak you were. I know it’s irrational, all right? I know it is. I hate that I can know it and still not shake it off me. I hate that I have this poison and that knowing isn’t enough to remove it. No one ever tells you that knowing something isn’t enough to heal it. You can know – very well indeed – that you have been brainwashed and half-destroyed by someone and still… still believe that you are the very soul of weakness. And I cannot look past it sometimes. I cannot look past it and then I think others will not be able to look past it either. As the
Nightingale couldn’t.’

Augus made a sound of frustration in his throat, jerked hard on the ropes until his wrists grazed. Gwyn looked up and watched, and then met Augus’ eyes again.

‘You’ve told me more tonight than you’ve ever told me,’ Gwyn said. ‘But you still have too much energy, I think. You’re thinking too much, Augus.’

‘Believe it or not, I don’t have a magical off switch if you don’t want me to become catatonic,’ Augus said, yanking hard enough on the ropes that Gwyn made a faint noise of discontent, then bent down and bit at Augus’ neck sharply, distracting him. Augus cut off a sound in the back of his throat and then opened his mouth in pain when Gwyn bit at his collarbone, sharply enough that it broke the first layer of skin. His breathing roughened.

Gwyn came back up again, licking at his lips, and then he opened his mouth to Augus’ cheekbone, resting his teeth over bone and skin, gently enough not to hurt, but still a threat. But Gwyn only breathed, open-mouthed against him, and then finally closed his mouth and pressed lips to Augus’ mouth.

It was bewildering. The rest of the world saw the vicious beast, the cold King, and didn’t know about the gentleness. And Augus thought that, for him, it was the other way around. Most of the time he saw the vulnerability, the careful, frightened creature, and beneath that the wild, vicious appetite that wanted to claim and kill and destroy.

‘I’m not done with you,’ Gwyn said, his voice so quiet he was almost mouthing the words. But there was something hungry in the statement, something dark, and Augus’ met Gwyn’s eyes even as Gwyn kneeled back between Augus’ legs and watched him. Augus felt something sharp move through him in response, and he couldn’t tell if it was pleasure or irritation.

‘Trying to punish me for not caving to your demands for a month?’

Gwyn shook his head, licking his bottom lip and looking down Augus’ torso. ‘No. But I have you tied up, and at my mercy for a change, and I don’t intend to be done until that sharp tongue of yours is quiet.’

Gwyn leaned sideways and opened the top drawer, bringing out a vial of lubricant and looking down at it, before meeting Augus’ gaze.

He said nothing at all, when he poured the clear, slick stuff over his fingers. Said nothing as he stoppered the vial and discarded it, and Augus watched with a caught feeling in his throat as Gwyn placed wet fingers to the base of his balls and let the stuff drip down his skin, the sensation ticklish.

‘Close your eyes,’ Gwyn said, finally.

‘It would be easier to use a blindfold,’ Augus said.

‘You taught me that sometimes it’s better when it’s not ‘easier’.’ Gwyn said, stroking his fingers down into the crease of Augus’ ass, gathering the lubricant that had oozed down.

‘What else have I taught you?’ Augus said, aware that his eyes were still burning, that he couldn’t shake that melancholy that was crawling back into him again.

‘That if you’re still able to talk like this, I have some way to go before wearing you out.’
Gwyn pressed his index finger to Augus’ entrance and then pushed, sinking deep at once, no careful preparation, no more checking to see if Augus was ready. The quickness of it forced the breath from Augus’ lungs. It had been some time since Gwyn was inside him, and even his fingers were large.

‘Close your eyes, Augus,’ Gwyn said, twisting his finger slowly.

Augus’ eyelids fluttered shut. In response, Gwyn curled his finger up, inwards, and applied a slow, steady pressure to Augus’ prostate that had him fisting the ropes and arching his back. He was oversensitive from his orgasm, and he suspected that Gwyn knew it. That slow pressure continued, and Augus made a strangled sound.

‘Enough,’ Augus said, ‘that’s enough.’

‘You’re not calling the shots, Augus,’ Gwyn said, rubbing the pad of his index finger against Augus’ prostate, the movements contained and tiny and entirely too much. Augus gasped and tried to kick out at Gwyn, and Gwyn shifted his position so that he straddled the outside of Augus’ legs, and had his free hand pinning Augus’ pelvis to the bed. ‘Keep your eyes closed, and I’ll think about going easier.’

Augus’ lips thinned, he kept his eyes closed, squeezed them shut to make a point.

Slowly, Gwyn released the pressure against Augus’ prostate, and that was almost worse, blood flowing and pulsing so that he could almost feel himself throbbing against Gwyn’s finger. He gasped once before closing his mouth again, bringing his breathing under control. He almost made a sound of relief when Gwyn started thrusting his finger back and forth, every motion at the pace Augus loved most, and all the more devastating for it.

His thoughts were starting to spin away again, but it occurred to him that Gwyn was a good study, and though it was obvious he preferred submission, he had his own style of dominating which suited him. Which also happened to suit Augus.

Never ever tell him that. It’ll go to his head and then you’ll be in ropes all the time. Can’t have that, can we?

Augus almost smiled to himself, and then forgot what he was thinking about when Gwyn withdrew and pushed back in with two fingers, forcing Augus to stretch around him, sliding deep all at once. Augus was acutely aware of the strength in Gwyn’s body, the muscles of Gwyn’s thighs resting against his own, the way Gwyn’s forearm would be shifting as muscles slid over each other, all focused on a point inside of Augus’ body, where Gwyn was once more pressing up into his prostate.

It was slow, but Augus felt the inevitability of it, and he opened his mouth to pant quietly. The pressure of it was almost terrible, except Augus could feel his cock twitch, feel the way he was responding to it anyway.

‘Can you come three times? Close together?’ Gwyn said, his voice rough with his own arousal.

Augus’ brow twisted together. ‘I won’t like it. I can. But I don’t like the third. It hurts too much.’

‘And you’re not a masochist,’ Gwyn said, sounding disappointed. Still, that unrelenting pressure against Augus’ prostate, and Augus groaned behind a closed mouth, his back arched as much as it could against the hand pinning him down.

‘Well, it so happens I am, but not like you, Gwyn. Not…like that.’ He stopped to take several deep
breaths, Gwyn wasn’t letting up on that pressure at all. When Gwyn started that horrible massaging motion, Augus jerked once on the ropes to make a point, and then focused on just bearing it.

‘So not three times then,’ Gwyn said.

Augus grit his teeth together. Why were they still talking about it? How was he supposed to talk about anything, when it felt like Gwyn had an electrical current attached to the base of his spine that kept shooting jolts up to his neck and directly into his cock? There was only so much he could take.

‘Good,’ Gwyn said to himself, when Augus was lost in the red-blackness of sensation. ‘That’s better.’

Augus had no idea what he was talking about and didn’t care to know.

Gwyn eased off the pressure again – too slowly – and then went back to thrusting, twisting his fingers, spreading lubricant. He’d withdraw and massage at the rim of Augus’ ass, teasing at the ring of muscle, before going back to a lazy thrusting which was betrayed by the shaking in Gwyn’s wrist.

The hand at Augus’ pelvis lifted, and Augus heard the sounds of Gwyn undoing his pants and making a faint sound of relief when he presumably freed his cock. Augus wanted to say something, but Gwyn was still moving his fingers inside of him, and Augus let himself drift on it.

Every couple of minutes, Gwyn would push that slow, unrelenting pressure into Augus’ prostate, pegging it unerringly, and even though it caused his cock to fill with blood, it was acute, and Augus couldn’t help but try and use the ropes to pull himself away from it – just to get Gwyn’s fingers to slide to a different part of him – each time. Gwyn didn’t let him, the hand back on his pelvis. Augus grit his teeth to stop himself from swearing, focusing on the heat in his gut, the feeling of heaviness returning to his balls, the way Gwyn’s breathing was uneven, unsteady. That was one thing he’d never get tired of; how aroused Gwyn got when he was looking after Augus.

The hand on Augus’ pelvis wrapped around his cock and stroked it once, and Augus grunted, then opened his mouth to go back to panting.

When Gwyn pushed back into Augus’ ass with three fingers, Augus wanted to scream.

‘I’m ready,’ Augus clipped off, his voice cracking.

‘I know,’ Gwyn said, clearing his throat.

‘You said…easier.’

‘I am going easier,’ Gwyn said.

Augus turned his head to the side and breathed hoarsely into his arm. Gwyn was probably right anyway. But it didn’t help when Gwyn bent down and kissed the tip of Augus’ cock again, before sucking it into his mouth.

‘Gwyn,’ Augus hissed.

Gwyn hummed an acknowledgement from around Augus’ cock, and Augus made a sound of frustration into his arm. It was too hard. The sensations were too strong, too coarse, and Augus wasn’t close enough to coming to justify the sharpness threading through him. His toes curled, he felt his pulse points juddering out of sync.
Time passed, and Augus stopped tracking it. Everything was too much heat, and even the cold air he was gasping for felt soothing for once. Every now and then Gwyn let go of Augus’ cock and rubbed firmly at the outside of his thigh, or his flank, a reassuring touch amongst everything else, an anchor.

When Gwyn withdrew his fingers and lifted his mouth from Augus’ cock with a single, long lick to the head of him, Augus moaned in relief. He was close, he wanted Gwyn inside of him, his arms were sore.

Gwyn turned Augus’ head away from his arm, using fingers to gently position Augus’ jaw before kissing him on the lips. Augus couldn’t even coordinate himself properly for the kiss, mouth staying open, still trying to focus on getting enough air.

‘That’s good, Augus,’ Gwyn said against his mouth, his own voice shaking.

Augus made a sound of acknowledgement, said nothing else. If he had his hands free, he’d have one on his cock already, he’d have come a second time by now.

Gwyn settled himself between Augus’ legs once more, lifted his hips and then positioned his cock against Augus. The movements were clumsy now, even awkward. Augus knew that Gwyn was dragging it out for himself as much as he was for Augus, and that – unlike Augus – had less capacity to endure it. The knowledge that Gwyn was willing to put himself through that, holding off when Augus had already come once and Gwyn hadn’t come at all…

Augus moaned for more than one reason when Gwyn began to push inside of him.

And then Gwyn was sliding home, too thick, too long, too much of everything, and Augus made a faint sobbing sound and his back arched hard with Gwyn’s hand not there to push him back into the bed. His feet dug into the mattress, and when Gwyn hilted, hips pressing against Augus’ hips, grinding even deeper, Augus saw brighter flares of colour behind his eyelids.

‘F-uck,’ Augus managed, and was vaguely aware of the harshness of Gwyn’s breathing.

Neither of them was going to last long then.

Gwyn’s movements were slow at first, but it was obvious that he was struggling. Augus pushed his hips up into Gwyn’s, wanting more, and Gwyn obliged with a broken sound. Augus’ senses were saturated, sharpened to points that felt almost unbearable. Gwyn’s cock had always been on the side of too much, and this was the masochism that Augus had, that he loved the feeling of being stretched too far, pushed too hard.

One of Gwyn’s hands rested by Augus’ side, the other dug bruises into Augus’ hip, yanking him up into every downstroke. His breath puffed out of him, and Augus felt it first against his chest, then his jaw, and finally his lips when Gwyn bent down and bit at his bottom lip possessively, a growl in the back of his throat.

Augus lost track of everything then, aching as his muscles contracted, as he felt himself tighten against Gwyn’s cock, then felt nothing at all but a sharp pain-pleasure that was coated in lances of neon green shooting across his sight, washing through him like a flood. He cried out as he came, as it was forced to last longer through every one of Gwyn’s rough, hard thrusts which made Augus feel like he was being cored.

Two thrusts later, Gwyn muffled several sharp sounds into Augus’ neck and then keened as he came, spilling deep, shaking against Augus’ skin.
Augus wanted his hands free to rest them against Gwyn’s back, but his entire body had gone limp, and he couldn’t think about anything. He still wasn’t back to thinking when Gwyn gently withdrew, or when Gwyn rubbed at Augus’ thigh and flank again.

Fingers picked the knots free at Augus’ wrists, and a mouth came and pressed against Augus’ tingling fingers, against the grazes on his wrists. A tongue lapped at a small trickling of blood, and all Augus thought to do was sigh and turn his hand, brush it against sweat-damp curls, against the shape of Gwyn’s face.

Gwyn lowered Augus’ arms carefully, slowly, even though he was still shaking. Gwyn disappeared for a while, and Augus didn’t think to even care about that. It seemed hardly any time passed when a blanket was being laid over him, Gwyn sliding beneath it too.

Lips pressed against Augus’ cheek, his eyebrow, his still-closed eyes. Gwyn’s mouth trembled against his, and Augus felt some lazy, full emotion inside of himself swell, but all he managed to do was turn towards Gwyn’s body. A hand slid possessively over his hip, but the lips against his own remained soft and gentle.

‘Sleep, Augus,’ Gwyn whispered. ‘You need some rest.’

Augus hummed in agreement. He certainly did. He felt completely wrung out. And it seemed safe enough.

With Gwyn’s lips still resting on his, Gwyn’s body heat radiating into Augus’ flesh, he slipped into the first sleep he’d caught in over a month. It was, for once, a welcome darkness.

Chapter End Notes

In our next chapter, 'Assertion:’

‘I am firmly of the opinion that Augus is a trustworthy member of my Inner Court, and that the situation that arose in the past will never have the opportunity to arise again. You do not need to know the details of what occurred, and I will respect and protect Augus’ right to confidence in this. What you need to know is as follows: I will no longer tolerate any member of my Inner Court, or any fae who lives within this palace, to question Augus’ loyalties or his motives in being in this Court publically. I will remove you from this Court if I hear tell that you are disseminating the lie that Augus is planning new ways to destroy the Unseelie Court.’

It was obvious from the expression on Aleutia’s face, and Gulvi’s, that they wanted to disagree with what he was saying. Ash looked confused. Fenwrel watched Augus closely the entire time.

It was Augus, of all people, who said something. He placed his hand on Gwyn’s knee underneath the table and shook his head.

‘Gwyn, you shouldn’t—’

‘I am not done,’ Gwyn said.
No new tags strictly in this chapter, though a general warning for Augus doing that thing where he draws blood when he's mad sometimes. :D

Feedback is love, and thanks to everyone reading! As I'm posting this, we actually have a tropical cyclone moving closer to us (we're not in the danger zone yet) and though it will probably be an ex-tropical cyclone by the time it reaches us, we're still under a severe weather warning. Huzzah Western Australia. If we're not on fire, we're flooded!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

* 

Gwyn

* 

Unlike Augus, Gwyn wasn’t able to sleep.

He dozed for a little bit, his body tired, but his mind raced onwards and ahead, turning over all the elements of Augus’ story, his chest aching. For so long, Augus had acted as though it was possibly the worst crime imaginable, and so Gwyn had put aside a part of his mind to try and contemplate something so bad that it was unspeakable.

To stand there and listen to that story, worse, to hear the way it affected Augus as he spoke it, Gwyn had needed every inch of his King’s façade to bear it. Gwyn didn’t doubt a single shred of the story. That was not a tale that one manufactured, though Gwyn had at first been looking for signs of deceit.

Augus slept, though he didn’t look peaceful. He never truly did, his face always troubled even in rest. Gwyn couldn’t say he was surprised. He reached out to touch fingers to Augus’ face, then at the last minute changed his mind. Augus needed undisturbed rest, not to startle awake at someone’s touch.

Gwyn got up and rubbed hands over his face, trying to clear his head. After the month he’d had, and now this, he couldn’t quite put his jumbled thoughts back into place. His muscles were still weak, his mouth still felt the shape of Augus’ cock, but he had too many other things to think about.

He showered, dressed, walked down to the kitchens instead of teleporting, needing to wander the mostly empty corridors and try and sort through the buzzing thoughts in his head.

The trows fussed over him and Gwyn found he wasn’t hungry. He picked at food, hardly tasting whatever he placed into his mouth. An hour later he left. He went back to the room he shared with Augus and sat on the bed, crossing his legs, watching Augus rest. After a month of not having him near, Gwyn wanted to be close to him. Especially after the tale that Augus had woven for him.

*
Gwyn could tell the moment that the nightmare sunk its claws into Augus’ mind, the next day. A faint hitch in Augus’ breathing, and Gwyn put down the paperwork he was looking over and walked to the bed quickly, wondering what to do, how to wake him.

Augus’ eyes screwed up, his mouth twisted, and Gwyn lowered his hand to Augus’ forehead without thinking.

‘Augus, you-’

A gasp, Augus’ whole body jerked, and then Gwyn bit the inside of his lip when claws dug into his forearm. Augus shoved Gwyn away, while still holding onto him, his grip fierce. A few more seconds and Augus seemed to realise where he was. He let go of Gwyn’s arm carefully, looked up at Gwyn without saying anything. Charcoal smudges darkened the delicate skin beneath his eyes, his lips were drawn at the edges. Gwyn wished he could have slept longer, more restfully.

‘Are you hungry?’ Gwyn said, keeping his voice quiet.

Augus shook his head.

Gwyn sat on the bed by Augus’ side. His forearm was trickling blood, but it would heal, as it had healed the night before. Of all the ways Augus had to lash out this was the mildest, and it seemed to give a measure of peace to Augus that he could vent his frustrations in such a way. He didn’t want to pit himself against Augus anyway. If Augus asked him, he would lay himself out for any amount of pain that Augus needed to dole out. But Augus wasn’t asking him, and Gwyn wasn’t sure that was what Augus needed right now.

‘You still look tired,’ Gwyn said finally, grimacing. ‘You should rest. But first…I wish it didn’t have to be this way, Augus, but I need to inform everyone in palace that you will not be demoted.’

‘Do I have to be there?’ Augus said. He looked away. Gwyn steeled himself. He wanted, more than anything, to tell Augus that it would be easy from now on. But their lives were not easy, and he wouldn’t lie.

‘Yes,’ Gwyn said. ‘You do. I need you to hear what I’m going to say. It won’t take long, and I can bring you back here immediately after. You can rest as long as you like.’

‘All right,’ Augus said cautiously. He looked at Gwyn under thick lashes, with a wariness that Gwyn didn’t think he’d seen since Augus was down in the Seelie cell, unable to predict what Gwyn would do next.

Gwyn placed a hand carefully on Augus’ thigh. ‘You’re looking at me like you think I’ve changed my mind. I’m on your side, Augus.’

Augus’ lips thinned and he looked away.

‘I’m on your side,’ Gwyn repeated, ‘even if you’re not.’

‘Perhaps I don’t want to talk about this,’ Augus said.

‘I’m sure you do not.’ Gwyn rubbed at Augus’ thigh and tried to think of what to do. This was Augus’ arena. Augus understood things like aftercare, he seemed to understand what people needed when they felt like this. All Gwyn knew was that he needed to drag Augus into a meeting, and otherwise…what was he supposed to do? Augus was already lying down. He wasn’t hungry. He looked so tired.
‘Fenwrel said you were in battle,’ Augus said, still looking away.

Gwyn winced. He didn’t like to think about it. ‘Two weeks ago. It…went well enough, in that we gained a retreat, but it was not a true victory. I suspect – and sources confirm – that it was a test. I am certain we will not survive what Albion is going to bring down upon us. He is a strategist who has lived far longer than I, with an arsenal far greater than mine. I have worked miracles before, Augus. But not like this.’

Augus’ forehead creased as he met Gwyn’s eyes. ‘But you are one of the best War Generals the fae world has ever seen.’

‘No,’ Gwyn said quietly. ‘I am not, Augus. I’m young and I’m still learning. It’s very easy to be the best when you have the best resources. But I cannot magic tens of thousands of experienced soldiers out of thin air, and…this is not something we should be talking about right now.’

Gwyn scooted closer, and then carefully placed his hand on Augus’ arm. Augus looked at Gwyn’s hand, he sneered, and Gwyn pursed his lips in preparation for whatever vicious thing Augus was going to say.

But Augus only closed his eyes, then took a deep breath and exhaled slowly through his nose.

Gwyn realised that it was better to get the meeting out of the way. Dragging this out would only exhaust Augus further. Worse, he thought he knew this malaise. It was familiar, and it plucked at deeper, buried feelings inside of himself. He tasted oranges in his mouth, remembered the sound of an arrow, and then an incredible anguish followed by almost nothing at all.

‘I’ll organise the meeting,’ Gwyn said, clearing his throat. ‘And teleport you down. I know you’re not in the mood. You won’t have to say anything at all. I’ll handle it.’

‘Fine,’ Augus said, and as Gwyn withdrew his arm, Augus lay back down on the bed. He turned his head and looked away, an emptiness there that Gwyn wanted to curl around and protect. But that would have to come later, he needed to organise a meeting.

*

The wooden table was long, roughly textured, designed to seat at least twenty people. Designed for a Court that had far more trusted members within it. Gwyn sat at the head of it, as uncomfortable as it felt. Even after all this time, he felt he was a child occupying the seat of the Oak King, or even his father and mother. But he needed the authority that it would convey.

Augus sat to his right. He didn’t look well. He watched everyone enter the meeting room, his expression never changing, even when Ash walked in. That didn’t go down well with Ash, his lips thinning, a storm passing over his face, darkening his brow. But then an easy expression returned, though he didn’t look away from Augus for a long time.

Gulvi, Aleutia, Fenwrel, Ash, the common fae servants, the most important member of the Unseelie trow community that occupied the palace, and another ten that were trusted to oversee individual sections of palace maintenance. The trows refused to sit at the table, as did the servants, but everyone else took their seats. Gwyn looked at them all in turn. Fenwrel looked concerned for Augus, but her expression remained composed and relaxed. Gulvi had a neutral expression on her face. Aleutia seemed angry to see Augus in the room at all – perhaps she’d been hoping he’d be demoted and banished.

Ash had turned to watch Gwyn with a glinty hardness in his eyes. He didn’t blink at all.
It was disconcerting. Unseelie fae threw their predatorial weight around all the time, but this was a level of intensity that made Gwyn want to shift in his chair. Instead, he sat straighter, squared his shoulders, taking a deep breath. He wanted to reach underneath the table and take Augus’ hand, but that could wait. This was far more important.

‘I now know the events that led to the Raven Prince’s defeat, and I am satisfied in their accounting,’ Gwyn said, and took in the surprised expressions on everyone’s face. Even Ash’s.

‘What did he do?’ Aleutia said, and Gwyn held up a hand.

‘I am not finished,’ Gwyn said. ‘And I will not be interrupted. Mind who you’re talking to.’

Aleutia subsided, her eyes narrowing, her frizz of wild, curly hair shifting as she settled back into the long-backed, wooden chair.

‘I am firmly of the opinion that Augus is a trustworthy member of my Inner Court, and that the situation that arose in the past will never have the opportunity to arise again. You do not need to know the details of what occurred, and I will respect and protect Augus’ right to confidence in this. What you need to know is as follows: I will no longer tolerate any member of my Inner Court, or any fae who lives within this palace, to question Augus’ loyalties or his motives in being in this Court publically. I will remove you from this Court if I hear tell that you are disseminating the lie that Augus is planning new ways to destroy the Unseelie Court.’

It was obvious from the expression on Aleutia’s face, and Gulvi’s, that they wanted to disagree with what he was saying. Ash looked confused. Fenwrel watched Augus closely the entire time.

It was Augus, of all people, who said something. He placed his hand on Gwyn’s knee underneath the table and shook his head.

‘Gwyn, you shouldn’t—’

‘I am not done,’ Gwyn said.

Augus blinked at him, disbelief crossing his features. Gwyn knew it had been far too long since Augus had anything like a genuine ally that was someone other than his brother.

Maybe he’d never had one. Which didn’t seem possible, because even Gwyn had allies. Soldiers he could trust with his life out in the field, Generals that he used to be able to go to if he had difficulties with strategy. Certainly support in the personal arena wasn’t something he knew but… professional support was something he’d once had in abundance.

Gwyn turned back to everyone else, knowing that this was long overdue. Gulvi had lectured him not too long ago about the dangers of playing with Augus’ reputation, and Gwyn hoped that this would be a firm step in the right direction.

‘If you have genuine concerns about Augus’ motives that aren’t based solely off rumour and conjecture, then you are to come to me, and we can discuss them. Augus was, once, a very refined and capable diplomat for the Raven Prince, and I expect that he will become the same for this Court in time. While his reputation presents some difficulties, I am happy to intercede in negotiations and other matters and stake my life and my own reputation on his trustworthiness.’

None of his words were couched in friendly casualness, he talked the way he would talk to his soldiers and officers before a battle.

‘Does anyone have any questions?’ Gwyn asked after a minute had passed.
‘Your life, Gwyn?’ Gulvi said, her head tilting. ‘Really?’

‘Yes,’ Gwyn said, meeting her black eyes and holding firm before the scepticism he saw there.

Gulvi looked like she wanted to say something else, but in the end she only looked at Ash, who was still staring at Gwyn like he could kill him with a look. Gwyn didn’t understand him at all. Augus was back, Gwyn was taking steps to protect him; what did Ash need from him? Whatever it was, Gwyn obviously couldn’t provide it.

Aleutia frowned at her hands which rested upon the table, her ears flattened halfway back to her head. Fenwrel’s ears were pricked forwards in open interest, but she kept her body language relaxed.

At any rate, no one was asking him any questions, and prolonging the meeting was a waste of everyone’s time. He’d never seen the point in useless small talk amongst his colleagues. Gwyn stood, his chair grating upon the stone floor.

‘You’re all dismissed,’ Gwyn said, and was glad when they understood that he meant immediately.

After everyone left, the trows filing out last of all, he placed his hand on the back of Augus’ chair. When Augus didn’t move, he touched his fingers to Augus’ shoulder.

‘Come,’ Gwyn said. ‘It’s done.’

Augus’ chair scraped, which was unusual, since he normally extended the gracefulness of all his actions to the items around him. Gwyn rubbed Augus’ shoulder in what he hoped was reassurance. He summoned his light quickly, wanting to return Augus to the room where he’d at least felt safe enough to sleep.

Once there, Augus didn’t move, and Gwyn carefully nudged him back towards the bed. Augus got onto it, resting his back against the pillows and bending his knees towards his chest, hands limp on the blankets.

‘You shouldn’t have done that,’ Augus said.

‘I will never let anyone treat you the way that you were treated in that Court,’ Gwyn said. ‘And I believe that to let people continue treating you as they have been, is wrong.’

‘You can’t just make people change their minds. I as good as killed the Raven Prince.’

The words sounded empty. Gwyn clambered onto the bed, kneeling before Augus, taking his cool hands and placing them in his warmer ones. He stared at the embroidered bedspread, trying to think of what to say. He wasn’t as eloquent as Augus. All his sentences were statements for the most part, and they didn’t lend themselves to poetry.

‘The Raven Prince manipulated you,’ Gwyn said. ‘Possibly from the very beginning. We know for a fact that he knew where you were, when the Nightingale had you.’ Gwyn kept on, despite Augus’ flinch at hearing the Nightingale’s name. ‘He was not an innocent. He was not powerless nor helpless, at any point, when you harmed him. Only at the end was he unable to act. He killed himself, Augus. He used you to do it for him. If not you, he would have found someone else.’

‘Why would he do that?’ Augus said.

‘I don’t care why,’ Gwyn said. ‘We all know that fae who live to a certain age sometimes hit crisis points where they become far more interested in dying, rather than living. Perhaps the Raven
Prince hit his and couldn’t survive it. I don’t care. He…you said it yourself, Augus. He had no interest in defeating the Nightingale. He gave the Nightingale land. He dined with him. I believe truly that he was once one of the greatest Kings of the Unseelie, but I believe that he no longer deserved the title when he released himself from his role. I don’t even know if he believed it. He gave you the Kingship. Augus, he…”

Gwyn shook his head. He squeezed Augus’ hands.

‘How can you feel guilty about this?’ Gwyn said, confused. ‘You who have spent your entire life advocating for the health of others, even when they have done terrible things?’

‘I don’t know, Gwyn. You’ve looked a loved one in the eye before killing them. Perhaps you can tell me why I feel the way that I feel.’

The words weren’t intended to be an insult, and Gwyn knew that, but even so, they stole the breath from his lungs.

Augus fingers curled in Gwyn’s hands, he rubbed at Gwyn’s palms, then sighed. ‘I want to be alone.’

‘Okay,’ Gwyn said, letting go of Augus’ hands. He had the feeling that he’d said the wrong thing, but…was there even a right thing to say? He tried to keep the worry off his face as he slid off the bed, but he didn’t think Augus was in a mood where he’d notice. Gwyn left the room and closed the door behind him. It wasn’t like he didn’t have things to do, and perhaps it would be good to keep his mind busy.

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Augus’ malaise lingered. He was reluctant to speak, and though he wasn’t deliberately cruel, it was obvious he had no inclination to humour anyone’s presence. When he wasn’t sleeping, he didn’t get out of bed, which was unlike him. But Gwyn hesitated when it came to getting Aleutia or Fenwrel.

On the fourth day, after a shower, Gwyn sat on the bed. He was wearing a large towel, his hair still dripping wet. The training session he’d run through had been brutal, but he found he needed the physical distraction more often. The knowledge of what Albion might be bringing their way made his skin crawl.

Augus lay with his eyes closed, but he wasn’t sleeping.

‘After Mafydd,’ Gwyn said, ‘I didn’t want to do anything.’

Augus opened his eyes, focused on Gwyn in a way that made Gwyn want to walk straight out of the room. Instead, he looked away.

‘I- I didn’t want to move,’ Gwyn said, not wanting to think about that time. He closed his eyes, forced himself to concentrate. Why was he even doing this? He could just get Fenwrel or Aleutia to come and check Augus over, and they’d both say that Augus was likely fine and just needed rest, and that would be that.

‘I couldn’t, actually,’ Gwyn continued. ‘Immediately afterwards, you know that I…went into shock, I think. I’m not sure. I don’t usually go into shock.’

‘You went into shock,’ Augus said, voice flat.
‘After everything…after…burying him, I lost some time, but I managed to get back to my room. Covered in soil and mud, and I didn’t think to get changed. I didn’t think I’d be able to sleep. But I slept, and then I didn’t want to do anything else. Everything was…wrong. My bones had been replaced with lead. My blood didn’t move. I knew it…moved but…it was like I had shot myself with that arrow. I didn’t want to move.’

Gwyn shuddered to remember it. He’d not cried after burying Mafydd. It was as though he’d poured himself out into that grave, and then there had only been numbness and a weight so heavy he’d thought his lungs were being crushed.

‘And how did your parents respond?’

‘I’m sure you can guess,’ Gwyn said, closing his eyes. ‘It wasn’t something they saw fit to indulge.’

There had been violence. A lot of it. At first it hadn’t worked, but eventually Gwyn’s animal survival instinct had taken over, and he’d dragged himself to his private tutors, so bruised that he was hardly recognisable. He’d collapsed at least twice, and his father had permitted him two days to rest then, but even so, he’d still needed to be forcibly dragged out of bed and punished for his recalcitrance.

‘The grief of losing a first love is such a trivial matter to waste time over, after all,’ Augus said, and Gwyn smiled stiffly, felt a painful throb in the back of his neck, in his back.

‘I’m sharing this because I think you should know that you can take as long as you wish. I would not rush you through this, Augus.’

‘You think I’m grieving?’ Augus said, his lips lifting in a smirk.

Gwyn met his eyes. ‘I know you are.’

The smug confidence on Augus’ face faltered, his mouth tensed. ‘Perhaps, then, I told the story wrong, if you are reacting this way.’

‘No,’ Gwyn said, scratching at a stray trickle of water that dripped from his hair, down his arm. He should have dried himself properly, but he knew he’d lose the courage to say what he wanted to say if he’d waited. ‘You didn’t. You formulated an awful plan in awful circumstances, it wouldn’t be the first time. It won’t be the last. I know what survival instincts can drive Seelie fae to do. Do you think I am somehow surprised by what you thought up? I admire your ingenuity. That you thought to keep one of those creatures, to steal one. After all that time, you—’

‘I don’t want to hear this,’ Augus said, gaze turning flinty.

‘Which part? The part where you’re not so unlike everyone else? Or the part where you are so addled by the Nightingale, that you see weakness where I see strength?’

Augus lurched at Gwyn. Gwyn raised his arms, tried to protect himself from the claws coming straight for him without actually hurting Augus in the process. Augus knocked his hands aside and grabbed his shoulders. Gwyn shouted when Augus slammed him down into the baseboard at the bottom of the bed. His neck had slammed into wood, he grunted again as pain radiated, seized at his bad shoulder. Worse, Augus dug his nails into both of Gwyn’s shoulders, exacerbating the pain, looking like he could destroy Gwyn with his glare.

Gwyn didn’t move, didn’t fight back.
He’d been expecting this.

‘What do you want from me, Augus?’ Gwyn said, swallowing. ‘How can you not understand? We talked of it once, how I liberated the lost. How you wished someone would come for you. If I could not do it then, at least let me try now. Don’t you understand?’

‘I am not someone you can rescue because you have a pathetic saviour complex,’ Augus hissed, and Gwyn nodded, turned the words over.

‘I know,’ he said, finally. ‘Because the person who saved you, was yourself. No one else came for you.’

‘And such a good job I did, too, ruining the Unseelie Court, ending up in a Seelie cell at the end of it. Destined to die.’

‘Instead, healing yourself alone, in the dark, with no one to look out for you.’

Gwyn closed his eyes just before Augus struck him, felt several stinging lines on his face. Augus’ claws had cut him, and the pain was welcome. It was far easier to deal with a physical manifestation of Augus’ anguish. While it wasn’t much assistance to Augus, it made Gwyn feel like he was somehow sharing Augus’ pain.

‘Stop twisting the facts of the situation,’ Augus ordered, and Gwyn tried to shift so that his neck wasn’t pressing down into hard wood. Augus lifted Gwyn slightly, and then shoved him down again. Gwyn grunted, took several breaths as his shoulder shrieked at him. Once he’d collected himself, he met Augus’ eyes again, a vivid, poisonous green.

‘I’m not,’ Gwyn said. ‘I have a different interpretation, and it’s not wrong. Why are you so vexed with me? Should I be treating you like the Nightingale? The Raven Prince?’

Claws dragged slowly and deeply across Gwyn’s torso where the towel had parted, and it hurt. Gwyn tried to twist out of Augus’ grip, the movement reflexive. Augus growled, low and loud, the sound vibrating through Gwyn’s skin. Blood seeped into the towel, down his skin, and Gwyn thought it was absurd that he’d just had a shower and now he had to deal with this.

‘What I don’t…understand,’ Gwyn forced himself to say, ‘is how you can…tell me that I am capable of monstrous acts and yet still believe I am…something more than that. Yet you believe you are both some weaker form of Unseelie fae, and that you are too monstrous in the same breath? The Nightingale lied to you, Augus. Loving Ash is not a weakness. And-’

‘I know all of this,’ Augus said, digging his claws directly into pressure points at Gwyn’s ribs and huffing out a sound of satisfaction when Gwyn cried out in pain.

‘What- what you don’t…’ Gwyn swallowed down words and squeezed his eyes shut, and when Augus withdrew his claws, Gwyn panted for several seconds, the pressure points still blazing.

‘Deeper breaths,’ Augus said, and Gwyn nodded tightly. He knew that, it was just hard to take them while he had furrows scored into his abdomen. He summoned his strength and forced his eyes open, staring at Augus.

‘What you don’t know, is what it is like to hear everything you’ve worked out for yourself, from someone else. All you’ve heard from others – at least, the others that held the most power over you – is that you were somehow inferior to them, because you cared for Ash, or your clients. They are wrong. Even fae like…the Nain Rouge have a measure of care for others. You don’t see that everything that you are, right now – even sick and unhappy – is fine, Augus.’
Augus stared at him like Gwyn was saying something truly horrendous. Like these were the words of rejection he’d expected all along. Gwyn didn’t understand it. But it was harder to concentrate with the pain shuddering through him. He wanted to press a hand to his abdomen, because he had a feeling that if Augus had pressed just a millimetre deeper, he could be spilling organs. It probably wasn’t the case, but he wasn’t comfortable, and he couldn’t seem to get rid of the feeling that he was ruining everything.

He was only trying to help, but this wasn’t his forte.

‘I don’t know what to say,’ Gwyn said, his voice cracking. ‘I only want you to see yourself as I do. That’s all. It’s foolish and I know that you probably can’t. I can’t seem to help myself. I’ll stop talking about it.’

Augus’ eyes widened, he looked down Gwyn’s torso and frowned. His hand shifted, pressed flat to Gwyn’s belly as though it could staunch the flow of blood.

‘When was the last time you slept?’ Augus said. ‘Was it when I did? It wasn’t, was it?’

‘This isn’t because I’m sleep deprived,’ Gwyn said, feeling frustrated. He grit his teeth together and forced himself into a sitting position, even though it made the pain worse. ‘I’m not saying these things because I’m irrational. They’re not hasty decisions cobbled together from…a lack of sleep, Augus, and you can’t just—’

A hand rested over his mouth, and Gwyn stared at Augus, his lips covered with his own blood. Augus had used the hand he’d pressed to Gwyn’s torso.

‘I want you to nod or shake your head in answer to my question,’ Augus said, staring at him. His voice was stern, and Gwyn wanted to give himself over to it. ‘Have you slept once in the past month?’

Gwyn hesitated, and then shook his head. Augus smiled, but the expression held nothing of humour in it. He bowed his head, kept his hand on Gwyn’s lips.

‘Do you know, I’ve spent the past month entirely wrapped up in my own thoughts, my own demons, and it didn’t occur to me that you found this difficult too.’

Gwyn leaned his head backwards. He wanted to disagree. Augus followed the motion and pressed his fingers to Gwyn’s lips again. He pressed his other hand to the lacerations on Gwyn’s torso, and Gwyn’s nostrils flared, his hands dug into the towel that was still hanging off him. Between the cuts and his throbbing bad shoulder, it was hard to concentrate.

‘Careful,’ Augus said, though Gwyn couldn’t be sure if he was saying it to Gwyn, or to himself. ‘Careful now. Hold still. Open your mouth for me. Just a little. Gently, that’s it, that’s perfect.’

Gwyn did it without thinking, responding to Augus’ words. He closed his eyes when Augus slid blood-slicked fingers into Gwyn’s mouth. Augus moved carefully, and Gwyn made a sound when he tasted his own blood and the fresher taste of Augus beneath that. There was no shoving or roughness, Augus didn’t push his fingers all the way back, and stroked his index and middle finger over the flat of Gwyn’s tongue, sending tingles through his jaw, down his neck.

‘There we are,’ Augus said, voice silken. ‘Just like that. You should see the way you look when you get the taste of fresh blood in your mouth, Gwyn. Even if it’s your own.’

Once, Gwyn would have protested that. He still felt the same sluggish need to draw back and say that it wasn’t true, he didn’t like it. But he did, he always had. Whether it was furtively licking the
tip of a bow that had lodged into the body of a deer, or swiping his tongue against the wounds on his forearm, or opening his mouth to the spray and splatter of battle.

Minutes passed, Gwyn licked Augus’ fingers clean, and though the pain was present, it had faded a little when Augus finally withdrew his fingers. He rested them on Gwyn’s cheek and leaned forwards, until his forehead pressed against Gwyn’s.

Gwyn felt drugged, like the blood had hypnotised him. His breathing was steadier.

‘He was everything,’ Augus said. ‘He was the King of an entire Kingdom. Not just in title but in… bearing. He had everything.’

‘Except death,’ Gwyn said.

‘Except death or…obliteration.’

‘And you miss him.’

‘I don’t know,’ Augus said, laughing. ‘Yes, sometimes. Other times…no. He was frightening and fickle, and he knew, Gwyn. He knew the entire time. I made the mistake of trusting him more than I’d initially intended to. It just never occurred to me that he could know.’

‘Thus proving that even Unseelie can be betrayed in their attempt to see the good in others.’

Augus drew in breath quickly, sharply, and Gwyn tensed, expecting retaliation. In response to that, Augus hushed him.

‘Careful,’ Augus said, rubbing his fingers over Gwyn’s arm, the touch firm and comforting. After some time had passed, Augus pressed his other palm to Gwyn’s chest, their foreheads still touching.

Gwyn dared to lean a little closer. It felt like he was stealing something. But wasn’t that what Unseelie fae did?

‘Why would he do it?’ Augus asked. ‘Create…circumstances like that?’

‘The Raven Prince was far older than even some of the oldest fae. Augus, also, if he had any capacity for sadness or grief, it is possible that the Nightingale was feeding off him as well. Sapping his strength.’

Augus’ hand stilled on Gwyn’s arm, and he nodded a few seconds later. ‘That is possible. I wish I could have helped him. Is that foolish? I…used my body and the tools of my profession to help people, and when he asked for that, I thought perhaps I could do the same. Oh, it’s foolish to look back and contemplate it. But I can’t help but think if I’d pushed harder, if I’d asked for more… But he already gave me so much of himself, and he was so terribly protective of himself.’

‘I don’t think he wanted it,’ Gwyn said. ‘Also, Augus, do not be offended, but whatever happened in that Court was not happening in a vacuum. Fluri the mouse-maiden was a healer and master Mage just like the Raven Prince. She was a member of his Inner Court for far longer than you. If she saw something going awry, she would have told him. Do not think you were the only voice he was hearing, concerned for his welfare. You were not standing alone, Augus. The Raven Prince ignored all. He single-mindedly pursued something, and he didn’t change his mind despite plenty of opportunities. He took the torture the Nightingale visited upon you and kept it fanned bright, that you would have enough rage left, one hundred and fifty years later, to do exactly what he may have wanted all along.’
'I was beginning to change my mind towards the end,’ Augus said.

‘Yes, and then he invited the Nightingale into the Unseelie Court.’

Augus leaned back and shook his head. He opened his mouth and then closed it again, staring at Gwyn like Gwyn didn’t know what he was talking about.

‘I could easily be wrong,’ Gwyn admitted. ‘But I find it is best not to underestimate the Raven Prince or the Oak King. For all that they have disappointed me. It is only that I see connections that make sense to me, but truly, they may not be there. All we know is already enough. More than enough.’

‘It is,’ Augus said, and then closed his eyes as though his eyelids were a burden. He rocked on the bed. ‘I am still so tired.’

‘Do you still have the stone?’ Gwyn said. ‘The tracking stone?’

‘Its magic is burned out,’ Augus said, slowly lowering himself back onto the bed and then tilting his head back. Gwyn placed a hand on Augus’ calf and petted it. He wanted contact, but he was far more used to touching hounds than people when it came to things like this. He hoped Augus wouldn’t make the connection. ‘Why?’

‘I wanted to ask your permission. Would you consider letting Fenwrel look it over? Not to tell her anything about what happened, only to give it to her and see what she can divine from it. Perhaps… being that she is a master Mage, she will be able to sense his energy and perhaps locate him. At least we could make sure the Raven Prince was protected? You would like that, wouldn’t you?’

Augus nodded hesitantly.

‘Yes,’ Augus said. ‘But I don’t want her to know.’

‘She will only know what you tell her,’ Gwyn said, squeezing Augus’ calf. ‘That’s all. Get some rest, and then we’ll go in the evening. I have some training to do.’

‘You’re still bleeding,’ Augus said. ‘Didn’t you just come from training?’

Gwyn shrugged one shoulder. There were too many cards stacked precariously in his mind, and he was not practiced as Augus when it came to caring for people. He was not even practiced at caring for a Kingdom. He missed the simplicity of the days when he was only a soldier. When his life was killing and responding to orders.

‘Gwyn,’ Augus said, like Gwyn was hopeless. ‘Come here. You’re bleeding.’

‘I don’t understand why that’s a hindrance to training,’ Gwyn said, as Augus reached out for him and took his fingers, pulling him down alongside him. Gwyn’s breathing hitched as his shoulder stretched out, and Augus rolled his eyes, kept tugging.

‘There,’ Augus said, when Gwyn had settled against the bed. Blood was all over the sheets. The trows must wonder at their bedsports. Or perhaps they didn’t. They were discreet, and had their own habits that Gwyn knew nothing about. ‘Sweetness. I didn’t know that they made you bury Mafydd.’

‘Oh,’ Gwyn said, the sound shocked out of him. That Augus would bring that up now. ‘Augus, please, I-’
‘I know,’ Augus said, rolling towards him and pressing his lips against Gwyn’s. ‘You haven’t slept, Gwyn. Just doze. Even for a few hours. Humour me.’

Gwyn made a faint sound when teeth bit slowly into his bottom lip. He went lax against the bed, his fingers curling into Augus’ dark green shirt.

‘You told them all that I am trustworthy,’ Augus said against Gwyn’s mouth. ‘I hope that I don’t make a liar out of you.’

‘I won’t let you,’ Gwyn murmured, and Augus stilled, and then his lips pulled into either a smile or a grimace. Gwyn wasn’t sure. But Augus kissed him again, and Gwyn realised that if he dozed he wouldn’t have to think about the pain. He’d wake mostly healed.

‘You can’t save everyone,’ Augus whispered.

‘I don’t need to save everyone,’ Gwyn said, committing himself to darkness and feeling himself float towards it. He knew there was more to say, some specific way to finish that sentence; but he’d already said enough.

Chapter End Notes

In our next chapter, ‘Burden:

‘I…petitioned the Seelie Court to return to me my full name, and…and the An Fnwy estate.’

Augus’ steps slowed, and then he turned so that he was keeping pace with Gwyn, but walking backwards, his eyes on Gwyn’s face. His expression was unreadable, and it had nothing to do with the night being so dark.

‘And?’

‘I was…successful,’ Gwyn said, still surprised at it all. ‘Two and a half weeks ago they gave me back my name, and then a few days before I confronted you, I was deeded the titles to the entirety of the An Fnwy estate. It’s…I’m the sole heir.’

Gwyn stopped walking, the truth of it sinking in.

‘I haven’t been back yet,’ Gwyn said. ‘I can’t bring myself to- I have to go and inventory what is left over. Without servants looking after it, the garden will overgrow. The house will stay in good repair, being of fae build, but…and it’s prime Seelie land. Are you angry with me?’
Chapter Notes

No new tags for this one. Feedback is love if you're inclined to leave it, and thank you so much for reading. <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Gwyn

* 

Fenwrel’s room was warm and inviting, ochres and crimsons in the rugs, in the tapestries on the wall that declared her allegiance to the Mages far more proudly than she did publically. Gwyn looked around curiously, noticing that Augus was comfortable in this space, that he made a beeline to a seat at the table as though it was ‘his.’ It was obvious that Augus trusted her in more than just words.

Gwyn knew how easily Augus could trust now, and it didn’t quench his wariness as he sat down at the table himself.

He watched Fenwrel move comfortably around her living quarters. She didn’t seem at all flustered that they had come to visit, and she made tea and set out small biscuits like she was used to the King and his advisor happening upon her all the time. Perhaps she got that attitude from her grandmother, or perhaps, the School of the Staff.

Gwyn took the small, black stone that Augus had given to him, and lay it on the table. Augus stiffened, and if Fenwrel noticed the stone itself as she poured tea, she gave no sign of it. She poured a small measure of cool water into the tea in Augus’ cup before she passed it to him on a painted saucer. Gwyn’s cup didn’t get the same treatment. She sat down at the table, folded her arms upon it, as Gwyn took four sugar cubes from the small jar provided and plopped each one into his cup.

When he realised Augus was watching him with raised eyebrows, Gwyn made a face.

‘I like it sweet,’ Gwyn said.

‘The sugar is there to be used,’ Fenwrel said, smiling. She then looked at the stone and pursed her lips. ‘I see you have brought me an artefact?’

‘Yes,’ Gwyn said, when Augus didn’t speak. He pushed it towards her. ‘I need to know what you can sense from it. It’s been used as a charm in the past, a location charm. But Augus says he can no longer…use it in the manner he has in the past. We are wondering if the magic has run out.’

‘Curious,’ Fenwrel said. She tilted her head at Augus and then gazed again at the black stone. ‘I have to say, I am quite relieved to see you out and about, and a little more lively than you were the last time I saw you. The last few times. Are you well?’

‘Not exactly,’ Augus said, surprising Gwyn with his candidness. ‘But I will be.’
Fenwrel picked up the stone in her fingers and then turned it, closing her eyes. She didn’t need to wave her staff, or do anything flashy like lesser mages might. Instead, she took several deep breaths and then her eyebrows pinched together.

‘This used to belong to the Raven Prince,’ Fenwrel said, not opening her eyes. ‘Some time ago. Did it not?’

‘Yes,’ Augus said, his voice hoarse.

‘And he made it for you?’

‘Yes, he did,’ Augus said.

Fenwrel opened her eyes and gazed at him for a long time, then placed the stone back on the table. She turned it a few times, sighed. ‘The intent of the charm is gone. I can only pick up his energy signature, nothing more. Augus has the right of it. I can tell who made the charm, and I can tell who the charm was intended for, but the actual meat of the magic has faded to nothing. I cannot even tell you who the location charm was meant to locate. Though I suspect I can guess.’

‘Possibly,’ Augus said.

Gwyn sipped at his tea. Absently, he put it down and added another sugar cube, then stirred it until the sugar started to melt. He didn’t realise Augus was staring at him until he raised the cup to his mouth again. Augus looked incredulous.

‘Should I just get you some cordial?’ Augus said.

‘I like tea,’ Gwyn said, frowning. ‘I just like it sweet.’

He put the cup down, feeling odd. Instead, he tucked his hands under the table and tried to focus on the stone instead. He was surprised when Augus touched his hand under the table.

‘I don’t like sweet things,’ Augus said. ‘Don’t stop on my account. I’m just surprised you can still taste the tea.’

‘Of course I can taste it,’ Gwyn said, scowling at him as he picked the cup again. Then he realised that Fenwrel was watching the whole exchange, looking amused, and he put the cup down again. This was ridiculous.

‘He’s been having problems eating,’ Augus said to Fenwrel, and Gwyn stared at him. That wasn’t anyone else’s business. And certainly not Fenwrel’s. Besides, it was tea, not food.

‘Hm,’ Fenwrel mused, tapping the stone lightly. ‘Nice try, young man. I almost believe that you don’t particularly care that the magic is gone. But I can tell it matters. I can try taking it to one of the Thirteen, but I doubt that anyone can revive what the Raven Prince intended to have fade away. You have no other location charms like this?’

‘He only made the one,’ Augus said after a beat.

Gwyn hadn’t realised that Augus was trying to change the subject, and now he couldn’t unsee it. Augus was tense, and he’d tried to hide it through misdirection. Gwyn shifted his fingers under the table, pressed his palm to Augus’, though he was still discomfited that Augus decided to avoid his issues by throwing Gwyn’s onto the table instead.

‘Do you mind if I take it to the Thirteen?’ Fenwrel said.
Augus shrugged with his fingers, splaying them in the way that indicated he didn’t care either way.

Fenwrel stood and bowed to both of them - Gwyn first, and Augus second. ‘If you’ll excuse me, I’d like to take this to the Thirteen now. You can imagine that they have been quite curious to have any of the Raven Prince’s artefacts, even those that just contain his energy signature. Do you need this returned to you?’

‘Yes,’ Augus said without preamble. ‘He gave it to me. It’s mine.’

Fenwrel nodded, even as Gwyn stood and Augus followed suit, his limbs moving more stiffly than usual. Fenwrel noticed, but aside from looking at the way he held his arms, she did nothing more than offer a polite smile.

Gwyn wasn’t sure what to make of her sometimes, but he was glad of someone who could respect Court politics at the least. He left the room, Augus following. As soon as they were in the corridor, Gwyn turned and slid his hand around Augus’ waist, meeting his dull gaze before teleporting them both back to their room.

Augus was definitely not out of the woods yet, but Gwyn supposed that was to be expected.

*

It was impossible to express the depth of rage he felt towards the Raven Prince around Augus. Instead, he vented in the training arena. He destroyed a longsword in the process – though it only proved to Gwyn that it was poorly made – and his light blistered along his bones, bubbled up through his hands. Black craters pockmarked the compacted dirt provided for training manoeuvres. He tried to keep his light away from the Unseelie Court whenever he could, worried it might cause permanent damage; but his anger burned too brightly, and if he didn’t exorcise his light now, he worried it would spill out at a less convenient time.

The Raven Prince – as far as Gwyn was concerned – did not deserve the love and care that Augus gave to him, let alone every other Unseelie fae who remembered him as though he were the best of them. Certainly, the Raven Prince had been unparalleled in certain political arenas, but was he truly the best? How much of it was his glamour? The reputation he carefully cultivated?

It made Gwyn crave the next battle. He wanted his new armour, he wanted a new sword. He wanted to burn through the lives of so many fae that he forgot he was anything other than a killing machine.

That was something Augus didn’t need to know about.

He powered through the hardest drills he knew, worked his body to exhaustion, accidentally hacked two deep wounds into his leg before he finally felt close to eliminating the worst of his protective fury. Another hour later, after sating himself on stale buns – much to the trow’s chagrin – and hunks of dried meat, the wounds had healed over and he showered off the sweat and the excesses of blood, tilting his head back to the hot spray and wondering how much more gracefully Augus would be dealing with this if the situation were reversed.

*

If only he could spend all his time with a still-recovering Augus, but Court matters drew him away constantly. He couldn’t be everywhere at once, and he was starting to feel snowed under. There weren’t enough systems in place to keep the Court functioning smoothly. The Seelie Court had the privilege of almost unlimited wealth and resources, prime land, healthy and well-trained soldiers.
The Unseelie Court had none of it, yet its people expected it to hold its own against the Seelie Court.

The pressure was crushing.

‘Can I grab a minute with you, my darling?’ Gulvi said, ducking her head into the room where all the logs of the treasuries were kept. Gwyn was poring over methods the Raven Prince had used, while simultaneously seething that he saw wisdom in them.

‘Can’t it wait?’ Gwyn snapped. He paused, forced himself to take a calming breath, then rolled up the scroll. ‘What is it?’

‘You’re looking a little worn, sweetling. I wanted to ask you; have you been keeping an eye on Ash?’

‘Ash?’ Gwyn said, staring at her. ‘Frankly, I try to avoid him. Why?’

Gulvi closed the door behind her, and her wings shifted slowly. Out and then in. Her black eyes slitted at the floor, and finally she rested her palms on the hilts of her daggers.

‘He does not like you.’

‘That’s not a secret to me,’ Gwyn said, huffing out a noise. ‘I would have thought that after Augus acquitted himself to the Court, Ash would have – at least – stepped down his campaign of…’

Gwyn stared at the papers and gritted his jaw. This was something he hadn’t been speaking to people about, and he definitely didn’t want to bring it up with Gulvi. Whatever issues he and Ash had, they were better off left unsaid.

‘Gwyn, I am telling you now, you need to talk to him. La! I don’t know, but I cannot get through to him. Can you ask Augus to speak to him? Ash is resolved to loathe you, and it is poisonous, Gwyn. I am concerned. Look at me, darling, I’m the one who doesn’t give a shit about Court politics a great deal of the time-’

‘That’s a lie,’ Gwyn said blandly, leaning back in his chair.

Gulvi grinned sharply. ‘Well, I certainly don’t care about what I know you can manage. But I think you aren’t managing this. I am concerned that he could do something.’

‘What could he do?’ Gwyn said, staring at her. ‘He primarily lives in the human world. He adores Augus. He has not – so far – done anything except pull me aside a few times and say some things that aren’t fit for polite company.’

‘I love him, Gwyn. By all the gods, that is my fate. I tell you, as your Queen-in-Waiting and as your friend, something is wrong. Perhaps I should have come to you earlier? Oui? But I think I tolerated his hatred of you in the same way that he tolerated my hatred of Augus. But as time passes, I am scared of what he might do. Don’t underestimate him, Gwyn.’

Gwyn sighed explosively, ruffling a parchment, and then he folded his arms and looked up at the ceiling. How many things was he supposed to be dealing with now?

‘I can’t speak to him today,’ Gwyn said finally.

‘Oui, I know you hardly have time as it is. We’re both…bailing water as fast as it comes in. I know. It doesn’t have to be this second. La! I do not even know if it would help. But I would be doing you
a disservice if I didn't tell you.’

Gulvi swore colourfully, in many languages, and ended up laughing at herself, the sound harsh and bitter. ‘I am busy, Gwyn. I am busy too. I have apprentices, clients, the Council of Lammergeiers, my duties here, my duties to you, I have…some godforsaken thing with Fenwrel, and I have Julvia. Julvia, Gwyn, who requires so much care and so much of my time. I do not want to leave her care to servants. Do you see? I cannot be with Ash every second. I don’t have one life, I have many lives, and they’re all full. I don’t suppose you know what it’s like to have too many friends and acquaintances, but I do, and Ash is suffering for it.’

‘He’s lucky to have you to advocate for him,’ Gwyn said.

Gulvi rolled her eyes. ‘Lucky is if you talk to him before anything happens. If anything happens. If you could even help. What could he do? Who knows? But consider yourself informed, Gwyn.’

She flicked her hands in a quick goodbye, and left, closing the door firmly behind her.

Gwyn groaned a few minutes later, resting his head on parchments.

*

Later that evening, having read so many parchments that his head hurt, Gwyn found Augus awake and reading some giant tome, flicking through the pages slowly, seeming more interested in the illustrations than the words. Augus looked up as Gwyn entered.

‘Could we go to that lake again?’ Augus said.

‘Which lake?’

‘The one you took me to, when I needed water. When I was…recovering,’ Augus said. ‘That lake.’

Gwyn flushed, rubbed at the back of his head. Augus was already putting his book aside and sliding off the bed, then grasped Gwyn’s arm, as Gwyn summoned his light and teleported them both.

Augus wore a far thinner, long-sleeved shirt than usual, no collar, no buttons, the colour of deep, green murk. It made his eyes all the brighter. It showed off the lean planes of his body. His pants were black and snug, but looked more comfortable than what he often wore. He had no boots, no rapier, and when he arrived on the lake bank underneath the stars, the first thing he did was shiver.

‘I’ll go back,’ Gwyn said. ‘Get you something-’

‘I am a waterhorse,’ Augus said, smiling at him under the night sky. ‘I like the cold. I like…this kind of cold. It does not bother you?’

‘No,’ Gwyn said, shrugging. They were elevated, the wind chill was higher than the ambient temperature, but Gwyn had been in more brutal landscapes and he’d trained in privation worse than this.

The lake itself was beautiful. Huge and deep, a black hole with hardly a moon to light it. Stars glimmering on the ripples. Gwyn knew that if he dipped his feet into the water, he’d be able to sense the myriad living creatures inside of it. He knew that he could call little phosphorescent fish to his fingertips, and watch their blue lights surround him as they nibbled away dead skin.
His eyes caught a young boginki watching them on the other side of the lake, a humanoid fae, her body thin, her long, wet hair falling around her as she crouched, poised on a small boulder by the lake bank. Her skin was bluish, her eyes bright, but she seemed unlikely to come over and cause them harm. Gwyn had encountered them before, and they tended to leave him alone.

Augus had seen her too, tilted his head, then looked over at Gwyn. ‘They don’t mind you, do they?’

‘No,’ Gwyn said, beginning to walk along the lake bank. ‘But I’ve travelled a lot over the years, and I try and leave fae alone. The times I have truly trespassed, I leave. I clearly don’t want her land, and I want to take nothing from her, so…’

Gwyn shrugged as his bare feet crunched into a gritty shore. Augus walked along his left-hand side, his feet in the water, the hems of his pants sloshing through the shallows.

‘It’s a very deep lake,’ Augus said.

‘Speaking of lakes…there seems to be a new one in the night gardens.’

‘Mm,’ Augus said. ‘I can change it back. But I’d rather not.’

‘Leave it,’ Gwyn said, smiling.

Augus walked ahead, and Gwyn stayed a few steps behind. The lake bank transformed into meadow, tiny alpine flowers closed up in protective buds, waiting for the sun. Shrubs nearby let off aromatic scents, some bitter like juniper, others sweet and compelling. It was open, yet mostly deserted. It was a nice piece of land, and Gwyn was glad that it was untouched by fae battle, arguments over which parcels of land belonged to which alignment.

A splash of water – loud, disturbing the evening – as Augus turned quickly and walked back to Gwyn, who knew well enough that Augus could make water fold around him in complete silence. Nearby, two owls took flight and winged away to the east.

‘Augus?’ Gwyn said, thinking that perhaps Augus wanted to leave. That something was wrong.

Instead, Augus’ lashes dropped low enough that Gwyn could see only slivers of green. Augus lifted his hands and Gwyn went to take an automatic step backwards, when fingers curled into his shirt and held him still. The other hand came up and curved around his flank, and then Augus stepped closer and managed to make Gwyn feel crowded despite the huge sky around them.

Augus dug his fingers into Gwyn’s injured shoulder. A white flash of pain and Gwyn gasped, only to have his legs swept out from under him. He tried to fall well, but Augus shoved him as he went down and the breath was knocked out of his lungs. He landed on his back on the damp shoreline, his hands digging into grit, Augus straddling him low on the hips and smiling.

‘You let your guard down around me,’ Augus said, his voice low and sure. ‘If I had been someone else, if this had been a battlefield…would this have happened? I think not. What are we to do with you?’

Augus’ chilled hand slid underneath Gwyn’s shirt. Gwyn shivered and looked automatically over to the boginki, who still watched them. He felt his cheeks burn, pressed a hand to Augus’ chest.

‘Augus, we can go back to the castle, if you-’

‘How is it, that when it comes to ploughing me or those Seelie soldiers outdoors, you’re
completely fine with it, but as soon as the roles are reversed, you’re shy? Wait, I know. It’s because you don’t mind everyone looking at your body while you conquer someone. Because you still think this is weakness, don’t you?’

Augus’ fingers plucked at one of Gwyn’s nipples. It was neither gentle, nor arousing. But he suspected Augus didn’t want it to be.

Next, a hand shifting his hair that seemed to take care with every individual curl. Then fingers pressed into his scalp and dragged down his skin, and that was pleasant. Gwyn’s legs came up, heels dragging furrows into the sand.

‘If Albion has tracking spells on either one of us…’ Gwyn said. ‘Truly, Augus, this is foolish.’

Gwyn sat up, and Augus fisted his hand in Gwyn’s hair and dragged him down again. The lake water sloshed increasingly against the shore, though there was no sharper breeze to encourage it.

‘I believe the only person here with a tracking spell upon them is me,’ Augus said. ‘And I daresay Fenwrel would have spotted another if it had been lain.’

‘I have one,’ Gwyn said. ‘I have one too. In case something happens to me. It’s good practice. I cannot remove your tracking spell, Augus.’

‘I know,’ Augus said, even as his fingers tightened in Gwyn’s hair. His free hand stroked across Gwyn’s torso in long, persistent lines. From his collarbones all the way down to the juts of his hips and the ridge of muscle covering them.

‘We can go back to the palace,’ Gwyn said, his voice harder.

‘Oh, I know,’ Augus’ teeth were very white under the cover of darkness. His hair had fallen so that it brushed Gwyn’s shirt, his neck. ‘I don’t want to go back to the palace for this. I’m not asking terribly much of you.’

His hand went from Gwyn’s hips to the button of his pants, working it open deftly before slipping beneath and wrapping cool fingers around his limp cock, squeezing firmly enough that Gwyn grunted out a breath and closed his eyes. Beneath the discomfort, even the pain of it, a dull heat sparked. Augus moved his hand, and Gwyn’s cock chafed against his pants, reluctantly hardening in Augus’ grip.

Gwyn thought of the boginki watching them. Thought of the fact that he was the King.

‘Augus,’ Gwyn said, and pushed at him lightly. He could shove him off, but he didn’t want to resort to that. ‘Really, Augus, I don’t like this.’

‘You’re not an exhibitionist when the roles are reversed,’ Augus said quietly, even soothingly, but he didn’t stop, and his thumb crept up and rubbed at the sensitive underside where the head of his cock met the shaft, where nerve endings were louder and caused stuttering jolts of sensation to interrupt his thoughts. Augus leaned in closer, never once letting up on the tight grip he had in Gwyn’s hair. ‘I know you don’t like this. But you’re going to come from it all the same. In your pants, in front of at least one of your subjects.’

‘Augus,’ Gwyn said, trying to turn his head to watch the boginki. She who hadn’t moved, staring their direction all the while. But she was all the way across the lake. Perhaps her eyesight wasn’t that good.

‘Some of them know already,’ Augus said. ‘Because they know what I am. If you truly want to
rebuild my reputation, how long do you think it will be before they realise the truth? That the great and King likes to be pushed around, enjoys pain, hm?’

Claws pricked into delicate skin and Gwyn shuddered and closed his eyes, wincing. Augus’ claws carefully spider-walked down his cock towards his balls, trailing over the soft skin, even snagging. Gwyn hissed. Despite the setting, despite knowing he was being watched, the tension in his body was turning to lust. Knowing that Augus was able to inflict a great deal more damage, apprehension entwined with anticipation and he made a faint sound.

‘I don’t…’ Gwyn said, trying to remember what he was protesting.

‘Sometimes,’ Augus said, ‘I dream of forcing you to take my cock so deep you choke on it, after every single one of your meetings, so that when you have to deal with Court administration, your throat starts to itch, your mouth waters, and you can’t quite remember why.’

‘I’d remember,’ Gwyn said, exhaling hard.

‘Look, your cock’s not even failing you. Straight to attention as always. Such a soldier, to the very end.’

‘Be quiet,’ Gwyn hissed, and Augus laughed quietly and squeezed harder, moved faster. Gwyn’s entire body felt like it was being heated through, though he tried to stop his hips from bucking upwards.

‘Look at this,’ Augus said. ‘I bet, that if I do this…’

One of Augus’ claws shifted in the tight space of Gwyn’s pants, a finger stretching out and piercing Gwyn’s inner thigh, far too close for comfort. Gwyn bit off a sound of fear, of threat, and his cock twitched in Augus’ hand.

‘Do you think you’d have the same reaction if I did it to your cock?’ Augus breathed, and then bit sharply at Gwyn’s lower lip, too sharply. Gwyn tried to turn his head away but Augus wouldn’t let him. Then he stiffened as he felt Augus’ hand shift from gripping his shaft, to holding the head of his cock with three fingers, the other two fingertips pressing against the flare, claws threatening the sensitive flesh.

‘Augus, don’t,’ Gwyn said, eyes flying open.

Augus’ smile was cruel, and Gwyn’s instincts told him to twist away, but with claws pressing to his cock, his thigh already stinging, he daren’t move.

‘Are you frightened?’ Augus said. ‘You don’t smell frightened. In fact, though you say no, I can see you’re curious. How curious, do you imagine?’

Gwyn’s breathing was hard, fast, as though he was being jerked off quickly, arousal hot and flaring with every beat of his heart. It was ridiculous that he liked this so much. Ridiculous.

‘It’s just as well that I don’t care how curious you are,’ Augus said, claws pressing harder. Not enough to cut through skin, but enough to hurt. Gwyn pressed his lips together to stop the sounds he was making from getting free.

‘Why does it have to be here?’ Gwyn pleaded as Augus’ claws threatened.

Augus’ hand shifted and he started jacking Gwyn’s cock slowly, then faster, keeping him hard and wanting. Gwyn grunted, his legs shifted restlessly, heels and then toes digging into wet sand. The
lake by his side was encroaching, waves sometimes touching his left arm, before slinking back once more. The pressure of the fabric against his pants was uncomfortable, even with an open fly. It couldn’t be comfortable for Augus either.

Still, he couldn’t stop the want that fired through him. He stared at Augus, the way he stretched over Gwyn’s torso. He looked at Augus’ lips, licked his own.

Augus, watching everything, didn’t miss any of it. He lowered his lips to Gwyn’s.

The kiss was nothing gentle. Augus’ tongue didn’t coax, it claimed, and when Gwyn moved his tongue into the kiss, Augus growled and bit it. His fingers were so tight in Gwyn’s hair that he could feel strands loosening and coming free.

Small wavelets lapped at his arm, his toes. Augus’ mouth was a furnace, his tongue so warm that it melted at Gwyn’s inner resistance. The arm he’d been resting on the shore came up, and he touched Augus’ thigh. He groaned into Augus’ mouth. The small pains in his body – the tiny pinprick at his thigh, the ache of his cock, even the throb of his shoulder – all added up until he was tilting his mouth into Augus’ mouth, an impatient noise vibrating between their lips.

Augus’ hand slowed, claws rested at the head of Gwyn’s cock once more. Gwyn whined into Augus’ mouth, and he felt the tension in Augus’ lips, the smile he would have made if he didn’t seem more concerned with thrusting his tongue over Gwyn’s, slanting his mouth for a better angle.

One claw pressed harder, angled in such a way that Gwyn’s sensitive nerve endings felt every bit of its sharp edge. He dug his fingers into Augus’ thigh, apprehension trickling through him. Augus’ body made it so that no one could truly see what was happening, and Gwyn felt like he was buzzing.

A single, sharp press, and Gwyn cried out as pain flashed through him. Augus pierced skin, and Gwyn wanted to pant through it, but Augus’ mouth was unforgiving, unmoving, catching the vibrations of noise that ended in Augus’ mouth.

Augus’ hand went back to the length of Gwyn’s cock, jerking him off quickly, each motion harder than it needed to be, exacerbating the ache, setting Gwyn’s body to trembling. He tried to turn his head away, breathing becoming an issue, but Augus’ fingers were too tight in his hair, and his mouth too hungry. Gwyn tried, instead, to get Augus’ attention by first pushing at his thigh, and then at his flank.

Only then did Augus withdraw enough to bite Gwyn’s lower lip, leaving the rest of his mouth free to gulp air.

‘Close, are you?’ Augus said, squeezing so hard at the base of Gwyn’s cock that his hips jerked to get away instinctively. Augus followed it up with jacking him off again, each movement over the edge of what was comfortable.

Protests formed on his lips, but he was too close, and despite himself, his hips moved into Augus’ touch. He blinked up and couldn’t see the night sky. Augus’ face was so close to his, those eyes seeming to see everything.

‘You’re still so shocked,’ Augus said, his smile dangerous, ‘every time you discover again that you like this. What will it take, Gwyn? Can you feel that? It’s all going a bit slicker now, isn’t it? I wish I could say it was all precome, Gwyn, but some of it is your blood.’

Whatever chagrin Gwyn might have felt minutes ago was gone. Augus lowered his lips to Gwyn’s
once more and Gwyn clasped Augus’ shoulder and fell into the heat gathering at the base of his spine.

His release – edged with the pain that Augus kept inflicting – was heavy and sharp. His bones felt like they’d lit up, his thighs ached from how much his muscles tensed, and Augus swallowed down every one of Gwyn’s sharp noises as he spilled over Augus’ hand.

Finally, Augus lifted his mouth away and Gwyn gasped, low sounds spilling from the back of his throat, rasping against skin.

‘All my life,’ Augus said, still moving his hand on Gwyn’s cock even as it was fast becoming too sore and oversensitive, ‘sex has only been the scenes I established with clients, and my first encounter with a submissive fae who showed me things about myself I suspected were there but didn’t quite understand. Everything required premeditation, lasted hours. It wasn’t until I met you that I came to see that there is quite something to be said about impromptu sex. That it can still be quite satisfying, even if it only lasts minutes.’

Gwyn filed all the words away, but Augus’ hand on his cock was too much, and he reached between them, trying to remove Augus’ hand by the wrist.

‘Please, Augus,’ Gwyn said. ‘Please.’

Augus sighed, slowed his hand until it was no longer moving, and Gwyn would have thumped his head back into the sand in relief if Augus didn’t still have Gwyn’s head pinned.

‘Is that true?’ Gwyn said, his heart pounding.

‘You’re quite the opposite, I know,’ Augus said, leaning down and licking Gwyn’s lips. ‘But for me, it is quite true. The novelty is taking some getting used to. You should be healing now, the soreness in your cock won’t last.’

‘I know,’ Gwyn said, and then sighed when Augus eased the grip in his hair, rubbing at his scalp soothingly. ‘I expect my pants are a mess.’

‘Ah,’ Augus said, laughing softly.

He got off Gwyn quickly, and Gwyn watched as Augus pressed a hand to the curve of his hard length in his pants. Then Augus was undoing the fly, undressing gracefully, making it look easy – as though his cock wasn’t a hindrance. Finally, naked from the waist down, he straddled Gwyn once more, this time his legs on either side of Gwyn’s ribcage, his cock almost close enough that if Gwyn were to lean upwards, he might be able to lick the tip.

‘Come closer,’ Gwyn said, his voice rough.

‘No,’ Augus said. ‘Stay like that. Watch me.’

With that, Augus took a hand to himself, curling fingers around his cock and starting a fluid rhythm with the hand that was still slicked with Gwyn’s come, and faint red streaks – hardly anything at all – from the tiny cut Augus had made in Gwyn’s cock.

It stole Gwyn’s breath away, and though his body wasn’t able to get hard again so soon, he could feel the ache that meant that he wanted to.

Gwyn couldn’t decide what to watch. His eyes moved from Augus’ hand moving on his cock, to Augus’ face, and then they stayed there, watching the lazy-lidded lust. Behind Augus’ sleepy gaze,
the faint upturning of his mouth, Augus’ eye contact was sure and constant, he watched Gwyn as
certedly as Gwyn watched him.

‘Good?’ Augus said, sounding very sure of himself, his voice only a little deeper than usual.

Gwyn nodded quickly. How could it be anything but good?

Augus was almost completely soundless, only the occasional uneven breath, a long sigh, marking
the increase of his arousal.

Gwyn knew what Augus had planned. He couldn’t even bring himself to feel much shame that the
boginki was still there, watching them.

Gwyn’s hands found their way to Augus’ ribs, slipped beneath his shirt. He traced slow patterns on
his skin that brought a flush to Augus’ cheeks that was visible even under the dark sky around
them. Augus drew his bottom lip in between his teeth and his nostrils flared, his hand moved a
touch faster, and then his back was arching, his eyes still locked on Gwyn’s.

The first pulse of come shot past Gwyn’s face, but the rest found its mark, warm and sudden. A
small amount found Gwyn’s lips and he opened his mouth automatically, licking at the silty, bitter-
fresh stuff. Augus hummed, appreciative, and then as he continued to move his hand – more slowly
now – on himself, he bent down and kissed Gwyn gently.

‘There,’ Augus said.

‘I don’t see why you got to take your pants off first,’ Gwyn grumped.

Augus’ laughter was loud, and Gwyn smiled against his lips, even as he dug his fingers into Augus’
shirt to keep him close.

*

The lake had been frigidly cold, but Gwyn hadn’t minded, joining Augus and cleaning himself off,
rinsing his pants as he would after a battle. They weren’t as messy as he’d thought, most of his spill
and the small amounts of blood had clung to his skin.

‘How is it that you are so against sex outdoors, yet you’ll happily walk around half naked?’ Augus
said some time later when they were walking around the lake once more. Gwyn wore nothing more
than a shirt, and Augus was fully dressed.

Gwyn shrugged. He’d never really thought too much about it. He was feeling calmer than usual,
and despite the chill in the air, he was warmed through on the inside. Augus, too, seemed
unbothered by the temperature.

After a few more minutes, Gwyn rubbed at the back of his neck and then took a breath.

‘I have something to tell you,’ Gwyn said, taking a slow breath. He’d been putting it off, afraid of
how Augus might react.

‘Tell me, then,’ Augus said, and Gwyn nodded to himself. Augus sounded relaxed, and Gwyn
didn’t want to ruin his mood, but he also wanted to tell Augus when they were both in more
peaceable states of mind.

‘I…petitioned the Seelie Court to return to me my full name, and…and the An Fnwy estate.’
Augus’ steps slowed, and then he turned so that he was keeping pace with Gwyn, but walking backwards, his eyes on Gwyn’s face. His expression was unreadable, and it had nothing to do with the night being so dark.

‘And?’

‘I was…successful,’ Gwyn said, still surprised at it all. ‘Two and a half weeks ago they gave me back my name, and then a few days before I confronted you, I was deeded the titles to the entirety of the An Fnwy estate. It’s…I’m the sole heir.’

Gwyn stopped walking, the truth of it sinking in.

‘I haven’t been back yet,’ Gwyn said. ‘I can’t bring myself to- I have to go and inventory what is left over. Without servants looking after it, the garden will overgrow. The house will stay in good repair, being of fae build, but…and it’s prime Seelie land. Are you angry with me?’

‘You don’t need it,’ Augus said, and Gwyn’s chest ached, because he felt like he did, and he didn’t know how to articulate why. ‘And I want to be with you when you go back.’

‘No,’ Gwyn said, taking a breath. ‘I want to go back alone.’

‘To all the booby traps they’ve left on the land? To what, Gwyn? Even if – by some miracle – that place is not designed to destroy you…what exactly are you returning to? What fond memories?’

‘It’s important land,’ Gwyn said finally.

‘That’s not why you petitioned to have it returned to you,’ Augus said. ‘That’s not why you asked for your name to be returned to you.’

‘I know,’ Gwyn said, his voice small. ‘I know that.’

He sidestepped around Augus and kept on walking, not wanting to dwell on it for much longer. There were too many other things to talk about. Besides, it was important that they have good quality Seelie land. For a host of reasons. And it wasn’t like an abundance of prime Seelie Courtland was just floating around, for anyone to-

Gwyn halted again, his forehead furrowed. A long time ago, centuries ago, he’d happened to have acquired a lot of high quality Seelie land. He turned to Augus slowly.

‘Augus, do you recall that first time that we met, and you told me I could pay you whatever I thought your services deserved?’

‘Mm,’ Augus said, looking intrigued.

‘What did you do with the land I gave you?’

Augus blinked in confusion, and then shrugged. ‘What land?’

Gwyn stared at him, and then felt something twinge in his chest. ‘The land, Augus. I gave you several titles to Seelie land. It’s…under your name. It was mine, so I could do with it what I liked. I deeded it to you.’

Augus’ eyes widened. He frowned, walked towards Gwyn, but Gwyn took a step backwards. He thought he’d…offered something special, something different. How could Augus not know? Did he not remember? Was he given so much land by fae in general that it didn’t matter?
‘You don’t remember?’ Gwyn said, feeling hurt and knowing it was stupid. It was centuries ago.

‘I didn’t look at them,’ Augus said, grimacing. ‘I…saw papers and thought…I’m not sure what I thought. Bonds for some Seelie war…thing, I’m sure. I didn’t- I received a lot of gifts at that time, Gwyn, and generally speaking, I had come to take them for granted. I was wealthy, and I had very little to spend it on, so I started to not pay much attention…’

‘You didn’t even look?’ Gwyn said, and Augus placed a hand on Gwyn’s forearm. His fingers curled into his skin, rubbed carefully.

‘It was different then, Gwyn. You know that.’

‘Different for you,’ Gwyn said, closing his eyes. ‘I think you knew that.’

‘I think I knew that I had to deal with a lot of infatuation from a lot of people. You never pressed for anything more at the Wild Hunts we commanded together. I assumed you’d come to your senses.’

Gwyn opened his mouth to reply, but Augus was stepping into his space, pressing his body along Gwyn’s. Even though his build was slighter, even though his shoulders weren’t as broad, he still managed to make Gwyn feel smaller with that simple movement.

‘Is the land still mine?’ Augus said quietly.

‘I think so,’ Gwyn said, shrugging. ‘The deeds were in your name, but they were possibly destroyed when you left that lake in the forest of Ethallas. It might be in the Seelie Registry. It should be sacrosanct, but I thought a lot of things were sacrosanct before…before everything.’

‘Before you were demoted,’ Augus said carefully, and Gwyn’s teeth ground together, he tried to step away.

The hand on his forearm tightened, and Gwyn made a sharp sound of frustration. Augus was back to rubbing at his arm again, but it wasn’t much consolation.

‘Careful,’ Augus said. ‘You’ll have to talk about it one day.’

‘So you keep saying,’ Gwyn said, his voice harsh. ‘I maintain that it was for only a few months and it’s irrelevant.’

‘You wouldn’t protest so much if it was,’ Augus sighed. ‘Anyway, is there a way to check that the land is still mine?’

‘It should still be yours,’ Gwyn said. ‘It was deeded to you. Seelie land titles work differently to… regular inheritance of land, or the sort of survival skirmishes that underfae have to go through to hold onto pockets of non-titled land. That’s why Seelie land titles are so valuable. That’s why I… that’s why I gave them to you. They all had lakes on them. I didn’t know what you’d use them for, I just thought…you asked me to give you what I thought your services were worth. I didn’t have anything valuable enough. In the end I could only pay you in what all the Seelie thought was valuable.’

Gwyn’s breathing was shaky, he felt a little unsteady. He felt like he’d exposed a raw nerve, and he didn’t like that Augus was standing so close to him, could read him just like he’d read him back then.

‘You could check to see if they still belong to me,’ Augus said. ‘But right now I think we should
keep walking around this lake. Though perhaps we should leave the boginki alone. I doubt she’ll like me getting too close to her. This is her home, after all.’

‘Okay,’ Gwyn said, as Augus pulled Gwyn back in the direction they’d come. Augus switched sides again so that he could still walk in the water, and Gwyn watched him. He seemed relaxed enough, he didn’t seem as weighted down by the world. It was all…better than things had been a couple of days ago. Gwyn had so many things he wanted to say about what Augus had experienced, but everything would be clumsy, and he didn’t think now was the time.

‘Do you know many other places like this?’ Augus said.

‘Like what?’

‘Beautiful places. Peaceful ones. Hardly anyone around.’

‘Oh,’ Gwyn laughed, watching his bare toes leave impressions in the sand. ‘Yes, actually. They are the best places, after all.’

‘Mm,’ Augus agreed. ‘Yes, they are.’

Gwyn could hear the smile in his voice, and knew it was enough. A weight lifted off his chest, despite the worries that persisted, the anxieties and responsibilities that lurked. He kept walking, and Augus walked alongside him now. He followed the border of the lake with Augus, wistful for a time when they might be able to steal away from the Court more often.

Chapter End Notes

In our next chapter, Explosion:

‘Ash,’ Augus whispered. ‘Is that true? What’s been going on?’

Gwyn lifted Ash again and then slammed him right back into the pillar, but Ash wasn’t fighting him. Gwyn noticed the way that Ash stared at the wounds eaten into Gwyn’s side, something pale on his face.

‘Why don’t you ask your brother, Augus?’ Gwyn said. ‘Ask him how he’s been trying to undermine this Court and me from the beginning?’
Gwyn

Early morning, early enough that Augus was dozing and only the nocturnal trows seemed to feel as awake as Gwyn felt, Gwyn made his way through the palace. The trows bowed as he passed, even though he tried waving them off back to their duties each time they did it. Now that the Unseelie Court had marginally more in its treasury, Gwyn was able to leave bits and pieces of silver about the palace as he used to for the Seelie trows. He didn’t have enough time to spread it as liberally as he’d like, but he could at least teleport here and there, dropping off some cutlery into a drawer, some coins in the sheets.

The trows would see through it, but it seemed to keep them appreciative. They fed on theft, and as long as Gwyn wasn’t making it clear in words or documentation or sign language that they were welcome to the silver, they got to feed their Unseelie appetites in the process of filching items freely given.

Gwyn made his way to a room that was shared, connected, between both the Seelie and Unseelie Court. It was the same room, despite being separated geographically, magically folded into an alchemy of physics that only the most adept of Mages understood. It was the bridge. The Seelie could not use the bridge to enter the Unseelie Court. Nor could the Unseelie use it to enter the Seelie Court. But the room existed, and both sides could use it at will, if they dared.

He walked to the deserted outer edges of the Unseelie palace. There, amongst other trees, he found a nondescript tree with a wide brown trunk, a generous canopy. Nothing about it suggested that it may be powerful, not its position nor its stature. Nothing indicated that it hid a door within its depths.

He placed his hand to the corrugated bark, and the very tree opened for him, bark crumpling in on itself with a dry, rumbling rasp. There, bared by Gwyn’s hand, was a small opening into darkness. No natural light glowed from within. Gwyn stepped into the tree and passed the magic barrier that kept all but the King and his King or Queen-in-waiting from entering. The barrier was invasive, horrid. It was tiny, slimy things burrowing into his skin. Should anyone else try and enter behind him, their skin would be sloughed off their bones, an agonising magic would destroy them. Not many people knew the bridge was even there.

A tightly spiralling staircase descending into the blackness of the earth greeted him. Gwyn stepped down, feeling his way with his hands, even his night vision stunted from the lack of light. He was stuffed tight into a narrow cylinder of roots and dirt.
After twenty minutes of descent, the temperature warmed. Gwyn began to feel doors set into the dirt from time to time, depending on where he placed his hands. They were never quite flush with the stairs, and the staircase itself had no landings for him to stop at. Gwyn never opened the doors. He knew enough now – had been to the underworlds – to know that this was a no-place of sorts. A liminal space between the two realms. Not quite underworlds, not quite fae realm. He didn’t want to know where those doors led, his instincts grating at him if he so much as brushed his fingers accidentally against one of the doors which were made of metal, wood, and at one point something like spider gossamer.

Skin prickling with gooseflesh, hair on the back of his neck standing stiffly, he descended further, and knew the reason he hadn’t come back to this place since the Seelie Court was due to the bone deep sensation that he shouldn’t be here in the first place. It was the same sense of wrongness he’d felt the first time he descended into the underworlds. There were some places fae were not meant to tread; this narrow shaft was one of them.

The descent continued for another two hours. The shaft became so narrow sometimes that dirt pressed unyielding against his shoulders. The heat began to swelter against his skin, he was covered in sweat. A primordial fear increased, prickled behind his eyes, made his throat feel thick. His bones began to throb. The imperfectly healed rib that had once held an aithwick began to radiate pain into the rest of him.

His hand brushed against a leather door, and Gwyn pushed against it, too tense to even feel a glimmer of relief that he’d found the right place. The door swung open, and Gwyn stepped into the room, blinking rapidly so that his eyes could adjust to the candlelight.

Something was wrong.

Someone was there.

Gwyn called his light, so that it was ready at his fingertips. He stared first at the Mage lounging in the single chair made of bone, one leg over the other. Then he stared at the damage.

Where, before, the room was supposed to have been preserved for an eternity – old lore scrolls and pieces of paper preserved on shelves behind glass – there was only destruction. The glass shattered. Blood everywhere. It pooled thickly on the floors, dripped off the walls, clung in ruby droplets to glass shards that glittered like perverse jewels. At first, Gwyn couldn’t tell where the blood was coming from, there were no bodies to justify so much fresh blood.

Horror sent coldness through him. The blood came from the old lore itself. Shredded bits of paper oozed thick, black-red blood. The reek was awful, as though it had been mixed with oil and ink, layered with a patina of rot.

Half a paper origami bird with writing swirling across it, flapped weakly, pitifully, as blood dripped from its pages. It had only one wing remaining, the other torn completely away.

He knew the Mage. Immediately, the Nain Rouge’s warnings came to mind. The words of Fenwrel played in his mind. The oathbreaker. The one that they were all concerned about. Here, in the bridge.

‘Davix,’ Gwyn said carefully, ‘what are you doing here?’

‘Waiting for you,’ Davix said, smiling, the picture of insouciance. He leaned back in the bone chair and his fingers twitched at his blue and white motley – a long cloak made of diamond cut pieces of fabric, each with a charm woven into them – a cloak only permitted to master Mages. He was
untouched by the blood around him. His thickly curled black hair showed no streaks of white like it
did last time. He was the picture of youthful, benign good-naturedness. Except that the room stunk,
and the old lore was shredded to pieces.

‘How did you know I’d come? I told no one,’ Gwyn said, hot, viscous light leaping along the back
of his spine.

‘Come, we are fae, aren’t we?’ Davix said, his blue eyes twinkling with amusement.
‘Synchronicity is our thing, is it not? I have been alive long enough to know when some events are
about to happen. I have been a Mage for a very long time, lad. Gwyn ap Nudd. It’s good to see you
without your coterie.’

‘You’re an oathbreaker,’ Gwyn said, looking at the bits of parchment, the chaos of words spinning
across their pages until they dripped into the blood and disappeared as inky blackness. ‘Did you do
this?’

‘Yes,’ Davix said, smiling.

‘Why?’ Gwyn stared at him.

‘They were misbehaving,’ Davix said. ‘They were put here for a reason, and still you couldn’t
avoid their siren songs.’

‘No one can enter this room unless they are the monarch.’

‘Then I must be King,’ Davix said, laughing. His voice was rich, but he managed to make every
word sound inoffensive, non-threatening. It only put Gwyn more on edge. ‘But of course I am not,
don’t fret. I’m King-in-waiting.’

‘Oura, Albion made Oura his Queen-in-waiting.’

‘You didn’t know? She retired out of Albion’s Court. She’s finding this whole dreadful debacle
rather tasteless. Albion, sea-fae vs. land-fae, all that tedium. I don’t think she likes me very much.’

‘Why did you do this?’ Gwyn said, gesturing to the old lore. The half-bird continued to flutter.
Gwyn had spoken to it once. Gwyn felt horrified, as though he was standing in the midst of some of
his largest battlefields, carnage as far as he could see. But this was only one room, and the
parchment was only parchment. Living parchment, yes, but…

They’d bled far more than they should have been able to. It was as though giant creatures had been
slaughtered in their place.

‘You were all playing with them far too much,’ Davix said. ‘I understand the impulse to play,
Gwyn ap Nudd. I understand it very well. But you don’t know what you’ve unleashed.’

Gwyn’s mind raced. He couldn’t imprison Davix, because he couldn’t pull him back through the
Unseelie entrance. He couldn’t harm him. Davix was too powerful, and Gwyn knew this was a
battle he’d not win. He was suited to swords and armour, not magic. Mages on a battlefield were
his greatest weakness. It would be exploited more, were it not for the fact that good ones were rare,
and many tried to avoid battle.

‘They told me that,’ Gwyn said finally.

‘They spoke to you?’ Davix said, and then laughed and hummed in pleasure. ‘My, my, they must
have been deplorably desperate. And lonely. Can’t say that I blame them.’
'What are you doing here?' Gwyn said again.

‘Aside from seeing to a rather pesky problem, I wanted to see you, of course,’ Davix said. ‘You and I…I can often tell what you’re going to do. You’re very predictable. Gwyn ap Nudd.’

Davix stood up preternaturally fast, then, in a blur of movement he was by Gwyn’s side. They were of a height. He was staring into eyes that were a faintly darker shade of his own. Fingers came up and touched his jaw and Gwyn reacted on instinct.

He called forth his light.

Or at least he meant to. The light wouldn’t move, and Gwyn felt it burn inside of him, felt suffocated, a sharp pain rising in his chest. He coughed, tried to call for his light again, felt nothing. He made a faint noise, and Davix shook his head, clucked his tongue in sympathy.

‘I know how to use that light of yours better than you do,’ Davix said. ‘What a waste. Now, tell me, how is that An Fnwy curse doing?’

Davix tilted Gwyn’s head to better look into his eyes, but Gwyn had the sense that Davix was looking at something else entirely, looking deeper.

Davix smiled, as though delighted. ‘It really is broken then, after all this time.’

‘The curse…it’s a myth,’ Gwyn said. A conclusion he’d come to after talking with Augus.

‘No,’ Davix said, elongating the word like he might to a child. ‘Gwyn ap Nudd, that curse is not a myth at all. What a sweet child that Crielle ferch Fnwy, I do believe it broke with her.’

‘How could you know these details? The curse is a story. You can’t simply look at someone and declare it broken.’

‘Do you know why your family threw Unseelie spawn?’ Davix said. ‘It’s because it’s in your bloodline.’

‘No, the Registry, it-’

‘There was a time when there was no Seelie Registry,’ Davix said. ‘I was alive to see it. A few others were as well. We remember, Gwyn ap Nudd. But there has always been the potential for Unseelie get in the bloodline. We were expecting it to be Crielle. Instead we got you. Curious. Why do you keep playing with the old lore? Why would you mess with Soulbounds? Don’t you know how very dangerous they are?’

‘Can they be broken?’ Gwyn asked.

Davix’s eyes narrowed shrewdly. ‘No. They are particularly permanent.’

‘Are you sure?’

Gwyn felt his bones compress under the force of the fingers at his jaw. He tried to jerk away, but Davix held him still with that single grip, with his icy gaze.

‘Don’t question me,’ Davix said.

‘Why is the parchment bleeding?’

‘What did I just say?’ Davix said, sounding like a disappointed parent. But instead of retaliating, he
only laughed and let go of Gwyn, walking across the room once more, his boots squelching in a layer of blood that was, in some places, centimetres thick and congealing.

‘You’re an oathbreaker,’ Gwyn said, leaning on the word hard enough that Davix turned and faced him, a smile lightening his face.

‘Oh yes, I suppose I am at that. Are they very bothered then? I was the second member of the Thirteen, did you know? I created that school. Those rules are mine to break. The younger Mages hold onto the rules as though they are sacred, but you learn in this world, Gwyn ap Nudd, that nothing is sacred. Nothing untouchable. Even the old lore thought they would persist forever, they had forgotten that they, too, can be killed.’

‘What do you want?’

‘Want?’ Davix said. He shrugged. ‘Wait and see. You’ll not have to worry about me for a long time.’ Davix winked at him, his rakish glamour one of self-confidence and charm. ‘And by the time you do have to worry about me, you’ll have other things on your mind.’

‘I could stop you now,’ Gwyn said. ‘I could-’

‘You can’t kill me,’ Davix said. ‘I am intrinsically impervious to your light. Or, perhaps I should say, I would never let it touch me. You can’t imprison me. I am older than the magic in the cores of these Courts and I can step out of any cell designed for me. I’ve behaved myself very well for a long time. But it is a season of turning, is it not? They’re my favourite seasons, I always feel like they were made for me. This isn’t your game, Gwyn ap Nudd. It’s mine. And those I pit myself against are a select few, and it doesn’t include you.’

‘You’re being quite candid.’

‘No, I’m not,’ Davix said, smoothing hands down his robes. Gwyn noticed that his fingernails were painted an icy blue. Behind Davix, old candles burned, and for once they didn’t burn in a fixed manner, preserved by magic. Now, they burned down, wax dripping off wooden shelves. The room was supposed to be untouchable, and yet Davix had come and destroyed it. ‘I’m hardly telling you anything. You’ll leave, confused, not understanding how I can interpret and understand synchronicity in this manner. You could have been a thaumaturge, like me, but instead you chose the wars of the weak, the ones fought in blood and battle. Diverting, delightful, and somewhat disappointing.’

‘You laid the curse on my family, didn’t you?’ Gwyn said, trying to ignore the desperate flapping of the paper half-bird trying to fly.

Davix smiled slowly. ‘Yes, I rather think I did. They displeased me. I responded. What a fascinating family. Crielle ferch Fnwy has done wonderful things to the Seelie Court. She’s prepared it very nicely for me.’

‘Prepared it for what?’

‘Oh, I hardly see how that’s any of your business,’ Davix said. ‘Seeing as you are Unseelie, and a traitor to my alignment.’

Davix laughed like it was a joke, and then dragged the toe of his pointed boot through blood, smiling down at it.

‘They deserved it, you know,’ Davix said. ‘The old lore. They exert too much irrational influence, even in the bridge. There’s already too many external influences at play. Kabiri and I have a very
old score to settle.’

Gwyn’s shoulder throbbed at the mention of Kabiri. This was an entire world that he knew almost nothing about. How long had it been like this? How many of the older fae were focused on these ancient manipulations of power? How many fae felt untouchable by the Courts and their Kings?

‘Why do you want me to know about this?’ Gwyn said finally. ‘If you think I cannot stop you.’

‘Because I think you’ll try,’ Davix said, ‘once you realise what I’m up to. I think you deserve a fair chance, seeing as I brought so much harm to your family. Would you buy that I feel guilty?’

‘No,’ Gwyn said, and Davix smiled darkly.

‘Good, then you’re not an entire waste of my time. Because, Gwyn ap Nudd, I enjoy watching people learn of their circumstances, rail and rally against them, only to lose. You know what that’s like, don’t you? It’s amusing, isn’t it? Watching soldiers come at you, feeling that amusement that comes as you enjoy watching them try their very hardest, burn their life away, when all the while you know deep down what the ultimate outcome must be.’

Davix tapped at a thicker section of blood, manicured black eyebrows arching up. ‘Also, my heartsong was once mischief. What greater glorious pleasure in life than to construct a gargantuan machine over a length of time you cannot comprehend, only to throw some wretched wrenches in at the last minute to see if your machine will prevail? You, Gwyn ap Nudd, are a wrench.’

A limp, blood-stained piece of paper on the ground formed into a fish, and Davix and Gwyn both stared at it. The origami koi shifted in a pool of its own blood, and then coughed weakly.


Davix swiftly drew his staff out – more a wand than anything – and blasted cold, blue fire at the fish. The thing dissolved into parchment fibres and a splatter of blood. For a few seconds, Davix looked disturbed, and then he took a deep breath and placed his staff back beneath his motley, sighing.

‘It seems there are wrenches everywhere. Kistrinty indeed,’ Davix said. He looked up at Gwyn and smiled, revealing perfect teeth, a perfect smile. ‘I must away, Gwyn ap Nudd. We’ll merry meet again soon.’

Davix bowed deeply, far more deeply than most fae, bending at an angle that was steeper than ninety degrees, a mark of profound respect. He straightened again and turned, exiting through the Seelie door, closing it behind him.

Gwyn, alone in the room, the scent of inky blood lodged in his throat. He stared at the destruction around him.

‘It’s…a game,’ the half-bird said, its voice just as cocky as it had been last time. ‘A terrible game. He’s always hated us. Him and his brother both.’

‘His brother?’ Gwyn said, staring towards the Seelie entrance.

‘Aye,’ the half-bird said, its voice choked with blood. Half its beak was missing, printed letters and words half-formed and then formed again on its parchment-skin, different languages, each of them dripping off the paper and then trickling off the shelf.

‘Is there anything I can do for you?’
‘No,’ the half-bird said.

‘Is there any way to break a Soulbond?’

‘No,’ the half-bird said. ‘They are permanent. As permanent as anything can be.’

Gwyn walked over to the half-bird, wishing he could do something for it. His feet rested in blood, and while he was used to the sensation, the wrongness of the place persisted. He wanted to shower and scour himself clean with a scrubbing brush, remove entire layers of skin.

‘Hateful,’ the half-bird said. ‘So hateful. I’ll help you, though it’s worth…nothing. Perhaps. Kabiri, the volcano god, tell him…tell him when you next see him that you have our blessing. The Red…the Red blessing. He’ll know.’

‘What is that?’ Gwyn said, staring at the weaker wing-flaps, a papery sound becoming wetter, squelching as blood continued to flow.

‘He’ll know. Remember…Gwyn ap Nudd…remember that we flew once. All of us.’

A powerful wave of grief flooded through him, and it didn’t make any sense. Gwyn didn’t know why he felt so heavy, so lost, like a small child in the face of his parent’s repeated rejections. He tried to touch his fingers to the paper, but he couldn’t even do that much.

‘Are you making me feel like this?’ Gwyn whispered.

‘Grief is good,’ the half-bird said. ‘A part of you knows what we are, deep down. A part of you gives us the emotion we deserve, even as…you are a child. Now…now I bleed my last words, saving these ones…for you. He wants you to be…powerful. Because he wants players in the game. But he…should be careful. You should all be…’

The half-bird made a faint keening sound, and then its wings stopped moving. The room sounded too silent, without that wet flapping.

‘We flew once…’ it rasped, its voice breaking on some grief so great that it made Gwyn’s eyes burn, though he didn’t understand why. The parchment disintegrated, paper fibres pulling apart in the sopping mess of its own blood. Gwyn touched his fingers to the red slick, oiliness on his fingers. It wasn’t quite like any blood he’d touched before.

In almost all other circumstances he would have tasted it to see what it was like. Instead, he was seized with the sudden urge to get it off himself. He wiped vigorously at his clothing until his fingers were tingling.

The bridge and the old lore were ruined. He backed away. When he closed the leather door behind him and entered the heat of the Unseelie shaft, the spiral staircase that led back to the Unseelie Court, revulsion suffused him.

It already felt like a dream. But it wasn’t a dream. Gwyn was only more confused now than he’d been before he’d entered the room of old lore.

*  

Gwyn went to Fenwrel’s rooms, but she was absent. He penned her a note on parchment, asking her to see him as soon as possible.

He understood certain types of war, but this sort of manoeuvring – the Oak King had never let
anyone guess that this was going on in the background, and if the Raven Prince knew of it, he kept his secrets locked up until Augus could dispose of them. Were the Oak King and the Raven Prince trying to escape the Nightingale? Or were they trying to escape something else? Something greater?

Something involving Mages and…at least one god?

The idea was intimidating to contemplate, but also infuriating. It was obvious that some of the bigger players in the fae world knew something was going on, such as the Nain Rouge. Gwyn could only guess at who else. Which meant he’d have to shake them down, and no one ever really wanted to shake down ancient fae.

But everyone seemed to be dancing around everyone else, keeping their secrets close. Surely it wasn’t a coincidence that the Oak King and the Raven Prince had disappeared from their Courts less than five hundred years apart? That was hardly a blink of an eye to the both of them.

On his way to the throne room to join Augus and the rest of his Inner Court for an inner meeting, a common fae servant ran towards him. He was out of breath, pale.

‘Your Majesty,’ he said, eyes wide.

‘What is it?’ Gwyn said. He thought of forces massed beyond the Court. He thought of all the things Albion could do to destroy them and itched for the armour he was waiting on, a sword, something.

‘It’s your Generals. They’ve all assembled in one of the grassed training arenas. The raven arena. They say they must speak with you urgently.’

Gwyn squared his shoulders, took a deep breath and nodded.

If they’d all assembled spontaneously, there was the possibility that war was coming.

*Shouldn’t you know that?*

Gwyn stiffened at the voice in his head. It sounded like his father. He *did* know that. Each of his Generals had soldiers and informants placed in select areas specifically to find it out. They all knew it was coming.

He teleported to a large grassed arena that was out beyond the bounds of the night gardens, still within the protection of the Unseelie Court.


The Generals made a circle around him.

His mind worked quickly. He was unarmed, he wore no armour. There was a slight divide in those who stood around him. Before him stood Ifir, proudly dressed in his plate and leather armour, his horns slicked with gold oil, his black hair shining and curled. Behind Ifir stood Kyoufu, the fog fae that had never liked Gwyn, as well as Magisa. Gwyn was surprised to see the harpy, Ocypete, who had always seemed well-disposed towards Gwyn, and called Ifir a traditionalist.

The others were either behind Gwyn, or to his left. Vane looked worried, his gaze going nervously back and forth between Gwyn and Ifir. Several pieces of information slotted into place. Gwyn’s eyes quickly noted those Generals that were wearing armour, those that were armed, and those that weren’t, like Gwyn.
His stance shifted just enough that his tendons pulled tight to spring. Ifir noticed, sneered, his gold-amber eyes glinting.

‘Do you really think this is the right time for mutiny?’ Gwyn said, voice cold. ‘Now? When we know Albion’s forces are amassing for a fight where the odds are stacked against us?’

‘Ah,’ Ifir said, his voice hard. ‘Why are those odds stacked against us, Gwyn? Because I think I know, I think we all know. I summoned the Generals here. Each of them know why we’re not likely to win any of the most important battles. I just don’t know why you thought you could keep it a secret forever?’

‘Keep what a secret?’ Gwyn said, trying to think of who his allies might be. Did he have any? Yes, surely, Zudanna looked like she was trying to keep herself separate from Ifir’s group. Quite a few of the Generals were unarmed, but then, quite a few were practiced in offensive, aggressive magic, so they wouldn’t need weapons to make a strike against him.

These were some of the most powerful fighters in the Unseelie realm. Gwyn was confident in his abilities, but he had a permanently injured shoulder, he was disadvantaged.

He didn’t want to teleport away. Couldn’t, needing to at least make a show of strength. He was raring for a fight, couldn’t stop the cold smile that crept over his face. Ifir’s eyes glittered with readiness. He shifted the shield that had the lion imprinted upon it, his hand found the hilt of his golden mace.

‘You have traitors in your own Inner Court,’ Ifir said, his lip curling. ‘How are we supposed to trust you? Why would any of us follow you when your heartsong is surrender? Tell me that. Tell me who you expected to follow you to their deaths for surrender.’

Gwyn’s chest went cold. His whole body felt numb.

Ash. Ash had threatened it once before, at the Triumphal Entry. He’d maliciously joked about it, but Gwyn had never truly thought…

The surge of rage that went through him was so bright that he almost couldn’t see.

After everything he’d done to ensure that Ash was safe. He didn’t have to like him, but he’d tried to give him so much. Those rooms catered to him in the palace transformation. Inner Court status when he’d done nothing to deserve it.

‘Is it true?’ Ifir said.

‘Yes,’ Gwyn said. ‘Surrender is my heartsong. Though why you think it such a burden when the Unseelie Court is growing from strength to strength by the week…’

‘Would you follow a War General with a heartsong of surrender?’

No, Gwyn thought in dismay. He never, ever would. It was why it was so important that they never find out.

A crackling sound popped in the air. Gwyn’s muscles tensed, his peripheral vision seeking the best places to retreat. Ifir’s magic was the same as all marid-djinn afrits, and it was one of the reasons they were such a powerful army. But rumours went that Ifir rarely showed his ability, rarely needed it, because he used his mace instead. Breath fluttered in his lungs on quick breaths. Balls of flame appeared in Ifir’s hands, just as Kyoufu and Magisa raised their arms, as Oceypete ignored the longbow strapped to his back and withdrew a short-sword instead. Gwyn was surprised to see her
there, she'd always seemed to be fair-minded, even calling Ifir a traditionalist. But she looked at Gwyn with nothing but disgust.

‘Your Majesty!’ Vane shouted.

A useless warning.

The fire that doubled as an explosive, shot in huge snapping flames from Ifir’s palms, as his amber eyes turned to licks of flame, steam pouring from his mouth. Gwyn was already sidestepping when Vane crashed into him to push him out of the way. But Vane was light, and Gwyn had been braced to move the other direction.

Vane screamed, hit with the full force of the explosive fire. The rest separated and plastered Gwyn’s torso and gut, his leg, the fire clinging, rocky lava splitting and blistering and eating into his flesh, dissolving muscle. The pain was excruciating. Vane shrieked repeatedly, even as he choked on smoke.

Gwyn shoved Vane aside, roaring at Ifir’s audacity, at the pain. He sensed movement behind him, around him, and fell into instinct.

Gwyn moved quickly – despite the pain and the damage – and shot a ball of light at Ocypete. She dodged the first, but not the second. She collapsed as the pulsing, incandescent light hit her directly in the neck and face, severing her right wing. Her twitched in death throes, and he ran forwards, seizing her short-sword from her limp hand. He turned back to Ifir, cutting down Kyoufu – who had always been poorly suited to close combat – as he went. That left Magisa, and Ifir.

‘Does this look like surrender to you?’ Gwyn shouted, as the other Generals fell back.

Vane was still shrieking, writhing on the ground, his body smoking. The jewellery he wore had melted into his skin. Gwyn thought he could be saved, but he needed a healer.

Ifir lunged at Gwyn with his heavy, golden mace. Gwyn snarled, took the few seconds of time he had to lash out repeatedly with light at Magisa. She dodged away, her eagle feathers cresting and falling with outrage. Gwyn marked every General that looked ready to assist – Zudanna and her own Generals, Luma, and Vane on the ground, the scent of burnt flesh in the air. He marked the ones who stood on the sidelines waiting to see what would happen – Baw, Hai-Hong, Mu, Buralga, Kerri, Euryale.

Better odds than he expected, given they all knew his heartsong now.

Rage turned his mind white and red. He wanted only death. The pain was nothing more than fuel. He grit his teeth, summoned even more light, the skin of hands and arms opening in furrows, the blood scorched black by his own light before it could fall. He finally managed to strike Magisa down, a head shot that killed her instantly. Ifir was upon him, and Gwyn shied away from hands glowing red, bones lit from within.

‘No,’ Gwyn snarled. ‘You traitor, this is not your moment.’

Gwyn stepped into Ifir’s attack where another might back away. Ifir was prepared for it, but he wasn’t prepared for Gwyn’s speed. Ifir’s horns made him top heavy, affected his centre of gravity. Gwyn aimed not for the crucial places that Ifir was protecting with his shield and his hands – his head, his torso, his neck – but instead rolled low, flicking the sword to take out one of Ifir’s Achilles tendons.

Ifir roared with the force of the great monster that lived inside of him, the sound rumbling through
the ground. He smashed his mace down and Gwyn made sure his free arm was angled into it, using it as a distraction.

Gwyn shouted as the mace smashed into his arm, simultaneously sliding the sword into Ifir’s hip and slicing through muscle and ligament, causing Ifir to collapse. Gwyn brought his body up clumsily and then drove the sword down, all the way through the other side of Ifir’s flesh and into the dirt, pinning Ifir to the ground. The sword wedged between bone, the hilt went all the way down to his skin.

Gwyn ripped the shield from Ifir’s hands and threw it to the side, his injured arm hanging uselessly by his side. He took Ifir’s mace and gave it to Zudanna, who held it up and ready.

He was breathing heavily, rage as much as pain streaking through him. Ifir watched him with wild eyes, and when he went to lift the sword from his hip, Gwyn bared teeth at him and knelt down – half-collapsed – and slammed the heel of his fist into Ifir’s neck.

‘Surrender, Ifir,’ Gwyn breathed, ‘or I will kill you where you lay, so help me.’

Ifir stared at Gwyn, pupils expanding and contracting, and then his face paled and he went limp, even as he choked for air.

‘Who will watch him?’ Gwyn spat.

Zudanna came forward, wielding Ifir’s mace confidently, and Luma stepped forward beside her. Luma had – at some point – transformed into her true form; a giant hulking hybrid horse-creature, her head that of a giant fang-toothed horse, her body hugely muscled, her hands splayed as though ready to tear others apart. Zudanna’s ears were pricked forward, she bared her wolfish canines, and her two Generals stood beside her, ready to fight.

'Give me your sword,' Gwyn said to Zudanna. She slid the smallsword at her hip out of the scabbard and handed it to him. She had Ifir's mace, after all.

‘If any of you teleport away, I will personally hunt you down, and what I did to the others will look like mercy,’ Gwyn said, staring at those that hadn’t chosen a side.

Mu bowed in acknowledgement. The others all looked too taken aback to react.

There was too much pain for Gwyn to negotiate anything more, and he stared at Ifir, who met his eyes and didn’t seem inclined to move.

Three of his Generals gone, dead, at a time of war. And one useless to him.

Gwyn teleported into the throne room, keeping Zudanna’s smallsword. He ran at Ash who was standing, talking to Augus like everything was fine.

Augus’ eyes flew open when he saw Gwyn. ‘What? What’s happened?’

Gwyn quickly transferred his sword to his other arm, grabbing Ash by the neckline of his shirt with his good arm. He fistfed his hand in Ash’s shirt, turned his whole body and slammed Ash into a marble pillar. Ash choked, his hands went up to the forearm pinning him in place. Gwyn raised the sword with an arm that shook and shrieked pain at him. He held the blade against Ash’s neck.

‘Gwyn!’ Augus shouted, angry now. Angry and scared.

‘What’s happened,’ Gwyn growled, ‘is that this traitor went and told the Generals what my
heartsong was, to turn them against me. What’s happened is *mutiny.*

He sensed Gulvi nearby, which was good, because he’d need her. The gods help him if she chose to take Ash’s side, because he was so close to the killing edge he didn’t know what he was willing to do to satisfy it.

He dug the sword harder against Ash’s throat, and his lips twitched when a thin line of red bloomed. Zudanna had kept her blade nicely sharpened.

‘Ash,’ Augus whispered. ‘Is that true? What’s been going on?’

Gwyn lifted Ash again and then slammed him right back into the pillar, but Ash wasn’t fighting him. Gwyn noticed the way that Ash stared at the wounds eaten into Gwyn’s side, something pale on his face.

‘Why don’t you ask your brother, Augus?’ Gwyn said. ‘Ask him how he’s been trying to undermine this Court and *me* from the beginning?’

He shook Ash hard, wishing that he could push his fist through Ash’s sternum and sink it all the way to his spine.

‘I still haven’t decided whether you’ll be spending the rest of your life in a cell or not, but I recommend you *stay here* until I return and decide what to do with you. Do you think I’m a merciful King, Ash? Did you think I would roll over for all of the Generals, just as I rolled over for you and tolerated your poisonous, *foundless* abuse? If you wanted to see me angry, Ash, well done. If you want to see me retaliate, then I will *retaliate.*’

Gwyn picked Ash up like he weighed nothing, and threw him down to the marble steps. Then he left him there, slumped on the floor. Ash didn’t move, he only looked up and stared at Gwyn in shock.

Gwyn pointed at the horrified common fae servants.

*‘Get Aleutia, bring her to the raven arena. Vane is injured and it may be a mortal injury. Get her now!’*  

Gulvi had her knives out, she looked at Ash in horror, but when Gwyn walked towards her, she snapped to attention. Thank all the gods for someone who could push personal matters aside in a crisis.

*I need you by my side in this,*’ Gwyn said. ‘Three Generals are dead. I need you to follow my lead, do you understand?’

*‘Oui, Your Majesty.’*

They both turned and started walking back towards the raven arena, Gwyn summoning his light to teleport, when he heard Augus clear his throat. He braced himself for Augus to come to Ash’s defence, but instead:

‘You’re injured, Gwyn,’ Augus said. ‘You need a healer.’

‘No,’ Gwyn said, staring back at Augus. ‘I need this Kingdom to *hold together,* and everything can wait until it does.’ He turned to Gulvi, his head pounding from the force of trying to hold back the pain and stay functional. ‘Whatever I order you to do, do not kill *anyone.* Do you understand? No matter what I tell you to do, I say to you now, do *not* kill anyone.’
Gulvi’s face turned to confusion, but then she nodded once.

‘Good,’ Gwyn said, teleporting them both to the raven arena.

Ifir was in exactly the same place he’d been before, the sword still pinning him into the soil.

Gwyn stood before him, Gulvi by his side. Gulvi was too seasoned to violence to have much of a visual reaction to Vane’s prone form on the ground, but Gwyn could tell she was shocked.

Gwyn stared down at Ifir, an ugly white heat moving through him.

‘You were such a valuable General, Ifir,’ Gwyn said, staring down at him. ‘But you’re a traitor to the Unseelie Court. You’re going into a cell, and you’re staying there.’

Ifir coughed out a derisive sound, said nothing.

‘Now,’ Gwyn said, ‘because I’m quite certain you need me to prove myself to you, due to my having this heartsong, I am going to prove myself to you. Do you think we haven’t had members of this Court watching your loved ones? Do you think we haven’t suspected you in the past? How naïve did you think I truly was, Ifir?’

He turned to Gulvi, even as Ifir’s eyes widened with horror.

‘You know what to do, Gulvi,’ he said. ‘Go find Ifir’s daughters. Ada and Adalia, yes? Give them the send-off that you’ve given to the children of others in the past.’

He could tell by the faint shift on Gulvi’s face that he’d be paying for bringing up that event later. But a few more seconds and Gulvi had teleported away, her knives up and ready.

He turned back to Ifir, who pushed himself upright and was trying to get the sword out of himself. Gwyn leaned over him and pushed it slowly back in place, then knelt, one knee on Ifir’s chest.

‘Not my daughters,’ Ifir said, great horns scraping furrows in the ground. ‘Leave them out of this.’

Vane gurgled in the background. A sound of teleportation and Gwyn turned to see Aleutia arrive, healer’s kit in her hand. She went straight to Vane’s side and Gwyn left her to it.

‘It’s too late for that, Ifir,’ Gwyn said blandly. ‘Gulvi’s already gone. She knows where they are. The south side of the Aram’kelton hills, yes? A lovely house I hear. The golden roof, hidden amongst golden trees. She is very good at killing children to make a point, Ifir.’

Ifir stared at him, his eyes turned a dirty red colour. He went very still.

‘You damned your daughters,’ Gwyn said, ‘and maybe your sons, if I decide it. You’re going to be spending the rest of your life in a cell. Augus will use his compulsions to rip every single truth and strategy from you until you are nothing more than a fae who needs fire and heat, locked up in the cold, damp, wet darkness for however many centuries you’ll last. Which won’t be that many, because I, Gwyn ap Nudd, Unseelie King, hereby remove your Court status, so that you may be nothing more than underfae.’

Ifir’s eyes rolled back in his head, and Gwyn got up, ignoring memories of his own demotion that threatened to swim up and choke him as he listened to the sounds of misery that Ifir made. The grass smoked where Ifir’s power flowed out of him.

He turned to the rest of his Generals and wondered which of them were still truly his.
'Does anyone else want to fight me?' Gwyn said, sounding almost normal. ‘We could make a game of it, if you like. As you can see,’ he gestured to the bodies behind him, ‘I have been spoiling for a good battle, lately.’

None of the Generals stepped forwards.

‘I don’t need you to like me,’ Gwyn said, meeting their eyes. ‘But if I do not have your respect, you can walk away now.’

Again, they all stayed in place. Finally, Zudanna stepped forwards and knelt on one leg, bowing her head.

‘Gwyn ap Nudd, King of the Unseelie Court and its Kingdom, and those that live within it, you have seen us through more victories than we had ever expected to win in recent times, and I expect you to see us through many more. I declare once more my allegiance to you.’

Gwyn watched as Luma did the same, followed by the rest of the Generals remaining. All of them kneeling on one leg, bowing their head, following Zudanna’s suit. Gwyn would have laughed at the absurdity, but all his energy was going towards hiding the extent of the pain he was in.

‘Your Majesty,’ Aleutia called. Gwyn turned to her. Was Vane dead? All that eager, puppyish friendliness, and now Vane lay unconscious and horrifically burnt. ‘I’m just saying…I’m sure Vane would say the same thing if he weren’t you know…charcoal.’

‘Is he going to live?’ Gwyn said.

‘Oh, sure, come on,’ Aleutia said, rolling her eyes. ‘I specialise in battle injuries, remember? He’ll be fine. Just a bit sore. I should have a look at you too, when you’re ready.’

Gulvi returned, blood on her knives. Gwyn stared at it, then met Gulvi’s eyes, hoping she’d followed his original orders to the letter. Something in her face indicated she had, but in that case, he wanted very much to know where the blood came from.

‘I want you to assemble in the east-wing meeting room,’ Gwyn said to the Generals. ‘We need to have a long talk. I expect I’ll be gone a few hours chasing this up, I suggest you use the time productively. Aleutia, please transfer Vane to one of the healing rooms when he is able to move. Gulvi, come with me, we are transferring Ifir to a cell.’

‘How exciting,’ Gulvi said, a grim smile on her face. ‘Do I get to execute this one too?’

‘We’ll see,’ Gwyn said, reaching down to yank the sword out of Ifir’s hip. Automatically the wound poured blood. If Gwyn was feeling benevolent later, he’d let Aleutia see to it, but for now, he wanted Ifir to feel the pain. At least, he did when Ifir was conscious again. The drop down from Court to underfae was brutal at the best of times.

He teleported into the Unseelie prison, Ifir in his arms, one of the horns bumping into his head. He tossed him into a cell – the same one that Dogwill Borough had been placed in – just as Gulvi appeared by his side.

‘Whose blood is that on your knives?’ Gwyn asked.

‘Someone I’d been meaning to do away with for some time,’ Gulvi said blandly. ‘And Gwyn? Don’t you ever put me in that position again. There are some things I don’t need to be reminded of. Oui?’
'If I can avoid it, Gulvi, I’ll avoid it. I doubt the ploy will ever work again. But...if it will help the situation, I’ll use it.'

‘Of course you will,’ Gulvi said, sighing. ‘Are you all right? You look a little ragged, darling.’

The pain was reasserting itself. Ragged was one word for it. One arm was still mostly useless. There were giant, bloody holes eaten into the flesh of his leg and torso. His shirt and pants had melted into his skin in some places. ‘I need to figure out how I’m going to deal with this.’

He turned and started walking away, and Gulvi followed, her wings flaring.

‘Does he know? Does Ifir know that I didn’t really kill them?’ Gulvi said.

‘No.’

‘Should we tell him?’ There was something anxious in her tone, and Gwyn didn’t have the patience for it.

‘No. I mean to break him.’

‘But, Gwyn, you—’

‘I am Unseelie too!’ Gwyn shouted, having had enough. His voice rocked through the prison corridor, despite the dirt around them that muffled sound. ‘I am not in the mood to play nice with Ifir after all that he has done. Now stay out of my way, Gulvi. I’ve had enough dissent in my ranks for today.’

‘Darling, what will you do with Ash?’

‘I can’t…’ deal with that, right now.

He had to. But he’d...give it an hour. Give Augus and Ash some time together. Maybe Augus could talk some sense into Ash, but if he couldn’t, Ash was going into a cell.

He couldn’t even contemplate how Augus would react to that.

‘He gets one chance,’ Gwyn said, turning to meet Gulvi’s eyes. ‘One. I’ll not kill him, because that Soulbond damns me as much as it does anyone else. But I swear to you, Gulvi, I am not his brother, and I am not his close friend; I owe him nothing.’

‘He tried to invite mutiny upon the Unseelie Court in a time of crisis. So – however reluctantly, Gwyn – I understand.’

‘He didn’t try, he succeeded,’ Gwyn said, anger bubbling through him. ‘I need to calm myself before I address anyone else again. I am too close to the killing edge. Leave me be for an hour.’

‘Of course,’ Gulvi said, bowing to him.

He teleported away and went to one of his stone rooms, bare of anything but a single bed. It was modelled after the rooms he used to go to when he was injured in battle fighting for the Seelie. Spare. Almost like a prison itself.

Gwyn drew back his good arm and smashed his fist into the wall. His knuckles split. A patina of pain rocked through him. He punched the stone block over and over again until the skin of his knuckles was shredded. He vented as much of his rage as he could, before he sagged onto the small cot and curled up on it, his breathing audible and distressed, his mind whirling with white
and red light.

In our next chapter, 'Realisations:'

‘It’s not like I ever got to see him much,’ Ash said quietly. ‘He avoids me.’

‘Does he,’ Augus breathed. ‘Small wonder.’

The anger he was feeling should have been confusing. He should have been aware of mixed loyalties. It should have been difficult. Instead, the sharpening of his focus turned to a white hot point, and Augus’ fingers turned to claws.

‘Do you have any idea what you’ve done?’ Augus said, staring at him. ‘Do you- I have spent months not telling you a damned thing about his past because it’s not my business to share what he has told me in confidence. It’s none of your damned business, Ash! But since he will never tell you, and since you don’t seem to understand anything about what’s going on – either because of jealousy, or twisted perspectives or underworld poisoning – I’ll lay it out for you, shall I?’
**Realisations**

Chapter Notes

No new tags, and feedback is definitely love. :D <3

Reminder to folks who may not have seen it, Augus/Gwyn's very first encounter has been produced as a novella, and chapter one of *Deeper into the Woods* is here. :) It's now the first step in Augus/Gwyn canon and will be completed in two and a half weeks.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

*Augus*

Ash blinked up at Augus from the marble floor where Gwyn had thrown him. Augus still couldn’t quite rid the image of Gwyn’s injuries from his mind. It was worse, in some ways, than when Gwyn had been tortured by Tigbalan. Though he knew that Gwyn was badly injured in most battles, seeing Gwyn wear caustic holes in his flesh, dripping blood from a crushed arm, had awakened something harsh and hostile in his heart.

For the first time, it was directed at his brother.

‘Are you all right?’ Augus said, staring at him.

‘Just…’ Ash pushed himself up to his feet, taking the hand that Augus had extended to help him up. He let go again, looking bewildered.

‘Is what he said true?’ Augus said, his voice far too cold, far too silky.

This wasn’t the way it was supposed to go. He was supposed to defend Ash above all else. Ash was the vulnerable one.

But he could still smell Gwyn’s burnt flesh. See the result of what had happened in his mind’s eye. His breathing was even, steady.

*Did you think I would roll over for all of the Generals, just as I rolled over for you and tolerated your poisonous, foundless abuse?*

Gwyn’s words rattled in his head. It was obvious that aside from the thin line of blood at Ash’s throat, the fact that he was visibly shaken, he was unharmed. Augus took Ash by the wrist and guided him into one of the side rooms. He closed the door, blocked out all sound. They were in a dim room lit with phosphorescent fungi clinging to the walls, the chairs were toadstools, the table was fashioned out of tree roots. It was so dismally clichéd that Augus resisted the urge to roll his eyes. Most of the side rooms were more fashionable, but Augus supposed that Gwyn’s sense of interior design had to express itself somewhere.

‘Is what he said true?’ Augus said again.
'Which part?' Ash said, rubbing at his throat. ‘Did he really say three Generals were dead?’

‘The part where Gwyn said that you had been abusing him?’

Ash’s shift in facial expression from shaken to defensive was answer enough. Augus had known they didn’t get along, but this was something else entirely. He knew it down in his bones. Knew from the depth of Gwyn’s fury – even though it had been banked and Gwyn hadn’t done more than threaten Ash – and knew from Ash’s muted reaction.

‘You deliberately sought to sow discord amongst his Generals? You wanted this mutiny?’

‘Yes,’ Ash said. ‘Yeah. No. I don’t know. He’d kicked you out of the palace! He said he wasn’t going to take you back! He’s always so fucking confident and proud of himself! And I didn’t think they’d do whatever…whatever they did! I just wanted to unsettle him a bit. You know.’

‘Through mutiny? When we are at war?’

Ash stared at Augus with wide eyes. He wasn’t even jumping to defend himself. Augus couldn’t tell how much of this behaviour was underworld poisoning. He desperately wanted to seek out Gwyn, make him see a healer. Those injuries…no one should have remained standing under that much damage. Was it being Court status all his life that made Gwyn treat such injuries with a different attitude to most fae? Or that hideous upbringing?

Augus pressed the heel of his palm to his forehead, took a deep breath.

‘What have you been doing to him?’ Augus said, and there must have been something in his tone of voice, since Ash’s eyes widened, he licked his lips nervously, all of his cocky, charismatic glamour disappearing.

A long pause, and then Ash shifted. ‘Hurting him.’

*Hurting him.* Augus closed his eyes briefly. Of course. Of course he had. And of course Gwyn hadn’t ever said a single thing about it. In fact, the one time Augus saw it happening in front of him – back in the Seelie Court – he’d encouraged it. He’d been the one to laugh along with Ash, to goad him as though it was what he wanted.

‘For how long?’

‘Since the beginning. Since he came to me with the idea of the Soulbond.’

‘*How?* How have you been hurting him?’

Ash rubbed at his forehead and then touched his hair uncertainly. He dropped his hands in his lap.

‘I dunno, man. Not like…heaps. Just…glamour sometimes. We…there was some violence before the Triumphal Entry. Well…during. You- It was when I pulled him aside, you probably don’t remember, you were pretty out of it. And just verbal stuff I guess.’

If Gwyn hadn’t seen fit to tell Augus, then he either thought it was deserved, or he didn’t think that Augus would help, or he didn’t think Augus would care.

‘He didn’t seem really that bothered by it,’ Ash said defensively. ‘I mean, he…you know, he was like he always is.’

‘Cold? Aloof?’ Augus said, glaring at him.
‘Yeah, dude, it’s hard to get a rise out of him. He hardly cares! One of the only times I ever got a real reaction out of him was when I threatened to compel him when I was King and he was still—’

Augus looked away, couldn’t stand to look at Ash’s face. When Ash was King and Gwyn was a lower status, likely Court. Gwyn hadn’t even said anything then. It hadn’t occurred to him that Ash was taking advantage of his powers in that way. It made sense now. It had been going on for months.

‘It’s not like I ever got to see him much,’ Ash said quietly. ‘He avoids me.’

‘Does he,’ Augus breathed. ‘Small wonder.’

The anger he was feeling should have been confusing. He should have been aware of mixed loyalties. It should have been difficult. Instead, the sharpening of his focus turned to a white hot point, and Augus’ fingers turned to claws.

‘Do you have any idea what you’ve done?’ Augus said, staring at him. ‘Do you— I have spent months not telling you a damned thing about his past because it’s not my business to share what he has told me in confidence. It’s none of your damned business, Ash! But since he will never tell you, and since you don’t seem to understand anything about what’s going on – either because of jealousy, or twisted perspectives or underworld poisoning – I’ll lay it out for you, shall I?

‘That man has been abused, Ash. All his life. In some of the most cruel ways imaginable. By his parents. By his cousin. Since he was born. In the very first moment he drew breath, his mother tried to murder him. He was beaten, tortured regularly, all in an environment where – for years on end – he saw not a shred of kindness, compassion or love. He was forbidden from feeding the way he was supposed to feed. He was – by all accounts – treated so monstrously because he was not as cruel as his family, and an aberration for both being Unseelie and not mean-spirited enough by their standards.

‘His mother – one of the most sophisticated glamour wielders in the world – tormented him with her glamour.’ Augus watched as Ash’s face drained of whatever blood it had remaining. ‘She poisoned him. His father beat him as much as Gwyn’s Court status would allow, which was plenty. I know for a fact that Efnisien’s torture was extensive, and lasted hours, if not longer, depending on the mood he was in. You remember Efnisien’s reputation for sadism, don’t you, Ash? Hm? I know you’ve been so out of the loop in the fae world, but surely you remember that much.’

Augus breathed sharp, painful breaths, because he knew exactly how Gwyn would react if he knew that Augus was revealing all of this to Ash.

‘He doesn’t sleep for weeks on end, sometimes longer, because he is never without nightmares. Ever. I have spent months trying to make progress with him, trying to help him, and you go and ruin it – not just once, but apparently over and over again! You’re not just hurting him, Ash. You’re hurting me! Every time you come at him, every time he doesn’t trust me enough to tell me what you’ve been doing, because he’s frightened of where my loyalties lie. I shouldn’t need to be placed in this position! I shouldn’t need to be placed in this position by you! I thought you were supposed to be the compassionate one, not the one who took it upon himself to abuse my lover and keep it a secret.’

‘Your lover?’ Ash said, despite the paleness of his face. ‘He made me defeat you! He tricked me into it! He said he was going to give you back to us, the Unseelie Court, and then he took you for himself! To rape you!’

‘He didn’t make you defeat me,’ Augus breathed, a darker, hungrier fury stirring. ‘You chose it. He
was doing his job, Ash. That was one of his two tasks as King. Defeat the Nightingale. Defeat me. You, however, chose it. *As my brother.*

‘You said it was okay! You looked me in the eyes and told me to do it. When I said I couldn’t.’ Ash turned away then, breathed like he wanted to cry.

‘I did. I did say that.’ Augus backtracked quickly, not liking where the conversation was going. He remembered that, at the time, it had seemed so important to forgive Ash. But at the time, he’d also expected to die. He’d not expected to have to deal with…the truth of everything that had occurred afterwards.

‘You don’t think I’m not *sorry* about that?’ Ash said, staring at Augus, his eyes already reddening. ‘I know what I did, okay? I fucking know. But you were destroying me, Augus. You were destroying me. I was trying so fucking hard to hold it together for the both of us. I had…I had- I *tried*, man. But you were ruining- Fae were *dying*, and I didn’t know what to do. I couldn’t live like that anymore. I couldn’t fucking live like that anymore.’

‘Then stop *blaming* him for something you chose to do!’ Augus shouted. He snapped his mouth shut and forced himself to take several deep breaths. He was too angry. Two waterhorses in the same room, in close confines, and his territorial, predatory instincts were rousing in a way that he thought he’d put behind him. ‘Ash, you have been bullying a victim.’

‘You can’t magically wave away the fact that he raped you,’ Ash said.

‘When have I *ever* done that?’ Augus said, incredulous. ‘When, *ever*, have I said that he hasn’t done that? At every point you’ve confronted it, I could have lied to you, I *should* have. But yes, he did rape me. He knows it. I know it. Neither of us tries to hide from it! Do you know what you don’t understand, Ash? I had already been raped so much, so *violently*, by the Nightingale’s infernal *creatures*, by the time Gwyn got to me, an unwanted cock didn’t seem like all that much of a chore, to be completely *honest* with you. Especially attached to someone who still had a conscience.

‘All I could see at the time was how much he was destroying *himself*. And I let him – because he weakened himself by trying to hurt me, by trying to emulate his family. It was a *strategy*. Perhaps you disagree with me using my body as leverage, but I worked him and I used myself as the lure. Within very little time of me knowing him, I could have *destroyed* him myself. In an instant, I could crush him, and he and I both know it. And if that is terrible, then that is terrible because of someone other than him.’

Augus went to the door, opened it and poked his head beyond it to see if Gwyn had returned. He hadn’t. Agitation rattled in his chest. He shouldn’t be here dealing with this. The fact that he’d even had to speak of Ash’s betrayal at all was a feral oozing thing inside of him. He closed the door again and stood as calmly as he could, his arms by his side.

‘Do you know what he used to do in his spare time?’ Augus said quietly. ‘He used to look in old parchments and books and scrolls for ancient tales of fae that had been lost or trapped or imprisoned in wars. He would then – while not telling anyone – go to see if those stories were true. As a result, he rescued fae that had been imprisoned or unfound for, sometimes, centuries at a time. Longer. He repatriated them to their people. He told no one he did this. It’s the reason he had the skills to find Julvia, when Gulvi couldn’t.’

If Gwyn knew that Augus was saying *any* of this…

‘I can’t think straight. I never *dreamed* you’d put me in this position. That you could do this to me.
That, after months of me trying to tell you, over and over again, to at least believe me when I said he wasn’t what you thought he was. You weren’t trying to help me. And if you think that you were? I am here to tell you categorically, you haven’t helped me, and you have harmed one of the few things in my life that are valuable to me. Do you even realise, Ash, the only reason I am standing before you now – whole and functional and free – is because of him? Do you not understand that the only reason I have any modicum of…hope for my future, is not just because I have you back in my life, but because he is in it? Do you know how many times he’s saved my life? I’ve lost count of how many life debts I owe him! How can you look at him and think he has brainwashed me like the Nightingale did? I am healing lakes. I accepted that Soulbond. I’m being more honest with you than you have been in decades. I’m not as well as I was, no, but I’ll never be as well as I was. That’s not his fault.’

Ash stared at him. His mouth was slightly open, his eyebrows pulled together, his eyes bright.

‘You’ve just…’ Augus was running out of words. ‘I’m so angry I don’t actually think I can help you right now, and I know you’re hurting too. I care about this Court. Not the Court of the future, but this one, the one that Gwyn rules. He’s a good King! He could be even better if he had more allies and less people working against him! You were just one more in a very long line of people that has treated him like pond scum, and the reason he reacted with so much coldness and aloofness was because he is accustomed to being treated with abuse. It is his façade, Ash, because he was often forced to attend dinner functions and have a Courtier’s ways despite hiding bruises and lacerations and knife wounds beneath his clothing.’

‘I didn’t mean for all this to happen,’ Ash said, but he didn’t sound like he believed himself.

‘You told his Generals that his heartsong was surrender. What did you think would happen?’

‘I don’t know,’ Ash said, staring past Augus, horror creeping across his features.

‘Here’s what I know, Ash,’ Augus said. ‘Gwyn has not known a real and stable love, not a shred of it, until he met me. You got it from the beginning. I adored you – perhaps not from the first second, no – but once I had accepted you into my home, I adored you. You have absolutely no concept of what it’s like to live without love and neither do I – but he does. He found something with me. But I’m sick, Ash, and I am not the most…expressive person, as you well know. I struggle to accept help when I need it, despite his offers. I am, perhaps, not the best person for him, and I care for him so much I can’t let him go. I try and build something with him and you tear it down? You threaten him with compulsions? Hurt him at the Triumphal Entry? Undermine him? Undermine his authority? I don’t want you in a cell, Ash. I will fight against that happening, but-’

Ash blinked the first wave of tears out of his eyes, and then they kept flowing. His breathing became shakier. He still hadn’t met Augus’ eyes since he’d looked away.

‘Why didn’t you tell me any of this sooner?’ Ash said.

‘Because you hadn’t earned it,’ Augus said. ‘And because it’s not my story to tell. You still haven’t earned it.’

‘This is not that thing where you come to your senses and I haven’t fucked up after all, is it?’ Ash said, almost to himself. ‘This is me fucking up.’

‘Yes,’ Augus said. ‘This is you fucking up. And possibly taking the Unseelie Court down with you. Perhaps it runs in the family.’

‘Ha-fucking-ha,’ Ash said, even as he sniffed and blinked more tears out of his eyes. He was still
staring past Augus, his lips turned down, hands clinging to his knees now.

‘One day,’ Augus said, closing his eyes. ‘One day we’re going to have to have a talk about what you did. What you did to me. Even if you were right to do it. Even if I gave you permission.’

‘Yeah,’ Ash said, closing his eyes. ‘I know.’

‘How could you do this to me?’ Augus said, his voice cracking. ‘Are you so selfish? How much of this is underworld poisoning? How much is just-

‘I know what you want,’ Ash said, his voice rough. He looked away, shaking his head slightly. ‘I know what you want. I know you want me to say it’s all the underworld poisoning. But Aleutia and Fenwrel say I’m healing fast. I’m just…I don’t know, Augus. I can’t give you a reason. Not any one that you’d like. Growing up, I only ever had to think about myself because as much as I loved you, man, you…were a closed door. You gave me everything.’

‘So it’s my fault now?’ Augus breathed, his vision blurring with something close to fury.

‘No,’ Ash said. ‘I’m just saying, I have some…I don’t know, I have some issues! If you and Gulvi have been right all this time, and I’ve been wrong? Then there’s- Then I have a- Then there’s something wrong with the way I’m thinking. Okay? Yeah? I don’t know, Augus!’

‘I know you’ve wanted to protect me,’ Augus said, ‘but there are other ways to go about it. You could have listened to me. You could have asked for meetings. You could have floated your concerns before the both of us instead of abusing him in private and maliciously going after him in my presence too! Everything you did – you even created an environment where he colluded with you to keep everything silent. You’ve just reinforced an entire lifetime of conditioning I am trying to get underneath!’

Augus listened to his breathing and pressed his fists to his chest. He wasn’t like this. He never got like this. He was usually far more controlled. But his heartsong wasn’t dominance anymore, he couldn’t practice the same self-mastery here.

‘What do I do?’ Ash whispered. He shook his head quickly and then laughed. ‘I mean, if you’re not too angry to tell me. It’s not…on you, Augus. I’m sorry. I know you don’t have the answers. But it’s not like I can just say to him, ‘hey, sorry I’ve been treating you like shit for months on end.’’

‘I don’t know,’ Augus said, wondering what was happening right now. What was Gwyn doing to deal with the situation? Three Generals dead. There weren’t that many to begin with. What would happen to the militaries they helmed? Would they even still want to follow Gwyn? What about the rest of the Generals?

Those injuries…and Gwyn had treated them like they were nothing. But they weren’t nothing.

‘I shouldn’t have had to tell you any of this,’ Augus said. ‘I know I haven’t given you many reasons to trust me over the years, Ash, but I don’t want to be placed in the position where I feel as though I have to betray someone else’s secrets to make a point. Especially his. I’m glad you didn’t ask me to choose between the two of you today, Ash. Because you wouldn’t have liked the answer.’

Ash met Augus’ gaze, bereft.

Augus winced. ‘I wish truly that I didn’t have to learn that about myself. Knowing Gwyn, even after all of this, he won’t truly want to imprison you. He has spent a very long time trying to protect
you. Trying to make sure that you are in a good position, for me. Because he knew it mattered to me. He gave you a balcony, that bar, that tower. He returned me to you as soon as he was able, even though he expected to die for it. He expected to…be found out and destroyed for freeing me.’

Augus walked over to Ash, who couldn’t seem to look away, his face flushed and tears still spilling. Augus reached up carefully, giving Ash plenty of time to move away. He cupped his cheek, and Ash leaned into it.

‘I didn’t mean to hurt you,’ Ash said. ‘Not you.’

‘Then you need to stop hurting him,’ Augus said, thumbing tears away and wondering how he and Ash would ever come back from everything they’d experienced.

But if there was one thing Augus was practiced at, it was feats of healing. He’d find a way. Just not now. Not today. He was still too angry.

‘I’ll come find you later,’ Augus said. ‘I need to see how Gwyn’s doing. You’re to stay here, all right? Here or your rooms.’

‘I could talk to the Generals again,’ Ash said, clearing his throat. ‘I can try and fix-’

‘I think it’s best if you don’t,’ Augus said, ‘for now at least.’

‘The way Gulvi looked at me…’ Ash shook his head, took a shallow breath and dragged his fingers across his thighs. ‘Jesus, do you think I’ve fucked things up with her?’

‘Just take it as it comes,’ Augus said, stepping away. ‘I need to find Gwyn.’

He wanted to say something else, but there were no soothing words left in him. He’d told Ash that he still loved him, what else could he say? Anything else would sound false. He knew he would settle down, given enough time.

He left Ash sitting on a faintly glowing toadstool, hearing the sound of Ash’s breathing slip into tears as Augus closed the door behind him.

*

It was more difficult to find Gwyn than he’d suspected. He wasn’t in the raven arena any longer, and the common fae servants didn’t know where he was. Gulvi was nowhere to be seen. Finally, Augus had to seek out assistance from the trows. One trow led him not to the healing rooms, but to a small stone-walled room that held nothing more than a thin, long bed and Gwyn curled upon it, his eyes closed, his face clammy and pale with sweat.

‘Fetch Aleutia,’ Augus said. ‘Now.’

The trow nodded and ran off.

Augus knew that Gwyn wasn’t sleeping, but Gwyn hadn’t acknowledged him. His nostrils were flaring on every exhale. His good arm was a mess of flesh, his torso had been burned horribly, and his upper thigh was a mess.

‘You’ve dealt with things like this before, I expect,’ Augus forced himself to say.

‘I always heal,’ Gwyn said, his voice stiff and strained. ‘You shouldn’t have gotten Aleutia. Vane needs her.’
Augus didn’t even know where to start. There wasn’t a single chair to sit down on, and the bed was too narrow. Had Gwyn always done this? Go to rooms like this one when he needed to recover from something? Augus shook his head. Gwyn had likely been doing it since he was a child after Efnisien was through with him; finding places to hide that were preferably not rooms that anyone would find much use in.

‘I know I should apologise to you,’ Gwyn said, some minutes later.

‘Do you?’ Augus said, stopping himself from kneeling by Gwyn’s side. He suspected Gwyn did not want closeness while he dealt with his physical pain. This was not a scene. This was not a level of pain that could be turned to anything beneficial to either of them. There were holes in his flesh, the room smelled of barbecue.

At that moment, Aleutia entered, her large, busy form taking up what seemed like the room itself, though it was largely her energy and huge hair that seemed to take up most of the space. She set down her healing kit and then knelt by Gwyn’s side, picking at the fabric of his shirt and clucking under her tongue when it made a wet, ripping sound, attached to his skin. Gwyn groaned and then took a shaky breath that meant he was gathering himself to bear more.

‘Yep,’ Aleutia said, turning to Augus. ‘You’re probably not going to want to stay for this.’

‘I do not sicken easily,’ Augus said. ‘Do you need any assistance?’

‘Not really,’ Aleutia said, pulling at the shirt again while Gwyn shuddered from the pain. ‘I know what this one is like from the rumours. He’s not the kind of person that you need to hold down. Isn’t that right, King? Now, we’ve gotta get this fabric out of your skin and you’ll heal faster.’

‘Vane?’ Gwyn said, squeezing his eyes shut. ‘How is he?’

‘He’ll live. He’s healing well, asked me exactly the same thing about you. What a cutie. He had a lot more damage. One of the downsides to wearing your economy is that it’s a bitch to pick metal out of skin. I still haven’t gotten it all, but the poor dear needs a break.’

Aleutia went quiet after that, moving quickly. She pulled out a thermos of heated water and several cups, mixing different tinctures. One – Augus could tell by the scent – was designed to dull pain. Gwyn refused it, though he did take a second which would speed recovery.

Augus noticed the damage of Gwyn’s good hand, the dust of stone on his knuckles. Then, he looked at a section of stone with bloodied smears against it, cracks in the block. He stared up at the ceiling, taking several deep breaths.

Aleutia worked quickly and efficiently, and Gwyn thinned his lips and handled the pain, even as she used tweezers and her claws to pick out melted fibres from his skin. At one point she needed a scalpel, and simply cut it off him, taking a layer of skin with it. Even when she dusted herbal powders into his flesh to assist her own magic and recovery, Gwyn did nothing more than thin his lips to white lines. Knowing that Gwyn could bear this silently made Augus appreciate Gwyn’s willingness to vocalise pain and vulnerability when they were intimate together. It was a choice – Augus knew – for Gwyn to allow noise past his lips, to let Augus hear it.

As Aleutia finished up, Gwyn turned to her and placed a shaking hand on her forearm.

‘Can you fetch me…the common fae servants? Three of them?’

‘You sure?’ Aleutia said, staring at him.
‘Yes,’ Gwyn rasped.

Aleutia shrugged, walked briskly from the room, giving Augus a long look as she went. He couldn’t read her expression.

‘Gwyn,’ Augus said, as Aleutia closed the door.

‘Not now,’ Gwyn said. ‘Wait. Until after the servants have arrived.’

Augus hissed out a breath. Ten minutes later, the common fae servants arrived, two at once, and one a few minutes later.

‘Anath,’ Gwyn said. ‘I need you to go to Gulvi, and tell her to inform Ocypete’s and Kyoufu’s kin that their Generals were traitors to the Kingdom. Tell her to follow protocol. She’ll understand what to do. Rhiannon, you must coordinate the sending of Magisa’s remains to her kin, though we will hold off on informing them for the moment, until Gulvi can deal with that. And Seanan, if Vane is conscious, ask him directly how he wants to inform Braith and the fie elyllon that he is healing in the Unseelie palace. If not, send a missive directly to Princess Braith.’

‘What of Lord Ifir, Your Majesty?’ said Seanan.

‘He’ll be unconscious for some time. I need to first speak to Ifir, before dealing with the marid-djinn afrit. The last thing we need is civil war, and I shall do all I can to prevent it. They will suspect something, yes, but there is not much to be done. Hold off and I’ll keep you informed. You’re all dismissed. Unless there’s anything else?’

The common fae servants bowed and left the room, closing the door quietly behind them.

Gwyn let his mouth go slack, taking long, pained breaths, his eyes still closed. Aleutia had left a cup of pain-relieving medication, but Augus didn’t like his chances of getting Gwyn to take it.

You should at least try. Are you or are you not his Advisor?

Augus went to Gwyn’s side and knelt by the bed, looking down at him. Gwyn’s shirt was cut and burnt, and Augus could see the mess of scar tissue from the old wound that Kabiri had given him. He touched his fingers to it, and Gwyn lurched, crying out, his eyes flying open.

‘Careful,’ Augus said, pushing him back down with his other hand. ‘If you’re going to try and murder a wall with this arm, it’s going to have repercussions upon the nerves. Lie down properly.’

‘Get your hand off it,’ Gwyn gasped, and Augus forced himself to laugh, grateful that it came out smooth and confident.

‘No,’ Augus said. ‘I’m checking the damage. Aleutia deals with the most urgent of injuries, but this is the most chronic, and I suspect you forgot all about it while you decided to kill some of your Generals.’

Gwyn cut off a noise in the back of his throat and grit his teeth together. Augus used the silence, the stillness, to smooth Gwyn’s hair from where it had stuck to his forehead.

After a minute, he picked up the cup of hot water and slid his other hand behind Gwyn’s head, lifting it.

‘Drink this,’ Augus said.
‘No,’ Gwyn said, and Augus shook his head.

‘I’m not asking you. I’m telling you to drink it. It’s not a soporific. It does nothing more than dull pain. Drink it.’

Gwyn opened his eyes and Augus could see the tightened skin around them, how much pain Gwyn was fighting off.

‘I know you’re used to dealing with things in your own way,’ Augus said, modulating his voice, making it gentler, ‘but there are other ways to deal with these matters. I will not tell anyone that you did it this once, and it will make it easier to speak with you. Drink it, Gwyn.’

A twitch of muscles that could have been a nod, and Augus carefully tilted the cup of herbs to Gwyn’s mouth, making sure he drank all of it. The brew was bitter, and Gwyn made a face towards the end. After, Augus lowered the cup and then thumbed some of the medicine away from his mouth. Even his lips were cold. His body was redirecting all its energy, all its fuel, towards helping Gwyn heal.

‘Ash said that he’s been hurting you for months,’ Augus said. ‘I know why you didn’t tell me, Gwyn.’

‘He’s your brother,’ Gwyn said, as though that explained everything. ‘And now this. Gods. I have to do something. I can’t just leave this unpunished. I have to…make some kind of stand. I can’t let my Inner Court treat me like this. I can’t. It was fine before. When no one else knew about it. But this is different. Even Crielle never tried to sabotage my military like that.’

‘Just every other part of your life,’ Augus observed blandly.

‘Just every other part,’ Gwyn echoed.

His mauled shoulder radiated a thick, palpable heat. Augus didn’t trust using meridians to help unblock the nerves at this point. He moved his fingers away and skimmed them down Gwyn’s torso, avoiding the worst of the damage. Gwyn would need to eat, and a great deal, to sustain this kind of healing. As it was, any fae who was dealt multiple severe injuries would take much longer to heal than if they were just dealt one.

‘I’ll not make any decisions until I’ve talked to him,’ Gwyn said finally. ‘Ifir was the one who organised the mutiny. I’ll need you to interrogate him while I’m there.’ Gwyn’s teeth gritted together and his eyes opened. ‘I want him ruined. There were so many ways he could have chosen to deal with the information that Ash gave to him, and he chose that? But he is the most effective commander of large-scale militaries, and his military is over fifty percent of our numbers. Gods help me, if I can salvage something, I will. We can’t have civil war. We can’t. There are already enough civil skirmishes, but something of the scale the marid-djinn could inflict? We’d be through.’

‘The other Generals?’

‘The ones that are not dead, re-pledged their allegiance. Possibly out of fear. Do you know what I find myself thinking? Albion would know what to do. He had to deal with dissent all the time with his sea-fae.’

‘Ah, yes, Albion. Let’s go to him and ask shall we?’

Gwyn’s smile was more of a grimace.
‘Three thousand or so years of military training, you’ll know what to do once you’ve given
yourself some time,’ Augus said.

‘I know what to do now,’ Gwyn said. ‘I just don’t like it.’

‘And? What do you have to do?’

‘I need to find a way to convince Ifir to be loyal to me, even if I have to break him to do it. Even if
it’s a forced loyalty until such time that I can eliminate him and find someone else to take over his
position amongst the marid-djinn. He cares for the Unseelie too. And he’s right, Augus. I wouldn’t
follow a commander who had a heartsong of surrender. I wouldn’t. Which leads me to the second
thing I must do…’

He turned his head and hesitated, then seemed to come to some conclusion.

‘Augus, once, I asked you to take my corrupted heartsong of triumph and break me of it; and you
did. I need you to do it again.’

Augus stared at him. He made a sound of disbelief. ‘Gwyn, it’s one thing to dismantle a heartsong
like triumph. Quite another to do it with a heartsong like surrender. You do realise my methods,
don’t you? You want me to force you to submit, and somehow, through that submission, break a
heartsong of surrender? I suspect it will be counterproductive.’

‘If anyone can do it, you can,’ Gwyn said. ‘I need it gone. Please, think about it. You can find a
way. I do not care how harsh your methods need be. I don’t care what you have to do. Only that
you do it.’

Augus pressed his palm to Gwyn’s forehead and closed his eyes, trying to think of what to do.
Ideas floated around, but all of them would require…a great deal more thought. It wasn’t even
appropriate for one fae to ask another to interfere directly with their heartsong. It would have been
repellent, if Augus hadn’t done it for Gwyn before.

‘I will see what I can do,’ Augus said finally.

‘I’m sorry to have put you in this position, with Ash,’ Gwyn said. ‘I never wanted you to know
how things were between the two of us.’

‘You were not the one who put me in this position,’ Augus said, sighing. ‘I think there is much
going on with Ash and I don’t think I have the…resources to give him what he needs. He has
always resented me spending too much time with others, and I always eschewed company so much
that his jealousy of others has never been so provoked until now. Worse, I think he is scapegoating
you to avoid his own deeds. But Gwyn, if I had known- You really thought I wouldn’t care what he
was doing to you?’

‘He is your brother,’ Gwyn said, closing his eyes. ‘He is your brother, and what am I, against that?’

Augus shook his head, frowning. While it was true that at least a part of Gwyn knew that Augus
cared for him, the rest expected something like this. Augus’ chest hurt.

‘I thought you wouldn’t believe me,’ Gwyn said. ‘Or that…you would think- Honestly, Augus, it
doesn’t matter. He wasn’t doing that much. I wasn’t expecting this type of acceleration from him,
though Gulvi did warn me. Gods, I’m an idiot to have underestimated him in the first place.’

‘What will you do?’ Augus said.
‘I think…if I am to keep him out of a cell, he will need to show some measure of contrition. And I will want a blood-oath, Augus.’

Gwyn opened his eyes, something stubborn in his gaze.

Augus could only bring himself to nod. ‘Do it. Have it in place until such time as he can see that you genuinely mean me no harm. Do you want me there while you speak to him?’

‘No,’ Gwyn said. ‘Unless you think-?’

‘No,’ Augus said. ‘I don’t think I can be around him right now.’

Augus was taken aback when Gwyn shifted and then pushed himself upright with a groan. Augus tried to push Gwyn back down again, but Gwyn placed his hand gently on Augus’ forearm.

‘I have to,’ Gwyn said. ‘The remaining generals are waiting for me. I need to get Aleutia to tend to Ifir and I must interrogate him when he’s conscious again – I’ll need you for that. I need to speak to Ash. I have to check on Vane. I cannot afford this indulgence of time.’

‘You are injured,’ Augus said.

Gwyn’s smile was cynical, self-deprecating, and he squeezed at Augus’ forearm as he swung his legs over the bed. He paused then, blanched, and placed a hand gently to the worst of the wounds on his torso.

‘I have been injured before, and I shall be injured again. Since you seem to know so much about it, you should know that Efnisien dealt me much worse, and I was expected to continue my training and education as usual.’

Augus stared at him. Of course, he knew, but to see the evidence of it in front of him and know that Efnisien was capable of worse, when Gwyn was nothing more than a child…

‘So you see, Augus,’ Gwyn continued, forcing himself to stand, ‘I am healing, and this is too much of a crisis point for me to rest. I’ve taken pain medication, something to speed recovery. I’ll be fine.’

‘You do realise,’ Augus said, ‘that if you want me to break you of this heartsong, you are going to need to give me the indulgence of time. To break you down, Gwyn, it will take longer than a day.’

Gwyn placed a hand on Augus’ shoulder, some soldierly sign of camaraderie which Augus wanted to roll his eyes at; it was clear that Gwyn was already mentally prepared to deal with his Generals, with Ifir, with Ash.

‘You’ll have it,’ Gwyn said. ‘But first, I must salvage what I can.’

He started to call his light to him, and before he disappeared he squeezed Augus’ shoulder one more time before letting go.

‘I’m glad you came to find me,’ Gwyn said. ‘Grateful.’

Augus nodded in acknowledgement, then frowned when he was left in the room alone. He looked at the blood and cracks in the stone that Gwyn must have punched repeatedly. As much as he wished he could explore the healthier aspects of Gwyn’s heartsong before it disappeared, Gwyn was right; it had to go.
In our next chapter, ‘Want:’

‘Fuck,’ Ash said, looking down at the table. His shoulders shifted, like he was bunching his hands beneath the table. ‘I don’t know. Am I going into a cell? Like Ifir?’

‘I need more than ‘I don’t know,’’ Gulvi snapped, and Gwyn turned to her and raised an eyebrow. He was quite certain that he was the one who was supposed to be running this show. Gulvi shook her head at him, and then turned back to Ash, thumping the table sharply with the flat of her hand. ‘Ash, my darling, fucking look at me.’

Ash looked at her, his eyes brighter than usual. His gaze flickered once to Gwyn, as though afraid, and then back to Gulvi.

‘I don’t know,’ Ash said, more desperate than before. ‘Look, I don’t know. Augus… talked to me too, and it’s kind of occurred to me that maybe I didn’t- maybe I wasn’t doing the right thing. Which I know- I know is obvious to all of you, okay? I get that. But I thought…I don’t know what I thought. After some of the things Augus said, I don’t know what I was thinking. I was mad. I did something really stupid. I didn’t think it would- I didn’t think it would end like this.’
Want

Chapter Notes

No new tags. A huge wave to all the readers, old and new, you're all awesome. Also, for new readers, my Tumblr inbox is always open to story or character asks, or you're welcome to leave comments, whatever's comfortable! :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Gwyn

*

It could have been worse.

That’s what he kept telling himself, despite the pain, the vague abdominal cramps that were duller after the medication that Augus had encouraged him to take. But there was a numb panic in the back of his mind. The sense that water was trickling through his fingers and he couldn’t hold onto any semblance of order now. That it would all be lost. They were expecting him to perform great things and at some point he’d started expected great things from himself too.

But he had to push that part of himself aside. It was indulgent and he couldn’t afford it. So instead, he told himself that it could have been worse.

He changed into a new shirt, and then fetched Aleutia, only to watch as she looked over Ifir in the Unseelie prison and made sure that Ifir was going to live. A few times, Aleutia had turned to look at him with something calculating on her face, and Gwyn knew that she was likely more loyal to Ifir than she ever would be to him. She had been the battle healer of the Unseelie for so long that Gwyn had wanted her assassinated when he still worked for the Seelie. No wonder she wanted to be sure that Ifir would live.

After that, all of his surviving Generals – barring Vane – were already sitting and talking amongst each other when he arrived and outlined his plans. Not that he had many plans to outline. They all agreed that civil war with the marid-djinn afrith should be avoided. Most stared at the evidence of Gwyn’s wounds on his thigh and didn’t look away. Zudanna still carried Ifir’s golden mace and it looked like she didn’t want to give it back in a hurry. Gwyn noticed that while they might not trust him and his heartsong, they trusted Zudanna. She led the second largest military and her kudlaks were fearsome.

So it definitely could have been worse.

‘Darling?’ Gulvi said, interrupting him thirty minutes later, while he stared at a piece of parchment, a fountain pen gripped too tightly in his hand. He was alone. His mind was foggy. The herbs had worn off, his body wasn’t healing quickly enough, he needed to eat to speed things up, he didn’t have time.

Gulvi looked concerned, her eyebrows pinched together, her mouth tense.

‘I can’t concentrate,’ he said finally. ‘I don’t think I should put him in a cell. It will look bad –
worse – if I put the much beloved gadabout of the Unseelie Court into a prison cell. If people think
things are bad enough that even he’d want to betray me…and so…’

Gwyn stared down at the parchment again.

‘I can’t think of the right wording.’

He pushed the parchment towards her, dropped the fountain pen and barely managed to hold off
making any noise as he pressed his hands against still healing skin, shuddering. He felt clammy.
Gulvi thankfully said nothing at all, and sat down in the quiet strategy room, looking over the
paper. She hummed, and he took a deep breath, hating the way it made his injured skin and
muscles expand. This was always so much easier to deal with in the middle of a battlefield.

‘I don’t think this is so bad, actually. You could start with this.’

‘I need you to be with me when I talk to him,’ Gwyn said, meeting her black eyes. ‘I don’t trust
myself. I don’t trust him.’

‘Afraid you’ll kill him?’ Gulvi said, though her smile held no humour in it.

‘No,’ Gwyn said. ‘Maybe. Just…this is something that needs to be witnessed. Augus is too angry.
You seem to be holding together.’

‘I’m angry,’ Gulvi said. ‘I heard what you said to him in the height of your anger. Foundless
abuse. Those are strong words, Gwyn. And they are not ones I hear from you.’

‘We all say things that we don’t mean, in the heat of the moment,’ Gwyn said.

‘And sometimes we say things we mean very much.’ She stared at him, and then pushed the
parchment back towards him, her fingertips tapping at the paper. ‘This is a start. Gwyn, I know he
can be vindictive, oui? He has been doing things, or saying things, yes? You said so yourself. That
he did not even tell me that he was doing these things to you…’

‘This isn’t something I want to talk about,’ Gwyn said. ‘What I want to do, is get this situation in
hand.’

He stood up, tried to shove the pain to the back of his head where a headache seemed to be building
in strength by the minute. Then he picked up the parchment, the fountain pen, and the small knife
he’d fetched.

Gwyn teleported to the throne room, taking Gulvi with him. He looked around slowly, and then
saw Ash by a pillar. Ash stiffened and moved away from it when he saw them, his shoulders
tensing. He stared at Gwyn, his eyes clear of vindictive fury for once.

Gwyn pointed at him, and then beckoned him with two fingers, not even looking to see if Ash was
following as he turned and walked out of the throne room towards one of the more private
interview rooms. Gulvi followed. Gwyn caught the sound of Ash’s steps, less crisp, more shuffling
in them.

\*Like a recalcitrant child. So help me, three Generals had better not be dead because he felt
childish.\*

The dark wooden table before them in the interview room, was simple, rustic. There were six
chairs, two on either side and one at either head. Gwyn took a chair from the broader side of the
table and sat down, hiding the urge to wince as it aggravated his wounds. Gulvi, after a small
hesitation, sat next to him.

Ash sat opposite Gwyn, now watching with something different in his eyes. Gwyn couldn’t pick the expression, he wasn’t sure he’d seen it on Ash’s face before.

‘Because of your treason,’ Gwyn said, meeting that gaze and squaring his shoulders, ‘three Generals are dead. Vane – another General – lies in excruciating pain in the healing rooms while Aleutia picks melted metal out of his body, and Ifir is underfae, and in a cell in our Unseelie prison, pending interrogation and judgement.’

Ash’s face paled, and Gwyn’s lips thinned. He couldn’t quite gather his thoughts together. His body hurt. He wished Augus were here for this. He didn’t want to have to deal with it at all. There was a sneaking guilt that lurked in his gut, that if only he’d done something sooner, said something sooner, actually stood up to Ash like most people would…this would never have happened.

‘Why, Ash?’ Gulvi said, interrupting the flow of Gwyn’s thoughts. ‘Why? La! I know you don’t trust Augus’ taste in men, but you trusted me, didn’t you? Once?’

‘Fuck,’ Ash said, looking down at the table. His shoulders shifted, like he was bunching his hands beneath the table. ‘I don’t know. Am I going into a cell? Like Ifir?’

‘I need more than ‘I don’t know,’” Gulvi snapped, and Gwyn turned to her and raised an eyebrow. He was quite certain that he was the one who was supposed to be running this show. Gulvi shook her head at him, and then turned back to Ash, thumping the table sharply with the flat of her hand. ‘Ash, my darling, fucking look at me.’

Ash looked at her, his eyes brighter than usual. His gaze flickered once to Gwyn, as though afraid, and then back to Gulvi.

‘I don’t know,’ Ash said, more desperate than before. ‘Look, I don’t know. Augus…talked to me too, and it’s kind of occurred to me that maybe I didn’t- that I wasn’t doing the right thing. Which I know- I know is obvious to all of you, okay? I get that. But I thought…I don’t know what I thought. After some of the things Augus said, I don’t know what I was thinking. I was mad. I honestly thought I could see something that no one else could. I’ve felt like that in this Court before, and I didn't do anything then and I just... So I did something really stupid. I didn’t think it would- I didn’t think it would end like this.’

‘It would have been easier if they’d just killed me, yes?’ Gwyn said quietly. ‘After all, you and Gulvi have been monarchs before, why not again?’

Ash stared at him, stared like he could see into him, and it was disconcerting. Instead of fury or agitation or annoyance, Ash was looking at him like he could peel back all the layers of who he was. Gwyn realised he had seen the expression before, but on Augus’ face.

Gwyn pressed his back into the chair, frowning. What on earth had Augus said to him?

‘I’ve been blaming you for a lot of things that I think are my fault,’ Ash said finally, tilting his head. ‘A lot of things. Yeah, I wanted you dead. I’m going into a cell anyway, so it doesn’t matter right? I wanted you gone. The first time I ever met you properly, you were trying to talk me into defeating my own brother. You plied me with alcohol, tried to sweet-talk me, showed me Terho like…like it was fine to parade around a victim to show how damaging Augus could be. You used us. All of us.’

A shutter closed in Gwyn’s mind. A door slamming shut. This again. None of them understood
what it was like. He had two tasks as King. Only two. It wasn’t as though he wanted to hurt Augus, nor did he always appreciate that he had the kind of mind that knew how to use people against each other. Crielle had taught him far too well, and the Oak King had only added accents to all of it, teaching the ins and outs of betrayal.

Gwyn opened his mouth to speak, and Gulvi cut across him, her wings flaring so far that they bumped against Gwyn’s shoulder.

‘He delivered Augus back to you!’ Gulvi said, incredulous. ‘He delivered someone who was supposed to die, whom everyone wanted to die! He made a promise to you when he didn't have to. He owed us nothing, and if you didn't help him, Gwyn would have had no alternative but to kill him, with the path that waterhorse was on! Instead, Gwyn delivered someone who didn’t retaliate when I stabbed him for my revenge. Who has – for whatever reason – stayed true to this Court and performed the common work day in and day out even though we all knew it was crushing his spirit. He helps Julvia, he defers to Aleutia, he’s friends with Fenwrel. It would be far easier for me if Augus hadn’t come back the way he is now. Tell me, again, how Gwyn defeating Augus was the worst thing that ever fucking happened to you. Because as far as I can see it, my darling, the only reason you got a semblance of your brother back was because of him.’

‘Because of Augus,’ Gwyn said, clearing his throat, staring at the both of them. ‘Because of Augus. He healed himself. I had very little to do with it, I assure you.’

Ash was staring at him again, and Gwyn was starting to think he liked that expression even less than Ash’s glittering malice. He couldn't tell what was going on, and it made him feel wrong-footed. In the silence that followed, he pushed forward the parchment and the knife, and watched as Ash’s eyes combed the page quietly. His nostrils flared, he closed his eyes as though pained, and then he placed his fingers on the hilt of the knife.

Ash looked up, eyes bright with tears, lips slanted in a grimace. It didn’t suit him. It was then that Gwyn realised he couldn’t feel it – that warm, sparkling glamour that Ash always brought everywhere with him, like champagne bubbles. There was none of it. Ash was keeping it down. He didn’t have to, and he was choosing to keep it out of the way.

‘Is it true?’ Ash said. ‘Augus…said some things. Is it true? How your family treated you?’

Cold ice was poured through him, and he felt something in him cool down to granite. He could have been made of stone then, he didn’t even feel the pain anymore. He stared at Ash and wanted to hurt him, wanted to yell at Augus. There were certain things that Ash could never know, because with his glamour, with his malice, he could do too much damage with them. It wouldn’t have mattered so much if it was someone else, but Gwyn had always looked up to Ash’s ease with people, his warm glamour, his friendliness. Gwyn had opened a tentative door towards a connection with Ash, and Ash had used it to harm him without even knowing it was there.

The sense of being stone broke away, and Gwyn just stared at Ash, unable to bring words together into complete sentences. He knew he should find some easy way to ignore it, to deflect.

‘The blood-oath,’ Gwyn said finally, his voice rougher than usual. ‘This may keep you out of a cell. At least for now.’

‘Yeah,’ Ash said, looking at the parchment again. ‘Yeah, okay. This is…’

He picked up the knife and read over the words again. He made a horizontal nick on the inside of his little finger, and as the blood welled to a vivid droplet, he took a deep breath.
‘I, Ash Glashtyn, of the Unseelie Court, swear this blood-oath to the Unseelie King, Gwyn ap Nudd and promise that I’ll never work against the Unseelie King or the Kingdom again, unless I have good reason. And that, if I feel I do have good reason, I will go to at least two members of the Unseelie Inner Court and discuss those reasons openly and honestly, before acting on any decisions. This I swear, on pain of death, should I not obey.’

He read the words verbatim, then went quiet, the blood-oath settling in his body. Gwyn sighed, a small coil of relief unfurling inside of him. It was progress, wasn’t it? It would keep them safer, at least for now.

Gwyn took the knife back, the parchment, and looked at Ash.

‘Now,’ Gwyn said. ‘What do you want?’

Ash’s eyes crinkled in confusion, he bit the inside of his lip. He looked over to Gulvi as though she had the answers, but she said nothing at all.

‘What?’ Ash said. ‘What do you mean, what do I want?’

‘It’s plain that you’re not happy here,’ Gwyn said. ‘None of us particularly are. Gulvi doesn’t like being a member of the Inner Court, Augus would prefer that he’d never met the Nightingale, and I don’t enjoy being King. But we’re not the ones trying to sow dissent and destruction from the inside of a barely functioning system. It’s clear that you’re at something of a loose end. What do you want? Is it more time in the human world? What?’

‘You’re asking me…what I want to do?’ Ash said slowly. ‘I thought…How come you’re not just, I dunno, yelling at me or something?’

‘I did that,’ Gwyn said. ‘I may do it again. But it doesn’t tend to solve anything in the long-term. A blood-oath is all well and good, it allows us to have a concrete sense that there are certain things you can’t do to harm us. Now, what do you want?’

Ash blinked at Gwyn like he was talking another language. Finally, he cleared his throat and looked over to Gulvi, and then his eyes slid towards the door.

‘No, darling, I’m not sure I should be leaving you alone with him at all.’

‘Please?’ Ash said, face eloquent, his glamour still remarkably quiet. ‘Just for like a few minutes. Please?’

‘It’s fine, Gulvi,’ Gwyn said. They had the blood-oath now. It meant something. Even if Gwyn didn’t put as much faith in them as others did, it meant something that Ash had made it.

Gulvi muttered something under her breath and then sighed, exhausted. ‘I’ll be just outside.’

The door closed behind her, and Ash folded his arms on the table and then sank his head onto his forearms. Gwyn couldn’t tell how much of it was an act, how much of it wasn’t. He was still somewhat shocked that Gulvi and Augus seemed to be – at least on the surface of it – on Gwyn’s side.

They have to be. It’s not about you, this mutiny is a level of public disgrace that we can’t have right now.

‘I don’t know what I want,’ Ash said, looking up after a few seconds. ‘The human world is great, but it’s not safe. I know it’s not safe. But it’s also not really safe for like…humans, right now, to be
around me. I’m…I changed, man. When the Nightingale lived here, and then when Augus was captured, I’d lost everything. I didn’t know he was still alive. I didn’t know he was going to come back. I thought I thought a lot of terrible stuff. I went from loving alcohol to being an alcoholic and I can’t shake that off either. I think I need…help? But fae don’t go in for therapists, do they? I need something, and I don’t know if I can get it in this Court.’

‘Did the Nightingale ever hurt you?’ Gwyn said, eyes narrowing.

‘Not…like he did Augus.’

‘That’s not an answer.’

‘It’s kind of an answer,’ Ash said, placing a hand over his eyes. ‘I dunno. He mostly just…he threatened things. I knew- I knew he was finding ways to hurt Augus but I could never catch him at it, and I could only ever see like the aftermath. When Augus was…when he was…and Augus wouldn’t let me help him. Like, at all. The Nightingale knew that. After he’d hurt Augus he’d hang around me, ‘cuz he could feed off how miserable it made me. So no, he never really hurt me like he hurt Augus, but he was a shitbag anyway.’

Ash laughed and then the hand against his face dropped back to the table. He stared at Gwyn again. ‘Augus said that you- that when you were younger-’

‘No,’ Gwyn said, finding himself looking down and hating himself for it. ‘Not ever again. I don’t know what he told you. But I don’t talk about it. Any of it. And it’s not fit for- Don’t talk about it with anyone.’

What if Augus had told Ash about Mafydd? Gwyn’s chest hurt, and that, in turn, reminded him of how much the rest of his body hurt.

‘Jesus,’ Ash said, his voice breaking.

Gwyn looked up when Ash didn’t say anything else. Ash’s expression was stricken.

‘What is it?’ Gwyn said, reluctantly.

‘Nothing, just…I just think I see something that I didn’t see before.’

Gwyn’s jaw worked with tension. He didn’t want this. He didn’t want this attitude change. It would have been easier for him if Ash was unrepentant, but easier for the entire Court if he wasn’t. Gwyn took a deep breath in through his nose and Ash seemed to sense the change in tension, because his fingers twitched.

‘I didn’t mean to get anyone killed,’ Ash said.

‘Except me.’

‘Except you.’ Ash’s face crumpled, but he steeled himself, took a deep breath and fisted his hands on the table, getting control of an emotional reaction that Gwyn was suddenly grateful he wouldn’t have to see. The man had tried to get him killed. The mutiny could ruin everything.

‘I want to imprison you,’ Gwyn said, his voice hard. He cleared his throat, shook his head, because if he wasn’t going to do it – not today – he had to keep focusing on other things. ‘You said that you could see a therapist in the human world? Would that be a safe option, given how you feel towards humans?’
‘Probably,’ Ash said. ‘I guess. If I’m not looking for sex and just looking for conversation, it’s not so bad. Especially if I’m sober. And I’ve seen human therapists before. A few times.’

‘Fenwrel could likely provide you with a ward to protect you from Seelie fae scouts, and the Court can pay for the therapist.’

Ash blinked at him and then shook his head absently. ‘I have money. The ward though, that could be good.’

‘You still haven’t answered my question, Ash. What do you want?’

‘I have no fucking idea,’ Ash said. ‘I’m not…I see Augus and Gulvi working so hard and it’s so weird and I just want to be able to help and I don’t know how to help. But I was thinking- I was thinking that I helped a bit during the Triumphal Entry, didn’t I? Sort of? In amongst everything else? Like, I made sure everyone was happy as much as I could, and kept the drinks flowing. I know I helped. I could put my glamour to good use maybe. If you’d let me. I’d understand if you didn’t want to. But with the blood-oath, I couldn’t work against you, right? Or the Kingdom? I could- I mean, I could help. Maybe.’

‘Let’s give that a few weeks,’ Gwyn said quietly, thoughtfully. ‘I need to let the dust settle.’

‘They’d all understand if you put me in a cell,’ Ash said, shaking his head in confusion. ‘Gulvi and Augus even, I’m sure. I’d understand. Why aren’t you just doing that? Just because of Augus? Because you care for him?’

‘No,’ Gwyn said. ‘Not just because of that. Your brother got a second chance, and he’s more than proven himself. I, too, know what it’s like to…be given an opportunity for change when all feels lost. I think you, as well, given that the underworld sickness is still in your system, given that…you’ve had years of being in situations that many could not understand or fathom; I think it may be worth seeing what you do with another chance. But – and I don’t say this lightly – you get one. And this is it.’

‘I did not expect anything like compassion from you, pretty much ever,’ Ash said, his breath shaking. ‘Which…seems stupid now.’

Gwyn stared at him, still feeling cold and detached. He didn’t trust Ash. He didn’t like him. There was a time when he’d hoped…well, he wasn’t sure what he’d hoped for. To earn the approval of one of the most beloved fae? To know what it was like to have that easy glamour wrapped around him for once, and it be genuine? Gwyn smiled bitterly and looked down at the parchment, before folding it in half, over the knife.

He stood up, and Ash reached for him across the table to grab his wrist. Gwyn jerked back quickly, and then felt like a fool. That was not the way a King responded to a member of his Inner Court. Not with a flinch, not like that. Especially not now, when he’d already retaliated, when he’d already gained something of his power back.

Even when you were King of the Seelie, Crielle still made you cower.

‘Sorry,’ Ash said quickly, his voice muted, he stared at his own hand, and then at Gwyn again. ‘Sorry. I’m sorry for all of it. You don’t have to believe me, okay? Okay? Just-’

‘Do you know whatannoys me most, about all this, Ash? It’s not that you could have ruined the fragile grip I already had on that military, because gods know they don’t want to trust someone who has been in the Seelie military for three thousand years. It’s not even that you told them the
truth. It’s that in the space of a handful of hours, you appear to have gone from maliciously trying to ruin me, to this level of contrition. Which makes it all feel cheap. It makes it seem as though those deaths? They didn’t really need to happen. Ocypete had children, sisters! Ifir has two daughters, two sons, a wife. Vane wears most of his wealth and a lot of it was destroyed, along with the agony he suffered during the attack. Kyoufu was already chafing at me about the destruction of war and now his remains will be returned to his people, with the knowledge that I killed him.’

Gwyn couldn’t look at him. He couldn’t even look. He walked over to the door and placed his hand on it, fingers curling. His whole body was a giant ache.

‘We all do very idiotic things, sometimes. Your brother, in particular, ruined a Court and destroyed many lives to try and- simply because he could not deal with something without lashing out and hurting others. So you remind me very much of him. Except that he never treated me the way you did. Ever.’

Gwyn heard Ash’s trembling inhale and he shook his head, hated himself for still speaking.

‘He could have,’ Gwyn said to the door. ‘Possibly, he should have.’

‘I used to think you didn’t tell anyone about what I was doing because secretly you felt guilty, and knew I was right to say everything I was saying.’

Gwyn’s lips twisted up into a grimace that was almost a smile and finally, he turned back to Ash. He shrugged with one shoulder, hated how it twisted all the wounds at his side. ‘You don’t understand, Ash. But I did feel those things. I still would. If you hadn’t done what you did, if you hadn’t made this…into what it’s become, I still wouldn’t have said anything.’

‘Because you were taught not to,’ Ash said, wiping at his eyes.

‘It doesn’t matter why,’ Gwyn said quietly. ‘I’m not going to let you treat me like that again. Please excuse me.’

He opened the door, closed it behind him, and forgot that Gulvi was waiting just outside. She caught the worn expression on his face before he could tuck it away, and the gaze she directed at him was stern.

‘I can’t,’ Gwyn said, feeling like he was unravelling. ‘Not now.’

‘Then, fine,’ Gulvi said. ‘In other news, the invitations for the Masque and the Winter Court have been sent out today.’

‘Already?’ Gwyn said, blinking. It felt like only a week ago that he’d announced the events.

‘We had a schedule, Gwyn. I think it’s important that we stick to it.’

‘Yes,’ Gwyn nodded, a little dazed. ‘I don’t have time to-’

‘That’s why the Winter Court is being managed by the rest of us. Do you think it’s time for me to bring in some more trusted advisors, darling?’

‘I don’t know that I’ll trust them, but yes.’

Gulvi smiled and looked him over. ‘Oh for things that hardly matter – event management and such. Besides, Augus has already said he’ll manage your costume for the Masque.’
‘He…has?’ That was definitely news to him.

‘Something about him having your measurements already?’

‘I…don’t like the sound of that. Him picking out my mask. That-’

‘Ah, well, he’s always a peacock, darling, so I wouldn’t fret. Augus will want you to look good, or at the very least striking. Can’t trust him to run a Kingdom, but you can trust him as a tailor! Now, can I go check in on our other wayward waterhorse? Or do you want me to leave him alone?’

‘Do as you wish,’ Gwyn said, nodding to her in respect. ‘I need to see how Vane is doing.’

He teleported away, trying to ignore the band of muscles tightening around his head.

*

Vane was conscious and covered in poultices when Gwyn arrived in the largest healing room. There were twenty one unoccupied cots, and Vane was in the twenty second. It wasn’t until Gwyn pulled up a chair to sit next to him, that he realised Augus was in the room, going through a cabinet of herbal equipment.

Augus turned around and lifted a hand, and then pointed to a jar. ‘Just getting some herbs for Julvia.’

Gwyn nodded. He turned back to Vane, looked him over, even though he was mostly covered with a sheet. Half of his face was covered with a poultice, which meant tissue was still regenerating underneath.

‘Your Majesty,’ Vane said, the eye that Gwyn could see looking cheerful. ‘Good of you…to make it.’

‘Has Aleutia removed all of the metal?’

Vane stared at him, his blue eye wide and pained, and then his arm twitched up out from under the sheet covered in red, raw skin, and he pointed to a basin by his bed. It was filled with tiny bits of bloodied silver, gold, other metals and alloys. Gwyn frowned to see it all, there were also some gems that had been affected by the heat. The metal had a waxy look to it, made his own wounds throb just to think about it.

‘The Court can reimburse you for what you’ve lost.’ Gwyn didn’t actually know if that was true, but the Unseelie Court would certainly try. He placed his hand on the basin to look more closely, and was surprised when Vane’s dry palm covered his own. He looked down at the smaller hand, the smoke-blackened nails, then looked at Vane.

‘You can’t, really,’ Vane said, his voice not as smoke-roughened as Gwyn had expected. ‘There were so many…spells laid into it all. Years of magic in that jewellery. All broken. Are you okay?’

‘Are you?’ Gwyn said, frowning. ‘That was brave of you. But unnecessary. Vane, I am King. It is far harder for them to kill me, than it is you.’

‘I would have done the same for Princess Braith,’ Vane said, half-smiling. ‘I would have done the same for anyone I cared about. Aleutia told me the same thing. I didn’t think. I didn’t have much time to think. At least I won’t scar. My pretty face is going to be pretty again.’

‘I think it would still be pretty even if you did scar,’ Gwyn said, laughing. ‘Though it’s good to see
you’re keeping in high spirits.’

‘What ended up…happening?’ Vane said, curling his fingers over Gwyn’s hand, as though anxious. ‘I don’t remember much. Aleutia didn’t tell me much either.’

‘Ifir has been demoted to underfae status and he’s currently in a cell, pending interrogation. Kyoufu, Ocypete and Magisa are dead. The rest of the Generals re-pledged their alliance to me, and-

‘That’s great though,’ Vane said, offering a game smile. ‘Really great.’

The sheet that covered him was stained with blood, poultices, the clear fluid that wept from healing wounds and those that didn’t want to heal. The room smelled of sickness, even though the healing rooms were hardly used. He wondered how much of it was the herbs that he could hear Augus fetching. Jars with their lids being unscrewed, the sound of him using a metal scoop to measure out what he needed on an old-fashioned set of scales.

A traitorous part of him wished that Vane wasn’t here, that he was alone with Augus. That, once more, Augus was by his side as he had been in the other room, touching his hair, his forehead. He didn’t let himself look over, but he wanted to.

‘Aleutia says I’ll be well enough to teleport back home soon. That lava stuff of Ifir’s packs a punch, doesn’t it? They should use it in battle more. Shame they…don’t, really.’

‘Don’t say that, maybe they’ll decide they want to use it in a civil war.’

‘Oh no.’ Vane closed his eyes – or at least, he closed the one that Gwyn could still see. ‘Oh no, I didn’t think… The fie elfyllon will do whatever we can. I don’t even know how you’re just sitting there like that. You’re so strong, Gwyn. I wish I could be that strong. Aleutia said you were really injured too.’

‘He was,’ Augus said, coming over, his healing kit stocked and a knapsack of herbs hanging over one shoulder. He came to stand behind Gwyn, and Vane looked up at him. He seemed, if anything, annoyed that Augus was there. Gwyn supposed that not everyone had the same reasons to view Augus in the same light as Gwyn did. It would take time for everyone to come to accept him, after all that he’d done.

‘Do you need anything from me?’ Gwyn said.

‘You still looking for a treasurer?’ Vane said, making a small, amused sound, and then gasping in pain. His hand went into spasm over Gwyn’s, and he made a reedy sound, almost like a whistle.

‘Do you want me to fetch Aleutia again?’

‘There’s not much more she can do now,’ Vane said. ‘My body has to just…knit together. She’s coming back in twenty minutes anyway. Getting some more herbs for me. I’m joking, by the way, about the treasurer thing. I mean, not really, but you know. It’s a joke. I don’t need anything. It’s nice of you to visit me. Really nice.’

‘I’ll try and visit again before you’re well enough to be teleported home,’ Gwyn said, turning his palm and gently squeezing Vane’s hand, his thin fingers. ‘If you can itemise the jewellery you lost, we will try and reimburse you. The injury happened on Unseelie land, you should have been better protected. I’m sorry I couldn’t do more.’

‘I’m sorry,’ Vane said, his eye going brighter. He looked away then, and shook his head. ‘The
King needs to be protected. I’m just glad you seem to be doing okay.’ He turned back and raised an eyebrow. ‘You are, yes?’ He smiled.

‘Truly,’ Gwyn said, standing. ‘Heal well, Vane.’

‘Thanks so much for coming by, it means…a lot,’ Vane said, turning his head to watch him go. Augus followed, and Gwyn shot Vane a smile as he walked back down between the beds and the drawn back curtains, between vines and plants gamely climbing up stone walls, until he reached the double doors and closed them gently behind them both.

Augus had a hand up to his mouth, amusement in his eyes.

‘What?’ Gwyn said.

Augus lowered his hand and hummed happily behind a closed mouth. ‘He adores you. I’m quite certain that is one General that wants to be ploughed by the King.’

‘What?’ Gwyn said, staring.

‘Really?’ Augus said, looking at him with pleased incredulity.

‘He’s just sweet-tempered, and eager to please. It’s not uncommon.’

‘Gwyn,’ Augus said, patient, a light in his eyes dancing. ‘What’s not uncommon is for soldiers and officers to lust after authority figures. Then they tend to become sweet-tempered and eager to please.’

‘You’re a cynic,’ Gwyn said flatly.

‘You- Still?’ Augus laughed outright then, the sound so rare and so genuine that Gwyn wanted to capture it in his fingers, even though he felt put out. ‘Still, Gwyn? Well, not that I’m the type to feel threatened, but it helps that you’re so wilfully oblivious.’

‘He’s grateful to be alive!’

‘Mm, I’m sure,’ Augus said, nodding in conspiratorial agreement. But then he took one look at Gwyn’s torso and stepped forwards, his expression clearing to something far more sober. ‘Your health. How is it really?’

Gwyn looked both ways down the long hall. It was completely clear of people, but he couldn’t break old habits. ‘I’m healing. But I haven’t sustained injuries to this degree for some time. I’m finding it- You should know that your brother accepted the blood-oath. He’s not destined for a cell, at least not now.’

‘What a smooth segue,’ Augus said. ‘I’ll see him then, I suppose.’

Augus looked troubled, and when Gwyn absently reached to place a hand on his arm, Augus stepped backwards, his mouth thinning. It was a level of rejection that Gwyn should have expected, but it took him aback all the same, and he dropped his arm. An unmoored sensation floated through him, and he looked away, staring instead at a wall sconce.

If he’d just…done something sooner, then Augus would not be in this position with his brother, lives would not have needed to be lost. Not in this manner.

‘Gwyn,’ Augus said, his voice insistent. ‘What are you thinking?’
‘You should see him,’ Gwyn said, voice muted. ‘He is troubled. And I cannot help him.’

Augus swore under his breath and Gwyn turned back, surprised. Augus stared at him, his eyebrows drawn together. He stepped forwards and placed his palm flat on Gwyn’s chest.

‘I’m frustrated,’ Augus said, not looking away from him. ‘Because I should have noticed, because there have been signs. I’m not displeased with you, Gwyn. But you don’t believe me, do you? Just as you don’t believe that Vane is infatuated with you.’

‘You weren’t supposed to notice,’ Gwyn said.

‘Yes, actually, I was.’ Augus’ voice was firm, and he sighed. ‘I think it’s too soon to expect you to understand why. But I was. And I didn’t. And I know that you-’

The corridor blazed with bright colours in warm and cool tones both, and Gwyn took several steps away from Augus, knowing Fenwrel’s energy signature well. The colours resolved around her, and she already had her staff out, staring between them.

‘I got your message,’ Fenwrel said.

‘I apologise,’ Gwyn said to Augus, ‘but I must talk with Fenwrel privately.’

‘We’ll pick this up later,’ Augus said, a sober promise in his eyes that chafed. Gwyn didn’t want to talk about any of it. But then Augus bowed to Fenwrel, and walked in the opposite direction.

Gwyn went to Fenwrel and she was already extending her hand.

‘Somewhere more private, yes?’ Fenwrel said.

‘Yes,’ he said, and enfolded them both in light.

They landed in the strategy room that he tended to use with Gulvi. Right now the walls were clean of parchments and documentation, no pots of ink waited on the tables, maps were stowed. Fenwrel paced away from him, paced back.

‘Your note wasn’t very specific,’ Fenwrel said suddenly. ‘You encountered Davix?’

‘You know of the bridge? Between the Seelie and the Unseelie Courts?’ Gwyn said.

‘Do I know of the bridge?’ Fenwrel echoed. ‘Do you think I’m an idiot? Where the Old Lore was banished – what could be found of it anyway – yes, of course. You met him there? That is for monarchs only. Not even Mages.’

‘Albion has made him King-in-Waiting,’ Gwyn said. ‘Davix destroyed the Old Lore. There is nothing now for the bridge to preserve. The whole place was covered in blood.’

Fenwrel’s pacing halted mid-step and then she turned slowly, her ears pulling back.

‘What does it mean, Fenwrel? What’s going on? What did the Oak King and the Raven Prince seek to escape?’

Fenwrel closed her eyes, her ears drooped. She tucked her staff back into the loop of fabric around her sari and let her arms fall by her sides. Gwyn sat on the table itself, grunting when pain flared.

‘They weren’t escaping the Nightingale, were they?’ Gwyn said. ‘It wasn’t the Nightingale, like I thought?’
‘It was, to a degree,’ Fenwrel said, sighing. ‘The Nightingale is a- He is like a thread that runs through a tapestry. An important thread, but not the greater picture. Gwyn, who led the Nightingale to all that magic that allowed him to enter the underworlds in the first place? Mages.’

‘I dislike being nothing but a chess piece amongst those who claim to be separate from the fae world. You have insinuated yourself on my Court. Davix whispers in Albion’s ear. And there is-’

‘Gwyn, it’s never that simple. The Mages are never as separate as they claim to be. And the classless fae have always claimed to be uninterested in the goings on of the world, and yet there are rumours of a Coalition…’ She squinted at him, and Gwyn stared back at her, showing nothing of his inner thoughts.

‘Is there?’ he said, feigning innocence.

‘You want straight answers yet you give none,’ Fenwrel said, spreading her fingers as if to say: what did you expect?

‘What does Davix want?’

‘I think the more pertinent question is does he have it already?’ Fenwrel said, tapping her foot against the ground several times and then huffing in annoyance. ‘I am not as old, nor as wise, nor as powerful as he. I am – to him – a mouse, and that is all.’

‘He said that he was the one who laid the curse upon my family. He said that it’s broken now,’ Gwyn said, and Fenwrel nodded like she wasn’t surprised.

‘He’s old enough,’ Fenwrel said. ‘He’s strong enough to mess with bloodlines.’

‘I don’t even know – to this day – what the purpose of the curse was. Save that it made the matriarchal line of my family crueller.’

‘I don’t know either, Gwyn. He’s strong enough to do far more than that. Gwyn, there are Mages – not many, not me – who are strong enough to mess with the entire world, if they decided to. Why do you think they swore oaths to be separate? To not interfere? Imagine that there could be a magical system strong enough to enchant entire continents, and then imagine the Mage that was strong enough to destroy that magical system and wait for you to arrive, knowing that you would. Imagine how much he knows about the world, that he can predict the movements of individuals and harm generations of fae. These wars between the Seelie and the Unseelie…they are a distraction.’

‘A distraction,’ Gwyn muttered, his teeth clenching together. ‘One that could see the Unseelie Kingdom ruined.’

‘Yes,’ Fenwrel said. ‘And there’s Davix, on the side of the Seelie. None of this is coincidence, Gwyn. Someone wants the balance destroyed, and if that’s happening, then someone stands to benefit from it. If there is some mystical classless Coalition, perhaps…perhaps things could be altered. Some of the classless fae are as old, and as powerful, perhaps not in magical systems, but in other ways. I don’t know what you want me to say, Gwyn.’

‘The Thirteen say that they haven’t chosen a side, and yet Davix is a member of the Thirteen and he is using war and ruination as a smokescreen for whatever his actual plans are? You’re telling me that the rest are supposedly so impartial they’ll just watch as it happens? They are not as above judgement as they think they are.’

Fenwrel laughed. ‘What, you’re going to march to the School of the Staff and shake a sword at
them? What would you do? What could I do? We watch. We wait.’

‘That’s it?’ Gwyn said.

‘The Raven Prince is no longer here, the Oak King left, what did they see that they didn’t want to live through? If that’s the question, it’s an answer I’m not sure I’m ready to hear.’

‘It looks like we’re going to be living through it in our lifetimes, if the escalation is anything to go by.’

‘Yes,’ Fenwrel said, sighing. A moment later she hopped up onto the table beside Gwyn and began swinging her legs, tapping the sides of the table with her claws. She looked weary then, her eyes drawn, her mouth thin. ‘But it is a Season of Turning. That means things never go quite as planned. It means we have a chance. Davix may seek to exploit the imbalance that the Season brings, but… you can’t tame a Season. Even he cannot. I have to hope, Gwyn. For my children. For myself. I came here because it’s important for me to hold onto something of hope. Now, look at me, and tell me you know nothing of this Coalition.’

‘I know that it doesn’t yet exist,’ Gwyn said quietly. ‘It never occurred to me that Albion could be so easily manipulated.’

‘And you? Do you think you’re not easy to manipulate?’

‘Not by most,’ Gwyn said, smiling wryly. ‘But by some?’ He tried to imagine it, the damage that Augus could do to him if he put his mind to it, even Gulvi, or Ash. He shrugged a shoulder. ‘Some could.’

‘I suppose that’s true for all of us. So what are you going to-’

There was a sharp rap on the door, and Gwyn turned towards it, sliding off the table even as Fenwrel did the same, both of them pretending that they hadn’t just been sitting side by side, their legs hanging over the edge.

‘Come in,’ Gwyn called, and the door opened immediately, one of the trows coming in and looking at him, a piece of parchment in his hands. Typically, trows didn’t deliver these kinds of messages, but most of the common fae servants were out running other errands.

Gwyn signed a thank you with his fingers, and the trow bowed and scampered out again, the expression on its face never changing. The Unseelie trows were far more dour than their Seelie brethren, but just as helpful.

He unrolled the parchment and felt something leap in his chest. Something hungry and vicious and not yet sated.

‘Anything dire?’ Fenwrel inquired.

‘No,’ Gwyn said, turning to her and grinning. ‘My armour is ready to be collected. If you’ll please excuse me.’

Fenwrel bowed to him politely, and Gwyn teleported away immediately, the parchment clutching tight in his fist.

Chapter End Notes
In our next chapter, 'Intervention:'

‘I’ve seen ten fae not consume as much as you just did,’ Augus said quietly. ‘I try and respect whatever lines in the sand you have put down between us, Gwyn. Some of them, anyway, but I’m starting to think that you don’t heal if I don’t smash through those boundaries of yours sometimes. So, today, we’re talking about what it was like when you were underfae.’

‘What?’ Gwyn said, wiping at his mouth. ‘What? No. I can’t. I don’t have time.’

‘Oh, of course. I should have just left you to slip into torpor? You would have done a splendid job running the Kingdom then, wouldn’t you?’

‘I’ve refuelled, I have things to do,’ Gwyn said.

‘No,’ Augus said, his voice going too cold. There was something deadly in his eyes then. Gwyn tensed, staring at him, feeling wary. ‘No, we’re talking about this. We’re talking about it now.’

‘So you can go and tell Ash all about it?’ Gwyn said, feeling something rebellious flare. ‘What did you tell him about my family?’
‘This doesn’t look like much,’ Gwyn said, as he walked around the armour resting on the mannequin. He’d expected something flashier, at least finished off with some kind of patterning. But Gwyn couldn’t deny that the shape of it looked like it would fit well, at least. For what he was paying for it though, he could have gone to any other smith and gotten ten suits of armour that fit well.

The rock fae watched nearby, almost expressionless. Something about him seemed amused, however. ‘It has illusions worked into the metal. The way it looks for you is not how it will look for others.’

Gwyn looked over, brow furrowed, and then looked back at the armour. The lighting in the cave was dim, a single fireplace burning merrily in a stone hearth nearby, and a smoky, guttering torch in the opposite corner. It gave the metal a ruddy glow, and beneath that it appeared a kind of dark charcoal in colour. Some parts of the metal were still rough to the touch. There were vicious, short spikes on the pauldrons, which meant he could shoulder into people and injure them. He’d wanted those on the set of plate armour the glasera dwarves had made for him, and he ran his fingers over them now. They were sharp, despite being squat. He looked at his fingers, saw pinpricks of blood.

On a metal trestle table nearby, a longsword rested within its scabbard, so that Gwyn could see no more than the hilt. His eyes were drawn to it, over and over again. The hilt looked simple enough. Gwyn didn’t know what the metal was, but it was wrapped with a leather grip that didn’t look particularly finished. Not nearly as stunning as what he used to wield. In fact, now that he looked at both the armour and considered the sword and its scabbard, everything was rough-hewn. He’d seen this rock fae’s work before, it was usually pretty and fantastical in nature.

This was a deliberate choice then.

‘We’ll get you fitted, and then I’ll show you what the others will see,’ the rock fae said. He moved towards Gwyn, even as Gwyn took his shirt off and hissed as moving pulled on his wounds.

The rock fae stopped, and then a crunching sound came as he frowned. ‘This is not suitable.’

‘It’s realistic,’ Gwyn said, even as he reached for the gambeson hanging on another mannequin nearby. ‘I get injured. I will be injured in battle, and before battle. I need to know that I can wear it regardless of the state of my body.’

‘This flesh of yours is pathetic,’ said the rock fae quietly, as he helped Gwyn with the gambeson. It
was a lightweight material, but Gwyn could already tell it was denser than his previous one. It was cut in a way that kept the seams off his shoulders, though he still dreaded the weight of plate armour on his bad shoulder. ‘Rock fae are pacifists, otherwise we would have crushed you all to fertiliser by now.’

‘I’m sure,’ Gwyn said, no mocking in his voice. Rock fae tended to keep to themselves and were hard to draw into battles of any kind, except for the civil wars they might have with each other. And those were rare.

The rock fae fitted the rest of the armour quickly and efficiently. Wearing gauntlets again was strange, and Gwyn’s fingers shifted in the plates of metal, feeling hampered. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d worn a gauntlet while handling a sword, and he’d need to practice to get the hang of it. Though he was doubtful the gauntlets would last his destructive light.

‘See here,’ the rock fae said, knocking the pauldron of Gwyn’s bad shoulder as lightly as he could with his stone fingers. ‘The metal has been worked, both physically and with spells, so that when you receive a blow to your injured shoulder, you will feel the weight of it displaced through your upper back. It will still hurt, but it shouldn’t cause as much pain as a direct strike to your shoulder over other types of plate metal.’

‘Can you demonstrate?’ Gwyn said, curious.

He grit his teeth when the rock fae drew his arm back, and tried to change the muscle tension in body to carry a blow. The rock fae hit him hard, and Gwyn staggered sideways, surprised to feel the pulse of violence through his upper body, even as his instincts braced for the force to come entirely through his shoulder. Sparks had skated off the armour when the rock fae had hit him, and they glowed white upon the ground.

‘You see?’ the rock fae said.

Gwyn nodded, shifting upright again, moving his head around, glad for the lack of helm. ‘That will take some getting used to.’

‘You could ask someone else to keep hitting you,’ the rock fae said. ‘I’m certain there would be volunteers.’

‘Why go to them, when I can just ask you?’ Gwyn said, and the rock fae bared its chasm of a mouth in something that resembled a smile. Gwyn was starting to like this rock fae. The armour itself – while it didn’t look special – fit very nicely.

‘I’m busy,’ the rock fae said, and then walked over to the metal table and picked up the scabbard. ‘Now, we’ll need to take this sword somewhere to demonstrate what it can do. How does the armour feel? Can you move in it? A simple drill will suffice.’

Gwyn moved his fingers in the gauntlets several more times. He looked at the vambraces. The metal was well oiled, responded easily and promptly to all of his movements. Plate armour never felt like a second skin, but this was the most comfortable armour he’d worn since his last fully fitted set. He could feel how even moving his bad shoulder displaced the pressure to his back. He lifted his arm, and though his shoulder screeched at him, the armour didn’t seem to be adding a great deal more to the pain he usually felt.

He took a breath and performed a simple drill, one based on hand-to-hand combat, that didn’t require a sword. His upper and middle back felt the strain more than usual, but it freed up his bad arm to manage more range of motion, more swing. He stopped at the end and felt impressed,
despite the armour’s appearance.

‘So what will the others see?’ Gwyn said, looking down at the metal that covered him.

‘Come with me, and I’ll show you.’

The rock fae led him down an almost entirely black corridor, holding the sword and scabbard in his rocky hand, only the glow from the fireplace they’d left behind lighting the way. They emerged in a room that was filled with palpable darkness. But then the rock fae said something that sounded like pebbles skimming across a river, and the room lit at once. Round, pale rocks began to glow, pressed into alcoves, resting on the floor, hanging from the ceiling. They were all the size of Gwyn’s fist, and the light was pleasant.

‘Are these hard to source?’ Gwyn said, staring at them.

‘Yes,’ the rock fae said, and then drew Gwyn over to a full-length mirror. Gwyn still only saw the simple black armour, and he grimaced at it. ‘Now,’ the rock fae said, ‘let me show you what others will see.’

He rapped the back of Gwyn’s armour smartly twice, two knocks, and then Gwyn’s mouth dropped open and he forgot whatever façade he was trying to maintain in front of the rock fae.

He took several steps backwards to get the entire effect in view. Where there had been no helm, the back of one had appeared, hooking over the back of his head, his ears, and then from above his ears antlers branched. They were black metal also, but frosted white at the tips. Gwyn tilted his head one way, then the other, and the antlers moved with him. He lifted his hands and felt only hair and his ears where the helm appeared to curve over the back of his head. He felt only air where the antlers were. But they were broad, strong, yet his face was still open, some of his hair still visible even with the illusion.

His face was smudged with soot in the illusion, blackened in some places as though he’d walked through a fire. It complemented the armour, and together he felt it gave the impression of white armour that had been charred black. He touched the smudges of soot and couldn’t remove them, surprised at how clear and bright his eyes looked with the black unevenly marking his face.

The rest of the armour itself looked far heavier, far more wicked. Now, the gauntlets also appeared frosted in white, and he could see a faint tracery of pale patterning at the edges of some of the plates. He looked down to try and see them more closely, and saw only the black metal once more. Then, he walked to the mirror and pressed one of the gauntlets against it, staring into the mirror to see if he could make out the writing. And, partly, he could. They were runes of magic, and he’d learned to read some of them. His armour had been enchanted to look like it had additional spells written over it.

‘What about Mages?’ Gwyn said. ‘Can they remove the illusion?’

‘No,’ the rock fae said, sounding pleased. ‘They can remove it for themselves, but as these illusions are strong and written repeatedly into the armour itself, they cannot remove the illusions for others without repeatedly casting magic onto the people they are trying to remove the illusions for. Do not mistake me though, soldiers who attempt to attack those antlers will quickly realise that they are false, and rumour will spread that it is an illusion – but I find that flesh creatures in battle duck from illusions just as well as projectiles.’

‘Why antlers?’ Gwyn said, turning to him.
‘When you were telling me of what you wanted, I had a vision of you helming the Wild Hunt. Hunter and hunted. I researched you further and learned that your family enjoyed stag and buck hunts regularly. Finally, I think it is long past time that we had a horned King again, don’t you?’

‘You speak of Cernunnos,’ Gwyn said. ‘But he was ancient, and Seelie.’

‘Symbols mean something,’ the rock fae said. ‘The Seelie should remember your connection to them. The Unseelie need know that you are theirs. This will show them that you are in both worlds, and yet not quite, too. So now you can see what the others will see. If you look at the armour, you will see it for what it is. If you look in a mirror, you will see the illusions.’

Gwyn stared again at the antlers. It reminded him of the collar and chain that Augus had made for himself. He’d used the stag to represent Gwyn as well. He’d even made a silver pin at the Triumphal Entry for Gwyn to wear. Gwyn’s heart twinged sharply to remember that crushed collar, to remember Augus taunting him about giving Gwyn one.

The rock fae stepped forwards. ‘Let me show you what the sword can do. Permit me to teleport you?’

‘Yes,’ Gwyn said, extending his arm. The rock fae grasped his forearm, and Gwyn winced as he had the uncomfortable feeling of dissolving into sand and sediment, before appearing in the lee of a volcano. The skies above was red and orange from the sulphur and other chemicals spewed in the gases from the volcano itself. He looked around, saw rivers of lava in the distance, heat haze all around them.

‘This is a place where rock constantly forms and reforms, so your light cannot hurt anything here,’ the rock fae said. ‘Take this sword.’

The rock fae slid it from the scabbard and handed it to Gwyn hilt first. The sword itself didn’t look fancy. It was a dull grey, it had a fuller to help with weight, the tip shone a faint black. He turned it, and then felt its balance. It was finely made. He turned it, swung it, enjoyed the feel, even though he was used to the paler metal of his old sword.

‘First,’ the rock fae said. ‘Make light with your hand. Shoot over there, if you will.’

Gwyn looked at the gauntlet itself doubtfully, and then summoned his hungry light, aware of the wrench on his resources as he did so. He’d have to eat soon. None the less, the white incandescence of it balled around his fist, and then shot near silently towards a tower of rock that fell apart as soon as the light touched it.

He looked at the gauntlet and the metal had held together. It didn’t even feel hot to the touch. He bent his knuckles and the armour moved easily. It didn’t appear to be damaged at all. His skin, on the other hand, was still split and cracked.

He looked at the rock fae in shock. ‘How did you do this?’

‘Now,’ the rock fae said. ‘Place the palm of your hand flat against the blade of the sword, like this.’

The rock fae moved closer to him and with hard, unforgiving fingers and movements, jerked Gwyn’s arm into position, so that Gwyn stood with the sword facing ahead as though thrusting and his gauntlet pressing onto the thickest, broadest point of the blade, his middle finger resting within the fuller.

‘Keep the sword pointed like so,’ the rock fae said, moving Gwyn’s arms for him. ‘Now make
your light.’

Gwyn frowned, thought longingly of roasted hunks of meat that he could tear into later. He called his light to him, feeling hungry for blood and bone and gore, and shot the light through the metal, casting aside his fears that he was about to destroy a well-balanced sword.

The sword glowed fulgent, the sound of burning leather filled Gwyn’s nostrils, and then Gwyn watched in awe as seconds later, a beam of light shot forth from it, channelled and directed, a line of the stuff that lasted longer than the simple balls of light he threw into the world. So that he could even turn and cut through metres of stone before it finally burned itself through.

He stared at the sword. The leather grip hung from it, blackened and useless, but the sword itself was unharmed. The rock fae laughed, the sound like tiny avalanches.

‘Can you work with a metal hilted sword? Leather will not last that light.’

Because the metal on the underside of the gauntlet wasn’t smooth on its surface, it had enough grain to catch and wield the sword itself. But it would be rough on his bare hands, he’d have to remember to wrap the hilt with leather if he needed to go into bare-handed combat. Or, perhaps…

‘Could you make another sword? One designed for bare-handed combat with a leather hilt? You can add it to the overall cost.’

‘Of course,’ the rock fae said, nodding. ‘So this is suitable?’

‘Very,’ Gwyn said. ‘What of the gauntlets? And the metal of the sword itself?’

‘The sword is designed to last repeated hits of your light. But your gauntlets will only have limited use. Maybe five or ten years before I’ll need to remake them. The metal will go brittle over time.’

‘Five or ten years is better than not being able to wear them at all,’ Gwyn said, staring again at the damaged he’d wrought in the rock by pushing his light through the sword. ‘How did you think to do this?’

‘Unseelie celestial light is rare, but not impossible. My old master knew of someone who wielded it, and had written down notes on his tablets. Before you go, I will give you a roll of parchment that outlines how to care for the armour, diagrams of the illusions, and more. You should know that no one can strip the illusions from the metal without destroying the armour itself. It’s part of my innate power. To seed things into stone and metal, so that even Mages cannot tear them free. My people housed our secrets in the hearts of mountains, and to this day, Mages cannot free them without mining the inside of the mountain itself and taking the stones with them.’

‘This is very fine work,’ Gwyn said finally. ‘I was expecting something different, and you’ve exceeded my expectations.’

‘Flesh creatures hardly know what is best for them, cladding themselves in things they do not understand. Now, this armour is yours. Let us return and see if you have any more questions that need answering.’

Gwyn nodded, braced himself for the sensation of turning into sand once more, felt like he was being squeezed through an hourglass too fast, and emerged back in a cave system that felt far friendlier than it had the first time he’d visited.

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Barely two hours had passed after Gwyn returned to the Unseelie Court and carefully put away the armour in one of his own private rooms, when one of the trows signalled to him that Mikkel was waiting for him in the night gardens.

It had been some time since Mikkel had visited. More than a month had passed, and in that time Gwyn had cast Augus out of the Court, only to accept him back again with open arms. Gwyn had worried about Mikkel, but there was no way to contact him without betraying their connection.

Mikkel wasn’t sitting on the lizard-deer bench when Gwyn arrived, but pacing, one hand on his hip.

‘For once, I know you’re coming, Cupcake,’ Mikkel said, turning and looking glad and afraid all at the same time.

‘What’s happened?’ Gwyn said, coming closer, staring down at him. There were shadowy circles under Mikkel’s eyes, and his curly hair – what little of it he could see under the tweed flat cap – was more unkempt than usual.

‘Nothing major, don’t be scared. Not like that. Ah, it’s been…tough. It’s been harder to get away.’

‘Are you suspected?’ Gwyn said.

‘Nah, I don’t think so,’ Mikkel said. ‘It’s just that Albion wants me to do shit for him nearly every day, and things are tense in that Court. No one is super happy. It’s wearing on me. When I live on my own, like, it’s not so bad because I can mostly control who I feel. But in that Court with so many people visiting, it’s like…it’s a bit like being stuck under a waterfall. Even the gloom of your own thoughts are better. At least you look forward to seeing me. Isn’t that so, Cupcake?’

‘It is,’ Gwyn said, sitting down on the ground as Mikkel took his customary place on the bench, tucking his legs up and sighing explosively.

‘You need a break though,’ Mikkel said. ‘It’s a bit like a dog chasing its tail up there. I’m getting a lot of things from you today. Like someone shook up a bottle of pop.’

‘Yes,’ Gwyn said, rubbing at his forehead.

His body was still hurting him. He suspected that the healing from Ifir’s attack had slowed to a crawl. He was beginning to feel light-headed. Once Mikkel went away, he’d go and get something to eat, and hopefully speed the healing process once more. He hadn’t expected to be dealing with so much at once, and even sitting now, he didn’t feel like he could relax.

‘What is it like, Reading Davix?’ Gwyn said. ‘What sort of a Read do you get on him?’

‘He fades in and out. A bit like you, but ah, not really. When he does come through, it’s garbled, like he’s feeling every single emotion at the same time, which I know isn’t possible. So I think he can scramble what I read from him.’

‘And Oura has left the Court?’

‘Huh, yeah, a while ago. You didn’t know until now?’

‘We’ve been paying more attention to the movements of polemarch Alysia, and Mera-Alane.’

‘Makes sense,’ Mikkel said. He took off his cap and shook his tightly curled hair, then ruffled it with his own hand. ‘I didn’t come here with a ton of tactical shit, by the way. I just came to visit.
Do you mind?’

‘No,’ Gwyn said. ‘I wish I had more time to spare for you. But-’

‘Oh yeah,’ Mikkel said, pointing at Gwyn’s head and tapping his own. ‘I know.’

Gwyn placed a palm flat on his belly. He still smelled of metal and light. Of blood and sweat and char. He needed a shower. Here, under the Unseelie constellations, with Mikkel nearby and the sound of breezes soughing through the trees, he felt more tense than before, as though he couldn’t quite remember how to unwind.

‘You’ve been hurt,’ Mikkel said.

‘I’m still wounded, if you must know,’ Gwyn said.

‘I didn’t actually mean that kind of hurt,’ Mikkel said. ‘But yeah, that wouldn’t surprise me either. I don’t really read physical pain like an emotion, but I know it’s there. Something’s happened that makes you feel a bit less like yourself, I dunno how to explain it. I suppose this is a really shitty way of asking if you’re okay. And I already know the answer is no. And then I’d ask if there was anything I could do. And of course you’d say no to that. And then I’d probably tell you to piss off then, and then you’d just get mad.’

Gwyn couldn’t stop the breath of laughter that formed. ‘Doesn’t it get tiresome, having every conversation in your head before you’ve actually had them?’

‘Does it fucking ever,’ Mikkel said, grinning sharply at him. ‘But I tell you something, actually having them, and having them play out exactly like you thought they would, is twice as tiresome.’

They shared a cynical smile, and then Gwyn looked down at the ground and dragged his fingers over it. Tiny roots, little bits of dirt, blades of grass and beds of clover. Small things that made him feel better about the world. He frowned, looked up at Mikkel.

‘What, do you think, would make you happy?’

‘Not having to think about the impossible things I want that would make me happy, for one,’ Mikkel said, looking at Gwyn in annoyance. ‘Because I’d like to not be a Reader. And then, if I couldn’t have that, I’d like to not be enslaved by the Court. And then, if I couldn’t have that, I guess I’d just want to be treated with some respect? Maybe? And then I get depressed. Which is very far away from being happy, let me tell you.’

‘Yes, but-’

‘Gwyn, some things are impossible, no matter how much power you have – or in my case, how much you don’t have. If I spend all my time daydreaming about the impossible, I’m gonna lose my chance to live my life. The parts of it that I actually want to live, anyway. I mean, I gotta tell you, it’s looking a lot less worth it by the day.’

There was a world weariness in Mikkel’s voice. Gwyn tried to think of all the options available to Mikkel, and was upset that there were so few.

‘You could claim asylum here,’ Gwyn said. ‘It can be done.’

Mikkel’s expression was pained, he looked away and rubbed at the stubble on his cheeks.

‘Cupcake, no,’ Mikkel said finally. ‘I’m Seelie. I’m not…I’m not very good at being Seelie, but I’m Seelie. I know what side I’m on, okay? It kills me, coming here, sometimes. I really like you,
but this place feels wrong, it hurts me. It’s like sitting in acid, and it reminds me that I don’t belong here. I couldn’t live here safely. Even if everyone left me alone, I wouldn’t be safe from myself. I’m a Seelie Reader that can’t really lie, I don’t belong here.’

Gwyn sighed and Mikkel echoed the sound, and they sat in silence for some minutes. Gwyn wasn’t sure what to suggest otherwise, and he knew that Mikkel was already aware of all of it. Aware of Gwyn’s frustration, his desire to help. There was nothing more that Gwyn could do.

‘You don’t belong there either,’ Gwyn said.

‘I know,’ Mikkel said. ‘I know I don’t. But that’s where I live now. The Seelie Court. At Albion’s beck and call. The thing is, I should belong there. The Seelie Court is all wrong now. Your betrayal, and some of the Courtiers are still sort of… twisted up in your mother’s way of thinking, I think? It’s like, it’s like the whole place is poisoned. You ever thought the Unseelie Court would feel cleaner than the Seelie Court? Because, huh, even with the acid feeling and the fact that it hurts to be here, it hurts more knowing that going back is even worse.’

Gwyn moved closer to Mikkel and had to hold his breath through the pain. He knew that Mikkel didn’t like to be touched, but Gwyn wanted to offer something. In the end, he just sat by the bench, trying to think of what to do.

‘One day, I won’t be able to let you go back there,’ Gwyn said. ‘Not when it does this to you. Albion is using you. As a slave.’

‘If you one day make me stay here,’ Mikkel said, staring at him, ‘then how are you any better?’

Gwyn fell silent again, and Mikkel with him. Finally, Mikkel sighed and rested his head on his palm, arm crooked on the statuesque bench itself. He smoothed a faint crease out of his pants and then touched the leather around his neck lightly. The red leather cord that his father had given him. Gwyn thought again of the armour, the antlers, and then the collar. What it might feel like to have metal around his neck, and Augus in control of it.

Mikkel made a faint sound and then laughed under his breath. But when Gwyn looked at him, Mikkel only shrugged.

More minutes passed, and Gwyn’s brow furrowed as a wave of dizziness pounded into him. His elbow nearly buckled where he was bracing himself on the ground. He took a deep breath, was surprised that it was shaking.

‘Hey now,’ Mikkel said, sitting up. ‘Gwyn?’

‘Uh,’ Gwyn said, his mouth dry, pain swelling in his gut. ‘I think…I may have overestimated what my body could handle.’

It was ridiculous. He knew he could handle more.

But then, he’d never had a chronic shoulder injury taxing his resources. He wasn’t used to using his light, and certainly not like he had – without feeding – with that rock fae. He used to stay very well-fed, eating in many of the spare moments he had. He was famous for it back in the Seelie military.

When was the last time he’d even eaten?

Dazed, he tried to cast his mind back, and couldn’t remember.
‘Damn it,’ Gwyn breathed.

‘Do I need to get someone?’ Mikkel said, sounding nervous. ‘Should I…see if I can get…that evil waterhorse of yours?’

‘No,’ Gwyn said, pushing himself upright and finding his way to a tree, leaning against it. ‘No, I just need a moment.’

Absently, he reached up to a low hanging branch and stripped it of leaves. It didn’t matter if they were edible or not. At King status, he’d digest it anyway. A far cry from the days when he was underfae and starving, yet unable to eat all the roughage he’d sometimes consumed at a higher status. The leaves were acrid, leathery, but he could feel the hungry way his stomach clutched at them.

‘You’re afraid,’ Mikkel said. When had he stood up? Gwyn blinked at him, as Mikkel looked up at him, eyes staring into him, ruffling through all his thoughts. It reminded him abruptly of when he’d been in the Seelie cell. When he’d looked at Mikkel with terror, rather than the friendship they had now. The bark against his back very much felt like the roots of that cell. Augus’ cell. ‘Oh, Jesus. I need to get someone, Gwyn.’

‘No,’ Gwyn said, swallowing down a mouthful of half-chewed leaves and thinking that carbohydrates, sugars, would be far better.

‘Yeah, Cupcake, trust me, I’m as freaked as you are right now. Just for different reasons. Look, I’ll come back though, okay? And then I’ll visit again, too. You don’t need to worry about me so much, man. I’m a whinger. Through and through. But I wouldn’t keep coming here if I really thought my life was in danger, because I’m a coward, and guess what, they live longer. Just…you wait right there. Okay? Don’t fucking move.’

Gwyn was too afraid to nod with how hard his head was pounding. Instead, his hand reached back and clutched the trunk, and he made a noise of what he hoped was assent.

Footsteps pounded away from him, he felt like he was stuck in a swamp. His legs buckled and he made an embarrassingly raw sound as his still injured thigh strained as he sank to the bole of the tree. His fingers curled in dirt, and his last clear thought was that even a King couldn’t be nourished by dirt…

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‘What is it? What’s wrong with him? I swear to god I didn’t do anything.’

‘Tch, I know you didn’t.’

That was Augus’ voice. Gwyn made a questioning sound, and was surprised at the rough hand that shoved him back against something hard.

A tree. That’s right, he was against a tree.

‘This daft idiot has forgotten how to look after himself. And really, that’s saying something,’ Augus snarled. He sounded furious. Gwyn coughed when he felt something wet against his mouth, trickling between his lips. Then he realised it was creamy and thick and it was fresh milk and he hadn’t meant to make a sound that was so hungry but Augus was letting him drink it too slowly and it wasn’t fair and-

‘Idiot,’ Augus said, the word like a spear. ‘Can you tell what he’s feeling?’
‘A whole lot of not-really-with-it,’ Mikkel said. ‘He’s not even broadcasting clearly, honestly. I think he’s happy you’re here, and confused, and desperate. I think that’s the hunger.’

‘Do you think?’ Augus said, caustic.

‘Hey,’ Mikkel said, sounding defensive. ‘I went and got you, didn’t I? After you fucking- Whatever. Can I do anything?’

‘No,’ Augus said, his voice softened, at least a little. ‘Not now. I’m afraid this is going to cut your little tête-à-tête short.’

‘I don’t know when I can come back again,’ Mikkel said, sounding uncertain. ‘It’s hard to get away. They know I have no family, hardly any friends. I can’t make easy excuses.’

Augus said something then that Gwyn couldn’t catch, his voice hushed, and Gwyn was reaching up blindly for the milk only to have his hand knocked back down again. His shoulder hurt. His whole body hurt.

‘Why’s he like this, anyway?’ Mikkel’s voice swam out of the gloom. ‘He’s the King.’

‘Anyone, regardless of status, can go into torpor if they’re not nourished enough. I did it myself voluntarily when I was imprisoned. But his body is doing it for him. Which is a sign that it’s well and truly had enough. Honestly, the things I have to deal with. He’ll be fine. Believe me.’

‘Yeah,’ Mikkel said. ‘Yeah okay.’

They must have kept talking, but with nothing else to feed upon, Gwyn’s world was rapidly dissolving into fragments once more.

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A sharp flare of pain across his cheek and then fingers hard at his jaw.

‘Concentrate,’ Augus said, and Gwyn blinked his eyes open, surprised at how heavy they felt. ‘I swear, Gwyn, I’ve had enough of this. Teleport us to the kitchens in the Unseelie Court. Do you even know where you are?’

‘Yes,’ Gwyn said, and then his hand fumbled against Augus’ arm and he teleported onto the floor of the main kitchens. Even that had wasted what energy he had remaining, and he could do nothing more than cry out when Augus shoved him against a bench and went away.

*Don’t disappear.* Gwyn’s fingers clenched weakly on air.

But then his mouth was being forced open and it was meat, not even hard to chew, but falling apart into fibres. It was savoury and rich and perfect. Saliva flooded him and he made a ravenous noise, his fingers clawing out and Augus swearing from a distance as Gwyn’s fingers found flesh and he dug in.

Slowly, he came to realise that Augus was the one feeding him, and then even more slowly, he realised that there was a huge bowl of stew beside him and he reached directly into the heat despite the cracked skin of his hand. He hated feeling like this. Hated being starving. But the food was very good. The trows could cook very well. But still, he was so *weak*. His hand shook as he brought messy amounts of stew to his mouth.

He lost track of how long he spent eating, Augus supplying him with more food. Meat, bread,
cooked and then raw eggs, even sugary mints made only from powdered sugar and peppermint oil that dissolved in his mouth and made him even hungrier. His whole body felt like it was fizzing to life, blood moving more rapidly, heart beating harder, and he drank down a tankard of mead and realised then that Augus was watching him and hadn’t looked away.

‘I’ve seen ten fae not consume as much as you just did,’ Augus said quietly. ‘I try and respect whatever lines in the sand you have put down between us, Gwyn. Some of them, anyway, but I’m starting to think that you don’t heal if I don’t smash through those boundaries of yours sometimes. So, today, we’re talking about what it was like when you were underfae.’

‘What?’ Gwyn said, wiping at his mouth. ‘What? No. I can’t. I don’t have time.’

‘Oh, of course. I should have just left you to slip into torpor? You would have done a splendid job running the Kingdom then, wouldn’t you?’

‘I’ve refuelled, I have things to do,’ Gwyn said.

‘No,’ Augus said, his voice going too cold. There was something deadly in his eyes then. Gwyn tensed, staring at him, feeling wary. ‘No, we’re talking about this. We’re talking about it now.’

‘So you can go and tell Ash all about it?’ Gwyn said, feeling something rebellious flare. ‘What did you tell him about my family?’

Augus’ expression didn’t even move, but it was too still for several seconds, and he looked like he’d been caught out, somehow.

‘I told him the truth,’ Augus said. ‘Because I couldn’t think of anything else that would get through to him.’

‘Did you tell him about Mafydd?’

‘No,’ Augus said, moving even closer, placing his hands on Gwyn’s bent knees. ‘No. I would never tell him about that.’

‘You don’t know what he could do with that information,’ Gwyn said, feeling odd. He didn’t want to talk about anything at all. He tried to push Augus’ hands off his knees, but Augus only dug his fingers in, and Gwyn took a breath. He still didn’t feel like himself. It was as though he’d been shaken very hard, and nothing was where it was supposed to be.

‘I do,’ Augus said. ‘I do know what he could do with it. And believe me, if he tries to use that against you…’ Gwyn watched in wonder as a darkness moved over Augus’ face and he looked away, swallowing. ‘I am not accustomed to feeling like this about him. At any rate, I would not have told him, if I wasn’t willing to own the consequences should he misuse the information. That is the truth of it, Gwyn.’

‘It’s private,’ Gwyn said, hating the way he sounded. It only occurred to him then that they were on the floor of the largest public kitchens, anyone could access it. The only reason trows weren’t probably in there was because they tended to vacate when Gwyn and Augus appeared together. He couldn’t see anyone, tried to push himself up onto the bench, but Augus rose onto his knees and pressed down on Gwyn’s shoulder, keeping him on the cold tiles.

‘I can’t be the only one that holds all your secrets with you,’ Augus said, staring at him. ‘But that’s another issue. I am not happy with how this situation panned out, I did not enjoy telling Ash what I told him, I did not enjoy knowing what your reaction would be, even if it was effective in jolting Ash from his rut. Or at least, seems to be effective. He’s not in a cell, is he? But you, sweetness,
you are deflecting. I know, Gwyn. I know how much you don’t want to talk about this, if the thing
you are trying to distract me with is something else that makes you miserable.’

Gwyn growled angrily, moved, shoved Augus off him and forced himself to stand, amazed at how
much more strength he already had. ‘I was underfae and then I wasn’t. It’s simple and it’s over.’

‘No,’ Augus said. ‘I knew at the time we would have to talk about this and the only reason I didn’t
push you was because you had just been through something devastating. But I had also assumed –
mistakenly – that you would tell me about it. At some point. You rebuff me at every turn. I only
found out about Kabiri because Aleutia forced it out of you. How long would you have kept that a
secret from me, Gwyn?”

‘You don’t get to know everything about me,’ Gwyn said, feeling trapped even though he could
teleport anywhere. ‘You have enough already. You have enough, Augus. You don’t need more.’

‘You know I don’t want to hurt you with this information,’ Augus said implacably. ‘A part of you
knows that. The part of you that let me back into the Unseelie Court. That supported me in front of
your Court. And, believe me, I know I don’t get to know everything about you. Given that you’ve
told me no details about Efnisien, hardly anything about Crielle or Lludd either. Most of what I
know about you I’ve picked up from hints, guesswork, clues and a mere handful of other moments
where you only give me scraps, for the most part.’

‘I can’t talk about this,’ Gwyn said, breathing faster, trying to skirt around Augus, only for Augus
to block him and stare up at him.

‘You’ve been so angry that I could ruin the Kingdom, or Ash, or Ifir and his mutiny. What about
you, Gwyn? What about what you could ruin, if you don’t take better care of yourself?’

‘I haven’t ruined anything.’ Gwyn was angry now, felt it as lazy, tired sparks beginning to swirl
together.

‘Yet,’ Augus said, the word as sharp as a knife.

‘Leave it,’ Gwyn said, and then found himself backed into a kitchen bench, Augus’ palm resting
threateningly on one of the largest wounds that Ifir had given him. ‘Augus, this is not something
that-’

‘How about you try telling me about it, and then I can decide for myself if it’s simple and over.
Hm? How about you tell me what it felt like to release me to Ash – who had been hurting you, who
sent you a letter telling you I didn’t want to see you again. Tell me what it felt like to live alone in
that Court with Albion and Crielle. Tell me how simple it was when you were demoted in front of
over a thousand fae, in a throne room you had ruled, in front of your mother? And that is just the
beginning of it, Gwyn. That is nothing about actually being in the cell, living as underfae, starving
to death, being forced to use your light for survival only to learn that it doesn’t feed you properly,
being hunted, being-’

‘Stop!’ Gwyn shouted, shoving Augus backwards and staring at him, his breathing audible now.

‘I didn’t even mention Kabiri or the fact that you nearly died from infection.’

‘Stop,’ Gwyn whispered. He closed his eyes. ‘Stop it.’

‘You thought I was going to kill you, or imprison you, the first time you saw me. You were so
happy, and then reality came in and you-’
‘Gods, Augus, do you never shut up?’ Gwyn said, turning away from him and facing the cabinets, his eyes beginning to burn.

‘It’s easier when I bring this kind of thing up after a scene, isn’t it?’ Augus said, and he sounded gentle, but none of it was gentle. Augus stepped up behind him and carefully slid his arms around Gwyn’s torso, leaned his head between Gwyn’s shoulder blades. ‘But even then, Gwyn, you still won’t talk about it.’

‘You were underfae,’ Gwyn said. ‘For hundreds of years, thousands. You managed. You’re hardly scarred! Two thousand years with almost no marks! The Nain Rouge is underfae now. Most fae are underfae. They live through it. They are not…they have the- they are physically the weakest, live the shortest lifespans, get sick, and I was still weaker than all of them.’

Gwyn leaned his forehead against one of the cabinets, which pressed the bench into his hip, but he didn’t care. Gods, he couldn’t talk about this without some monstrous hatred rearing up inside of him and threatening to swallow him whole. He wanted to throw up everything he’d just eaten.

‘And I deserved it,’ Gwyn said, forcing his eyes open and staring at the tiny details of woodwork in front of him. ‘I deserved to be demoted. I’d betrayed them all.’

‘And you were so hungry,’ Augus said, his voice too soft.

‘They didn’t feed me in the cell,’ Gwyn said, ‘and I didn’t know I needed that much to eat! Not until- Not until I was underfae and I couldn’t- They’d cut the aithwick out and it wouldn’t heal. They beat me after I’d become underfae, when I was unconscious, and I couldn’t fight back. My ribs were- I couldn’t breathe properly. The first time I felt like that, Efnisien had just finished with- and I had to wait for my lungs to heal, but of course back then they healed in hours! Or a couple of days! Not…not…’

‘Not weeks,’ Augus said, his lips moving against Gwyn’s shirt. ‘Not months. Did they ever feed you in the cell?’

‘And it was your cell, and I just couldn’t stop laughing to think that after everything, how I’d treated you for those six months, I knew what I deserved, I knew. You managed it for six months, but I- And that I couldn’t manage it, Augus. That I couldn’t pull myself together. Really, there is only one thing I’m supposed to be. One role I’m supposed to play.’

Gwyn tried to push away from the bench, but Augus’ arms tightened around him, his hips pushed forwards and kept Gwyn against it.

‘You’re a soldier,’ Augus said.

‘I’m meant to be strong,’ Gwyn said, his voice cracking. ‘That’s it. That’s all. I don’t have to be anything else. I don’t have to be good or clever or beautiful or creative or skilled at being a Courtier. A good thing, because I am none of those things. But strength? The ability to get on a battlefield and look death in the eye and call it forth and command it and go on through countless injuries and everyone would always say ‘oh look how strong he is’ or ‘he’s not afraid of anything’ or whatever they might say. In a handful of moments, Augus, less, I was not only not strong, I was so, so weak. It was as though I had one last thing to hang onto. One thing which I didn’t hate myself for. Because if I couldn’t be anything else, no one could deny I was that!’

Gwyn squeezed his eyes shut. ‘Then it turned out I wasn’t strong, either.’

‘You don’t know how to look for different kinds of strength,’ Augus said. ‘Or if you do, you don’t
know how to apply them to yourself. But you were strong, and—'

Gwyn grit his teeth and slammed his arm back, elbowing Augus out from behind him. He whirled around. Augus had a hand curled protectively over his upper arm where Gwyn had jabbed him.

‘Oh yes,’ Gwyn said, scathing. ‘Let’s talk about all the different ways I was strong. How you couldn’t even fuck me the first time we saw each other again, without my having a panic attack because, oh no, how could I possibly handle what everyone else has to deal with – the threat of actual, lasting physical harm. Or, I know, let’s talk about how I begged the gods to help me, instead of just dying. And now I have a debt with some underworld god who is connected to the Old Lore and Davix and whatever nightmare is coming for all of us in the future! But wait, let’s not forget how—’

He didn’t expect Augus to lash out. He didn’t expect the hands that came for his chest or the way he was slammed back into the bench, and so he stood, panting, face burning with his anger, while Augus still managed to look so insufferably calm.

‘So who do you sound like, right now, I wonder?’ Augus said. ‘Your mother? Your father? Efnisien? Someone else?’

‘Myself,’ Gwyn said.

‘Ah, yes, because you have hating yourself thoroughly in hand, don’t you? Gwyn, you were supposed to die, and you didn’t. Dying would not have been the strong thing to do. That’s what they wanted. It’s what your family wanted. It’s what you have wanted. But I didn’t want it. And you didn’t want it. No, you didn’t have many good choices available. No one wants an open debt with a god. No one. That’s why we try to have nothing to do with them and hope very much they’ll stay in their respective realms.’

Gwyn didn’t want to hear any of this, and worse, Augus had no idea what he was talking about. So often he seemed to know, but right now it all sounded absurd. He shook his head, tried to move, only for Augus to bare his teeth and lean harder against him. Gwyn made a sound of frustration.

‘I had never, until that time, known what starving to death felt like,’ Gwyn said. ‘You’ve known it often. You blithely refer to hard winters like they were nothing.’

‘They aren’t nothing,’ Augus said, his eyebrows twisting together. ‘Do you want to know how I felt, that I was possibly failing Ash when we were shivering together, gaunt and starving? When those darkest, longest days trickled by and I had to skip meals altogether to make sure he could at least have something? Or worse, Gwyn, how I felt knowing that I was doing that for him, but that if I skipped too many meals and died, he would certainly not survive the following winter on his own? Do you think that was nothing? You don’t think I know how frightening that is? How… vulnerable you feel to the very whims of the realm? One more bad storm, and that’s it.’

Augus closed his eyes, his lips thinned. Gwyn noticed his freckles now that he seemed paler than usual.

‘You think I don’t know what it’s like to hope against hope that the next tree or the next shrub has fruits or berries upon it?’ Augus said, opening his eyes again. ‘That there might be something to eat somewhere if I could only find it? Ethallas was not a generous forest in the winter. Not for the amount of food we needed to sustain ourselves. A lake like that is only supposed to sustain one waterhorse, and we were two of us and underfae both.’

Augus’ fingers curled into Gwyn’s shirt, he frowned up at him.
‘Ash and I were lucky,’ Augus sighed. ‘Even despite all that. We had each other. I was strong enough to defend a good lake. I wasn’t being punished. I wasn’t being hunted every day. I didn’t have a Kingdom that was crying out for my execution. I hadn’t been abandoned. Gwyn, Ash told you that I didn’t want to see you anymore. What were you supposed to think?’

‘That…’ Gwyn looked sideways. ‘That things were going very much the way they should be going.’

‘If that were entirely true, wouldn’t you have just let yourself die? Why not resign yourself to it, if you knew that is the way it is supposed to be?’

‘I’m not good at resigning myself to anything,’ Gwyn said, closing his eyes.

‘Ah, of course. The cardinal sign of weakness,’ Augus said, faintly mocking.

Gwyn stared blankly ahead, remembering it all in bursts of colour and the sound of thudding footsteps and rasping breaths as he just tried to get ahead of the enemy and survive.

‘I think,’ Gwyn said, hesitantly. ‘There was a day. Just one day. I’d killed soldiers with my light and I was still famished. They had quite a bit of food on them. I think they expected to be hunting me for some time. I had…reserves of food. A lot. And I was being good. You know, rationing. I know about rationing. But I just thought–I just–I was still so hungry and I was reckless. I ate all of it in one afternoon. I mowed through it. And afterwards I was still hungry. And so every day after that, every moment, I couldn’t eat or think about eating without knowing that I was going to die anyway. No matter how much I fought it. No matter what I did. Everything I ate was bitter with it, like ashes in my mouth. Until that moment, I’d imagined I could at least salvage some kind of life as a reclusive underfae. I am an explorer yet, I would have–You know, you think if only you have enough food, then maybe…’

‘And then you had enough food…’

‘Only to realise it’s not enough?’ Gwyn said, staring at Augus, his chest taut and tense. He felt like he could taste ashes in his mouth now. ‘I found shelter, food, water. It wasn’t much. But I’d found it and then I was still going to die.’

‘Now, of course, whenever you eat anything…or think about eating…’

‘I know I’m King,’ Gwyn said, looking away. ‘A part of me, well, it’s like I’m constantly trying to prove it to myself. As though I am saying, ‘look, Gwyn, another day without food, and another, and you are still able to train and wield your sword and teleport easily and talk to everyone.’ As though I am somehow proving to myself how strong I can be. But I’m still so hungry, Augus, all the time. Even when I try not to think about it, a part of me knows. And then I’m scared anyway, that I’ll taste my own death on my tongue, the inevitability. I’ll always know how being made into that again, losing…everything, is only one betrayal away.’

‘Is it like that every time that you eat?’ Augus said, frowning.

Gwyn shook his head. ‘No. Just then? No, it was a panacea. Ambrosia. The apples you gave me when you found me, and they were the first fresh, good things I’d had to eat in some time? By the gods, Augus, they were incredible. But then I catch myself in it, in the gluttony of it, or the…desperation, and I feel…weak and pathetic and…small. Not a soldier. Just some disgusting thing, like mother always said.’

His eyes had been blurred and burning for some time, but the tears never spilled. It was still locked
up inside of him, coiled up with too many other issues. How he’d looked up to Albion, only to try and convince himself that Albion was then the enemy. How he’d felt like a child, trying to insist to Kabiri that he’d survive the infection if only he had the fire.

‘I called her ‘mama,’” Gwyn said, ‘at the end. In front of all those people. They didn’t hear me, but she did. She looked at me as though garbage had just talked to her. I didn’t mean to call her that.’

‘Didn’t you?’ Augus whispered.

‘I did,’ Gwyn said, something twisting in his heart until it felt so strained it would snap. ‘I did. I don’t know why. I didn’t expect mercy from her, and yet…’

‘She was your mother.’

‘I know she didn’t love me,’ Gwyn said. ‘But I couldn’t help myself. She still had tears on her face. She’d lost Lludd and Efniisen and her sister and her family. How she must have felt, that I was the last one left. Me. Of all of them.’

Gwyn’s voice was shaking and he couldn’t seem to make it stop. He kept shaking his head over and over again, as though that would somehow dash all the awful thoughts away, or rectify things.

‘Because, Augus,’ Gwyn said, his voice breaking, ‘because if she could betray her heartsong of appearance to hurt me, to tell them that, then couldn’t she have betrayed it all along? It was the only thing that stopped her from…it was one of the reasons she hated me. So couldn’t she have betrayed it when I was born? Couldn’t she?’

Gwyn’s eyes drifted shut, he felt so tired. His stomach was full, his body healing, but the words had stolen something from him and he didn’t know how to find it again. All the impetus he had to interrogate Ifir, to keep himself going, it was all gone. He sagged against the bench and didn’t want to lean against Augus’ gentle touches to his face, but couldn’t stop himself. There were fingers at his hairline, then thumbs resting behind his ears, then lips pressing to the curve of his jaw.

‘My dear heart,’ Augus said, and Gwyn shook his head against Augus’ hands. He felt like he’d fly apart at any moment, and he didn’t want to.

‘I did everything they asked me to,’ Gwyn said, his voice flat now, bleached of emotion. ‘They told me to be Seelie, I almost convinced myself that I was. They wanted a soldier, I became one. Lludd told me to stay out of his navy, I never served on a boat or a ship. They needed Mafydd’s body gone, I removed it. They wanted a better General, so okay, that too. Then they wanted a King when I had never ever wanted that, and gave me my tasks, impossible tasks mind you, ones that others didn’t want to touch…I did it. I did everything they asked me to. Everything. I didn’t do it well. I didn’t do it masterfully or gracefully with the flourishes expected of the Seelie, but I did it.’

‘Yes,’ Augus said, and his own voice was strained, despite how empty Gwyn felt. ‘You did.’

‘And then they did that. All of them except Ondine voted for my demotion, my execution. I’d saved some of their lives.’

‘You have saved all of their lives. The Nightingale had the ruin of the entire realm firmly in mind.’

‘They’re the Seelie,’ Gwyn said. ‘They’re supposed to be fair and true and just. They’re supposed to see the truth.’

Gwyn opened his eyes to one of the most intense stares he’d ever seen Augus give him. Augus’ eyes were bright, his hands were still on Gwyn’s face. Gwyn’s heart beat faster again, an uptick in
fear. Because suddenly he realised what Augus had trapped him into admitting, and it made him feel ill.

‘Sweetness,’ Augus whispered. ‘You know they did the wrong thing, don’t you? That they treated you unfairly?’

Gwyn was paralysed. He couldn’t move. Couldn’t do anything more than blink at Augus and hate that Augus had tricked him into this and hate, even more, how awful he felt beneath that.

‘All right,’ Augus said, his fingers tightening on Gwyn’s face. ‘You can’t say it, can you?’

Gwyn shook his head.

‘All right. I’m not going to make you. There’s no point. But I do want to say something, even if you don’t believe me. You’re one of the strongest people I’ve ever met, Gwyn. You earned my respect the very first time I broke that heartsong, because you chose personal integrity over what everyone else wanted for you. You’ve earned it again and again, since then. Your strength has not very much to do with the fact that you were raised to be a soldier. But I know, for you, that is such a core part of your identity. No wonder the demotion and being underfae hurt you so much. It’s not a surprise, Gwyn. It was supposed to kill you.’

‘I’m so tired, Augus,’ Gwyn said. He couldn’t listen to this anymore. The words meant nothing to him. He knew Augus was trying to give something to him, but Gwyn felt too heavy.

‘I want you to teleport us to our room now, Gwyn,’ Augus said, smoothing his fingers over Gwyn’s forehead. ‘And then you’re going to lie down for a little while.’

‘But-’

‘Just a little while,’ Augus said. ‘I’m not asking you to sleep for days. Just rest. Yes? Doesn’t that sound good?’

‘It sounds like bliss,’ Gwyn said, his words bumping into each other.

Augus was still laughing when he pressed his mouth to Gwyn’s cheek. ‘I swear, Gwyn, only you could be injured all over and dealing with the after-effects of not feeding yourself and think that lying down to heal is bliss.’

Gwyn burrowed his head into the gap between Augus’ neck and shoulder and inhaled deeply, sighing at the familiar scent of fresh water and silt. A burst of warmth then, as Augus’ hands buried deeply into his unkempt, tangled hair, holding him close. It shivered down his neck, down his back and bloomed at the base of his spine, the anchor he needed in his chaotic world.

Chapter End Notes

In our next chapter, 'Interrogation:'

‘It is an honour to have you here in my Court, Iliak,’ Gwyn said, reaching out with both of his hands, holding them palm up and offering a greater and more obvious sign of peace than he usually would.
Iliak looked down at Gwyn’s hands, his lips slanting in a considering manner, his hands still behind his back. Then he looked into Gwyn’s eyes, black, thick eyebrows pulling close together.

Gwyn could feel his own heart beating, could smell the char of fire and the sweet-mellow spice of fresh saffron.

Slowly, with consideration, Iliak brought his hands forth and grasped Gwyn’s palms, and then slid his broad, callused hands up to Gwyn’s wrists and clasped them. ‘Well met, my Lord. I must talk with you about my brother, Ifir.’
Apologies for no update last week! We're back to weekly updates at least for the foreseeable future. No new tags for this chapter. :) Thanks to the readers / commenters / folks who leave kudos! You folks are awesome.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Gwyn

* *

Weariness marked him despite the food he’d consumed, despite resting by Augus’ side. He strove to hide it from Augus, but he suspected that Augus not only saw all the signs of it, but expected it anyway. Still, Augus didn’t demand he return to bed. Perhaps he finally understood that there were demands that a Kingdom issued that must be put above all else.

He wondered if Augus ever realised the great insult Gwyn did to the Seelie Court, by putting Augus before all of it, visiting him in the cell, and then finally ignoring most of his responsibilities to seek him out. Letting the Seelie Court fall slowly into disrepair while Gwyn indulged himself as he had never really allowed himself in the past was perhaps one of the greatest signs that he was done with them, even before he knew he was.

‘You’re still injured,’ Augus said, voice quiet, eyes sharp on his torso. But Gwyn sensed something else in that gaze, thought that Augus looked at him like he might be hungry for something different, and then wondered if he was imagining things. It was only that after all he said to Augus, all those awful words, there was a part of him that just wanted to forget. Even for a few minutes. Gwyn wondered if he imagined hunger because it was latent within him, because saying all that awfulness in the kitchens didn’t soothe him at all.

‘Healing, though,’ Gwyn said. ‘It’s a shame this all happened during one of the rare times that Mikkel was able to visit.’

‘I wouldn’t worry too much about that,’ Augus said, as Gwyn combed his fingers through his hair and tried to settle the thick curls. ‘I gave him some tips…excuses he could possibly use to get away from the Seelie Court. He might come back sooner than he thought. He seemed hopeful when he left, at any rate.’

‘You helped him?’ Gwyn said, as Augus folded a small throw blanket at the base of the bed.

‘Why wouldn’t I?’ Augus said. ‘While he’s definitely not the kind of company I would ever seek out for myself, it’s clear that he cares for you. And you for him. He was more afraid for you, than he was of me, and I think that says a lot.’

Gwyn pursed his lips, thought about it as he walked into the bathroom that was more of human-make than he’d personally prefer. But then, Augus liked things to hearken back to human designs, for all that he liked to pretend that he didn’t. Gwyn had made the bathroom with him in mind. A shower would clear his head, at least enough that he could consider the rest of the day.
He expected to be spending much of it in preparation to visit the Unseelie cells to see how Ifir was faring now that he was finally conscious once more.

* 

It took hours to prepare Augus for the interrogation of Ifir. Augus had no professional training in the art, and Gwyn needed Augus’ compulsions, but he also needed to be clear that Augus was playing a part, that he was not the master in that domain. It surprised him that Augus acceded to that quickly and he felt something like warmth in his gut when Augus asked astute questions, when he offered insights that were helpful. He thought he might be catching a glimpse of the person who had helped the Raven Prince so often that he’d ended up on the Raven Prince’s Inner Court. Even better – Gwyn tried to convince himself – Augus didn’t try to distract him, didn’t try to bring up things that pained him to think about, stayed as focused as Gwyn needed him to.

Gwyn was not entirely surprised to be called away towards the end. He’d been expecting an emissary from the marid-djinn afrit, and was surprised to see Iliak himself – King of the marid-djinn and the afshin afrit – waiting in the throne-room with his hands clasped behind his back. His horns were huge, spiralling slowly upwards like a markhor’s, and his thick neck and massively broad shoulders reflected the strength he needed to keep that weight atop his head. His ridged horns were painted with gold and decorated with the brass and copper bands of his station. Without the horns, he stood at eight feet tall. With them, he was ten feet and formidable.

But he wore no weapons about his person that Gwyn could see. He was stern, but didn’t seem furious or outraged. Gwyn could see the resemblance between Iliak and Ifir well. They maintained the same style of facial hair – a neatly trimmed beard and moustache, their eyes glittered with flames, their skin brown and weathered from a life lived in mountainous desert regions and rare oases.

‘It is an honour to have you here in my Court, Iliak,’ Gwyn said, reaching out with both of his hands, holding them palm up and offering a greater and more obvious sign of peacekeeping than he usually would.

Iliak looked down at Gwyn’s hands, his lips slanting in a considering manner, his hands still behind his back. Then he looked into Gwyn’s eyes, his black, thick eyebrows pulling close together.

Gwyn felt his own heart beating, smelled the char of fire and the sweet-mellow spice of fresh saffron.

Slowly, with consideration, Iliak brought his hands forth and grasped Gwyn’s palms, then slid his broad, callused hands up to Gwyn’s wrists and clasped them. ‘Well met, my Lord. I must talk with you about my brother, Ifir.’

‘Of course. Somewhere more private?’

‘And outdoors, please. I do not enjoy the jolt of my horns hitting doorways made of stone, it jars one’s neck.’

‘I can only imagine,’ Gwyn said, leading Iliak towards the night gardens and taking a deep, silent breath, mentally summoning his strength.

* 

Three hours later and night had fallen around the lands of the Unseelie Court. Gwyn leaned with
his back to dirt within a cramped Unseelie cell that smelled of blood and fire. It looked like Ifir had tried to burn his way out at some point. Now, Ifir was exhausted, clammy, in pain, healing as slowly as any underfae would heal from the injuries that Gwyn had given him. Ifir wasn’t able to sit properly due to the sword wound in his hip, nor could he stand, with his Achilles tendon still severed.

His eyes contained a muted, red fire, and he used his own horns to brace his hips so that less weight rested upon them.

Gwyn brought a canvas sack of tools he might need with him, and Augus leaned nearby, seeming far less bothered about their surroundings than Gwyn expected.

‘Your brother came to visit me, today,’ Gwyn said, looking down at him. ‘He doesn’t want civil war, imagine that. He didn’t endorse your mutiny. He didn’t even know it was coming, until you didn’t return from the meeting and he began to suspect that his younger, foolhardy brother had done something foolish.’

Ifir laughed, the sound coarse and pained. ‘He calls me younger, but we’re each of us over ten thousand years old, and only ten years between us.’

‘As someone who has a younger brother,’ Augus said from the corner, ‘believe me when I say that’s all it takes.’

Ifir looked over at him warily. No fae liked to be around someone so adept at compulsions, and even having Augus in the cell increased the tension.

‘You must be hungry,’ Gwyn said. ‘Thirsty for something more than the damp, brackish dreck that you have no doubt needed to lick from the walls. I imagine that’s difficult with horns such as yours. I know you’re in pain.’

Gwyn crouched quickly, uncaring for his own healing wounds, and lashed out, grasping Ifir’s hip and digging his thumb into the wound. Ifir’s nostrils flared, creases appeared around his eyes, but he stayed silent.

‘I want to be very clear,’ Gwyn said, voice quiet. ‘Very clear. You have betrayed me, you have betrayed the Court, and you have betrayed your people. Now, I expect none of that to matter to you, because as you are so fond of saying – you are Unseelie. So let’s think instead of how you have betrayed your family and your children.’

Ifir’s eyes blinked open, shone bright, red fire leaping to orange in his irises. Gwyn looked over at Augus, nodded once. He could feel Ifir tensing beneath him, more afraid of the compulsions than the physical pain. Gwyn could relate.

‘They’re alive,’ Gwyn said, staring at him. ‘It was a bluff. I have proof of life in that bag over there, given to me by Iliak himself, today.’

‘But the swan maiden,’ Ifir said, his eyes wide and hopeful and terrified, ‘she had blood on her blades.’

‘It wouldn’t be much of a bluff if she didn’t,’ Gwyn said, ‘would it?’

Ifir opened his mouth to keep talking, and Gwyn looked over at Augus, cueing him into the conversation.

‘Why did you choose that specific method of mutiny?’ Augus said, tilting his head, the compulsion
so heavy that Gwyn felt it plucking at his own nerves; a sign that even though he was doing better since eating, he still hadn’t found his equilibrium yet.

‘I wanted everyone to know what you were,’ Ifir said, talking to Gwyn. ‘They could choose their side. I’m of the old guard, we don’t serve surrender.’

‘You don’t want to serve him anyway,’ Augus said, every word light despite the power rippling through it. ‘Or do you?’

‘It’s complicated,’ Ifir said, groaning as the compulsions forced the answers from him. Gwyn swallowed, his mouth a little dry. He was glad Albion had never had someone with this ability while Gwyn had been in the cells, even if Mikkel was the next best thing. ‘Can you tell me more about Ada? Adalia? I thought- You made me think- You expect me to believe-’

‘I have proof of life, as I said. But you don’t get to see it now. Augus, continue, please.’

‘Would you serve this King if his heartsong was different?’

‘Yes,’ Ifir said, and then his eyes widened, rolled sideways, stared at Augus in horror. Gwyn lightened the pressure he was digging into Ifir’s wound and drew Ifir’s attention once more.

‘Explain further,’ Augus said.

‘I don’t like you,’ Ifir said to Gwyn, his voice shaking. ‘I don’t have to like you. I didn’t like the Raven Prince, beg your pardon, but he was anti-military and he always treated us with disrespect. I’m not…I’m not as stupid or dense as my brother might think. I watched you, your strategies. You didn’t lead massacres against us when you didn’t have to, and you were quick to negotiate where other leaders wouldn’t. Yes, that wasn’t so true in your early days, but you became seasoned to war as most of us did. I don’t like you. I don’t trust you. I will not follow a heartsong of surrender into an early grave. I will not lead my people into an early grave, for all you think I don’t care.’

‘Do you want the throne yourself?’ Augus said.

Ifir laughed. ‘Fuck off. This throne? This Kingdom?’

‘Yet you fight for it still,’ Gwyn said, holding up his hand to stop Augus from continuing his compulsions. ‘You pledged the marid-djinn afrit, you’ve fought.’

‘Against the Seelie, the only fight I’ve ever really known when I’m not fighting other clans. I don’t want to rule it. I want brains on my mace and screams in my ears. I have my daughters and sons, it is enough.’

Gwyn waved at Augus to continue with the next line of questioning.

‘Are any of the other Generals in Gwyn’s Unseelie military yours, or loyal to you?’ Augus said.

‘No,’ Ifir said, squeezing his eyes shut. He raised a hand and looked like he wanted to cover his eyes, then his arm went limp again. ‘But you can’t kill me, can you? The military is too weak without us. It’s a sign, you know. That the military is too weak.’

‘I know,’ Gwyn said, staring at him.

‘I tried to convince the others to turn against you. Tried to convince them that the stories of how you came to the Unseelie throne don’t add up. They don’t. But Zudanna, Vane…some of the others, they are loyal. At least for now. It’s still not enough.’
‘It’s not,’ Gwyn agreed.

‘I suppose now you’re going to use him to find out everything you can?’

‘Indeed,’ Gwyn said, standing and stepping backwards, staring down at Ifir, feeling detached.

‘I’d do the same,’ Ifir said, staring at him with something that could have been grudging respect.

‘Go on then. Do your worst.’

Over the course of two hours, Augus used compulsions to pick at Ifir’s mind, needing little guidance from Gwyn except in a few strategic areas. All that Augus revealed, only confirmed what Gwyn had always suspected: that Ifir cared about the Unseelie but had no ambition for the throne, though he would like to be a War General of higher standing. That, now that the mutiny had failed, he would be obedient until such time as he could turn on Gwyn again – unless his heartsong changed. That he was desperate, as they all were, because they could taste the end of the Unseelie Court in their mouths and were looking for miracles and hoping that answers could be found in drastic acts.

Ifir was sweating at the end of it, and Gwyn went to the pack and drew out a glass, stoppered bottle of water and herbs, giving it to him carefully, sip by sip. To his surprise, Ifir let him, though he didn’t seem happy about it. Then again, his hands were shaking, and there was no way he’d be able to support the bottle himself.

‘So you’re not going to kill me. Are you going to let me out?’ Ifir said, his voice weak now. He’d not tried to resist many of the compulsions, but there were a few he’d held out on, and he was showing signs of strain and exhaustion.

‘Eventually,’ Gwyn said. ‘You realise that I must make an example of you.’

He turned back to the sack and pulled out the hacksaw. Ifir’s eyes went wide, the fire in them muted to a blackish-purple. He shrank back, his hands clawed into the dirt, his horns dug into the dirt walls behind him.

‘You have a choice,’ Gwyn said. ‘I can do it, or your brother. He volunteered himself for the duty. But I expect that he would prefer not to have to humiliate you in this fashion, better that you can both blame me when you are back amongst your people.’

Ifir stared hatred at him, before looking again at the hacksaw. To his credit, he didn’t complain, nor plead. He only looked at it, eyebrows twisting together, before something in his face seemed to settle towards resignation.

‘I want to see the proof of life first, if I may,’ Ifir said, making an attempt at politeness.

Gwyn nodded, turned back to the bag and pulled out the small wooden box that Iliak had fetched for him. Within it, two small marks of freshly spilled blood on parchment, along with two notes, and declarations signed by Ifir’s wife, and his blood brother. He handed the box silently to Ifir and watched him fumble the latch, before his nostrils flared and he inhaled deeply, fingers pawing at the parchment before he could finally lift it to his eyes and read it. He crumpled the parchment in his relief, tension wound out of him.

‘If you think my mercy is weakness, you should tell me now,’ Gwyn said, his voice detached. ‘Because it would be easy to kill them. We have been watching you for a long time. We know your safe havens, we know the roads you take to get to them, and we know your local enemies. Believe me when I say I can make your life very difficult.’
'Do you think your King is being weak?' Augus said, smirking. 'Showing such mercy to your daughters?'

'No,' Ifir said, his eyes already wide at Gwyn’s threat. 'No. Clever, not weak. I thought- I believed you’d killed them. Until I see them again with my own eyes... But even before, you defeated me – four of us – in combat. You had Generals defending you. It is not your weakness that worries me, it’s that you served in the Seelie military for three thousand years. Unseelie or not, that changes someone.'

'It does,' Gwyn said, picking up the hacksaw and turning it in his fingers. 'I know it does. The Unseelie could benefit from someone who believes in putting the Kingdom first. As for virtue – how virtuous do you think I am, Ifir?'

'Send him away,' Ifir said, his voice breaking like it had under compulsions. He looked over at Augus, then back to Gwyn. 'Just outside the cell. This is something I would not have witnessed by anyone other than yourself or the ifrit.'

'Look away,' Gwyn said to Augus. 'But remain.'

'Certainly,' Augus said, looking up at some point of dirt on the cell wall.

'I’ll still have to fight you,' Ifir said, staring at the hacksaw.

'I’d expect nothing less,' Gwyn said, kneeling by his side and reaching for his horns.

Ifir did fight, and he fought well, given he was underfae and badly wounded, exhausted, hungry. Gwyn overpowered him quickly, easily, one knee on Ifir’s horn to hold his head down to the ground. Ifir panted, limp and spent, every breath filled with rage.

There was a single, full body spasm as Gwyn pressed the hacksaw three quarters of the way down one of Ifir’s horns.

'Am I above the bone core?' Gwyn said, and Ifir swallowed thickly, and then his head twitched into a nod. Afrit had short bone cores, and removing them was reserved for only the most dire of punishments. Gwyn and Iliak had talked at length to determine where might be best to cut for treason.

Gwyn worked quickly with the hacksaw. But even so, it was a long and painful procedure to remove three quarters of one of Ifir’s horns. It was thick, broad, fibrous, and every rough vibration of the hacksaw sent small shockwaves into Ifir’s skull, which didn’t have much of an effect at first, until Ifir moaned and pressed his fingertips to his skull to try and stop what must have been an inescapable headache. Gwyn stopped halfway through when Ifir’s chest heaved, and he turned and retched. He didn’t bring anything up, and after spitting out saliva, he forced himself back down to the ground and gestured for Gwyn to continue.

An afrit’s horns were slow growing, taking centuries to grow even a handspan, and thousands of years to reach their proper breadth and height. The removal of an afrit’s horn, was a local custom, a public way of indicating to all afrit who saw them in the future that they had committed an atrocity by afrit law. Gwyn had made sure to discuss this measure of punishment with Iliak, and it was Iliak himself who had first suggested that Gwyn cut off the base of the horn, removing the bone core, preventing the horn from growing properly again.

In the end, Gwyn had settled on this, which at least meant that the horn would recover and the bone core would remain untouched.
The cell began to smell of hot keratin, and Gwyn was careful to make sure it was a clean break, not snapping the horn off at its other side even though it would have been faster to do so. At the end, the horn broke off in his hand and he felt a heaviness in his own chest. He wanted to tell Ifir that he never wanted this, but Ifir was a member of an older school of Generals who did not believe in signs of empathy when a punishment was being meted out.

‘I’ll send this to your brother,’ Gwyn said, carefully wrapping the horn in a length of cloth and placing it in the sack he’d brought with him. ‘He’s temporarily taken charge of your military in the interim.’

‘The interim? Until he finds another General? Or until you return me to them?’ Ifir said. He hadn’t yet opened his eyes. His arm twitched up like he wanted to feel the stump remaining, but at the last moment he moved away. Gwyn suspected he wouldn’t feel the damage until they both left Ifir alone.

‘You’re experienced,’ Gwyn said. ‘You’re effective. Though a couple of the other Generals think your methods outdated, none of us want civil war, and all of us acknowledge the depth and breadth of your wisdom. It’s why you’re treated as a serious threat when you turn that against the Unseelie Court.’

Gwyn picked up the pack and shouldered it, stowing the handsaw and looking down at Ifir. He’d have to send Aleutia back to him, and he’d have to start sending more food and water down.

‘Farewell,’ Gwyn said, inclining his head even though Ifir couldn’t see him do it.

Augus had stepped out of the cell, and Gwyn was following, when Ifir cleared his throat. ‘When Albion comes for us, I’ll fight if you let me. Not for you, not for the Kingdom, but for my people. For myself.’

‘I know,’ Gwyn said. ‘I’m counting on it.’

‘You’re more Unseelie than I thought you were,’ Ifir said, smiling, lips splitting over teeth.

‘Let’s hope the Seelie learn that too,’ Gwyn said, and they shared a brief moment of bitter connection before Gwyn left the barrier of the cell and walked towards the exit, Augus following behind him.

* *

‘Do you know, I think he trusts you more now that you’ve fought him, defeated him and taken one of his horns?’ Augus said, as Gwyn sent Ifir’s horn and a letter off with a fae courier and then washed horn dust off his hands.

‘Some people are like that,’ Gwyn said. ‘That’s the same everywhere. Seelie or Unseelie. There’s certain warriors that look at you differently once they know you won’t take any more of their nonsense. Ifir is one of them. I hoped – of course – that it wouldn’t come to this, but he is ultimately a fae of fire and slow-burning volcanoes, there was bound to be a confrontation at some point.’

They made their way down corridors, walking towards their shared room instead of teleporting there. Gwyn needed to clear his head. His wounds were healing well, but he felt unsettled. The talk he’d had with Augus in the kitchens, not getting to see Mikkel properly, the knowledge of what Albion could bring down upon them, and now wondering what Davix had planned for all of them…he felt like he was a hound chasing its own tail, trapped in a loop and unable to stop it.
‘You’re good at it,’ Augus said, thoughtfully. ‘Not just on the battlefield, you knew all the questions to ask him in an interrogation.’

‘He’s military, I’m military,’ Gwyn said. ‘I daresay someone else would have handled the whole situation better than I. But there was little I could do once he found out what my heartsong was. There aren’t many military fae in the world who would put their lives on the line once a King said, ‘oh, and by the way, my heartsong is defeat, but…it doesn’t have to mean our defeat, it could mean the defeat of others!’’ Gwyn’s voice dripped sarcasm, and he laughed, the sound dark. ‘For all you claimed surrender could – can – be healthy, you can’t have commanders and officials and Generals who have surrender or defeat or the spirit of giving in lying within their hearts.’

‘Then it’s a good thing I have an idea how to break you of it,’ Augus said, as they turned another corner.

Gwyn stared at him. ‘You do?’

The look Augus gave him was faintly disapproving, troubled. ‘I do. You won’t like it. I’m going to need at least two or three days.’

‘I can give you two or three days,’ Gwyn said. He could. Ifir was in a cell. The Generals all had their tasks. Now they were only waiting for Albion, and he knew that Albion would not fall upon them in the next week, at the least.

Gwyn kept staring at him. Augus looked sidelong at him, kept walking, then several seconds later he looked at Gwyn with his eyes narrowed and a smirk found his mouth, he shook his head as though to himself.

‘I’ve been neglecting you, haven’t I?’ Augus said, and Gwyn’s brow furrowed.

Augus grabbed his wrist in a strong grip and then opened a door as they passed it, yanking him within, closing the door and pushing Gwyn against it in one smooth movement. The shoulder pack that Gwyn was carrying slid to the floor, and Gwyn’s heart beat faster, hungrier. The wood against his back was hard. A quick look around the room revealed that they were in storage. Huge rolls of parchments and paper on metal reels, pieces of wood being prepared for fountain pens, inks in bottles for those who might need it.

Augus’ arm slid past Gwyn’s body and rested upon the door, turning the lock with a sharp click that made Gwyn’s mouth feel dry.

Augus kicked away the pack and then grabbed Gwyn by the shirt, jerking him forwards and spinning them so that Augus was leaning against the door. His hands went up to Gwyn’s hair and fisted hard, painfully, so that Gwyn couldn’t stop the hiss of breath that escaped him.

‘Down,’ Augus said. ‘Now.’

Gwyn started to lower himself, but it wasn’t fast enough. One of Augus’ hands let go of his head and knuckled down into his good shoulder, leaning waterhorse weight into it so that Gwyn slammed onto his knees, feeling them cracking upon slate. He winced, braced himself against the door, looked up at Augus.

There was a time when he would have fought this. When he would have made excuses, claimed that he didn’t have time. He felt all the words of protest in his mouth, but he couldn’t let any one of them spill. Augus looked like he already knew, and Gwyn kept looking at him, apprehensive, hopeful, as he leaned towards Augus’ pelvis, his crotch, and then rested his forehead against
Augus’ pants. He tilted his mouth forwards, lips brushing against the suede that Augus had chosen to wear.

“You’re so desperate you can’t even find the will to protest, can you?” Augus said, and then he laughed. “Come on then. Are you going to just nuzzle it, or do you actually remember what you’re supposed to do with a cock when you’re on your knees?”

Gwyn flushed, his hands moving up to Augus’ pants woodenly, clumsily. He was eager, but Augus liked to humiliate him, and Gwyn wished it was easier to deny the fact that he wanted this so much.

He opened Augus’ pants and found his limp cock beneath the fabric. Pressed forwards and licked at it before he’d even freed it entirely, curling his tongue around it and digging his fingers into the hem of Augus’ pants. Augus sighed above him, and then hummed quietly, fisting Gwyn’s hair up in a cruel grip and shaking him slightly.

“I don’t have all day,” Augus said. “Work faster.”

Gwyn winced and he drew Augus out of his pants, bracing the base of his cock with his fingers resting on straight pubic hair, his mouth opening as he licked generously at Augus’ cock. He tongued the foreskin, and then tried to slip his tongue between it and the head of Augus’ cock. Then, he moved forwards, taking half of Augus’ smaller, limp cock into his mouth and pulling backwards, sucking hard, pulling the foreskin back between his lips and teasing it with his tongue, before Augus hissed and then growled softly.

“Faster,” Augus snapped. “You want to spend forever doing this, then you can find time for it later.”

Gwyn made a faint sound, opened his mouth to sink down, only to have hands grab at his head and pull him backwards. He stared up at Augus, confused, stung. Augus’ lips were thin, eyebrows drawn together.

“I can’t go much faster,” Gwyn said. “Not like this.”

“It’s just occurred to me that you doing this without putting up much of a protest is not the progress that I thought it was. Or at least, not entirely. How anxious have you been of late, that you need this so badly that you cannot even manage token protest?”

“Honestly,” Gwyn said, exasperated, annoyed, his heart knocking in his chest and hating the sensation of it. “Do you just like hearing yourself talk?”

Augus blinked at him, and then the smile that curved over his lips was dangerous, showed sharp canines.

“All right,” Augus said, like he’d come to some sort of conclusion. He pulled Gwyn forwards with a hand clutching tight at the back of Gwyn’s head, with his other hand, he fisted his own cock until the tip slipped into Gwyn’s mouth. Then, he let go of himself and petted the top of Gwyn’s head. The gesture didn’t feel comforting so much as condescending. ‘Come on, Gwyn,’ Augus said, sounding impatient. ‘I thought you fancied yourself to be good at this.’

Gwyn blinked up at Augus in surprise, his mouth full of him, tasting silt and the faintest hint of musk and spring water. Augus patted his head again in that patronising manner and Gwyn let the edges of his teeth rest lightly on Augus’ sensitive skin.

Augus laughed. The sound as dangerous as the smile he’d offered earlier. That condescending pat again and Gwyn huffed a breath of frustration through his nose, closed his eyes and concentrated.
Augus wanted him to work faster, he could work faster.

Augus’ cock didn’t harden quickly, even though Gwyn started bobbing his head slowly – wary that Augus’ flesh would be sensitive – increasing suction once Augus didn’t seem to be having any trouble with it. About sixty seconds passed and Augus cuffed the back of his head. It was light, nothing more than a tap, but Gwyn stopped, his mouth opened and he slid back to protest. 

The cuff came again.

‘Have you forgotten what I want so quickly?’ Augus drawled. ‘I said work, I said go faster, and instead you’re treating this like some leisurely—No, don’t take your head off my cock.’

Claws scraped over the back of his scalp, forcibly holding him in place. Augus bent over him, growling again, Gwyn’s head hurting where his hair was pulled so tight. He made another sound of frustration, and Augus pushed Gwyn’s mouth to the flat of his pelvis. His cock was hardening now, and Gwyn knew that breathing was going to be difficult soon, especially with the way that Augus had changed his centre of gravity, using more of his weight to keep Gwyn in place.

‘Have you forgotten how to use your tongue?’ Augus snapped, and Gwyn moved his tongue automatically. His heart pounded as he rasped it against the underside of Augus’ thickening cock. He sucked, worked saliva into his mouth, and Augus’ grip shifted on his shoulders. Augus shifted to more of an embrace, sliding his hand beneath the neckline of Gwyn’s shirt, and Gwyn began to relax until he felt claws puncturing his good shoulder, scraping down skin, lighting fires of pain inside of him.

He groaned, and Augus did nothing except introduce more scrapes across his back, slow and measured, forcing Gwyn’s skin to give way.

Augus’ hips started rocking forwards rhythmically, his arms and hands still holding him in place, and Gwyn relaxed his throat as best he could but with no pause in Augus’ pace and the pain distracting him, he wasn’t able to. His throat wouldn’t open, and Augus rocked harder even as Gwyn screwed his eyes shut and tried to concentrate on not gagging, on not indulging the spasm that threatened his chest and throat. He reached up and gripped Augus’ pants, and Augus did nothing more than jerk roughly into Gwyn’s mouth, wedging the head of his cock into tightness.

‘Take it,’ Augus said, his voice crisp. ‘We’re not off to a good start, are we?’

With that, Augus mercilessly pushed his hips forward and forced his cock into the tight space at the back of Gwyn’s throat, and Gwyn made a despairing sound as he tried thumping at Augus’ thigh to indicate that he just needed to catch his breath, just quickly, if he could only-

A thick choking noise, Augus digging his nails into Gwyn’s back, and Gwyn’s throat worked hard to try and expel Augus’ cock even though there was nowhere for it to go. Augus refused to move, and Gwyn made a desperate noise, tried to push backwards.

‘No,’ Augus said, petting him in that condescending way again. ‘This is about as easy as it’s going to get, Gwyn.’

Gwyn’s chest was tight, and worse, his own cock was responding to the rougher treatment. Despite the pain in his throat, the sense of being invaded, he felt the strain in his pants as his cock hardened in the confines of fabric.

Augus ground forwards in a circular motion, triggering another wave of strangled noises from Gwyn. Gwyn’s fingers dug into Augus’ pants, and Augus laughed breathlessly behind him.
'You don’t need to breathe,’ Augus said, his voice firm. ‘And you’re some way from passing out. If I was the kind of fae that liked to gamble, I might make a bet that you’re getting hard in those trousers of yours, if you’re not already. In the meantime, keep panicking. You’re delicious when you’re like this.’

Claws cut into his flank, and Gwyn flinched and cried out as much as he could around Augus’ flesh lodged in his mouth, his throat.

Augus pulled back just enough that Gwyn could gulp a hoarse breath and then he thrust back in, the motion bullying back into Gwyn’s throat. Slowly, Augus kept up the rhythm and straightened, dragging both of his hands back into Gwyn’s hair and yanking him forwards. Gwyn couldn’t do much more than keep his mouth open, keep his teeth out of the way, and feel his face burn hot when he realised he couldn’t keep track of the saliva in his mouth and he felt it instead on his chin.

The breaths he managed to catch were quick, sharp things that felt like blades in his throat, the grip in his hair was implacable. Even though it was difficult, even though it hurt his throat, his scalp, strained at his shoulder, his cock was getting harder all the time. So much so that even that was an ache between his legs, a heavy throb that demanded attention. But Gwyn couldn’t spare it, Augus was moving too quickly, too roughly, and if Gwyn didn’t concentrate his mouth was going to spasm shut, his teeth were going to scrape across Augus’ skin.

So Gwyn kept his mouth open, the wet sounds of what they were doing moving up between them and Gwyn half wanted to cover his ears and half wished he had something to grind himself against. He settled for curving his hands around the back of Augus’ thighs, and then finally up to his ass, digging in, getting a tighter grip.

Augus hissed above him, thrust deep and stayed there, holding Gwyn in place, Augus’ breathing audible.

Gwyn wasn’t panicking now. Something went loose in his spine, in his good shoulder, and even though his heart was straining in his chest, he didn’t want to move. He was close to something greater than himself, something he’d only ever experienced a few times in his life. Perhaps he should have been embarrassed, the way he was clinging to Augus, but all of it was floating away, receding.

The hands on his head drew him backwards slowly enough that Gwyn knew that Augus was finishing up, and Gwyn wanted Augus to come down his throat, wanted more, strained against the fingers moving behind his ears.

His head was tilted up once Augus’ cock slipped free. Lambent green eyes looked down on him, and then thumbs were at the corners of his mouth and slicking over saliva. Augus didn’t look away from Gwyn’s eyes as the thumbs became the fingers of one hand gliding in the stuff, before three fingers slid into Gwyn’s parted mouth, as deep as they could go. Gwyn’s throat worked, the claws were scratchy, it was harder to stay relaxed with the threat of them, the way they tickled at the back of his mouth.

But otherwise, he didn’t move.

‘I don’t want the Unseelie Court to fall,’ Augus said, his nostrils flaring, his lips turning into a frown. ‘But sometimes, I want it over, destroyed, so that I might steal you away somewhere. Somewhere dark and beneath the water and wholly mine. So that I can show you everything that you’re capable of. So that I can teach you to love it.’

Gwyn blinked at him, felt his skin become taut with gooseflesh and the hairs on the nape of his
neck stand up. Augus’ fingers rubbed at the flat of his tongue, the sides, and Gwyn curled his tongue around the digits, then closed his lips and sucked.

Perhaps he should be more worried that Augus sometimes wanted the Unseelie Court to fall.

At his most desperate, trapped moments, he wanted the same thing. He looked ahead at their future and didn’t know how they possibly could prevail.

But unlike Augus, he didn’t think of a future after that, he saw only failure and the terror that came with it. Augus would not have pleaded with him to become King months and months ago, if he didn’t think – hope – that Gwyn could bring something forth where the others couldn’t.

Augus’ other hand slipped from the back of Gwyn’s head and thumbed at the pulse point under his ear, and his frown deepened. He closed his eyes briefly. Gwyn sucked harder on Augus’ fingers, tried to wiggle his tongue between the gap of index and middle finger, wanted Augus not to look like something about Gwyn was upsetting him.

The next gaze that Augus directed down at him was critical. Gwyn wanted to scratch at his own face, the saliva was getting itchy, but he didn’t want to let go, either.

Gwyn looked pointedly down at Augus’ cock. Surely if Gwyn’s cheeks were beginning to feel itchy from the air, then Augus’ cock was feeling neglected? He looked back up at Augus again, made a faint sound over Augus’ fingers. Felt it vibrate through the whorls and patterns of Augus’ fingerprints.

Please, Gwyn willed. His own lower stomach was a knot, his balls felt heavy. He knew it was entirely possible that Augus could walk away from this right now. After all, Augus had consummate control over his own arousal and he could bring himself off easily. Gwyn had always struggled with it.

Augus bent down slowly, the hand back in his hair pulling Gwyn backwards into an arch. Augus licked over the place where his knuckles met Gwyn’s lips, then kept lapping at the space, encouraging Gwyn’s mouth open.

As soon as Gwyn’s mouth opened wide enough, Augus drew his fingers out and slid his tongue in. Gwyn couldn’t stop himself from moaning. Augus bent him into an even more unforgiving arch, Gwyn’s cock hurting where it chafed against his pants. Augus kissed Gwyn thoroughly, generously, forcing heat into his blood even though Gwyn felt warm enough, making his breath come faster, until Gwyn was making faint sounds against Augus’ mouth and feeling like he was about to be bent in half.

‘I want you,’ Augus breathed, ‘to bend over that table behind you. You’re going to reach out with your arms, stretch out over it, and hold the other side. Because I think you’re going to want to brace yourself. You know why, don’t you?’

Augus bit Gwyn’s lower lip sharply, then moved back, dragging him upright by his hair. Gwyn felt shaken, dizzy. Augus grabbed his cock and balls through his trousers, squeezing hard enough that Gwyn winced, felt off-balance. He held still, and even that pain – because it was painful – was satisfying something inside of him. His exhales were short and hard and as hungry as he thought the light in Augus’ eyes might be.

‘All right,’ Augus said, his voice harder. ‘The table. Now.’

Augus let go, and Gwyn took a half step backwards, and then turned, head swimming, and saw the
table Augus must have meant. It was sturdy, wooden, broad enough that when Gwyn began to bend
over it, he realised just how far he’d have to stretch to get his hands hooked around the other side,
just how bare he’d feel, even clothed. It would hurt his shoulder. He hesitated, and he heard
Augus’ intake of impatient breath and almost forced himself to just lie down then and there but…

‘Augus,’ Gwyn said, staring at the table, closing his eyes at the wrecked sound of his own voice.
‘My shoulder…’

Augus hadn’t released the nerves in his shoulder for a long time, and dealing with Ifir and the
mutiny had meant it was more tense than usual. Having his arm by his side was okay, even moving
it he could bear, but stretching it up above his head would be a problem.

‘Look at me,’ Augus said, and Gwyn reluctantly turned his head, wondering if he’d just somehow
ruined something without realising. Augus took one of his arms and wrapped it around his ribs. ‘I
want you to do this with your bad shoulder. Pin it underneath yourself. Understand?’

A wave of relief as Gwyn nodded, bending over the table again, half-forgetting that he was
supposed to feel exposed in the first place. He stretched his other arm forward and hooked it over
the other side of the table. The arm beneath his ribs was uncomfortable, but discomfort was
nothing like the shriek of pain his shoulder screamed at him when it was overstretched.

Augus walked up behind him. Gwyn felt fingers in the hem of his pants that tugged quickly, not
caring for Gwyn’s hiss when the fabric pulled roughly on his cock. Then, claws pricking through
the back of his linen shirt. A simple, sharp tear and his back was bared to Augus’ hands.

Gwyn vaguely recalled that he used to destroy Augus’ clothing a lot, and Augus used to be so
annoyed about it. But on the receiving end, Gwyn couldn’t bring himself to mind.

Fingers splayed over his neck, his shoulder, and then curled and dragged down, creating furrowed
lines of sensation that didn’t end until one hand had fit in between Gwyn’s ass cheeks and the other
had curled around and a claw teased too threateningly at the head of Gwyn’s cock. Gwyn’s hand
gripped the edge of the table harder, the hand beneath his ribs twitched.

‘What is your fascination with tables lately?’ Gwyn said, remembering the aphrodisiacs, being tied
to the table; Augus edging him with herbs. At the time it had seemed like a kind of torture; now,
something in Gwyn’s gut felt warm and wretched with want at the thought of something like that
happening again.

‘It’s more a fascination to see you stretched over them,’ Augus said lightly, even as his hand
moved away from Gwyn’s ass and then returned several seconds later covered with…slick?

‘You have lubricant?’ Gwyn said, blinking hard. Had Augus had it in his pocket the entire time?
When they’d been interrogating Ifir? Was that-

Gwyn bit into his bottom lip when two fingers pressed into him. He was already up on tiptoe when
Augus kicked his legs further apart. Augus hummed when Gwyn hissed at the stretch of it, Augus
turning his fingers, always pushing deeper, making Gwyn yield to him.

‘Always,’ Augus said, something devious in his voice as he crooked his fingers in Gwyn’s ass and
curled down with easy aim, pegging his prostate and Gwyn scratched a sound out of his throat
because it was too soon, too much, too early. He couldn’t exactly crawl up the table, stretched out
the way that he was, and Augus’ other hand had moved from his cock and was now pinning his
lower back to the cold wood.
Two fingers became three, and Gwyn was panting and already hard and was tempted to kick at Augus’ shin to see if that would speed things up but…he knew that it wouldn’t.

His eyes flew open when he felt a fourth finger nudging at him, he began to push himself upright and Augus pushed him back down to the table.

‘Stay,’ Augus said.

‘I’m not…’ Gwyn wasn’t sure how to finish the sentence. There would be no room.

‘You could, you know,’ Augus said, withdrawing his three fingers until they were only shallowly inside him, his whole body feeling like a giant, empty ache. ‘Observe.’

Augus stretched three fingers out against muscle and Gwyn heard the sound his own blunt fingernails made as they still managed to scrape across wood. He was aware of Augus laughing, even more aware of the sting and the way it made his pulse points feel like they were leaping out of sync, the way his heart seemed to skip beats inside his chest. Stretched like this he could almost imagine four fingers, but he couldn’t make himself imagine more, not the way Augus intended.

‘One day,’ Augus said to himself. ‘But not today.’

Gwyn was halfway through taking a breath of relief when Augus withdrew his fingers and was pressing his cock into him. Augus eased in carefully, which was far more than Gwyn expected. Even so, he still had to make sure he breathed through it. It didn’t seem to get any easier with time, and there was always the sting, the ache, the feeling like Augus was coring him and making room for himself, like Gwyn would never quite belong to himself again. Especially when Augus’ hands pressed down on Gwyn’s back, holding him in place, even as his pelvis pushed forward and their skin mashed together.

He felt Augus shifting his stance, felt the way Augus rose up on the balls of his own feet because it shifted his cock where it rested within Gwyn.

Augus said nothing when he withdrew and snapped his hips forward so hard that Gwyn’s breath whuffed out of him before he could gasp it back again. Then, with no pause, no comment, Augus started a hard, deep rhythm that threatened to move even the sturdy table. Gwyn tried to push himself upright to relieve some of the pressure in his lower back and Augus snarled at him, the hand pushing down becoming claws digging in, spilling blood.

‘Stay,’ Augus said. ‘Take it. That’s…all you have to do.’

Gwyn wasn’t even sure he could manage that much.

Gwyn’s cock stayed hard, slapped the underside of the table with every shift of Augus’ hips, and that stung, but not enough to stop the rush of heat that flowed through him. He growled, scrabbled at the edge of the table and then couldn’t hold the sounds back, cries and moans spilling out over his bruised throat.

The multitude of pleasure and pain began to coalesce, and Augus fucked into him like he wanted to break Gwyn and the table. Even so, there was still that undulation in his hips that meant Gwyn’s prostate was glanced over, the angle was good, and Gwyn groaned in despair and want even as the violence of it, the way he was stretched over the table, made him feel raw and exposed.

Augus didn’t slow down when – minutes later – Gwyn realised that he was going to come without a hand touching his cock at all. His lips pulled back in a grimace as the sensation of it rushed up and down his spine, as his balls drew up, as tension coiled tight as a spring inside of him and then
unleashed, made him feel like he was flying apart. Augus fucking him through it mercilessly. Each jab of his hips making Gwyn feel like he was being drained of everything he had left, his cock pulsing far longer than normal. Augus continued even when Gwyn grew soft and sensitive, when he knew he couldn’t handle much more. Claws continued to cut into him, gripping tight.

It was hard to keep track of everything, the aches and pains and pleasures wrought. Gwyn began to feel like a part of him was drifting, and he felt warmth suffuse him when he realised from the slight stutter in Augus’ movements that he was close.

‘Augus,’ Gwyn murmured, his forehead rocking over the table. ‘Please.’

He was aching when Augus finally stilled and pressed deep, his cock twitching with release, his hair draped over the middle of Gwyn’s back as his forehead came to rest upon the scratches he’d made. His breath was hot where it gusted against Gwyn’s skin, his tongue wet where it rested, tracing lazy patterns.

A couple of minutes later, Augus stirred, pressing lips to Gwyn’s flesh deliberately.

‘Your shoulder?’ Augus said, against his skin.

‘Sore,’ Gwyn managed, trying to clear his throat and aware he’d just have to wait it out. ‘Not as bad as it could have been.’

‘Good,’ Augus said, rubbing at Gwyn’s flank, then reaching up and cupping the nape of his neck. ‘Good. You did the right thing, telling me. You were-’

‘I should have just-’

‘No,’ Augus whispered against him, ‘you did a good thing. With how sore I wanted to make you, it was best that nothing else interfere with that.’

Augus laughed against him, pressed wet kisses over his back, lips sliding over sweat. ‘Okay,’ Augus whispered, ‘unhook your hand and lower your arm, and move back onto the flat of your feet slowly.’

Gwyn had no choice but to listen. His arm was sore, and Augus didn’t withdraw from him; every movement he made reminded him that Augus’ cock was still inside of him. A small part that he didn’t want to listen to wished it could always be like this.

Which, Gwyn knew, was unrealistic. He didn’t like to listen to that part of him.

Augus withdrew carefully, then reached between Gwyn’s legs and rubbed fingers over his opening, fingertips moving over his own come. Gwyn winced, tried to squirm away, and Augus made a pleased sound.

Gwyn made himself stand, but he wished he didn’t have to. Until Augus slid arms around him, pressed his chest to Gwyn’s naked back.

‘Will you teleport us to our room?’ Augus said. ‘A shower, perhaps, and some more rest. No sleep, Gwyn, I know, but you can rest can’t you?’

Gwyn closed his eyes, a twinge of pain sparking in his chest for all the times they’d had that hadn’t ended like this, for how easy Augus made it seem.

‘Just like that?’ Gwyn said.
‘Just like that,’ Augus said, his arms tightening in a way that felt less like a trap, and more like an embrace.

Chapter End Notes

In our next chapter, 'Heartsong:'

‘What heartsong do you want instead of this one?’ Augus said. ‘You know that some Mages have been able to change their heartsong simply by willing it over time? Obviously it’s not so simple for most of us, but I still think that—’

‘Wildness,’ Gwyn said, taking a deep breath. ‘I’ve had it before. I lost it too soon.’

‘Ah,’ Augus said, leaning back in his chair and closing his eyes. ‘It’s what I’d ideally like for you as well. But Gwyn, you’d have to change a great deal if you wanted to keep it. You had cabins and the woods and the wilderness and far less responsibilities back then and you still lost it.’
Chapter Notes

No new tags! But a reminder that this does touch on some of the tags and that it has what some might consider disturbing themes within.

*

I can't speak for anyone else of course, but this is one of my favourite chapters.
*quietly rolls it out* Thanks to everyone for reading! And a special thanks to those who comment, you folks are awesome. To everyone reading this who has finals - good luck!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Gwyn

*‘Today is going to go a little differently to what we’ve done previously,’ Augus said.

Gwyn looked over the room where Augus intended to try and break his heartsong of surrender. It still contained a saltire cross, the chests of drawers he’d come to associate with Augus’ expression of dominance. There were still beams in the ceiling designed for bondage and suspension, and spelled hooks in the walls where someone could be tied and restrained and fastened.

As far as Gwyn was concerned, it all looked identical to what he’d come to expect from Augus. Except that instead of being told to strip and lean against a cross, they were currently sitting opposite each other at a table, and Augus had brewed them both tea. With no sugar. Gwyn frowned at it, but he’d had a big meal earlier in the day – because Augus had said there was no way he would go ahead with this undertaking if Gwyn wasn’t at least fed in the first place.

‘First,’ Augus said, ‘who’s managing what in the palace? How do you know you have the time to do this and it’s not just desperation to get it done?’

Gwyn traced the rim of the saucer upon which his mug rested, and then placed both of his hands flat on his brown pants.

‘Zudanna is taking lead in military matters, and the majority of the remaining Generals are happy to listen to her. The few that aren’t were happy to defer to Mu, who is in turn at peace with listening to Zudanna. We still have our scouts out in strategic locations following Albion’s movements, and so… Albion will need at least a week to assemble a decent force, and then – since not all of those fae could teleport, let alone teleport all of their supplies – they would need time to be moved through portals. So for now, I know I have at least a week without Albion drawing us into a large-scale war. Small scale battles I trust Zudanna to handle.’

Gwyn looked nervously over to the cross. The more he thought about it, the more he saw sense in what Augus had said before. How would Augus break a heartsong of surrender by demanding Gwyn’s submission? It would have been an easier undertaking when Gwyn’s heartsong had been
triumph, and even that hadn’t been easy.

‘What else?’ Augus prompted.

‘Gulvi is Queen-in-Waiting and has exceptional understanding of our contacts, merchants, more. I’ve sewn up a few open issues that needed to be resolved. There is, I think, no better time for this.’

‘What heartsong do you want instead of this one?’ Augus said. ‘You know that some Mages have been able to change their heartsong simply by willing it over time? Obviously it’s not so simple for most of us, but I still think that.’

‘Wildness,’ Gwyn said, taking a deep breath. ‘I’ve had it before. I lost it too soon.’

‘Ah,’ Augus said, leaning back in his chair and closing his eyes. ‘It’s what I’d ideally like for you as well. But Gwyn, you’d have to change a great deal if you wanted to keep it. You had cabins and the woods and the wilderness and far less responsibilities back then and you still lost it.’

Gwyn nodded, because that was all true. ‘But maybe…’

‘Maybe?’ Augus said.

‘Maybe…’ Gwyn bit the inside of his lower lip, unable to articulate something he hardly understood himself. ‘Maybe this time it would be different.’

Because if Augus stayed…he was always so much better at seeing the things that Gwyn missed, the signs of self-neglect when they became too extreme. Because Augus had brought him back from the brink when he’d been dangerously close to collapse. Because it wouldn’t be the first time Augus had done it. Yet it was a terrible thing to expect from someone else, and Gwyn couldn’t expect it, it wasn’t fair, and because he understood that one day Augus would walk away, and Gwyn would just have to accept it.

‘Perhaps,’ Augus said, watching him too closely. ‘You’re not going to like what I have to do, to break this heartsong.’

He stood, gestured for Gwyn to do the same.

‘I might not like it,’ Gwyn said, ‘but I asked. I said you could do whatever it took, I didn’t say it lightly.’

‘No, you said it out of desperation,’ Augus said. ‘Take off your shirt. I need to check the state of your heartsong. It may be too strong for this. In which case, I’ll just enjoy my time with you and send you on your way.’

There was a smile in Augus’ voice, but his expression was troubled.

‘Do you not want to do this?’ Gwyn said, as he removed his shirt and left it draped over the back of the chair.

‘In truth?’ Augus said, walking up to Gwyn and turning him, everything detached and clinical, ‘no, I don’t. Just because I can see the merits of why it needs to go, doesn’t mean that I want it gone. There is a part of you that has always wanted to sink so deep, to let go of everything. That part of you let me drown you in the lake. Gives you something that you so often cannot give to yourself. But…I suppose, if you’ve had it once and you gain another, that doesn’t mean that it won’t remain inside of you, influencing you. Just as loyalty, justice, triumph and wildness have all done the same.’
Hands pressed into Gwyn’s back, lukewarm and cooler than his own skin, making him shiver. Augus placed his ear over skin, like he was listening to Gwyn’s heart, but in truth he was doing far more than that. Whatever energy that Augus carried within him to make healthy wetlands spring from poison and char, was the same energy he could use to sense someone’s heartsong. Gwyn felt nothing at all.

Augus inhaled sharply. ‘It’s already destabilised. And I think for some time. Are you simply unable to hold onto a heartsong?’

Gwyn stared ahead at the floor and shrugged a shoulder. He’d never wanted it as a heartsong, so he couldn’t say he was particularly upset to hear that it had destabilised. Nor was he surprised.

‘No wonder you asked me to remove it,’ Augus said, his hands rubbing Gwyn’s back carefully. ‘All right. I have to say you don’t seem particularly nervous.’

‘I’m not,’ Gwyn said.

‘Ah well, let’s do something about that, shall we?’ Augus walked around to face him and there was a mischievousness on his face that Gwyn both liked and caused dread to bloom inside of him. ‘I imagine you can guess what the next twelve hours are going to involve, because I need to tire you out to make you cooperative.’

‘I’m being perfectly cooperative,’ Gwyn said, and then closed his eyes. It wasn’t going to matter either way.

‘Stand over here, let’s get you into ropes.’

Gwyn made a faint grumbling noise and grudgingly walked to where Augus had pointed. It was going to be a long day.

* 

After the first few hours passed, Gwyn already felt like he was going to break a lot quicker than Augus thought he was. Predicament bondage was the order of the day, and it was all hideously familiar to what Augus had put him through centuries before, when Gwyn had visited him the very first time in his underwater home. Though there were differences now that Gwyn couldn’t help but notice.

The first being that instead of suspending both of Gwyn’s arms above his head, he’d first carefully and securely roped Gwyn’s bad shoulder and arm across his torso so that the shoulder wouldn’t feel too much strain. Every sure loop of the mildly scratchy rope pulled tighter, until finally Augus started in on Gwyn’s other arm.

Back then he’d been in the prime of his health. He should still be in the prime of his health, but with months of not being able to train as concertedly as he’d like, not being tempered in battle as often as he used to be, not eating as much as he should…he was fit, but he didn’t have the endurance or stamina that he used to have. It was startling, he was Court status back then, and technically King status brought with it greater physical strength, made almost all attributes stronger.

Gwyn stood on tiptoe in the centre of a soundproofed room in the Unseelie Court, surrounded on all sides by stone walls and glowing baubles of magelight. His arm was roped above his head, anchored to a beam. Already, he was feeling the twitching and shivering in his muscles that meant that even if he wanted to keep going, his feet would just give out.
He didn’t want that either. There was a scratchy, annoying piece of rope tied at the base of his balls, applying constant pressure, already a dull ache. He knew that if he sank to the bottom of his feet, the rope would stretch from where it was tied and pain would crawl all through his spine, up the back of his throat, even into his fingers.

‘There are plenty of other ways to tire someone out,’ Gwyn said, glaring at Augus, who was measuring out herbs into dosages for Julvia and not even keeping an eye on him. ‘For example, I could just train for a few hours. It wouldn’t hurt.’

‘I want it to hurt,’ Augus said, not looking up. There was a pause, and Gwyn thought he was smiling then, even though he was looking down. ‘You want it to hurt.’

‘Not like this,’ Gwyn said, feeling off balance, wishing he could wrap his fingers around the rope that had him bound and brace himself further against it.

‘True enough,’ Augus said, looking up at him and smiling benignly as though a sadistic thought had never crossed his mind. ‘I want you tired.’

‘I haven’t slept for-’

‘Look at you,’ Augus said, smiling sharply and putting the measuring spoon down, his eyes flashing. ‘Bad-tempered, talking back, grumpy, rude. Am I not paying you enough attention? You were always sensitive to that.’

‘No, I wasn’t-’

‘Shh,’ Augus said, still smiling, walking over in a way that made Gwyn wonder if he should have just kept his mouth shut for another ten minutes. ‘I thought you wanted the heartsong gone?’

‘I just don’t see how this benefits anyone but you,’ Gwyn said.

Augus’ eyebrows twisted together, his eyes grew wider, and when he reached Gwyn he placed both hands flat on his naked chest. ‘Sweetness, don’t you want to do things that benefit me? Hm?’

Gwyn stared at him, his mouth going dry. He wasn’t sure what to say. It scared him, sometimes, to contemplate that he would endure almost anything if Augus asked him to, if he thought it would make Augus happy. That he had endured a knife sliding between his ribs and something that Augus called gentleness and more because Augus had asked him to.

‘Gwyn?’ Augus prompted, and Gwyn blinked at him and thought perhaps that if he nodded, he would give something of himself away. It might be something that Augus already knew, but that wasn’t the point.

Augus smirked. ‘I’m quite certain that if I made it a firm question – ‘don’t you want to make me happy?’ You’d find yourself very hard-pressed to say no. You’d put up with almost anything, wouldn’t you? It’s quite frightening, I think, to know that about yourself. It’s not brought you much happiness in the past, that loyalty, that desire to do well by others.’

Gwyn rolled his eyes to cover the way his cheeks were reddening, and took a deep breath, trying to ignore what Augus was saying.

Augus walked behind him, opened a drawer, and Gwyn bit his top lip while Augus couldn’t see the nervous gesture. Then, he heard the sound of something being removed and the sound of the drawer being slid shut carefully – Augus always took such care with the furniture around him – and then he heard a rattle of metal objects contained in a box.
A sense memory stole through him, sharp and visceral, even though it wasn’t a sound he’d heard for centuries. His heart beat faster, dread welled and he felt a horrible tension wind through him.

‘Augus,’ Gwyn heard himself say, ‘you can’t be serious.’

‘So you remember, do you?’ Augus said, entirely too pleased with himself.

‘They were punishments. I haven’t done anything that warrants—’

‘You’re bellicose, quarrelsome and you complain.’

“You haven’t given me any rules,” Gwyn said, the hand above his head – tingly now – trying to grip on something to brace himself and finding nothing but air. Augus had roped his palm so that he couldn’t even bring his fingers together. ‘I haven’t broken any rules.’

Augus was standing so close to his back that Gwyn could feel his skin responding. Then he could feel Augus’ breath on his neck, steady and calm.

‘Gwyn,’ Augus said, very softly, ‘don’t you want to make me happy? Don’t you know how it pleases me to see you wearing them?’

Gwyn couldn’t stop himself from growling, even as a swooping sensation fell through him, made him feel like he was drowning. And hadn’t it felt good in the end, letting himself be drowned by Augus? Giving into him, even as his lungs had screamed for air?

‘Fuck you,’ Gwyn said, the words coming from some abrasive, resistant place. The place that was still bewildered that he’d ended up with a heartsong like surrender in the first place.

Augus laughed, the sound gusting across his back, and it wasn’t a dark, sinister laugh, but something delighted and real.

‘Did I touch a nerve?’ Augus said, pleased. ‘Is it so hard for you just to say yes? This is the worst pretence I think I’ve ever seen you maintain, of all the facades you have. That you don’t just want to roll over for me and do whatever I say. Do you think I’ve forgotten that you want to be collared and leashed for me? Hm?’

Augus was still talking so that every word fell upon his neck and tense shoulder, ghosting across sweat and cooling it. Gwyn’s entire body began to shake, his endurance wavered. Gwyn closed his eyes to even think about that crushed collar, the way the metal had just bent under Augus’ boot, destroyed.

‘I think I preferred it when you were breaking my heartsong of triumph,’ Gwyn said, finally.

‘Now you’re just lying,’ Augus said, pressing his lips to Gwyn’s neck. Gwyn shuddered when he felt the wooden box press against his flank, Augus nudging it against him deliberately. ‘You were suicidal back then. You’re not now. Things are already improved for you, sweetness.’

‘Not if you use those clamps,’ Gwyn said.

Augus scraped his teeth over Gwyn’s skin, just hard enough to be a threat, but not hard enough to cause pain. Then, a click, as the box was opened. The clinking of Augus’ fingers trailing through them. A few seconds later, Gwyn felt cold of metal trace over his skin and risked going on one foot to kick backwards at Augus.

‘Why is it,’ Augus said, after nimbly stepping out of the way, ‘that people who are tied up in
compromising positions often feel like they have any basis on which to negotiate with me?’

Gwyn had only just gotten his leg back under him when Augus kicked it out from beneath him, aiming behind the knee joint. The shock of it left Gwyn on one leg and losing his balance, nearly falling to the flat of his foot. Pain yanked through his balls and then up the back of his spine, a strangled sound choked out of his throat.

Seconds later, the first clamp was attached to the sensitive flesh of his armpit. Gwyn panted, trying to focus on getting both legs beneath him, standing on tiptoe, when the second clamp was attached, and then another. They were alligator clamps with high tension in the springs, they clutched and bit angrily at him, and the pain built and built until finally it peaked. From there, the section of sore skin would go strangely numb and aching, and Gwyn didn’t yearn for it. He remembered what it would feel like once they were removed.

‘It’s special for me to see you like this,’ Augus said, adding more clamps down the side of Gwyn’s flank, pinching up already taut skin that resisted his fingers and fought against the teeth of the clamps so much that Gwyn knew there would be tiny little cuts in his flesh.

Gwyn ground his teeth together. ‘So special that you kept yourself busy doing something completely different?’

‘Ah,’ Augus said, trailing the back of his hand down Gwyn’s torso, even as he held a clamp in his fingers. The skin on skin contact sent warmth shivering through Gwyn’s body, he closed his eyes, not sure what to think. ‘You’re a creature of contradictions at times like this, aren’t you? Do you think I wasn’t aware? Of every twitch in movement? The way you look so splendidly frustrated when you can’t get comfortable? Do you think I can’t feel the glare you direct my way when you don’t think you’re getting enough attention? After all, you’re a King, aren’t you? They expect worship, don’t they?’

‘I didn’t mean-’

‘Shh,’ Augus said, placing the clamp against Gwyn’s lips. ‘New rule. I don’t want you to interrupt anymore unless I ask you a question.’

Gwyn leaned his head back and raised his eyebrows at Augus. He opened his mouth to disparage, then went utterly still when Augus’ hand dropped and the clamp trailed along his flaccid cock. He didn’t know what was wrong with him. He knew he could be argumentative, but he was being far worse than usual, and he knew, he knew that Augus would respond to that. He closed his eyes, couldn’t watch, hated the feel of those fingers on his sensitive skin.

‘Did you think I wasn’t listening out for every shift in your breathing? The evenness that means you’ve mastered yourself well, the breaks and hard exhales that mean you’re unravelling because of the ropes that I placed upon you? Do you think, now, that I am not hungry to know how you will react to me when I do something you’re dreading?’

Skin pinched up at the base of his cock, and then Gwyn felt the horrible grip of the clamp. Pain shot through him. Gwyn’s eyes squeezed shut. He forgot about the ropes, tried to move away, came down on his heels and was met with a shaft of additional pain that sliced all the way up the centre of him. He cried out, and Augus had his hands on his hips and was already helping him back into position. Gwyn couldn’t control his breathing. It was all confusion. He was so much better at this once, wasn’t he?

*You surrender too quickly. No mystery as to why. No wonder Ifir doesn’t want to follow you.*
‘Shh,’ Augus said again, pressing his clothed body close to Gwyn’s and licking over his collarbone, then biting into the top of a pectoral, tongue hot against him.

The pain was a horrible echo, fading slower than it should because the clamp on his cock reminded him of how sore the rest of him was.

‘Why do you think that I went from someone who became too bored to see clients more than once – at least most of them – to someone who wants to tie you up for days, for weeks, to break you and re-break you? I know you likely fear that I will get bored, but let us observe the months preceding us, instead of the future. How many times have we spent together? I don’t become less interested in your reactions. How you flush red first at your cheeks and then your ears and your neck, or how those muscles that you trained for combat and killing twitch if my breath touches you.’

Gwyn blinked his eyes open and stared at Augus, his mouth dry. Another clamp was cold and sharp against his skin, and Augus circled it around Gwyn’s nipple, the flesh pebbling beneath his touch.

‘You’re not comfortable with this, are you?’ Augus said, eyes never leaving Gwyn’s.

‘The clamps?’ Gwyn said, because he couldn’t say anything otherwise, as though Augus was stealing all the words from Gwyn’s chest. ‘I don’t like the clamps.’

Augus smiled, knowing, and then shrugged eloquently, rising up on tiptoe and pressing his lips to Gwyn’s, his mouth closed, his lips chaste.

‘That’s really all you’re uncomfortable with?’ Augus said against his mouth. ‘Think carefully, Gwyn. If you’re honest, maybe I’ll stop telling you just how much I like to pay attention to you. Do you want that?’

Gwyn didn’t know what he wanted. Augus looked at him like he expected an answer. Gwyn didn’t know if he liked all the things that Augus was saying. It was so much…more than those times when Augus would just say baldly untrue things, like that he thought Gwyn was beautiful when Augus looked like that. But now Augus was saying these small details that seemed like they might be true. If they were true, maybe Gwyn did want to hear them.

‘I don’t know,’ Gwyn said.

‘Is there something you do want? I should let you know that I’m not going to untie you or stop placing clamps on you until I want to.’

Gwyn seized on the question, remembering what Augus had said earlier, a raw wound in his heart.

‘I want to make you happy,’ Gwyn said, his voice quieter than usual. ‘Would that…be good?’

‘Is it what you want?’ Augus said, watching him like Mikkel sometimes did, like they could both flip through his thoughts and come to their own conclusions.

‘Yes,’ Gwyn said, his cheeks burning.

‘Even if I wanted you to suffer for me?’ Augus whispered. ‘Even if I attached every single one of these clamps to your sensitive skin until you could no longer stand on tiptoe? Until your body was no longer yours, but mine?’

Gwyn’s heart beat harder than ever, and it wasn’t only the pain causing it. His bad shoulder throbbed even though it was stabilised and secure. He balanced not on the balls of his feet, but on
the fulcrum of Augus’ words.

‘How can you break the heartsong if you’re asking me to give this to you?’ Gwyn said, confused.

‘I asked myself the same question,’ Augus said, something troubled moving across his features. ‘But I know what I’m doing. I’m not asking you to give this to me, I’m asking you if you want this, if you want to please me. Even if it will hurt you. Even if you will want to beg for it to stop before eventually begging me to stop. Even as you know that I will be thrilled and aroused to hear all of it. That every cry or moan you give to me won’t kindle compassion in me, but the desire to see you flayed open so that I might do whatever I wish to you and know that I can eventually make you love it, if that is what I wish.’

Gwyn had to close his eyes against that stare, had to minimise the affect those words were having on him. There were people in the world who would hear something like that and run in the opposite direction. Here, instead, a yearning that gaped apart inside of him, his cock twitching despite the clamps.

‘Yes,’ Gwyn said, refusing to open his eyes.

Augus gave a long exhale, and Gwyn was too busy trying to decipher it when more clamps were attached to the other side of his flank. As Augus worked, he would sometimes stroke parts of him, a hand smoothing down his belly, patting at his upper thigh, rubbing beneath his jaw. Each touch began to feel hypnotic, even though the bites of pain brought him back to reality, reminded him that his fatigue was growing greater.

He fought sinking to the balls of his feet for as long as he could, until his entire body was trembling and Augus was hushing him even though he wasn’t making any noise.

‘Settle,’ Augus said. ‘Settle onto your feet for me. It’s only pain, Gwyn. It’s not going to harm you. Look how much you’re bearing for me already.’

For you, Gwyn thought, everything else becoming hazy. But it was hard to draw full breaths and every clamp would cause an individual blaze of pain when it was removed. He’d lost count of how many Augus had attached to him. His skin felt tight all over.

‘Settle,’ Augus encouraged. ‘Your legs are shaking. Just…relax your legs. Here, I’ll help you shall I? So you don’t go down too fast?’

Two firm hands around his hips, holding him in place, then pulling him down. Gwyn wanted to take the terrible strain off his legs, but the rope around his balls was already merciless and Gwyn’s spine ached in anticipation of how it would hurt.

‘Even if you don’t want to do this, you want to serve me, don’t you?’ Augus said, his voice too soft, too understanding.

Gwyn made an inarticulate sound and his head fell forwards as he let Augus pull him down towards the ground where pain waited, pushing its way into him until he was wetly crying out against Augus’ shoulder, wondering how on earth this could get anyone closer to having a heartsong broken.

It wasn’t until the pain eclipsed most of his thoughts that he realised it didn’t matter anyway. It wasn’t up to him to know. Augus knew.
Hours passed in various states of pain before Augus untied him. By then, the clamps had burnt through his resources, the removal of them having him begging Augus to stop halfway through. Augus had only made a sympathetic noise and kept going, relentless, until Gwyn was sure that the pain couldn’t keep peaking, was sure that he was bleeding badly even though he wasn’t bleeding at all.

He leaned into Augus when the ropes were removed, thinking that if things were different, if it was only a few months earlier, he would have fought to hide this. To be strong. But hadn’t being underfae proved what lay in the heart of him? Hadn’t Augus already seen what he was anyway?

Gwyn turned his head absently towards Augus’ neck and then clung at the sleeve of his shirt.

‘Augus,’ Gwyn murmured.

‘A few steps over here,’ Augus said, walking backwards, a hand around Gwyn’s waist drawing him onto a rug. ‘Now down with you,’ Augus said, not seeming to care that Gwyn was getting sweat all over his clothing. ‘Lie down. That’s it.’

Gwyn lay on his back upon plush material, and his eyes followed Augus as he wandered about the room. Augus returned with rope again and looked over Gwyn’s bad shoulder critically, before carefully raising that arm above his head. Gwyn let him, wincing, but Augus only left his hand a little above his head and still resting on the ground, not stretched all the way up above him. It was instead crooked at a right angle above him. Then, Augus took his other arm and placed Gwyn’s hands together, looping the rope in a figure eight around his wrists and securing his hands in a resting position above his head.

Augus’ lips were soft and firm when they brushed over Gwyn’s lips, his tongue almost tender even as Augus licked his way into Gwyn’s mouth like he belonged there. Gwyn’s eyes closed, his hands twitched. Augus shifted so that he was leaning over him, braced on his own arms, changing the angle of the kiss until his tongue slid against Gwyn’s just so, until their noses were snug against each other. The kiss was deep, thorough, warm. Gwyn sighed through his nose, shivered.

Minutes later, Augus pulled back and hummed when Gwyn’s lips followed him, his neck arching. But Augus had pulled back too far, and Gwyn blinked his eyes open instead, looking up at him.

‘Do you remember when you used to think that I would ruin you?’ Augus said. ‘How afraid you were? That I could take charge of you and you still always worried – at least a part of you – that I would somehow use that to destroy you?’

‘I still…sometimes do that,’ Gwyn said.

‘But not always, now. I need you to understand something…everything I do today, it’s to a purpose.’

‘I know,’ Gwyn said.

‘I don’t want this heartsong to go,’ Augus said, looking away, lips slanting into a grimace. ‘If we had the luxury of living our own lives the way we want, I could send you floating so often. You could find so much peace, Gwyn. So much.’

Gwyn stared at him, swallowed. Wished that his arms were free. ‘It will always remain,’ Gwyn said, finally. ‘My first heartsong was loyalty. Can you…look at how I’ve…’ He had to close his eyes. ‘Can you look at how I’ve been with you, and say it is not still there?’

‘And will I still have that loyalty after I do what I have to do today? You may not understand.’
‘If it’s to break the heartsong, I’ll understand,’ Gwyn said.

‘So you say,’ Augus said dubiously, though there was a smile in his eyes as he stood up and walked to another chest of drawers. Gwyn watched him go, his body twisting to keep Augus in view. He didn’t even think about getting up off the floor. ‘You know, it cost me a small chunk of the treasury to get another one of these. Who knows where my first ended up. I wonder if you’ll remember…’

Augus turned with a round stone cylinder in his hand, it was dark grey, polished, had a rounded end and looked like an oversized pestle for an oversized stone mortar, or a kind of thin stone club.

Gwyn’s gut felt like molten lead, his breath escaped him on a huff. He hadn’t seen one of those again since the first and only time Augus had used it on him, and he felt something huge and hungry roar through him, blasting away his thoughts.

Augus laughed softly as he walked back over and knelt beside Gwyn, rubbing the tool between his hands. The *pistillum*. Gwyn remembered it well. Perhaps he should have been horrified, but all he remembered was that before it had become unbearable, there had been hours of the most delicious pain he had ever known, would ever know.

The stone rod was placed, rounded tip down, between Gwyn’s pectorals.

Instead of a flash of pain, something dull and slow pooled through him in lapping waves that lulled. It felt like over-stretched muscles, the fatigue from training. He didn’t need to pit himself against it because it was so slow-building it was easy to tolerate. He didn’t need to fight it because even as it built and spread through his muscles and nerves, it was never aggressive. It was a bruise that widened and expanded, even though his skin never looked bruised after its use.

By the time the pain was large and shocking, Gwyn was adrift in it, his eyes closed and his mouth open and no longer caring how hard he was breathing or even that pleasure was daring to curl through him at it.

Augus left the stone against him for chunks of time – ten minutes, twenty, longer – and then removed it and drag his bluntened claws down Gwyn’s skin and dragged him back from that deep, restful place with sensations that felt too good. Gwyn groaned, shivered, twisted into those claws and the touches. Then the *pistillum* would return, placed into his armpit, or his flank, or his belly. At each interval Augus would pet him, rub soothingly at his scalp, scratch gently across his chest or thumb at his nipples, stroke firmly at his thighs.

It was getting harder to think beyond the wells of pain that Augus was drowning him in. There weren’t sentences or words but the textures of his own breath in his mouth, his racing heart, sweat cooling on his body, the hunger for all of it – the pain that he should dread and didn’t, the touches that came afterwards that usually threw him off balance and now seemed to be exactly what he’d always wanted. A hand cupped his cheek gently and he turned into it, lapping at Augus’ palm, tasting his skin, feeling the grooves of flesh against his tongue. Fingers feathered through his hair and Gwyn tilted his head back, seeking a stronger touch, then groaned deeply when Augus massaged the top and sides of his head.

‘Oh,’ Augus said quietly. ‘Do you remember that I once said you could go so deep for me?’

Gwyn nodded, though he didn’t truly care about what Augus was saying. Augus had moved the pistillum again, placing it just above his half-hard cock. Gwyn was aroused, finding some deep, throbbing resonance with the nature of the pain.
‘Do you know how beautiful you are?’ Augus said, the words so very careful, as though Augus was handling broken shards of glass.

‘Am I?’ Gwyn said.

Was that even possible? Did it matter?

‘Do you think I am?’ Gwyn said, his voice deeper than usual, the words hard to come by. He reached for them and only the barest of sentences was there. Even the texture of his own voice humming through him added to that bruising, swelling pain until it radiated out from his pelvis all the way to his jaw, pulsed behind his eyes.

‘I do,’ Augus said. A pause. ‘Does that scare you?’

Did it? Augus was rubbing his thumb over Gwyn’s lips, then knuckles were coasting along his jaw, the point of his index finger traced the delicate cartilage shell of Gwyn’s ear. He shivered. Was he supposed to be feeling scared? None of it was frightening.

‘No,’ Gwyn said.

Lips met his, and Gwyn opened his mouth to the kiss even as his hips shifted, feeling so heavy that it was like the lower half of his body was made of stone.

‘Do you believe me?’ Augus said against his mouth. ‘That I think you’re beautiful?’

That was a harder question. Why Augus even thought now was the right time to ask these sorts of questions, when Gwyn had almost no shreds of workable language left to him, was something he couldn’t fathom. He felt a dull concern in the back of his mind. Did Gwyn believe him? He wanted to. He wanted to be able to give that to Augus. Especially now.

If Augus knew how much Gwyn wanted to give to him…

‘I want to,’ Gwyn said, so earnest that he felt young and foolish and naïve all at once. But instead of mocking him, Augus’ hands – neither one needed to hold the pistillum in place now that it was resting in the natural dip of Gwyn’s pelvis – burrowed into Gwyn’s hair and massaged at his scalp, kissed his cheek and then his eyebrow and then his lips. If that was Augus’ reaction, then Gwyn’s response was fine. He sighed and the minute tension that had found him rolled free.

‘You look after this Kingdom,’ Augus said, like Gwyn had any interest in following complex conversation, ‘you look after us. But you’ve still managed to find the energy to grow. I saw that in you when I first met you. That very first time. That it didn’t matter what the world was doing to you, or what you were doing to yourself, you would still fight for something better. Even as you believe so fiercely that you don’t deserve it, you fight for it.’

‘I always…took the things I shouldn’t,’ Gwyn said, unsure if what he was saying was making any sense. ‘I want a lot of things.’

‘Do you?’ Augus said, smiling against his cheek. ‘Like what?’

‘You,’ Gwyn said, unable to stop the way his lips twisted up. ‘Like that.’

‘What else?’ Augus said, even as the pain kept building. Gwyn was breathing deeply to accommodate it, and Augus reached down and rubbed at his chest, reassuring circles. ‘What else do you want?’
It was hard to think beyond the ‘you’ that he’d uttered, but he stretched further in his mind and saw images and half-started dreams that never went anywhere.

‘Forests,’ Gwyn whispered. ‘Hounds. Good food. People who…know me and then still…like me.’

His forehead furrowed. He couldn’t think that there was anything wrong with what he’d just said, yet uneasiness had flittered inside of him. But then there were lips on his and they were moving to the underside of his jaw, licking over his pulse.

Gwyn’s voice cracked when he felt fingers curl around his cock.

‘You’re doing so well,’ Augus said, shifting away from his face. ‘You’re being very good for me, Gwyn. So good. I’ll return the favour, shall I?’

Augus shifted the pistillum so that it was pressed just a little higher into his gut, pain blossoming in a new location. Gwyn’s whole body was covered in sweat and the rug was so soft beneath him, and then Augus’ hand was moving up and down, fingers coasting over the head of his cock. Gwyn became fully erect so quickly that it was a taut ache in his gut layered on top of the pain the pistillum sent through him. He whimpered and knew he was close. Too close. It wouldn’t take long at all.

‘I don’t think I’d be able to do this with anyone else,’ Augus said, as he nudged Gwyn’s legs further apart. ‘I wouldn’t even have thought to try it until I met you.’

Gwyn didn’t bother trying to decipher what Augus meant.

Augus picked up the pistillum again, even as his hand kept moving on Gwyn’s cock. The worst of the pain in his gut eased away slowly, and then Gwyn shuddered when he felt the pistillum nudge beneath his balls and press hard into his perineum, the stone warmed from body heat and causing a sharper, deeper pain to bloom. It wove complicated patterns of sensation through his spine, behind his eyes, into his balls, his cock, made him feel like he was being filled by something even though he wasn’t.

His throat hurt from the harshness of his gasps, from the arousal that spiralled tight and thorough until it was the beginning and end of his awareness, drowning sound and minutiae until all he knew was the hugeness of it, the knowledge that it couldn’t keep expanding forever and that eventually it would burst.

He wasn’t aware of the sounds he was making when he started to come, nor the way Augus kept the pistillum in place and kept his hand moving, milking every last drop from him, wringing him out, his flesh now slick from his own spend.

The pistillum moved away, was placed back on his chest. Augus’ hands didn’t overstimulate for once but instead painted wetly up his side, before two come-covered fingers rested just inside his open mouth, poking gently at the tip of his tongue.

Gwyn licked without thinking, warm and drifting and unable to remember the last time he’d felt like this. Even the tips of his fingers and toes felt good.

Time moved past him, the pistillum was shifted a few more times, keeping him in an ocean of sensation. Eventually, when Augus moved it away, Gwyn could only lay insensate until an arm moved behind his shoulders, until Augus’ voice sounded and vaguely, Gwyn realised that Augus was asking him to sit up.

Coordinating his limbs was almost impossible. He staggered to his feet, his joints feeling like
they’d liquefied, leaned heavily against Augus. Arms wrapped around him and Gwyn sagged, and Augus was saying something and Gwyn got the gist of it somewhere, tried to focus on where Augus wanted him to go. Then, Augus helped him while Gwyn moved with his eyes half-shut and his arms roped and still drifting. He was grateful and felt a measure of peace that he couldn’t recall. Even as Augus tied him to the upright saltire cross, retying his arms. Even as Augus dragged fingernails down his spine and then up the backs of his thighs.

Then, Gwyn only knew that he was floating and that Augus wasn’t touching him, and for once, Gwyn didn’t care about that either. He felt connected and anchored and good. The cross was stable beneath him. Everything was the way it was supposed to be, and he couldn’t imagine that there was anything he could do to improve the situation. He had left it all up to Augus, and Augus had more than proven himself.

Augus who was now standing so close to him, facing him, a hand roaming his body with slow, deliberate intent.

Gwyn forced his eyes open and thought that if he died tomorrow, or in an instant, he wouldn’t even care. Not if he got to have this.

‘Augus,’ he said, like that in itself was enough. But it wasn’t. Gwyn couldn’t find sentences, so instead he could only find a handful of words to convey what he felt. Words that he didn’t think he would ever say out loud while Augus was there. But his reasons for hiding them were no longer valid, didn’t matter when he felt this good. ‘My anam cara.’

Augus blinked at him, eyes widening, pupils dilating. Then, strangely, his face twisted into sadness and he stepped forwards and stood on tiptoe and pressed his forehead to Gwyn’s, holding his head in place, the grip in Gwyn’s hair desperate and firm.

‘Gods,’ Augus said. ‘I hope you let me do this to you again. I hope you can trust me enough for that, after this.’

Gwyn nodded, because of course he would. Of course he would trust Augus enough to let this happen again. It was so good to give himself to Augus like this. His skin tingled from it. It felt like he was buzzing, suspended in a state he couldn’t describe and didn’t need to.

Augus nodded, took a shaky breath and slid his hand slowly from Gwyn’s hair and then stepped back, walking slowly around him. Gwyn caught a glint of silver before closing his eyes again, too uncaring to even wonder at it.

‘I hope this works,’ Augus said behind him. ‘I hope it doesn’t. That you’ll forgive me.’

A hard, brutal shove against his bad shoulder, a blaze of pain so bright that Gwyn shrieked.

The broad, long knife followed the path of the arrow that had wounded him when he was underfae. It cleaved to the path that Kabiri had forced all the way through his shoulder to the other side of it.

Nothing at all but the sensation of falling very far, very fast. Something cracked inside of him, more forceful than the pain that had wrecked him, worse than the clamps being removed, worse even than the knife.

Gwyn’s mind snapped with white-hot fury. His light exploded.
In our next chapter, 'Wildness:'

Augus ran down a staircase towards the back entrance of the Court, taking the stairs two at a time and then jumping the balustrade when he was close enough to the ground, watching a bolt of light shoot over him as he dropped ten feet to a crouch, absorbing the impact into his body before running again.

In a way, he thought, he deserved this. After what he’d done. He’d almost expected it. Perhaps not this…

*Close enough.*

Deep dread grew inside of him. Gulping down breath, he felt his muscles tensing, thickening and growing. His skin sprouted hair. His neck lengthened, his teeth sharpened, his hands and feet turned to hooves. Even as he loathed others witnessing him shift into true-form, his fear of that light, of Gwyn’s wrath, was even greater.
Wildness

Chapter Notes

No new tags, and thanks to everyone for reading! Comments always appreciated, and *waves* to the lurkers. :) The chapter's coming early tonight as I have very unpredictable internet access right now. Chapters will go back to being updated on the regular schedule next Friday!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Augus

*

Augus ran.

He swore over and over again inside his head, even as his chest ached, as his eyes still showed him the echoed glare which was all of that light destroying the room, the cross, the bindings, and all the tools that Augus had been carefully amassing for months. The only reason it hadn’t destroyed him, was that Augus expected some kind of reaction, was moving away when the air crackled and charged around him, the scent of chemicals rose sharp in his nose.

Then he ran.

Now, he bolted through corridors towards the outside of the palace, heart in his throat, remembering that this was not the first time that he’d had to run for his life while Gwyn wanted to kill him.

He didn’t even have time to laugh at the irony of that.

Save my life how many times, sweetness, is this how you try and make up for it?

Witty words weren’t going to save him. He’d seen Gwyn’s bloodlust before, and he knew this was different. Could feel it in his animal instinct and the sound of his own boots thudding against the floor, could tell by the way Gwyn – sore, tired, naked, wounded Gwyn – was gaining on him, wasn’t shouting in rage, wanted nothing more than to catch him and kill him. Augus couldn’t reason with him, there was nothing he could say when the killing edge had found him, Gwyn’s own soldiers had to get out of his way once he reached bloodlust like this.

Not only that, but Augus knew the breath he’d use to reason with Gwyn would narrow the distance between them; it was narrowing already. He didn’t think the trick he’d used when Gwyn had hunted him in the Seelie Court would work again.

Augus ran down a staircase towards the back entrance of the Court, taking the stairs two at a time and then jumping the balustrade when he was close enough to the ground, watching a bolt of light shoot over him as he dropped ten feet to a crouch, absorbing the impact into his body before running again.

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Deep dread grew inside of him. Gulping down breath, he felt his muscles tensing, thickening and growing. His skin sprouted hair. His neck lengthened, his teeth sharpened, his hands and feet turned to hooves. Even as he loathed others witnessing him shift into true-form, his fear of that light, of Gwyn’s wrath, was even greater.

As a waterhorse he was faster, much faster. He galloped on hooves that struck sparks across the stone floors, raced past trows and a single common fae servant, still heard the sound of Gwyn’s footsteps behind him. Augus had put some distance between them now, but Gwyn had King status, he wasn’t exactly slowing down.

Augus shoved aside his primitive waterhorse desire to hunt with some difficulty, trying to think of what to do. How to manage this. He burst through an archway and made his way into the night gardens, and still Gwyn followed. Augus leapt a low marble bannister and sailed metres through the air, landing and pivoting sideways around the palace itself, away from that light, putting on an extra burst of speed. A small idea grew in his heart, something that might distract Gwyn just long enough to snap him out of the worst of his bloodlust.

Because even if Gwyn couldn’t forgive him, Augus needed to make sure he was well, physically and mentally. He needed to make sure that the heartsong was gone and provide aftercare if Gwyn would even let him.

That was the problem, sometimes, with knowing how to break people.

The worst part, that he had gotten to see Gwyn truly surrender to him, that Gwyn had called him anam cara. To hear Gwyn call him the friend of his soul, the words that were sometimes used to indicate a soulmate… That Augus could learn what that level of connection felt like, only to taste bitterness in his mouth that he might never know it again.

He bolted through tall trees with broad black trunks, branches and leaves whipping across his face and flanks. He couldn’t hear Gwyn as close now, but felt that attention upon him, sinister and relentless. His waterhorse didn’t even want to turn and fight back, as it so often did. Perhaps his waterhorse form remembered being led around on a collar and a leash a long time ago, in front of Seelie spectators, his own brother.

With sweat lathered on his flanks, foam beginning to fleck the edges of his mouth, he dropped his head and powered through a stand of shrubs, jumped several logs and curved away from Gwyn. He needed distance. Just to give himself enough time to do as he planned.

Minutes later when he suspected he had it, he stopped, planted his hooves at the edge of a clearing surrounded by trees and stood, heaving for breath as he summoned his waterhorse powers to him – verdant and thick and strong – and reached for the water in his environment. He sent that power outwards, focused it, growled in threat and fear and defence, the sound rippling in the air around him.

He braced himself when Gwyn was coming, arched his powerful neck, watched him with eyes that saw even more of his environment than he did in human-form. His nostrils flared, the muscles in his hind legs bunched to spring if he needed to. His tail lashed, ears twitching and then lying flat against the back of his head.

Gwyn sprinted through the woods towards him, smelled of the thick blood he was still spilling copiously, the scent of it bringing saliva to Augus mouth, his tongue working behind his sharp teeth. But Gwyn’s face was almost expressionless, his eyes glittered with menace and promise.
Augus stepped back, willing Gwyn to run across the clearing, to take the easiest, most obvious path.

Gwyn raised his hand to summon his light, his fingers curling, and it had already gathered at his fingertips when he crossed into the clearing and his leg sank straight through the ground into the muddy pit that Augus had created. Gwyn was running too fast to stop his momentum, and he tumbled into the watery mess that Augus had hidden beneath sound soil, knowing that Gwyn’s weight would break it apart. His head disappeared beneath the surface with a splash.

Augus shifted quickly back into human-form, running around the swamp he’d created beneath the soil, staggering at the immediate awkwardness of human limbs and the way two legs never felt quite as stable as four.

A gasp as Gwyn broke the surface, only using one arm to keep himself above it, dirt covering his hair and face. He stared at Augus not with madness now, but with fear. Now, he seemed to feel the pain in his shoulder. He wouldn’t even use that arm to help him stay afloat.

Augus crouched, raised his hands, palms forward, worry coursing.

‘Gwyn,’ Augus said quickly, as reassuringly as he could, as he gentled his glamour as much as he was able to. ‘Gwyn, I’m not going to hurt you, all right? All right? It’s me, Augus. You need to let me help you. Can you do that?’

Gwyn stared at him, the whites all around his eyes showing, trying to kick backwards to the other side of the swamp. He was terrified, he wasn’t thinking properly. Augus was just a threat, and Gwyn was responding like any wild animal.

‘Like any wild animal…oh, please let that mean what I think it does.

‘Gwyn,’ Augus said, creeping closer and stopping when Gwyn hooked an arm onto solid soil and didn’t seem to have the strength to pull himself out of the sucking maw of watery dirt. ‘Gwyn, careful, easy, I’m not going to hurt you, all right? You asked me to break your heartsong, and I need to check that I’ve done it, and I need to make sure you’re going to be okay. Yes?’

Gwyn growled, bared his teeth when Augus got too close. But he still stared at Augus with a combination of fear and what was maybe increasing awareness. Augus stopped moving and knelt, hands still up.

‘I need to help you out of there,’ Augus said. ‘Sweetness, you have to let me help you. If you’re angry, it can wait, all right? Careful.’ Augus eased closer again, Gwyn watching every move warily, his hand twitching on the soil. ‘Careful now.’

‘I understand,’ Gwyn said hoarsely. The muddied water around him was already staining red from the wound in his shoulder.

‘You need to listen to me,’ Augus said, his voice firming, relief letting him know just how scared he’d been. ‘You need to let me help you, okay?’

‘I can’t seem to…’ Gwyn blinked at him. ‘I tried to kill you.’

‘Yes, yes,’ Augus said, waving his hand, ‘I think that’s understandable, actually. Gwyn, you’ve been hurt, you were in a scene for some time, you need to let me help you. You need to give me your hand, and let me pull you out of there. Come on now.’

Gwyn’s forehead bunched and he looked confused, lost. Augus wanted nothing more than to
smooth the expression from his face, but he couldn’t. There were more important things that needed to happen.

Augus was close enough that he reached out, staring at the cracks in Gwyn’s wrist and skin, the way he’d hurt himself to use his light.

‘Come on,’ Augus coaxed. ‘Grab my- That’s it, that’s good, Gwyn.’

Augus pulled him out easily, the water responding to his power and Gwyn’s weight no trifle when he still had so much of the waterhorse coursing through him.

As soon as Gwyn was out of the water though, he backed away, shaking Augus’ hand off his arm and staring. Augus could scent fear, a complex array of other chemicals. It made the waterhorse in him hungry, responsive. Augus felt himself shiver with a hunger that was darker, deeper, unquenched.

‘I can’t seem to stop myself,’ Gwyn said, shaking his head. ‘I know it’s you. I just…’

It reminded Augus too strongly of when Gwyn was underfae and couldn’t stop his instinctive fears. This time Augus had deliberately betrayed Gwyn’s trust – it was the only way he could see to stab at the heart of what surrender might mean for Gwyn. To force his survival instincts to the surface, to harm the wild creature that dared to let its guard down even for a second.

‘It’s fine,’ Augus said, licking at his lips. ‘It’s fine.’

Gwyn was bleeding a lot. Augus had to get him to Aleutia. Not that there was much she could do, but Augus needed to be sure.

‘No,’ Gwyn said, staring at him. ‘I understand, Augus.’ Gwyn broke off to take several harsh, fast breaths, and then he stopped and his own nostrils flared and his ears pulled back as he scanned the surroundings around him, eyes narrowing, the fingers on his uninjured arm flexing and relaxing, flexing again. He turned back to Augus again. ‘I’m so…’

He blinked hard and then pressed a hand to his face. ‘I don’t feel well,’ he said finally.

‘You’re going to listen to me,’ Augus said, his voice turning into command. ‘You’re going to teleport us back into the palace. The scene isn’t over, Gwyn. You’ve lost a lot of blood, you’ve just exerted yourself a great deal, and your body is weakened by what I did alongside lack of sleep. Come here. I won’t hurt you, it’s safe.’

Gwyn’s gaze was hard, his lips thin. He scanned his surroundings once more.

Augus expected to have to keep talking to him, but instead, Gwyn picked his way silently over the ground and moved towards Augus carefully, keeping an eye on him, keeping an eye on their surroundings.

Then, close enough that Gwyn could easily reach out and teleport the both of them, Gwyn pushed his face to Augus’ neck and inhaled deeply. This close, Augus could see the gleam of fresh blood on his shoulder, it flowed over black, clotted stuff. It had to be agony to disturb all the nerves like that. A wound in the centre of terribly scarred tissue.

‘You’re afraid,’ Gwyn said, his voice low. ‘But I won’t hurt you either.’

‘Perhaps not right this instant,’ Augus said wryly, even as he felt his skin prickle when Gwyn pushed his nose directly into the tender point between ear and jaw. Another sniff, and Gwyn made
‘No, Augus,’ Gwyn said, the words stilted, ‘I understand. I didn’t in the moment, but I do. And now you’re afraid. I haven’t killed you, but you’re still afraid. It’s not residual, it’s fresh. You’re afraid, now.’

Gwyn’s hand came up and pawed at Augus’ arm, petting at his sleeve, then his chest. The fingers became a fist, gripping Augus’ clothing hard, and light consumed them both.

* *

Gwyn broke away when they arrived in their bedroom. He roamed around the room, seeming almost uncaring of the knife wound that had pushed all the way through his shoulder. He glanced up to Augus warily every now and then. His fingers touched objects in the room. He picked up a wad of blanket and pulled it to his face, closing his eyes and inhaling deeply. He dropped that and then walked into the bathroom, walked out of it again.

‘I don’t feel well,’ Gwyn said again, looking at him from under thick, white lashes.

Augus had watched it all and felt unmoored. Normally he knew exactly what to do during a scene, after a scene. But this was not the rejection and fear and rage he expected.

‘We need to go to Aleutia,’ Augus said. ‘And then you need to rest.’

‘Aleutia might not be here,’ Gwyn said.

‘Actually, she is,’ Augus said, taking a breath and sighing. ‘You weren’t the only one who had to make sure everything was in order for this. I’ve had her on standby, just in case.’

‘You knew you would stab me,’ Gwyn said, looking down at the blood on his shoulder, touching it with shaking fingertips. Then, he brought reddened fingertips to his lips and sucked on them, before dropping his hand and leaving the blood alone. ‘You knew you’d do it like that. You broke triumph by making me feel as though I was weak and could never win a thing. You broke surrender by betraying me when I had forgotten that I was supposed to expect betrayal.’

The words hurt. That they were stated in such a bald, matter-of-fact way, in that clinical voice. Augus shrugged. He didn’t know what else to say. He was quite certain he was supposed to be providing a great deal more aftercare. Certainly more than a shrug.

‘It was a game,’ Gwyn said, turning away and looking at Augus sidelong. ‘You were playing a game. It wasn’t real. It felt real at the time. But it wasn’t a real thing.’

‘I’ll never do it again,’ Augus said. ‘Not unless you ask me.’

He was surprised to hear his own voice was shaking.

Why did powerful people in his life always ask him to do things that he didn’t want to do?

‘Augus,’ Gwyn said, his eyes widening. He took a step towards him, another, and then he was across the room and in front of him, snuffling into his neck again so that Augus made a noise of frustration and stepped back, skin tingling.

‘Can I check the state of your heartsong?’ Augus said, his voice even again.

‘Yes,’ Gwyn said, turning and presenting his back easily, as though Augus hadn’t just…
Augus took a deep breath and closed his eyes. This was not the way Gwyn was supposed to react at all, and he grit his teeth together, furious at him for being so unpredictable, at himself for even caring this much. He placed his hands to Gwyn’s back, unable to avoid the blood, noticing swelling and inflammation. He pressed his ear to skin and sent forth spirals of power, seeking for that place in the centre of Gwyn where he might learn the truth of him.

He felt a feral, wild place where something very different had been. When he felt his own power mingling with Gwyn’s, he thought longingly of his old lake, of wild swamps, of forests filled with wind and sun and covered by azure skies filled with towering fluffy cumulus. It was strong, pulsing with life. Even stronger than the first time Augus had encouraged him towards it, centuries ago. This was no tentative thing, it felt like an entire landscape had sprung forth from nothing. Augus had no idea that the heartsong had ever grown this strong when Gwyn had it the first time.

‘I wanted it, you see,’ Gwyn said to the room, to Augus. ‘I wanted it back, even before my heartsong became surrender. I would have found a way to get it back, but you are efficient, expedient. I would have endured anything to have it returned. The first time I had it, I knew it was where I was meant to stay. When I lost it, I… But I didn’t know it would hurt you to do it.’

‘You’re-’

‘You talk about aftercare,’ Gwyn said, turning and blinking at him. ‘Do you ever need it?’

‘I need you to see Aleutia,’ Augus said, his voice less reassuring and more desperate. ‘Just for my own peace of mind. Gwyn, let’s-’

‘If you had caused me permanent harm, you would have activated the blood oath,’ Gwyn said. ‘But we can see Aleutia. I’m not…something’s not right.’

‘You have a great fucking wound in your shoulder,’ Augus snarled.

Gwyn didn’t say anything else when he took Augus’ hand and teleported them. But he watched Augus with something pensive on his face, looking almost as troubled as Augus felt.

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Augus paced as Aleutia looked over Gwyn’s shoulder. She’d asked him once to cut it out, but it was Gwyn – of all people – who had given Aleutia a look that seemed to suggest that she ought not bring it up again. After that, Aleutia chattered half to herself, half to Gwyn as she prodded and poked, as Gwyn looked around the healing rooms quietly and kept down every pained sound as though for Augus’ benefit. He was far paler than usual, two spots of red on his cheeks, his eyes closed or even squeezed shut when he thought Augus wasn’t looking.

‘It’s already healing,’ Aleutia said, once she’d mopped the blood away, in some cases having to scrub it off where it had already dried to his skin so that even the quick dunk in the swamp Augus had created hadn’t removed it. ‘Slow, but that’s to be expected when something like this happens to an old injury. I’m not even going to ask why Augus needed me on standby for something like this, but my advice for the future? Sex is more fun without stab wounds. That’s just my personal experience.’

Neither of them responded, and Aleutia only made a sound of impatience and bandaged Gwyn’s shoulder more to staunch the bloodflow, than because he needed it.

‘Can you give him something for the pain?’ Augus said.

‘I don’t need it,’ Gwyn said, at the exact same time that Aleutia said:
‘He won’t take it.’

‘If you would provide something that isn’t a sedative, I can ensure that he takes it,’ Augus said, keeping his voice even.

‘Suit yourself,’ Aleutia said, raising her eyebrows, tucking her frizz of hair behind her rat ears and turning away to her herbs.

Gwyn slid off the low bench she’d had him sit upon, and when Aleutia turned back to him, he flinched then stiffened. He raised his chin and looked at Augus quickly, perhaps to check if he’d noticed.

Aleutia handed Augus the analgesics in pill form, leaves pounded flat and then rolled into small balls, several in a small glass vial. Augus turned to walk to the door, but Gwyn wasn’t following. Gwyn – still nude, partially covered in dirt from before and unconcerned with his appearance – was watching Aleutia, his head tilted to the side.

‘Is there anything else I can do for you, Your Majesty?’ Aleutia said, once she’d noticed.

‘You…once said that I’m a psychopomp,’ Gwyn said, hesitant. ‘My light – I feed upon fae that I kill with it.’

‘That’s right,’ Aleutia said, folding her arms.

‘But I can’t. When I was underfae, I couldn’t feed properly using that method. But food – meat, flora, sugars – wasn’t enough either. Do you know why that is?’

Augus was surprised that of the two of them, Gwyn was bringing it up, and that he was choosing to bring it up now. Aleutia pursed her lips and then nodded.

‘Well, I think I do. When was the first time you were allowed to feed using your light? I’m not stupid, you know. I’ve deduced that those fine Seelie parents of yours weren’t letting you use it. There’s no way you’d know so little about being what you are otherwise. So come on, spill, when was the first time you fed using your light?’

Gwyn closed his eyes. ‘I was six. It was an accident.’

‘And then? When was the second time? A month later? A week?’

Gwyn turned to Augus, bit his bottom lip. Gwyn was still terribly pale, every now and then tremors moved through him. Augus wanted nothing more than to get him to a bed, try and understand why everything wasn’t moving the way he thought it would.

‘It was a few months ago,’ Gwyn said.

Aleutia went still, then exhaled hard.

‘There’s this thing that some fae can do. It explains a lot. Your mother had like…what, the strongest glamour of almost any common fae? Or fae? You should have inherited a lot of that. Honestly, I think you did. And yet your glamour always feels stunted. Has always felt stunted. People have commented on it. On both sides of the river. Unseelie who aren’t able to feed their true appetite can, in rare circumstances – particularly if they’ve got high status seeing them through – practice a kind of autophagy. They eat their own glamour. After all, glamour is a form of life force.'
When you were made underfae, were starving to death – I remember the state you were in the first time I saw you in the Court, Gwyn – this...thing your body had done to adapt, no longer worked. The potency of glamour drops drastically when you’re underfae. What remained just wasn’t enough. But by that point, you were three thousand years into your lifespan and your alimentary system also didn’t know how to process your true way of feeding properly. Honestly, I doubt you’ll ever be able to feed ‘correctly’ now? There are some things that can’t be undone. So my personal theory is that you feed off your glamour, and that’s why it’s stunted by average fae standards, let alone from what one would expect of Crielle’s son. But that alone isn’t enough, so you also need what the Seelie common fae consider to be nourishing food. A dual appetite to make up for the one you weren’t allowed to use.’

Gwyn blinked at her a few times, and then turned to Augus, who was turning over the information in his own head. Fae torpor involved sustaining the body with glamour, if food and water wasn’t available. Gwyn’s body had taken something that other fae did during life or death situations, and turned it into a daily coping mechanism.

‘Does it put him through physical stress?’ Augus said, as Gwyn took a few steps towards him, towards the door.

‘Sure,’ Aleutia said. ‘But I doubt he even knows to notice it anymore. Three thousand years is a long time to get used to something. Fenwrel’s your best bet if you want to explore it further. Glamour is attached to meridians and that’s her wheelhouse. I don’t think you can change it. And I don’t think you’d want to be underfae status any time soon.’

Gwyn nodded, said nothing, and then his good arm lifted and his hand bumped against Augus’ arm. He didn’t take his wrist or hand, let his arm drop again and followed Augus silently, leaving Augus in charge of saying their farewells.

Once they’d closed the door behind them, Gwyn took a shaky breath and looked around again, then reached out and teleported them both without a word.

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Once back in their bedroom, Gwyn stood awkwardly in the room, his shoulders dropping, his head bowing.

Augus tentatively threaded his fingers through Gwyn’s hair, and Gwyn flinched, held still, then after a breath, turned into the touch. With his free hand, Augus tipped two of the pills from the small bottle into his hand and pressed both to Gwyn’s lips, feeling them chapped against his fingertips.

‘Gwyn,’ Augus prompted. ‘Take them. If there was ever a time you deserved to indulge…’

Gwyn opened his mouth, swallowed them both dry, then reached up and rubbed at his face, almost like a sleepy child might. His breathing wasn’t easy anymore. Too sharp on the inhale, too short on the exhale. He moved away from Augus, walked towards the bed and whipped the blankets back. He clambered into the centre of the bed and clumsily pulled the blankets back over himself. He curled up on his good side, and then, with only about half of his face exposed, he turned towards Augus and stared at him.

‘Did I ruin it?’ Gwyn said.

‘Ruin what?’ Augus walked towards the bed, leaning down to unbuckle his boots and slip them off. Unbuttoning his pants and sliding the belt free. He took time to fold the pants, to lay the belt
carefully upon them, needing time to compose himself. He undid the top two buttons of his shirt and the buttons of his cuffs, and moved onto the bed, curling up to face Gwyn, sliding his leg between Gwyn’s legs, pressing a hand against Gwyn’s sternum and feeling his heart. It was racing.

‘The room,’ Gwyn said. ‘The stone thing- the **pistillum**? Did I ruin it?’

‘Very likely,’ Augus said, reaching up and watching Gwyn stiffen as Augus went to touch his face. But after a few seconds, Gwyn closed his eyes and turned his head a little, exposing more of his cheek so that Augus could stroke it.

‘But I liked it,’ Gwyn said, shivering. ‘The **pistillum**. I-’

Gwyn’s breathing came faster, inhales taken too quickly after exhales, his breaths getting shorter. Hyperventilating. Augus felt something click into place. He moved closer, pushing his body against Gwyn’s, his forehead against Gwyn’s forehead, slid an arm underneath Gwyn’s arm, careful of the bandages around his shoulder.

‘All right,’ Augus whispered. ‘This is more along the lines of what I was expecting. It’s okay.’

‘I didn’t mean to scare you,’ Gwyn said, shivering. ‘I could have killed you. I didn’t even realise it was you. When the knife- I thought it was an arrow, or- I didn’t mean-’

‘I know,’ Augus said, soothing, still faintly bewildered because he had expected so much anger. Perhaps he should have expected this. It was normal for Gwyn to focus on the things he’d perceived as having done wrong, after all. ‘I know, Gwyn. I was already moving away. I knew to protect myself.’

‘You were scared,’ Gwyn said, plaintive.

‘Not that you were going to kill me,’ Augus said, and Gwyn’s breathing hitched. ‘Gwyn, you dolt, I had just stabbed you in the shoulder.’

Gwyn was still shaking, he was still covered in smears of dirt. His hair was clumped together, and Augus reached up and started to tease it apart. It was too prone to knots that felted together. Gwyn’s light burned away his ability to grow most forms of body hair, and Augus wondered if the hair on his head would be thicker if it wasn’t for that power flowing through him.

‘I thought I was underfae again,’ Gwyn said, shuddering. ‘I thought- I couldn’t think properly, because of…everything. Why- How did you do that to me?’

‘I’ve talked of floating before,’ Augus said, his own breath brushing against Gwyn’s face. ‘It’s something that can be drawn from people who are submissive in nature. A type of trust, I suppose. Of surrender. You end up floating above all the things that concern you, inhibitions drop away.’

And then I stabbed you in the shoulder once you’d found it. Once you were brave enough to give that to me. No one – least of all Augus – would blame Gwyn if he was too afraid to go back into that space again. With Augus, with anyone at all.

‘I needed you to inhabit what was left of your heartsong. With a technique like that, I could have strengthened it again. But then to break what you had left, I needed something to shock it from within.’ Augus hesitated, then tried to inch even closer to Gwyn, this time not to provide Gwyn comfort, but to give something to himself. ‘Do you remember the things we said before I hurt you?’

A silence, and Gwyn’s hand twitched where it rested. His breathing – more relaxed now – turned
shakier for a few beats, and then he nodded.

‘You’re not angry?’ Gwyn said.

Augus closed his eyes, canted his head and scraped teeth gently over Gwyn’s cheekbone. ‘Why would I be angry?’

‘It’s presumptuous,’ Gwyn said. ‘I wasn’t thinking. About any of it. Even the things you were saying before. It was hard enough to say anything to you, to reply. And then you were standing so close to me, and I couldn’t stop myself and…’

Augus wondered how long Gwyn had been keeping those words secret. But it made sense, Gwyn struggled with endearments. He was awkward with sentiment. Even now, afraid that Augus would be mad at him for daring to address him so. Augus wasn’t prone to being verbally sentimental, all his life he’d had Ash to handle that side of things, and it wasn’t like Augus needed to be with clients.

But through Augus calling him ‘sweetness’ and ‘my dear heart,’ Gwyn had come to use those words himself a few times.

Augus pulled Gwyn’s forehead back to his and shook his head. ‘I liked it,’ Augus said. ‘If I said that you were my anam cara also, would you tell me I was wrong? That I don’t know what I’m talking about? Hm? Should I make it formal? Gwyn ap Nudd, you are my-’

Gwyn’s arm moved quickly, his hand was over Augus’ mouth before the words could be spoken. He looked at Augus with alarm, eyes wide, and then he made a face because the idiot had used his injured shoulder. Gwyn stared at him, pain and fear on his features. Aside from smirking against the palm over his mouth, Augus did nothing.

After some time had passed, Augus reached up and gently removed Gwyn’s hand.

‘The reason I was afraid,’ Augus said quietly, ‘was that I don’t know if you’ll ever let anyone take you that deep into yourself again after I harmed your trust the way that I did. The reason I am afraid, is that I would…miss it. I would understand, but I would miss it. I was afraid of what I had done to myself, and to us.’

It was obvious that with all of Gwyn’s progress, he still wasn’t ready to hear some of these things, but still, Gwyn said nothing for a long time, only staring at Augus with a mix of wonder and fear. Finally, he took a deep breath and looked down between them, shaking his head.

‘Of course I would,’ Gwyn said, looking up again. ‘Of course I’d let you. Don’t you- I keep saying it, but I understand, Augus. I know you wouldn’t do it again. I can tell you didn’t want to have to do what you did. It was evident even…when you were doing what you were doing. But I don’t remember ever feeling like that before, and you say that you can do that to me again, and that it wouldn’t even have to end like that?’

‘It’s not supposed to,’ Augus said.

‘And you’d give that to me?’

‘It’s…more something that you’d give to me, but, yes. It will be harder to get you there, next time. A part of you will expect it to end the way that it did.’

‘But if I still wanted it, we could…even if it took longer, or was harder, could it still be done?’
Augus pressed his lips to Gwyn’s, then opened Gwyn’s mouth with his own, sliding his tongue within, licking over Gwyn’s tongue, holding him close with a fist in his hair, nails scraping too hard over his scalp. Gwyn returned the kiss, leaning towards him. His movements were eager, passionate, but also sluggish. Despite trying to seem as though he was fine, he was exhausted. So Augus pushed him with his own body weight until Gwyn lay flat on his back. Gwyn grunted faintly at the pain that moved through his shoulder, and then kept kissing him. It was easy to overwhelm Gwyn like this, he only had to move a step faster than Gwyn, control the kiss, and Gwyn was panting beneath him, his legs moving restlessly around Augus’, his good arm eventually moving up to rub at Augus’ side.

‘It could still be done,’ Augus said, after many minutes had passed. ‘But now, Gwyn, you’re going to get some sleep. Proper sleep.’

‘But-’

‘Gwyn,’ Augus said, staring at him, ‘you can be woken in an emergency, but in the meantime, you have been through a lot. More than just what you have experienced in the past two days. My dear heart, my wild creature, you’ll be fine here. Every animal needs a place that might offer if only a few moments of rest; even you, Gwyn.’

Gwyn stared at him a few seconds longer, and then his lips quirked up, not a smirk, but something far more tentative. It was contagious, and it wasn’t the kind of smile that Augus got to see often.

‘It’s mine again,’ Gwyn said, closing his eyes. ‘I always hated that they made me King, and I lost it.’

‘It will be hard to keep,’ Augus said.

‘Perhaps,’ Gwyn said, his mouth going slack, his breath already slowing into something deeper.

Augus watched as Gwyn moved into sleep far faster than he usually did. One moment his breathing was hitched or trembling, the next it was smooth, easy. His face relaxed, his hands went limp. Augus slid off his body, leaned into his side instead, arranged the blankets better around them both.

His mind was troubled. He’d put Gwyn’s needs before his own, which was part of the responsibility he undertook when he constructed scenes. But this time…

He didn’t want to hurt Gwyn. Not like that. Even though the outcome had been far better than he’d planned or expected, he’d also been prepared for an outcome where he could have lost everything. Where Gwyn ended their accord – as Gwyn liked to put it – and wouldn’t forgive him.

And he’d risked that because Gwyn asked him to. Because Gwyn said that he would endure anything. Augus hadn’t even asked himself if he was willing to do the same.

An hour later he slid out of the bed and dressed again, knowing that Gwyn was hours away from nightmares, and that he had some time to himself. He buttoned his cuffs, his shirt, re-set his collar, shifted his hair so that it fell neatly behind his back and then quickly wound a strand of rubbery waterweed around it so that it would stay in place.

He wandered corridors and eventually wended his way up to Ash’s tower, of all places, knocking quietly at the closed door, leaning his head against it. Was Ash even here? Augus hadn’t thought to check.

The doorknob turned and Augus straightened, tried to compose himself.

...
Ash seemed surprised to see him – which twisted at Augus’ chest – but then he was waving him inside, his curly hair shorter than usual, wearing some cotton shirt from the human world with some cartoon lion in the centre of it. His jeans were frayed at the bottom, he wore no shoes, instead closing the door once Augus entered and scuffling after him.

‘Everything okay?’ Ash said.

‘No,’ Augus said, shaking his head. The scent of alcohol in the air wasn’t as strong as usual. Augus walked to an overstuffed couch of nubby red fabric and eased himself into a corner, arranging little plump cushions until he was comfortable. ‘I just broke Gwyn’s heartsong, because he asked me to.’

Ash stared at him, going pale. Then he shook his head in disbelief. ‘You can do that?’

‘I’ve done it before,’ Augus said.

Augus had come to a decision. It occurred to him that if he’d been more open with Ash – genuinely open – earlier, perhaps things may not have gone the way they did in the end. Especially in terms of what Gwyn had been put through, what he’d experienced. Maybe they still would have, but there was a lot that Augus didn’t share. Didn’t like to share. ‘I’ve done it before with him. It was how we first met. He asked it. I did it.’

‘Is he…is Gwyn okay?’ Ash said, shaping the words like he wasn’t even sure he was allowed to ask the question.

‘Better than I expected,’ Augus said, shrugging, ‘but he’s sleeping it off, and it remains to be seen if he’s just taking his time to process what I had to do to break it. I wouldn’t be remotely surprised if he came to the conclusion later that it wasn’t worth it, after all.’

‘Jesus,’ Ash said, coming over to the couch and sitting at the other end. Normally he’d sit closer to Augus, or stretch his legs out and rest his feet on Augus’ thighs. Now, he maintained a distance between them, a buffer. Augus wasn’t sure how he felt about it, but he also didn’t want to be anywhere else. Not just now. ‘He wouldn’t have asked you to do that if I hadn’t told everyone, would he?’

‘No,’ Augus said. ‘At least, not for a long time.’

‘Does it hurt? Like, to have your heartsong broken like that?’

‘Yes,’ Augus said, leaning back into the couch. ‘It’s traumatic.’

‘So…why are you here and not with him, then?’

‘Because I keep expecting a reaction I didn’t get, and I couldn’t- He wasn’t supposed to be okay with what I did. But now I’m not sure why I was so willing to do something that could have destroyed what we have. I’ve come to the conclusion that I’m still sabotaging myself. The things I want. My happiness.’

‘I could’ve told you that,’ Ash said, pressing the heels of his hand to his face. ‘Dude, like, look at it this way. I know you miss your first lake, your home. I know because I fucking miss it all the time. I want to go to a place that feels safe and perfect and it’s that lake where we both grew up, in Ethallas. And you know, you’re Inner Court now, and the family of water fae that live there – you could challenge them in a second and get that home back, but have you? Nope.’

‘I can’t live there,’ Augus said. ‘I can’t live there again now that they have. It will never be what it
'You don’t let yourself have a lake. Not properly. You don’t nurture any ecosystem solely for yourself. You don’t let yourself grow things unless you’re healing lakes for other people. Like, I get self-sacrifice? To a point? God knows I’ve forced myself not to hunt so often that I’ve lived most of my life half-starving and am pretty sure I use sex to fill the hole that remains in my gut. I’m sure you know that. But like…I dunno, man. You were always like that, bro. From the beginning. When I was too young to realise. And I took it for granted. So maybe you grew up thinking that was just how things had to be.’

Augus didn’t say anything, trailed his fingers along the armrest and thought of the way Gwyn had smiled at him. The way his body had gone so pliant and accepting towards the end, the way he’d ached for every touch that Augus had offered, submitted so beautifully that it made the hair on Augus’ skin rise.

‘I didn’t defeat the Raven Prince,’ Augus said, his voice rough, catching in his chest. ‘He wanted it, he engineered it, and he used me to do it. If he didn’t want to be defeated, he could have said – a hundred times over – that he didn’t want it, perhaps the course of history would have been changed.’

He could feel Ash’s gaze pushing at him, but he didn’t look at Ash.

‘The Nightingale, when he was in the palace with us, he used to sometimes ask me to meet him in his rooms. For nothing good. Nothing I’d ever enjoy. But I went. I could have rebelled, I could have refused, and I didn’t. I went.’

He dug his nails into the armrest, the fabric letting off deep pops as his nails sunk through the thick cover into the stuffing.

‘It’s a pattern. And I’ve just done it again. Differently now, because Gwyn – if he had known how this would have impacted me – he would never have allowed it. He was willing to endure anything, but not that. So it was different. This time, he asked for something and unlike the others, had no idea what he was asking for. You can’t break a heartsong of surrender without breaking someone’s trust.’

Ash moved closer then, until he was kneeling on the couch and his hands were resting flat by Augus’ thigh, watching him.

‘But I’ve broken his trust before and he’s stayed by my side. Both – I imagine – because he wants to, and because he’s been conditioned to stick by people who brutalise him.’

‘Augus,’ Ash said, staring at him, ‘you just said that he asked you to do it and that he was willing to bear anything. What did he say after? Did he change his mind?’

‘No,’ Augus said, shaking his head because it wasn’t the way it supposed to have gone. ‘He said he understood. Among other things. He wasn’t even angry. That’s not a normal way to respond to that. Perhaps one day he’ll realise that.’

‘Okay,’ Ash said slowly. ‘Or maybe he just knows that he asked you to do something and knew it wouldn’t be easy and then it wasn’t easy and he gets it? Like, I don’t know what you did, but if…what you and Gulvi have said about him is true – then he takes responsibility for things? Right? I don’t think that’s the issue here, Augus, though, I mean – you’re upset because you did something and expected to lose something because of it. Something you really want. Am I right?’
‘I don’t understand why I keep doing it,’ Augus said, staring at him. He unhooked his claws from the armrest and spread his fingers. ‘I don’t want to keep doing it. Even when I went to heal the lake on my own, I had no idea that family would murder me, but I did know I’d… I knew I was putting myself at great risk. I knew. I did it. But I know it’s not guilt, because I’ve been doing it for so terribly long, long before I started destroying lakes or fae or a Kingdom.’

Scenes with Gwyn always brought down Augus’ barriers too. Would he look at this moment tomorrow with horror? Ash was the one who was supposed to open up to him, and Augus was the one who would take the words and respond with acceptance. But that method of doing things didn’t seem to apply in the same way anymore.

‘Do you have to know why?’ Ash said after some seconds passed. He moved even closer, and then flumped down beside Augus, leaning his arm into Augus’ arm. ‘Like, you know you don’t want to do it, maybe it’s just more important to learn what the warning signs are. I bet there’s warning signs. The ‘why’ of it will come later. Y’know? In the meantime, I dunno, did you feel great about what you’d have to do to Gwyn?’

‘No,’ Augus said. ‘No, I told him that he wouldn’t like it.’

‘Maybe you wanted him to stop you,’ Ash said.

‘No,’ Augus said, shaking his head. ‘He doesn’t value himself enough to care what I do to him, for the most part. I’m quite sure I could literally torture him, and if I framed it in the right way, he’d accept it.’

Ash said nothing for several breaths, and then he dragged a hand through his hair and bent one leg up so that his heel rested on the couch.

‘Fucking hell. Never thought you’d be the kind to take up with some kind of long-term project, bro.’

‘Nor I,’ Augus laughed. ‘But you’re forgetting I’m also a project. And he’s taken up with me, too. You don’t spend a year in the underworlds and come out unscathed.’

‘Y’think?’ Ash said, bumping into him. ‘Okay, so, if you didn’t want him to stop you, then… maybe you were trying to tell yourself something.’

‘Perhaps. But I had to do it all the same. Gwyn’s correct, Ifir won’t follow him while he has the heartsong of surrender. Many of them will question it. With it gone, altered, he’s in a better position to run the Court. I can’t very well deny him that, can I?’

‘Sure you can,’ Ash said. ‘Though I see your point. But like, you could’ve gotten someone else to break it, if you knew the best way to-’

‘No,’ Augus said, looking over at him. ‘No. Impossible. I would never let anyone else see him like that. Ever. Unless he wants it? No. Not an option. Do you think I trust anyone else to know how to handle him when he gets like that? I barely trust myself.’

‘So you’re like – you were the best person for the job?’

‘Yes,’ Augus said, and then his lips thinned.

‘You were the one most likely to get him through whatever you did? Make sure he was okay?’

‘I know what you’re getting at,’ Augus said, elbowing Ash’s arm lightly.
‘Yeah, so let me get there already, Jesus. I think you’re…I think this isn’t what you think it is. I could be wrong, because I’ve been wrong a lot lately, so let me explain and you can tell me to go to hell or whatever afterwards. This was all above board, Augus. He asked you for something that seemed pretty necessary to run the Kingdom after I went and fucked things up, you figured out a way to do it and you knew you would be the best person to steer him through it and make sure he was okay afterwards. Miracle of miracles, he was okay afterwards. But you got upset. I think it’s not because you were in any real danger of losing him, but because this echoes an older pattern where you did lose stuff because other people asked you to. But Gwyn didn’t ask you to lose anything, and you didn’t lose it. You’ve just said you could torture him and he’d fucking accept it, so I’m pretty sure he’s gonna wake up later and you know, just be relieved not to have that heartsong anymore.’

Augus closed his eyes, inhaled sharply through his nose, his chest ached.

‘He called me his anam cara,’ Augus said. ‘And then I- I hurt him. Rather badly.’

Augus’ voice cracked and then he laughed, surprised at his own reaction to what he was saying.

‘Yeah,’ Ash said, carefully sliding an arm around Augus’ shoulders, making Augus feel so stupidly fragile that it took several seconds of squeezing his eyes shut to stop himself from turning and shoving Ash away and storming from the room. ‘Yeah, Augus, you just didn’t want to hurt him.’

‘I didn’t,’ Augus said, his own legs coming up, tucked up into his chest. He scraped at the black material covering his knees, his eyes felt hot. ‘He’s had too much of it already. I didn’t know I had a line, Ash, and I crossed it.’

‘Yeah. If there’s one thing I know at the moment, it fucking sucks balls to hurt the people you care about.’

Ash started laughing, couldn’t help himself. ‘You do know a lot about that at the moment.’

‘Fucking so much, man,’ Ash said fervently. ‘Even Gulvi is mad at me. Also, for the record? It’s really fucking hard to come up with a scenario to explain all of the politics of this to like, a human therapist? Who doesn’t live in a Kingdom like we do? She thinks I’m part of an organised crime syndicate.’

Augus laughed harder, and Ash shoved him affectionately, before leaning into him.

‘No really, she does. She thinks I’m like part of a cadre of like…criminals. Because it’s the only way I can explain the coup, and betraying like, the boss and shit. I’m pretty sure she thinks I’m a drug trafficker? Oh god, I hope she doesn’t think I’m a human trafficker. I mean I doubt it. I go in wearing like a shirt and jeans, so she probably doesn’t think I’m that important. But yeah, man, I made the Seelie into the opposition, yet another organised crime ring. It’s kinda fun. Though like, she doesn’t know much about organised crime and I only know stuff I’ve picked up from books and movies so it’s all very Godfather and Sopranos right now.’

‘I have no idea what you’re talking about,’ Augus said, his shoulders still shaking. ‘Is she helping though?’

‘Yeah,’ Ash said, quietening, ‘she is. Actually she gave me a couple of books about how kids who’ve been through like child abuse…the issues they have when they’re older. What they can be like as adults. It’s helped. It’s ah, it kind of sucks to realise how much of Gwyn I see in the case studies. But I see elements of you and me as well. Not from our childhoods but like…everything we went through with the Nightingale. So I guess it’s useful on a few levels.’
Augus sighed, and slid his feet off the edge of the cushion, back onto the ground. He leaned forwards and then bowed his head. It was an old invitation, and he wasn’t sure if Ash remembered it.

But Ash did, because a broad hand rested on his scalp and then curved down to the back of his head, and Augus felt it like a tingle of heat sliding down the centre of his spine. Warmth pooling in him, leaving him more relaxed, the headache that had been building vanished as muscles he didn’t know he was tensing, unclenched. He sighed, rested his head in his palms, as Ash gently massaged at the back of his head.

‘You know,’ Ash said later. ‘I know how much trust you’re showing me. I hope you know I’m grateful. I’m not going to hurt you or him with any of this. I don’t want to.’

Augus nodded, said nothing. He felt wrung out. Gwyn had asked him if Augus had ever needed aftercare, but the truth was, it wasn’t something he’d ever needed before, even though the professional submissive he’d seen when he’d been learning the tricks of trade had told him that he might. He’d always been so composed, so certain, so emotionally stable.

‘On a scale of one to ten, how bad is Gwyn’s past?’

‘Does it matter?’ Augus said. ‘I don’t know how quantify it. Worse than you’d think. He wears it better than some. Not as well as others. He’s still alive, despite several attempts to not be. He still fights, despite bouts of despair. I respect that.’

‘He asked you to change his heartsong to better serve the Kingdom, even though he’s Unseelie? So…what does that mean?’

‘He can be a martyr,’ Augus said, groaning softly as Ash massaged at a tense band of muscle behind his ears. He’d missed this physical affection, felt some tangible connection to his brother that he’d not had for a long time. ‘In the traditional sense of someone who is devoted to his beliefs. He believes the Unseelie Kingdom must prevail. Not win, just…remain in place, remain a haven. He’ll do whatever it takes to achieve that. For a warmonger, he’s surprisingly anti-war.’

‘It was hard you know,’ Ash said, his voice low, ‘it was hard to convince Ifir that Gwyn was like…not worth it.’

Augus’ gut clenched, and Ash rested the palm of his hand on the back of Augus’ head and left it there, soothing him, possibly worried at how Augus would react to his words.

‘I mean, Ifir was always suspicious, but that’s just Ifir. He scrutinises everything. Even then, it was kind of…it wasn’t until I revealed Gwyn’s heartsong that I could even tip him in a different direction other than just wary loyalty. You’re not going to kill him, are you?’

‘No,’ Augus said.

‘Thank fuck,’ Ash said quietly. ‘Sorry. It’s selfish to ask. I just…have been thinking about it a little. A lot.’

Augus shrugged to indicate that it was fine, and then later, Ash coaxed Augus down to rest his head on Ash’s thigh, and Ash smoothed Augus’ hair and looked out into his own loungeroom. They said nothing at all, and it was almost like old times, except that Augus felt aged and sore from what life had brought him, and he couldn’t help but wonder if Ash felt the same.

A couple of hours had passed before Ash rested his hand on Augus’ shoulder.
'You think you should go back to him?' Ash said quietly. ‘Yeah? You’ll see for yourself it’s going to be okay, Augus. And you can always come back if you need to. I’m here a lot at the moment. Here, or at therapy, and sometimes helping Gulvi with Julvia. That’s about it.’

‘Mm,’ Augus said, sitting up and turning, hugging his brother and closing his eyes, breathing deep, reminding himself that he hadn’t lost Ash. That, despite everything, his brother was still his brother, even when he was lost and struggling. ‘And you? What do you need?’

‘More of this,’ Ash said, smiling. ‘When you have time for it. I like when you talk to me, you know. I want to be…I want to be someone you can do that with. I’m going to be- I’m going to work on it, Augus. Because I’ve learned that just wanting you to lean on me isn’t the same as like, knowing how to do it. So I’m gonna learn how to be a better brother. It took me a really long time to see everything you did for me, you know. Or even just some of it. I thought that’s what all family did for each other. I thought it was just what older brothers did. Now I know that you kind of went above and beyond for me. A lot. For all that I’m fucked up on some things, I’m really not on others, and that’s mostly thanks to you.’

Augus stared at him, and then hoped that his face conveyed something of amused revulsion even as warmth bloomed.

‘That’s disgusting,’ Augus managed.

‘Isn’t it?’ Ash said. ‘But I’m the sentimental one, aren’t I? You’re the cold…whatever you are. I don’t know, what are you aiming for again? You’re a sap, Augus.’

Augus shoved him lightly before standing, and Ash laughed as he got up, looking impish.

‘My door’s always open, Augus,’ Ash said. ‘Like, really.’

‘I know,’ Augus said, glad that Ash was trying, that…everything he’d risked when he’d told Ash what he had about Gwyn seemed like it had helped. ‘Good evening, brother.’

‘Night bro,’ Ash said.

Augus wandered away from Ash’s rooms, and ended up moving through the corridors of the palace for some time before he eventually returned to Gwyn, curling up in the bed with him, glad for his body warmth and the way – even in sleep – Gwyn moved closer to him and murmured his name in a sleep-warmed voice like it meant safety.

He only hoped Gwyn would feel the same way when he woke.

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Chapter End Notes

In our next chapter, 'Nostalgia:’

‘This place is harmful to you. I am all for someone confronting the things that cause them hurt, I am a staunch advocate of people facing what still frightens them…but only if they have control over how they face it. There’s no healing when a hurtful thing is around you all the time, Augus.’
‘Yes,’ Augus said. He agreed. ‘But Gwyn is here.’

‘I’m not telling you to do anything,’ Fenwrel said. ‘I am certainly not telling you to leave Gwyn. But…you are a waterhorse, Augus. You are not made for a castle of stone. Even if you were healthy, you would not fare well living here for the rest of your days.’

‘But while we rebuild everything…’

‘I’m not trying to argue with you. I only want you to consider your future.’

‘What future?’ Augus said, his voice becoming sharp. He pulled his hand away from Fenwrel’s and slid off the bed, forcing his legs to stay strong beneath him. ‘The future where someone finds me for revenge one day and murders me? Or the one where the Unseelie Kingdom fails and I spend the rest of my life running? Or, perhaps in this ideal world of yours, the one where I have a lake again. A perfect, whole lake that is mine, and then what? What’s to stop someone else like the Nightingale coming along again? What’s the point? Whether I’m in this damned palace or in a lake or in a cell in the Seelie Court, what’s the point?’
Nostalgia

Chapter Notes

No new tags, but some of the previous tags are touched on (namely: flashbacks / nightmares).

I am back in Perth! For those who are reading, *The Wildness Within* will commence again mid next-week. :D Thanks to all who are leaving comments, kudos, bookmarking or just lurking and enjoying yourselves. *waves*

See the end of the chapter for more notes

*Augus*

The nightmare that raked into him was short and vicious and didn’t leave him with any scenes or memories, only the sense that his life had been turned upside down, that he had been eviscerated from the inside out and that black, tarry gunk was left clinging to the inside of him.

Augus bent over the bed when he woke, retched so hard he thought he’d strained the muscles of his throat. But he brought up nothing other than copious saliva, which he spat onto the floor before realising that was an uncouth habit and he shouldn’t have done it. He was shaking violently. He couldn’t remember anything other than the horrible sense that he’d been polluted from the inside out. He’d spent his entire life trying to live cleanly and the Nightingale had come along and made creatures invade him until there was nothing of himself left.

He clawed at his forearm before he could stop himself, then clawed his shirt open and raked fingernails over the Soulbond.

A loud cry of shock when hands reached out and stopped him, and only then did Augus remember where he was. Gwyn frowned, restraining Augus’ wrists, looking at the place where Augus had hurt himself.

‘Normally it’s the other way around,’ Augus said, his voice hoarse. ‘You wake me up. Didn’t you have nightmares?’

‘Yes,’ Gwyn said calmly. ‘But they’re not always loud. Be easy, Augus.’

‘Shut up,’ Augus snapped at him, and then in a vindictive rush he yanked his hands free and dug his fingers into the pressure points of Gwyn’s forearm, watching the flinch and the grunt and gritting his teeth hard because it was all *wrong*. Gwyn was the one who needed comforting. How dare he just sit there like he was fine? ‘I stabbed you in the shoulder yesterday.’

‘And my heartsong is wildness,’ Gwyn said, his voice strained. ‘You did exactly what I asked you to. But I wouldn’t have asked you if the cost would be this high. For you, Augus. Be easy.’

Gwyn drew his forearm away from Augus’ fingers; red, angry bruises already forming. He reached out carefully, took Augus’ wounded arm and looked at the blood on it. Gwyn’s fingers shifted, and then Gwyn leaned down and licked, his breath gusting over Augus’ skin, something hungry in the
way his tongue rasped over his skin, gathering up the blood into his mouth, saliva painting sorely over the scratches Augus had given himself.

Augus stared at the mussed blond hair beneath him, at the way Gwyn’s grip shifted and tightened. He licked at his lips, arousal slinking through him. He pushed it away, because he had things to do when he woke and he couldn’t keep pushing them back but…

‘How come it’s affecting you like this?’ Augus said. ‘When you got it the first time, it was…different.’

‘I had it as a heartsong for a long time, Augus,’ Gwyn said against his skin, before licking again at the blood before the scratches healed over. ‘A long time. It’s not like the first time when it came upon me. It’s like it was always there waiting for me. My mother used to joke that I was such an unrefined beast and though she meant it as the lowest of insults, that I was nothing more than a base creature, I always felt whatever measure of pride a child in that setting could feel. Would that I could be a scenting hound, or a deer in the woods, a rabbit in its burrow or a badger in its sett. And whatever you did to me, Augus…I feel calmer.’

‘I think that will last about eight hours,’ Augus said, swallowing.

‘Probably less,’ Gwyn said, his voice dark and faintly mocking. ‘Maybe twenty minutes. But I’ll take what I can get. You know, this morning, when I woke from my own nightmare, it occurred to me that I have felt what I felt with you before. But only in moments. In the nock and zing of the loosed arrow. In the perfect swing of a well-balanced sword. When I am in a moment but not lost in bloodlust, and I am just…’ Gwyn looked up and blushed. He wiped at a spot of blood at bottom of his lip and smeared it away. ‘You hold too much power over me. You did before. You certainly do now.’

‘And your shoulder?’

‘It’s closed over,’ Gwyn said, frowning. ‘Still sore. More than usual. Stirred up, like a bee’s nest. And you? Are you still sore? Can you not believe me when I tell you that I think this has all been worth it?’

Augus stared at him, then looked away. It wasn’t supposed to be like this at all. He was off his game. He’d been off his game and now he’d woken up and he still couldn’t…feel out the situation. He wanted Gwyn to grow, but he thought it would follow predictable patterns, and instead he felt as though Gwyn had bounded ahead, and he was left behind to catch up somehow.

‘You’re still sore,’ Gwyn said. Augus had no idea how he managed to make those words sound so gentle.

‘I won’t do it again,’ Augus said, looking back at him. ‘It wasn’t pleasant trying to manipulate you into becoming King. This was worse. I’ll not…I’ll not keep doing this. It’s one thing to follow my own pleasure in a scene, quite another to do this.’

‘I know,’ Gwyn said. ‘I won’t ask you again. If I lose it this time, it will be solely my responsibility to get it back again. And I will. Somehow.’

Gwyn looked uncomfortable then, rubbed at the back of his neck. He looked at Augus’ shirt – now torn open – at the Soulbond and then closed his eyes.

‘Augus, I can’t remove your Soulbond. The magic to do it – I think it’s all been destroyed. And before the Old Lore was destroyed I asked it directly if it might be removed.’
Augus pressed his hand over his chest, his fingers fisted over his skin. He couldn’t feel the Soulbond, but he knew it was there, staining him, chaining him to Ash’s life.

‘What did the Old Lore say?’

‘That it was as permanent as any mountain.’

Augus blinked, his eyes narrowed. ‘That’s what the Old Lore said? That analogy was theirs?’

‘Yes,’ Gwyn said, staring at him. ‘Why?’

‘Mountains aren’t permanent,’ Augus said, looking off into the distance and shaking his head slowly. ‘Not at all. It’s a very specific reference. I think it means that it can’t be broken quickly, like a weak curse. But maybe over time it will erode… That’s really what they said? They talk to you?’

‘It’s exactly what it said,’ Gwyn said, certainty in his voice. ‘Perhaps…you’re right, Augus. But I think it also means that you may have to find a way to make peace with what Ash and I made you take into yourself. I didn’t always regret it. But knowing how much you hate it now, knowing how much has been forced… on you… I would keep looking if you asked me to. But with the Old Lore destroyed, I’m not sure what else I can do.’

Augus took several breaths, willed his heart to slow further. He scouted inside himself for the new energy meridians he and Fenwrel had laid down inside of him. Even that made him aware of his older, polluted system lying within him.

‘I just want it all gone,’ Augus said, smiling ruefully. ‘But Fenwrel has explained why that isn’t possible. I used to be better at acceptance, once.’

‘I imagine whatever you had to try and accept back then was easier,’ Gwyn said. He started to lean forwards and then hesitated, pulled back, frowned at himself.

Ah, then, Gwyn was right, perhaps it wouldn’t even last twenty minutes.

‘Well,’ Augus said, shrugging. ‘And you? What shall you be doing today? Working yourself ragged as usual?’

‘As usual,’ Gwyn said, sliding off the bed and raising his hand briefly to the bandage at his shoulder. Augus expected him to unwind it, but instead he left it in place as he walked into their shared wardrobe – more a large, adjoining room than anything. Gwyn hadn’t even showered, and Augus was about to comment on it when Gwyn said: ‘But first, I think it might be time to scout a new location for a cabin. It shouldn’t take too long, and I’ve put it off.’

Augus’ reaction was mixed. A flush of pleasure and surprise that Gwyn was doing something to take care of himself without prompting. And then a stranger sense of loss within himself. Ash was right, Augus had no lake, he’d not invested anything of himself into the lake Ash had found for him, and he didn’t even have a verdant balcony like his brother did. Now, he nurtured no landscape that was his own. Even the lake spirits he’d helped after harming them, they all had told him not to return.

Why could Gwyn do it, when Augus couldn’t? It was a disparity that made him narrow his eyes at the rumpled bedding. Once more, he had the oddest sense of Gwyn pulling ahead and Augus was being left in some strange, isolated place.

He settled his own hair, fleetingly touched the back of his own head.
Because that’s just what I need, some kind of existential crisis.

His shirt was ruined from his own actions, but the wounds at his forearm were no longer bleeding thanks to his Inner Court status and Gwyn’s seeking tongue. Augus sighed, unsettled. Another day in a palace he couldn’t bring himself to love no matter how much Gwyn had tried to change it for him.

Perhaps you’re just ungrateful.

Augus frowned. Perhaps he was. He thought briefly about going with Gwyn, but he had things he needed to do, tasks he had set himself.

Remember when the Each Uisge didn’t have to do anything at all, other than protect his lake and hunt his food?

Augus closed his eyes. Maybe, in truth, he needed a day of focusing on other things, because whatever was in his mind felt like the strands of poison that the Nightingale had infected him with years ago.

*

It happened hours later, when he was walking from the kitchens after a long meeting with the trows. He’d visited with them to determine how best to make sure that Gwyn was eating regularly, and for them to inform him when he wasn’t. He was down one of the darker corridors, seeking the library that housed scrolls of diplomatic assignments, wanting to look over his own notes that he’d once made under the Raven Prince’s auspices to see if he could fit himself to that position now. Diplomacy instead of the common work. It hurt him to hope for it.

Shadows loomed in the dark stone corridor. The opaque stone here seemed to absorb the darkness, and even though magelight glowed against the walls where Fenwrel had laid it, this place was less visited than the others in the palace and so Fenwrel hadn’t been as generous. Darkness bloomed between every ball of light, and it had the strange effect of making the hall seem gloomier than it actually was.

One moment he walked through the present, the next he stumbled hard into the past.

He wasn’t aware of falling, only the jolt of his body against stone, and that could have been anything, anyone, and it certainly could have been the Nightingale directing the slurchers to throw him through the stifling air of the dank cave in which he lived.

‘Are you already broken?’ the Nightingale said, laughing. Musical laughter. ‘Again? So easily? Did you know the old Each Uisge would never have let me do this? The reason we all left him in his lake was because he was so dangerous. A bit stupid, yes, but that seems to run through the incarnations, doesn’t it? I have to say, Augus, if you’re already broken, I’m going to kill you. Then your brother. Or wait…do you think this incarnation of the Glashtyn would have a high threshold for the underworlds?’

The Nightingale was in a rare, jovial mood. Augus moved stiffly against the stone, thought something may have broken. His bones had turned brittle. His fingers didn’t twitch into his palms anymore, the repeated pain of scraping at stone when his claws had fallen out wore on him.

A sharp click on the ground as the Nightingale approached him. Boot-steps, but also the tap-tap-tap of his walking stick. He didn’t need it, he used it to-

Augus’ breath rushed out of him when the wood clipped hard across the back of his head.
‘Are you broken?’ the Nightingale said, his voice smooth. ‘I didn’t leave you for that long in the dark, did I? Only three weeks, my darling. You’d prefer me to the dark? It’s almost flattering, isn’t it?’

A long pause, and then Augus bent spasmodically when the walking stick jabbed hard between his legs. A lance of pain up his spine. He could taste blood in his mouth. He knew something was broken. Why wouldn’t he just die already? Every time he was left in the dark he could feel it. The death of the place. How the underworlds wanted to consume him as much as the Nightingale did.

‘Come now, my tired little horse, I’m asking you so many questions and you’re not responding to any of them. You should know that when I ask something of you, I want a response. Haven’t you taught that to all your clients? I don’t even understand how what you could do, could ever appeal to any fae, and yet it does. You know, they remember you. They still talk of you. They all think you’re collecting herbs. Except that brother of yours.’

A stab in the ribs, and the walking stick broke through skin and Augus couldn’t wail, because he’d screamed himself voiceless in the cloying, complete darkness.

He yearned for the Nightingale when he was absent, and when the Nightingale came, he felt his mind tearing itself apart, because he no longer knew what he wanted.

Freedom was no longer possible. So what then could there be?

‘Can you talk?’ the Nightingale said, crouching near him, sounding disgusted. ‘Have you ruined your voice again? It’s just darkness, Augus. Even Terho handled the underworlds better than you did. Think about that.’

He had thought about it. It hadn’t helped much.

‘If you want your brother to live, prove to me you’re not broken. Give me a sign. Reach out with your hand, lay it flat against the floor. Signal to me, darling.’

Minutes must have passed before Augus truly understood what the Nightingale was asking, and then even more time crawled on as he tried to remember what it might be like to want to move his arm, to want to lay his hand flat on the ground. Every muscle and tendon ached. His fingers didn’t even shake anymore when he managed to extend his hand and lay it flat.

A signal.

Don’t kill my brother.

Ash was likely already dead. Augus’ breath hitched on something that could have once been laughter.

Augus heard the rush of air before the cane slammed down on his hand. He felt the pain as though from a great distance.

‘Fix it,’ the Nightingale commanded imperiously to the slurchers.

Oily-wet frog-like fingers crawled over his arm, crawled down to his broken hand, and Augus blacked out when bones crunched as they were pushed back into place, shoved unceremoniously through skin. When he woke, one of the slurchers had curled around his hand like a cold, sticky glove. A bandage. Because heaven forbid the Nightingale broke a bone and it didn’t heal properly.

Augus’ breathing was irregular, he thought his heart was skipping beats, too sluggish.
When he heard the footsteps again, he realised the Nightingale was still there.

‘There are places I can’t go,’ the Nightingale said calmly. ‘But you can get there. Places in the underworlds where I am barred by demons and gods alike. But your body isn’t banned, and I don’t need your mind.’

Not again.

Augus managed some sort of whine of protest, sounding deep in his chest, rolling his forehead onto the floor.

‘That almost sounded like you have some fight in you yet,’ the Nightingale purred. ‘Is it really so unbearable? One would think you needed a break from all of this torment. You won’t need to think at all, my darling.’

I don’t know what you’re going to make me do.

The Nightingale talked of tasks, of places, of things he couldn’t do that Augus could. Truthfully, Augus couldn’t remember how to stand, and the very thought of getting his legs underneath him made him want to curl up pathetically until the thoughts went away. But the slurchers could take over everything. He’d come back to himself sore and alone and likely in the dark. Last time, he’d been covered in gore, blood, none of it tasting like anything he’d encountered in the human or fae world.

His unbroken hand started scratching weakly at the stone. It was reflexive, pathetic. Some animal instinct working to escape even though there would be no escape.

In the beginning he’d tried to recall the feel of sunlight on his skin, the taste of pondweed in his mouth, the flash of silvery fish.

All of it was lost. He tried to recall the sun, but the memory only felt as burning hot and unstable as his own heart weakly pounding in his chest.

He knew enough to know that he wasn’t in the dark anymore.

Knew enough to know that his unbroken hand wasn’t broken, and he was scratching at a different kind of stone.

But he also knew that the stone was still hard against his skin and body, felt a fatigue that pinned him to the floor. He vaguely recalled that things were different, it was all different. But he couldn’t quite remember what his name was, and he certainly didn’t see the point in remembering anything else.

Just in case it hurt too much.

* 

‘Augus?’ Fenwrel said, crouching beside him.

He turned slowly to look up at her, then managed a weak laugh.

‘Do you stalk me?’ he said. There was the proof that he remembered language, and sentences. He didn’t quite trust himself to move yet. He couldn’t remember… He hadn’t had an event like this for a long time now. He could hear how shaky his breathing was, tried to master it, then realised there was no point.
‘Stalking you? No,’ Fenwrel said, grimacing, looking him over critically. She looked perfectly put together as always. A golden sari today, a dark red choli, and her brown eyelids highlighted with a dusting of gold. Her hair pulled up, pinned back. ‘Many libraries are down this corridor. I didn’t expect to find you here. Will you permit me to teleport you to my rooms?’

Augus stared at her, felt the raw skin of his fingers where he’d scratched at stone. Normally he only needed a few minutes to compose himself, but truthfully, he had no idea how long he’d been lying on the floor.

‘What time is it?’ he said.

‘Late evening,’ Fenwrel replied.

‘Damn,’ Augus said, closing his eyes. He’d definitely not had an event this bad since he lived in the palace with the Nightingale. Whenever catatonia had threatened him in the Seelie Court, Gwyn had always been there, coaxing him back. ‘I think I might have to take you up on that offer.’

‘I hoped you would,’ Fenwrel said. ‘I’m going to have to touch you to do it.’

Augus grunted in what he hoped sounded like acknowledgement. He felt a careful hand slide beneath his head like he was a fragile object, another encircled his wrist. He saw bright waves of colour behind his eyes – crimson, leaf green, daffodil yellow – and then he felt like he dissolved into the spectrum.

The next texture was a mattress beneath blankets, and Fenwrel was already moving her hand away from beneath his head. She kept her fingers around his wrist and Augus knew she was checking his meridians. He couldn’t feel it this time, but then he felt more numb than usual.

‘I don’t understand why this is still happening,’ Augus said, a shudder moving through him. ‘I’m healthier. I know I’m healthier.’

‘As you get stronger, you may find yourself facing stronger symptoms of what you’ve experienced,’ Fenwrel said, sighing. She sat on the corner of the bed, before swinging her legs up and tucking them beneath her. She took up Augus’ wrist again and placed the fingers of her other hand into his palm. ‘Your meridians are holding up well. You are healthier. But I can also tell you have been shaken. That you are still…Augus, you were poisoned and there’s no cure for it. What caused your collapse?’

‘A memory,’ Augus said, his smile more a grimace than anything. ‘Though I feel as though I have been in the past more than usual, of late. This palace…’

‘It haunts you,’ Fenwrel said.

Augus said nothing at all, wishing he could pour the poison out. That he could somehow cause it to bubble to the surface of him and become vapour. One quick gale to blow it away, and it could all be gone.

‘Augus,’ Fenwrel said softly, ‘do you think the palace is the best place for you?’

Augus pushed himself up, aware of how stiff all his limbs were. He must have been lying on the floor for hours. He crossed his legs, stretched out his arm again for the contact that Fenwrel offered. Normally he disliked that sort of touch, but the last thing that felt real was his memories of the underworld, of missing fae and warmth and fresh water and the sun on his skin. The warmth in Fenwrel’s hand was welcome.
‘Gwyn is here,’ Augus said.

‘This place is harmful to you. I am all for someone confronting the things that cause them hurt, I am a staunch advocate of people facing what still frightens them…but only if they have control over how they face it. There’s no healing when a hurtful thing is around you all the time, Augus.’

‘Yes,’ Augus said. He agreed. ‘But Gwyn is here.’

‘I’m not telling you to do anything. I am certainly not telling you to leave Gwyn. But…you are a waterhorse, Augus. You are not made for a castle of stone. Even if you were healthy, you would not fare well living here for the rest of your days.’

‘But while we rebuild everything…’

‘I’m not trying to argue with you. I only want you to consider your future.’

‘What future?’ Augus said, his voice becoming sharp. He pulled his hand away from Fenwrel’s and slid off the bed, forcing his legs to stay strong beneath him. ‘The future where someone finds me for revenge one day and murders me? Or the one where the Unseelie Kingdom fails and I spend the rest of my life running? Or, perhaps in this ideal world of yours, the one where I have a lake again. A perfect, whole lake that is mine, and then what? What’s to stop someone else like the Nightingale coming along again? What’s the point? Whether I’m in this damned palace or in a lake or in a cell in the Seelie Court, what’s the point?’

He closed his eyes, his lips thinned. First he couldn’t stop himself from talking to Ash, and now this.

‘I don’t know what the point is,’ Fenwrel said quietly. ‘I do know that there is a power to making a home, even if you have to make a new one, over and over again. I do know that the rituals that come with making a place yours will give you an anchor, especially you, Augus, because you are a waterhorse, and they are supposed to be anchored to an ecosystem. The Nightingale didn’t care about your needs. I know the Raven Prince didn’t care about your needs – because it wasn’t in his nature to care for anyone’s needs but his own. Do you really want to be like them, Augus? Don’t you think – even knowing you could lose it all – it’s worth giving yourself something like an ecosystem again?’

‘Gwyn is here,’ Augus said, walking over to one of the windows and staring out at the eternal night of the Unseelie Court. ‘I’m anchored to something.’

‘Anchored to him?’ Fenwrel said. ‘That’s an achievement, after all you’ve lost, all that was taken from you. But would you consider other anchors? Ones that you could share with him in the future? He cannot be your only tether, Augus. Not least because it’s unfair on him.’

Augus bared his teeth at the glass, felt a snarl building in the pit of him.

He was furious with her and with himself for not being able to make these leaps on his own, especially when he knew that Gwyn was in the same position. It wasn’t enough for Gwyn to only have Augus, he needed places out in nature, he needed other people to talk to – Mikkel or Vane or Gulvi. Health was so much more than another person. It had to be.

But the idea of having his own lake again, it was terrifying. It was something he didn’t want to think about. Couldn’t let himself think about.

Even getting close to the idea of it filled him with nausea.
‘It is unfair on him,’ Augus said, closing his eyes.

*Would he even understand? His abandonment issues stretch across millennia. Mine don’t fare much better these days.*

‘I’m not trying to incite guilt,’ Fenwrel said.

‘I know that too,’ Augus said, turning to her. He folded his hands behind his back, sighed. ‘I have been a long time without a wetland of my own. Everything since then has been a half-measure. I cannot go back to what I had before. I’m not that person anymore.’

‘That’s true.’

‘Do you know, I always fancied myself to be so much more together than Gwyn. Now…well, in some matters I still am, but in others? It’s an ugly thing, to know how damaged you are.’

‘For you, I expect it feels that way,’ Fenwrel said. ‘I see things differently. You’re alive. You have some power. Some control. Some choosing over what things might look like. There’s a right path for you, Augus, and you’re not *quite* there yet. I’d know, trust me.’

Augus laughed softly and then traced the thick curtains with his fingers. He was late in getting the next batch of medicine to Julvia. Thankfully it was all prepared now, and it only needed to be delivered.

‘Did you really happen by me, by chance?’ Augus said, frowning at her.

Fenwrel made a face, and then looked away, and Augus folded his arms.

‘You’re a Mage,’ Augus said. ‘Surely you’re better than stalking.’

‘You’re…’ Fenwrel made a gesture with her arms that looked somewhere between frustrated and lost. ‘You’re not quite a student and not quite a patient but somewhere in that, Augus, I have a duty of care to you. In the short time I’ve known you, you have gotten yourself killed. I gave some of my life to bring you back. It’s- I found you via an extension of the tracking spell. No one else knows. It is set so that I am informed if you stay too still, for too long, in a single place, especially if there are signs of physical distress. It doesn’t track nightmares, your sleep habits; it’s very specific.’

She got off the bed herself and resettled her sari, watching him all the while.

‘I left you for *eight hours*, Augus. Such was my reluctance to betray your privacy. But eight hours is a long time to leave anyone in distress. I’m not…I’m not *pleased* about it. But nor do I think I did the wrong thing.’

Augus wanted to be furious. He did. But truthfully he couldn’t summon anything more than a thin relief that it had been her who had found him, and not Gwyn or Ash or worse; Gulvi.

‘You don’t have to wait eight hours, next time,’ Augus said.

Because if this was his reality, if this was something he had to deal with, it would be better to have people on his side, wouldn’t it? He’d trusted her with his *meridians*. This didn’t seem to be so much worse, after that.

‘That’s a relief,’ Fenwrel said, smiling. ‘It’s been a rather stressful day. Would you like to stay a little longer? We can talk of other things. I imagine that would be better for the both of us.’
'That would be welcome,' Augus said, offering a weak smile and looking back towards the window again. He forced himself to take a deep, slow breath to settle his heart. ‘So, tell me, are there any other fae you’ve got secret tracking spells on?’

Fenwrel’s ears tipped back and she made another face, and Augus beamed.

‘Is it a certain swan, by any chance?’

‘When I said ‘other things,’ I don’t believe I meant this,’ Fenwrel said primly.

‘Tough,’ Augus said, feeling like he was finding his stride. ‘Consider it retribution.’

She gave him a fiery look, and Augus only raised his eyebrows, after all, what did she expect?

*

He’d rescheduled with Gulvi, and met her at the top of the tower where she kept Julvia housed. He’d changed some of the herbs, not much, just enough to make sure that if anything happened to him – if there were any disasters – Julvia could stay on something like a regular schedule.

Gulvi met him, an odd look on her face. She waved him inside the circular room that smelled of swan and hay and bird excrement even though the room was always well-cleaned and ventilated. Julvia, in her heavy swan form, seemed to still when he entered. But she was always wary, and aside from looking her over quickly to make sure she seemed health as he always did, he left it and walked to the small wooden table where they now measured out Julvia’s dosages.

‘She’s been in a strange mood all day,’ Gulvi whispered, turning to look at Julvia, where she stood stiffly in the corner. ‘I cannot say what it is.’

‘Are you concerned?’ Augus said, frowning.

But Gulvi shook her head in a way that wasn’t remotely convincing, and Augus didn’t know what to think. For a little while now, Gulvi had been sure that the medications were doing something, but Augus couldn’t be sure how much of that was Gulvi’s need to have at least one other member of her family survive what had occurred with their whole mind intact.

He paused as he measured out herbs and pills into small individual vials, each representing a day’s worth. His heart had never truly settled, his mind still filled with shadows. Even his eyes were sure that dark corners hid living creatures that watched him and waited.

‘It seems she is not the only one acting strangely today,’ Gulvi said, when Augus forced himself to concentrate on what he was doing.

‘It must make you happy,’ Augus said quietly. ‘Or…if not happy, then at least vindicated, to know that…’

To know what? That Augus would never be the same again? Perhaps she would be. It still wouldn’t bring her family back. And he would never have done such a thing to her family in the first place if the Nightingale hadn’t dragged him down into the black.

He shook his head, bit his top lip, felt the way Gulvi glared at him.

‘I misspoke,’ Augus said finally, exhaling through his nose and trying to pull his mind back to the present.
Gulvi seemed to expect him to say something else, but Augus couldn’t think of anything he wanted to air in her presence. Truthfully, he was weary. He thought of the way Gwyn had been so easy with him, hadn’t been angry at all, and now Augus wished he was lying down with Gwyn somewhere near him. He didn’t want to sleep, but his body ached.

‘Whatever you did,’ Gulvi said, ‘it seems to have brought your brother to his senses. Ash is…more engaged now. He says you spoke the truth to him. But he’s still lost.’

‘And?’ Augus said, staring at her, his jaw tensing. ‘What do you want from me? Hm? Should I fix that too? Are you going to tell me that I need to find something for him? Some kind of home for him? At what point do you think you could-’

Gulvi raised a hand, the other rested on the hilt of her knife. Her eyes wider, her wings flared.

‘You could stab me again,’ Augus said, sighing. ‘I believe you never managed that whole ‘one for each of my sisters’ goal you were aiming for.’

‘You’re pathetic today, aren’t you?’ Gulvi said finally, dropping her other hand, her wings relaxing against her back once more.

‘Yes,’ Augus said, stoppering the vials closed and packing up some of what he’d brought with him.

‘Bad day, darling?’

‘Can you not call-’ me that?

Augus forced his mouth shut around the words and took a moment. Every Courtier used certain endearments in the every day. Even he used the word ‘darling’ when he went into the mindset of a Courtier. It would be hypocritical at best to ask- And he certainly shouldn’t ask it of Gulvi, who would no doubt thrill to use it even more whenever she was around him.

‘I’ve had better,’ Augus said roughly, placing jars and containers in the knapsack he’d brought with him. He didn’t know what to think of Gulvi, even now. They would never have anything like friendship, and he would never be anything more than the one who destroyed her family, and that was the way it was supposed to be. And if-

A loud swan shriek – a broken, wretched fluting that pierced his ears. He turned and was met with a heavy flapping weight. Wings beating at him, a beak tearing at his skin, trying to grasp at him and then webbed, clawed feet kicking over and over. A flurry of movement, the grunts of a bird, and Augus was pushed into the table before he tried to get out of the way.

I swear I am this close to just eviscerating everything.

‘Julvia!’ Gulvi was crying out, trying to herd Julvia away, but nothing worked. The swan came at him again, honking, beak wide and ready to grasp at anything it could.

Augus clenched his fists, opened his mouth to protest. Then, a faint click inside of himself, and he realised. He stared at the swan who kept launching for him, over and over, barely held back by Gulvi’s strong wings, her outstretched arms.

It took only seconds to exit the room, close the wooden door behind him. He leaned his back against the wall opposite, stared ahead, his hands shaking.

More seconds and the door opened again, slammed shut with Gulvi standing in front of him now, her own eyes reflecting what he already knew.
‘She recognised me,’ Augus said, breathless. ‘She recognises me!’

Gulvi rattled off a sentence in a language he didn’t know, then she winced and took a deep breath. ‘I had thought all day that she looked at me like she sometimes knew what I said. But it came and went. I thought I was hallucinating. I thought- La! I cannot- I have to go back and soothe her. She is sorely upset.’

‘Wait,’ Augus said, holding up a hand, still leaning against the wall. ‘I can make the medicines in a different room. If that’s what’s helping. Likely, it’s Aleutia, but- And it will be even longer before she can shift again. If she can ever shift again. She may not even regain-’

The words fled and he stared at the wooden door as though he could see the swan maiden behind it.

Even if he hadn’t been the one to call her back to herself, he’d helped. He’d been certain for so long now that the Nightingale had killed that part of him, murdered it in his endeavour to mock the goodness out of him. Yes, Augus had retained glimpses of it, whatever he could use to help Gwyn or the lakes, even Ash. But this…

It was the lightness of hope and the zinging of exhilaration underneath his skin and Gulvi looking at him with awe and wonder and fear on her own face.

‘You should go to her,’ he said. ‘I can fetch Aleutia.’

‘Oui, please.’ Gulvi nodded firmly and then looked at him for a little longer, like she wanted to say something else. Then she opened the door and moved back into the room, her large wings blocking Julvia from view. Before the door closed again, Augus heard Julvia flute an uncertain call to her sister, and Gulvi responding with warmth, tears already in her voice.

Chapter End Notes

In our next chapter, ‘Service:’

‘Why are you here, Augus?’ Gwyn said.

‘Afraid of what I’ll do?’ Augus said, not turning around to face him.

Gwyn took the shallow steps up the dais slowly, every motion confident. Then, he was standing directly behind Augus, and he looked over his shoulder, cheek brushing against wet black hair, his chin against Augus’ cheek.

‘No, I’m not afraid of what you’ll do,’ Gwyn said, his voice low.

He felt Augus’ shudder, attuned to it.

What the heartsong of surrender had taken from him was his ability to easily initiate. With it gone, he knew now that he’d been slave to a passivity he’d not truly understood or been able to grasp for months. He’d let Augus suffer for too long. Gwyn didn’t reach out. Even in the Seelie palace when Augus had been prisoner and Gwyn had felt bound to him, he’d still been able to ambush Augus, still been able to summon control back to himself whenever he’d felt the need for it.
‘What is it like?’ Gwyn said, carefully curling his hand around Augus’ flank. Augus tensed beneath him, and Gwyn felt his own fears stir too. What if this was unwelcome? After all, Gwyn stole far more than he should from anyone who showed him a measure of kindness. ‘You were King once. The Raven Prince gave it to you, even knowing you would ruin the Kingdom he’d strengthened.’
‘He’s rallying his troops, then,’ Ifir said from where he half-lay, half-sat in the cell.

There were signs that Aleutia had been tending him regularly. From the bandage around his ankle, to the scent of a bitter herbal poultice in the air, to the black tarry substance that had been painted over the top of Ifir’s severed horn. Even his eyes seemed brighter.

‘He is,’ Gwyn said.

An hour earlier, one of Zudanna’s scouts had reported to Zudanna, and she in turn had come to find him. The news was both not good, and what they expected.

‘Numbers?’ Ifir said, staring at Gwyn shrewdly.

‘Maybe twenty thousand, only the common fae platoons. No news yet on whether he’s rallying the navy to work on land but…chances are high.’

‘Yep,’ Ifir bit out, pulling himself upright onto his hip. He rubbed at his overgrown moustache and beard.

‘I want you out in the field,’ Gwyn said.

‘I want to be out in the field. My people respond better to me than they do to my brother. He doesn’t use them well. He’s good for interim work, but actual war? Let me do my part. I’m useless here.’

‘You’ll do your part as an underfae,’ Gwyn said grimly, crouched, his arms folded. ‘I’ll not be raising you back up to Court status, and you’re on probation. If you step onefoot out of line, Ifir, I will slaughter you where you stand and call it collateral damage. And I will be backed by some of those Generals. You’ve made fewer friends with your latest move.’

‘It was worth it,’ Ifir said, laughing, the sound roughened into a faint, damp hack. ‘And you? What will you do about that core of yours?’

‘It’s no longer surrender,’ Gwyn said quietly.
Indeed it wasn’t. The switch had happened so cleanly, Gwyn wondered if he’d been transitioning from surrender into wildness anyway. Wondered if he had – over the past few centuries – been bending his will to it so diligently that it had no choice but to return. Mages could will a heartsong into being, perhaps Gwyn’s desperation had called it back. It would have been helped by literally living in the wilds as an underfae, determined to stay alive, to adhere to his survival instinct. Maybe he found something even in his desperate, animalistic fear.

‘That only shows that you know it was a problem,’ Ifir said, frowning at him.

Gwyn nodded, because of course he’d known. But it wasn’t as though it had made him unable to fight, unable to throw his will into battle, unable to triumph still.

‘Tell me something,’ Ifir said. ‘This whole spin that you were always biding your time with the Seelie, just waiting to join our side, it’s not true is it? It doesn’t add up. Others believe it, so let them, okay. I can see why you’d need something like that to build your reputation. But you were always too clever, too strategic when you worked against us. You didn’t operate at all like an ally working from the inside. You picked off our best Generals and commanders. You destroyed the most effective militaries. You ruined us. So what’s the truth then? I know you fight as fiercely for us as you ever did for them. I’ve seen it.’

Even as you haven’t wanted to?

‘I was told to be something by a family that didn’t want their reputation ruined, and I tried to be it. For a long time. It never felt right, but one has to try and make a life somewhere, don’t they?’

‘Why did you never defect?’

‘They were very convincing,’ Gwyn said, his mouth thinning.

Ifir pushed himself further upright and watched him closely, then tilted his head. ‘Efnisien was your cousin, wasn’t he?’

Gwyn nodded. Ifir nodded a few seconds later, a look on his face like he understood everything. Even if he’d pieced some of it together, he understood none of it, and it filled Gwyn with an odd sort of bitterness. It was as though, after all this time, no one could ever truly comprehend what his parents had been like. Even Augus had taken such a long time to understand.

‘And becoming King of the Unseelie?’ Ifir said. ‘What was that?’

‘I was asked. No one else wants to do it.’

‘Yep. That’s true. I know that one’s true. The only people that want it right now are the ones that shouldn’t have it.’

Gwyn stood, dusted off his knees.

‘I’m going to die on a battlefield pretty soon anyway, I think,’ Ifir said, unprompted.

‘Maybe we all are,’ Gwyn said, smiling grimly.

‘But not if you can help it, right?’ Ifir said, appearing shrewd. ‘Maybe I buy it then, why you seem so Seelie still. Must change a man to live with all of them, in that Court, all that constant rhetoric about honour and virtue and the Kingdom. Hey, do me a favour, keep an eye out for any specialist fae militaries Albion throws together. I’ve got a bad feeling about this one.’
‘As do I,’ Gwyn said, exiting the invisible barrier of the cell. He inclined his head once to Ifir and walked down the long underground corridor, thoughts tumbling together, wanting nothing more than to leave the confines of the palace and roam, unfettered.

* 

He’d imposed a time limit on himself of three hours to deal with paperwork, then he was going to seek out Augus. He was concerned for him. Augus was prone to doing more dangerous things when he was troubled, but Gwyn found himself worried less for that and more for the fact that something about what Augus had done to break Gwyn’s heartsong had hurt him. Gwyn didn’t understand it. Yes, what Augus had done was extreme, but anything less wouldn’t have cracked the heartsong through. If Augus had told him what to expect, Gwyn would have braced for it and it wouldn’t have been effective.

Gwyn only marvelled at the brilliance of it. Immersing someone in the heartsong only to break it from the inside out. But it was obvious that Augus didn’t feel the same.

He stared down at papers, he couldn’t afford to siphon off any more income from those that ran the stables and the kennels, especially now that the Wild Hunt was coming up. But he needed to find something more if they were to acquire more people responsible for different components of taking care of the Unseelie Court. The Unseelie treasury pockets only went so deep, even if he had a lot more to utilise than he did previously.

A knock at the door and he kept his eyes glued to the page, a quill moving over it. ‘Come in.’

The door opened a crack, and Gwyn could tell it was Ash from the scent of him. So much like Augus, but heavier, siltier.

‘Hey there,’ Ash said.

Gwyn took a moment to gather himself. He’d seen Ash around the palace a few times now since Gwyn had asked the blood-oath for him, and he wasn’t sure where they stood with each other. As King, it was his job to keep Ash under control. But otherwise…what were they? Gwyn was Augus’ lover at the very least, and that…didn’t that mean something?

‘Good afternoon,’ Gwyn said, putting down the parchments and looking up. ‘Is everything okay?’

‘What? Oh, yeah, totally,’ Ash said, sliding in with a tray and a glass of some clear brown-gold drink. It didn’t smell alcoholic. ‘I just, I mean- I’m used to bringing Gulvi drinks and stuff when she’s working and I thought I might- You know now that I’m actually here and doing it, I can see how this is a bit weird. Yep. But this is something I do for Gulvi and you know…’

Ash moved lightly in the room, slid the tray down after deftly clearing some parchments and stacking them. He watched Gwyn closely as he did everything, and Gwyn found his own eyes tracking back to the papers he was looking at, because direct eye contact from Ash was disconcerting. He’d gotten used to it with Augus – barely – but it was quite different coming from his brother.

‘It’s good for me to have things to do,’ Ash said, clearing his throat. ‘It’s sweet iced tea. The trows said you’d probably like it.’

Gwyn looked at the glass dubiously. It did smell intriguing, but…

He was King and immune to almost all poisons anyway, so even if- But Ash couldn’t harm him because of the blood-oath, so Gwyn’s suspicions were foundless.
Gwyn tried to search for the right thing to say that didn’t seem like it would lead him into a trap.

‘…Thank you,’ Gwyn said.

Ash beamed at him, eyes twinkling. ‘You’re welcome.’

He spun away and walked towards the door. Then he turned and quickly walked back, Gwyn’s entire body tensing in response. But instead of doing anything untoward, Ash picked up the glass and took a large mouthful of it, swallowing it down and smiling.

‘Just to, you know, prove I didn’t poison the fuck out of it. All right then, bye for now. If you like it, you should let the trows know.’

With that, Ash jauntily exited and closed the door behind him. Gwyn blinked at the door, blinked at the glass, and then forced himself to look at the papers. After two minutes and feeling the tray and glass on the table like a physical presence, he put the papers down and looked at the glass, condensation beading on the outside.

Finally, he picked it up and allowed himself a wary sip, and then frowned. He did like it. But Ash was so obviously trying to buy favour and Gwyn didn’t know what it meant. No one changed their minds that quickly about anyone, least of all Gwyn.

He put the glass down, uncertain, and told himself only a few more hours and he could seek out Augus.

*

Tracking skills came in handy when seeking Augus. It also nurtured his heartsong to follow scent trails through the palace, letting his body be lured by odours of fresh water and chlorophyll and something bittersweet at the back of his throat.

He recognised in himself a shift since his heartsong had changed. He’d forgotten what it might be like to feel more comfortable in his surroundings because his senses would show him the lay of a place, but he’d also forgotten how much more restrictive four walls and a roof felt, how endless corridors of stone could make him yearn for the touch of the moon’s light on his skin, or a fresh breeze in his hair.

Now he felt himself as an animal caged by his role, and he’d gone from being resigned to Kingship, to actively not wanting it once more. If he didn’t do something about it, the heartsong would destabilise.

He wouldn’t go to Augus again to fix it. Not like that. It wasn’t the betrayal nor the stab wound that had hurt the most in the end, but the look on Augus’ face afterwards.

Gwyn knew what it felt like to betray someone else and betray yourself in the same moment. He knew the whip strike of pain that came from hurting someone. When he’d let the arrow fly, he’d felt it hit his own body as soon as it had hit Mafydd’s. It made no sense, but that was the way of it.

The corridors and Augus’ scent drew him to a place that surprised him, stirred apprehension in his heart. He opened the two wooden doors and walked into the temenos that held the Unseelie crown. It was a long, narrow room of black marble, the polished stone striated with gold and silver. The werelight that had lit the space the last time he had been here was now replaced with brighter balls of magelight – burning stronger, giving the place a warm glow.
Augus was at the termination of the columns, standing on the dais in front of the Unseelie crown,
his fingers tracing the delicate metal twigs and leaves that had been fashioned to denote the ruler of
a Kingdom.

Once, Gwyn would have felt scared for Augus’ desire for power.

Now, only fear for what might have brought Augus here in the first place. He could feel the
melancholy hanging in the room, was set upon by a desire to transform it. He turned to the doors
he’d closed behind him and slid the metal bar through braces, locking it from the inside.

His steps echoed off the flat, faceted slabs of marble as he walked slowly towards Augus.

‘When I wore it,’ Augus said, ‘it felt so heavy. Do you think it knew that I wasn’t supposed to be
King? Was the weight a punishment?’

‘No,’ Gwyn said, his voice reflecting back to him in the narrow space. ‘It’s like that for everyone.
It is the weight of responsibility to the Kingdom.’

Gwyn knew what it was like to handle both crowns in his hands now – Seelie and Unseelie. They
were identical except for the metals that made them. The Seelie’s crown a spindly golden
confection of twigs and leaves, the Unseelie’s a silvery-pewter. Both seemingly indestructible.
They felt light and fragile in one’s hand, they felt crushing upon one’s head. Gwyn recalled that
Ash used to wear the Unseelie crown in the human world while he’d gotten drunk mourning his
brother. Had he been punishing himself?

‘Why are you here, Augus?’ Gwyn said.

‘Afraid of what I’ll do?’ Augus said, not turning around to face him.

Gwyn took the shallow steps up the dais slowly, every motion confident. Then, he was standing
directly behind Augus, and he looked over his shoulder, cheek brushing against wet black hair, his
chin against Augus’ cheek.

‘No, I’m not afraid of what you’ll do,’ Gwyn said, his voice low.

He felt Augus’ shudder, attuned to it.

What the heartsong of surrender had taken from him was his ability to easily initiate. With it gone,
he knew now that he’d been slave to a passivity he’d not truly understood or been able to grasp for
months. He’d let Augus suffer for too long. Gwyn didn’t reach out. Even in the Seelie palace when
Augus had been prisoner and Gwyn had felt bound to him, he’d still been able to ambush Augus,
still been able to summon control back to himself whenever he’d felt the need for it.

‘What is it like?’ Gwyn said, carefully curling his hand around Augus’ flank. Augus tensed
beneath him, and Gwyn felt his own fears stir too. What if this was unwelcome? After all, Gwyn
stole far more than he should from anyone who showed him a measure of kindness. ‘You were
King once. The Raven Prince gave it to you, even knowing you would ruin the Kingdom he’d
strengthened.’

He heard Augus’ swallow, the unsteadiness of his breath. This close, he could tell Augus was
trying to mask it.

‘I never even wanted to be Court status,’ Augus said, the fingers of both hands still upon the
crown.
Gwyn opened his mouth to respond, and then a strange knowledge crept through him. He stared at the crown, brow furrowing. Fenwrel had confirmed Gwyn’s suspicions that the Raven Prince and the Oak King had both left their respective Courts because they were afraid of what the future might bring. A future connected to gods and Mages. Now, the Unseelie Court was at risk of total destruction, it could easily become a relic of a protected palace with no protected Unseelie fae remaining.

The Raven Prince had engineered not only the destruction of Augus, but…the destruction of his own Court. He’d ensured it by handing Kingship to Augus, knowing all along what Augus might be capable of.

Gwyn’s eyes narrowed, he stared at the crown and wondered what the Raven Prince wanted to achieve by trying to find a tool to destroy everything he’d made. Absently, Gwyn pressed his lips to Augus’ jaw, his breathing coming faster. There was a purpose to it, he was certain. What did the Raven Prince stand to gain by weakening his own Court before he had someone else destroy him? Was it only boredom?

‘If I ever ask you to do something that will lead to you betraying yourself,’ Gwyn said, placing his other hand upon Augus’ where it was over the crown, ‘I want you to tell me. I don’t want that for you.’

‘The heartsong had to be changed,’ Augus said, his hand shifting beneath Gwyn’s. Their fingers slipped between each other’s, and Gwyn felt the crown thrumming against his fingertips then. The power in it. In two hundred and fifty years, he could name a successor to the throne and it would no longer sing for him like this.

‘Next time you’ll tell me,’ Gwyn said, and though his voice was quiet, he knew it held the weight of command in it from the way Augus stiffened.

‘So you’re telling me what to do?’ Augus said. ‘That always goes down well, doesn’t it?’

‘Sometimes,’ Gwyn said, turning his head towards Augus’ neck and nuzzling it. He smelled the soft warmth where jaw stretched into neck. The hand he had around Augus’ flank trailed upwards, until finally he went around Augus’ arm and slid his fingers up to Augus’ throat, resting them on either side of his trachea, not squeezing, still a threat.

Augus growled, the sound reverberating around them, nothing like Gwyn’s human-form growl.

Gwyn pressed his lips to Augus’ neck. When one of Augus’ hands came up and tried to pull Gwyn’s hand away, Gwyn bared his teeth and bit down, surprising a sound out of Augus’ throat. ‘Do you remember how much you liked getting fucked against a wall?’ Gwyn said, tracing the indents he’d left with his teeth, with his tongue. Sometimes, he thought, Augus needed to be distracted from his own mind as much as Gwyn did. Not as often, no. And he would fight it, in his own way. But that worked too, Gwyn liked the fight of it. ‘Remember when I pulled you down on my cock in that wasteland and you yelled because it split you so much, but you still wanted it?’

‘If you think that you can just come in here and—’

Gwyn squeezed Augus’ throat. Not enough to cut his breath off, but enough to make him think twice about talking.

‘Let me,’ Gwyn said. ‘Just let me.’

He slid his hand away from Augus’ throat when he felt some releasing of tension, and then he
turned Augus’ hips so that his lower back was resting against the flat stone table that held the
crown. He watched Augus carefully as he reached for the crown, felt it light and frail in his fingers.
He lifted it, and then placed the crown upon Augus’ head, watched as Augus’ eyes widened and his
mouth pulled tense.

‘Gwyn, what are you—’

‘It suits you,’ Gwyn said, leaning forwards and pressing his closed mouth to Augus’. He pulled
back just enough to say, ‘Your Majesty.’

Augus inhaled sharply, then laughed, the sound cutting in the temenos.

‘You don’t think it’s dangerous?’ Augus said. ‘Giving me a crown? Calling me ‘Your Majesty?’
The last time we played like this, Gwyn, I nearly broke a blood-oath, and you nearly died.’

‘All Kings can learn,’ Gwyn said, feeling nervous and scared and strangely confident all at once.
‘Can’t they?’

Augus’ breathing was definitely shaky now, and Gwyn closed his eyes to think of how wounded
Augus was.

‘You don’t have to do anything, King,’ Gwyn said, his fingers trailing along the crown and then
moving into Augus’ hair, then moving down to his shoulder. Finally, his slid his fingers along the
underside of Augus’ shirt collar to the buttons that moved down the centre, undoing each one. They
looked like they might be made of malachite, and the shirt itself was a dark, unctuous green. With
only three buttons undone, he could already see where the Soulbond stained him, blackening the
skin, gleams of opal-blue brightness flashing from beneath. ‘You should let me do this for you.’

‘Should I,’ Augus said, and Gwyn wished he had rope.

He paused, thought of all the different rooms he’d made in the palace, and then gripped Augus’
side and summoned his light, transforming them both into warm brightness.

They resolved into place – Augus still wearing the crown – in a stone room that looked out onto
Gwyn’s private night garden. Here, a narrow bed, some wooden crates, and in the corner of the
room by the window, the kind of table that one might illustrate maps upon. Gwyn hadn’t made
time for it. The room should have smelled of inks and parchment and even the musk of feathery
quills. It smelled only of the linens and blankets and mattress upon the bed. The polished wood of
the room.

‘Stay,’ Gwyn said, moving towards one of the crates and kneeling by it, opening it and drawing out
a length of scratchy, fibrous rope. This wasn’t the kind that Augus used when he wanted someone
to submit to him. This was designed for every day usage. To hold things in place. To secure. It
wasn’t made with a waterhorse in mind, but Gwyn liked it all the more for it.

Augus inhaled sharply. His hand reached up to the crown, and Gwyn moved over fast enough to
stop him from removing it.

‘Leave it,’ Gwyn said, staring into green eyes and holding a coil of rope in his other hand. ‘It suits
you. Your Majesty.’

‘This is not a game I’m familiar with,’ Augus said. ‘Perhaps I’m not interested.’

‘Would you let me convince you?’ Gwyn said swallowing. Because he wouldn’t make Augus. Not
like he once had. Augus could do that to him, yes, because Gwyn’s thoughts on Augus taking
control of him were different. But Augus had been made to do so much in his life, whether knowingly or unknowingly, and Gwyn had come to a conclusion. Augus was Inner Court now, if Augus really fought him, it didn’t matter if Gwyn could overpower him, he would step back.

Augus searched Gwyn’s eyes and then finally shrugged, his hand dropping from the crown, noncommittal.

Gwyn nodded, kept unbuttoning Augus’ shirt until it was open, baring his chest. He drew it off Augus’ arms and let it fall, the buttons making tiny noises when they hit the floor. Then, he turned Augus so that Augus was no longer facing him and drew his arms behind his back. He made sure that Augus was grasping his wrists with his own hands, and then began winding the rope about his olive-touched flesh, watched the way claws flexed and shifted.

‘You should let your servants worship you sometimes,’ Gwyn said.

‘Oh, is that what this is?’ Augus sounded bemused.

Gwyn slid his hand down Augus’ bare flank, fingers brushing over gooseflesh, and then found Augus’ right pocket and delved within, finding the tiny vial of lubricant that Augus carried with him. He withdrew it and tossed it onto the bed. They’d need that.

His fingers had brushed against something small and crystalline, and Gwyn managed to catch it before it rolled off the bed. It was the crystal charm he’d made for Augus, in the hopes that Augus would use it in an emergency. He didn’t think Augus carried it with him, smiled to see it, and picked it up, tucking it safely back in Augus’ pocket without saying a word.

Gwyn turned Augus back to face him, pressed his lips against Augus’ mouth and waited until he felt the slight parting, before carefully kissing Augus’ mouth further apart. He slid his tongue inside and felt Augus’ shoulders shift as he worked against the ropes binding his arms. A hunger roared through Gwyn in response and both of his hands lifted and held Augus’ face still, and then he was kissing him and leaning him back at the same time, knowing that Augus couldn’t balance himself, that he had very little choice but to simply accept, and hopefully let go.

He could feel the tension in Augus’ body when he was leaned back to a degree that would make most people want to stabilise themselves with their arms. Felt a more strenuous shift in Augus’ shoulders. The crown stayed in place. The twigs and leaves stuck in one’s hair, and the crown sought someone’s head. Once placed, it needed to be removed manually, it would not fall.

Gwyn moved his mouth back just enough, opened his eyes to see the way Augus glared at him. Behind the glare, something troubled, uncertain.

‘Let me, Augus,’ Gwyn said. ‘Try.’

‘Wouldn’t it be better if you were the one tied up?’ Augus said, eyes glittering. ‘I know I’d prefer it.’

‘Sometimes,’ Gwyn acknowledged. ‘But for now, try for me, Augus. I know it’s hard.’

He felt the sudden bunching of Augus’ left shoulder, knew that if Augus’ arms were untied, Gwyn might have been backhanded in the face for even daring to talk to him that way. But Augus’ arms were tied, and Gwyn only raised his eyebrows and waited.

‘Let me,’ he repeated. ‘Your Majesty, please let me.’

Augus shuddered again at those words, and Gwyn didn’t think it was all uneasiness or discomfort.
He lowered his head again and kissed along one of Augus’ collarbones, slowing the motions until Augus’ breathing was long and slow, slightly shaken.

Gwyn lowered himself slowly to his knees, his hands finding Augus’ belt as Augus straightened now that Gwyn was no longer tilting him backwards. Augus’ calves were against the bedframe, the mattress.

He unbuckled the belt and slid it through until he could lay it on Augus’ shirt. Then he bent further and found the latches and buckles of Augus’ heavy boots, sliding immaculately polished leather through metal, aware of the gaze on the back of his head.

He encouraged Augus to lift each foot, removing the boot, the sock, pressing his forehead to Augus’ shins as he did so. He was reminded abruptly of how Augus had undressed him back in the Seelie Court, when Gwyn had been recovering from Tigbalan’s torture and Augus had been determined to show him what ‘gentleness’ was. The whole experience was still a turbulent, troubled haze of memories, but he did remember how breathless he’d felt, Augus taking care with every part of his body while removing his clothing.

Gwyn stroked his fingers down the bridge of Augus’ foot. Then curled his thumb and fingers around the back of Augus’ ankle, stroking the knob of bone, first with one hand, and then with both as he found Augus’ other ankle. His joints were strong, but lean and thin. Even if Augus trained for years like Gwyn did, he wouldn’t put on muscle in the same way, his body type was entirely different. It lent itself to wiriness, to the huge spring and tension held in tendons and sinew.

The knowledge that Augus had let Gwyn have access to this side of him, the beauty of him, for… months now, it stole something out of Gwyn’s chest. For a minute all he could do was touch Augus gently and lean his head against Augus’ thigh, thinking about how he’d never dreamed he could be this lucky. Even when he’d met Augus the first time, wanted him for his beauty and his wit and his conversation, he’d never imagined it could be like this. Augus standing before him, his arms roped behind his back, not fighting him, not even spitting insults.

So Augus might not be King anymore, nor King ever again, but Gwyn knew what this familiar feeling of deference was. Knew what it was to want to worship someone, or do well by them. Remembered a glimpse of it at the feet of the Oak King. But this was so much more, and he was struck by a need to show Augus that.

He reached up and undid Augus’ pants, sliding them down narrow hips, the curve of his ass, and then watched as Augus cooperated and stepped out of them. Everything placed rumpled to the side, Augus now nude before him. Gwyn felt hungry with all that he could do and try. No hands in his hair to distract him, and Augus’ sharp tongue unusually muted.

His hands traced the shape of Augus’ shins and knees and thighs, moving up slowly until he could rest his thumbs in the natural dips above his hip bones, until he could lean in and press his nose against the pelt of hair above his soft penis and breathe, stay focused. Above him, Augus sighed as though more of his tension was flowing away. Gwyn made small smoothing motions with his thumbs, encouraging him.

One of Gwyn’s hands slid over the top of his thigh and then down between his legs, his fingers gently nudging Augus’ legs apart – not much, just enough that he could reach further back into heat and trace fingers over the delicate skin of his scrotum. He made sure to keep every touch slow as he shifted his position and licked over Augus’ cock, tongue moving from the base, all the way to the tip, the head still hidden by foreskin.

Blood moved beneath the skin and muscle against his tongue, Gwyn felt it as Augus started to
harden beneath his ministrations. It didn’t happen quickly like it did with Gwyn, and Gwyn felt like he was earning something important because of it. His palm cupped Augus’ balls, massaged them gently. He cleared his own mind so that he could focus on clearing Augus’.

When Augus was fully erect, Gwyn’s other hand came around and loosely moved over his cock a few times, getting a feel for the length of it, knowing how it would feel when it was in his mouth, down his throat. His mouth was already watering, and for the first time since he’d started, he looked up at Augus and blinked at the intense, vivid way that Augus was staring down at him, the crown upon his head, looking like he’d been King all along.

He was certain Augus would say something. Remained certain when he shifted Augus’ cock with his hand so that he could press his lips to the exposed, flushed tip. He kissed it as chastely as he might Augus’ mouth, maintained eye contact. It was so much easier like this. Him on his knees, Augus standing above him. He blinked in surprise at his own thoughts, realised that his assurances that he’d made to Augus had been correct after all. That heartsong of surrender – no longer front and centre – was a part of him now. Like loyalty, it compelled him to want to serve, support, be there for someone.

He thought he understood it more now than he ever had when it had been his core energy.

Taking Augus into his mouth was always easy, taking him deep easier without hands forcing him; and though he missed that, this was good too. The hand that had rested at the base of Augus’ cock came up and held Augus’ hip steady, so that Gwyn could move his head back and forth, keep his other hand between Augus’ legs, feeling the shift and twitch of muscle and skin, Augus’ arousal so much more than the siltier taste of him or the thickness on Gwyn’s tongue.

Augus’ reactions were minimal – as always – so Gwyn waited for the small signs that he was on the right track. A held breath here, a slight shifting of Augus’ feet, a shift in his whole body as his arms twitched behind his back. Then, as Gwyn applied long, firm suction and drew backwards, pressing the head of Augus’ cock to the roof of his mouth, Augus exhaled and there was a sound at the top of it, something that might have been a moan in someone else.

Gwyn kept going for minutes longer, knowing that he could drag it out with Augus, that he could give so much more because it took so much longer for Augus to come than the average fae. One of the many things that picked him out as the waterhorse he was, and something that Gwyn had come to value, even though it meant that his own body was often driven to heights of oversensitivity that he would never normally seek himself.

He felt hungry to try everything, wanted to move quick and fast and devour. But keeping Augus’ pleasure in mind…doing what Augus would appreciate most, it involved slowing down, being firm and thorough and patient. Even Gwyn taking Augus into the back of his throat was studied, the swallows paced rhythmically as Augus sighed and breathed more loudly above him.

There was something else that Gwyn wanted to try with Augus, but Augus had never asked for it, and Gwyn had never done it before – with anyone – so he’d never offered. But he’d received it once, from Mafydd, and he’d loved it then. And like this, maybe he could give it to someone else. Maybe Augus would like it too.

When Augus gasped, when the inhale that followed was a groan, Gwyn moved backwards, keeping Augus’ cock against his chin. He looked up again, saw the freckles standing out more on Augus’ face with the flush in his cheeks. Gwyn could feel his own face burning hot, a combination of taking Augus so deeply into his throat and his own cock demanding attention in his pants.

‘Turn around now,’ Gwyn said, both hands on Augus’ hips, encouraging the movement himself.
Augus was facing the bed, and Gwyn went onto his feet to push at his lower back, holding him in place with a hand on his thigh. ‘Down.’

Augus made a faint sound of frustration, not having his arms or hands to brace himself, but he made the movement graceful anyway. His chest touched the bed first, then his head – turned to the side.

‘All the way,’ Gwyn said, until Augus’ top half was resting entirely on the bed, his legs hanging over.

‘This is slightly undignified,’ Augus said, his fingers flexing, arms shifting in the ropes. He hadn’t struggled enough to injure himself with them. All of Augus’ motions were still contained. He might be feeling wary, but he wasn’t afraid.

Gwyn knelt between Augus’ legs, and Augus made a sound of surprise. After all, the position was all wrong for fucking.

That could come later.

Gwyn pressed his hands flat to Augus’ flanks and pressed his lips to Augus’ lower back, feeling very tiny hairs against his face. Unlike Gwyn, Augus had body hair – though it was only visible under his arms, on his head, between his legs. Gwyn traced his nose through it, touched the fine stuff with his tongue, and then arced his head to Augus’ flank and bit teeth into the tender skin, thinking of how little care Augus showed himself sometimes.

Augus grunted, inhaled sharply at the bite. He didn’t like pain in the same way that Gwyn did, but Gwyn still bit again a few centimetres lower, applying a slow pressure, pulling on the small patch of skin until blood vessels broke and he left a bruise behind. It wouldn’t last more than an hour, but it felt good to see marks on Augus. Ones that he’d made.

Both of his hands slid down to the curve of Augus’ ass, even as Gwyn kissed his way down Augus’ spine, then further into the cleft of his ass. His hands massaged, then pulled so that Augus was more exposed, looked curiously at the place that never looked like it could take Gwyn’s cock, dusky and smelling of silt, musk and fresh rains in wetlands.

Gwyn leaned forwards easily, licked deeply, tasted something slightly more metallic but still plainly Augus.

Augus stiffened beneath him, his body tensing, and Gwyn only repeated the gesture with his tongue, then did it again, keeping the movements slow and firm.

Then he pressed a kiss to the curve of Augus’ ass and rested his cheek against it.

‘You’ve never asked me to do this,’ Gwyn said. ‘Have you experienced it before?’

‘Such a long time ago,’ Augus said, his voice thinner than before. ‘Back when…I didn’t know what lines I needed between myself and my clients. But it was too intimate a thing to share with strangers, so I stopped. It’s been…two millennia? More?’

‘You taste good,’ Gwyn said, and Augus’ skin prickled with gooseflesh. ‘And I’m not a client, so I can do this, and you just have to lie there, don’t you?’

‘I suppose I do,’ Augus said, breathless and thoughtful. ‘I find I’m curious.’

‘That’s better than all the other things you could be.’
‘Isn’t it, though?’ Augus laughed.

Augus sighed when Gwyn shifted his face once more, fingers digging into Augus’ flesh and thumbs keeping him spread, losing himself in the taste of Augus – which eventually became the taste of Gwyn’s own saliva. He explored carefully, ran his tongue down Augus’ perineum, licked over scrotum – the skin so sensitive that even that alone had Augus hissing above him. He started to try taking one of Augus’ balls into his mouth only for Augus to make a quick, short noise. Gwyn was already moving away when Augus said:

‘Too sensitive.’

‘It’s okay,’ Gwyn said, moving back up to his ass and licking again, poking the entrance with his tongue, finding a rhythm with his breathing, with what he was doing. This was very much something he wanted to do again, especially when Augus shifted, his hips pressed back. Augus’ breathing was louder now, and every few breaths he’d moan softly, his fingers would splay and then shake a little.

The shaking seemed to trickle all the way through him until Augus was trembling and Gwyn was so hard that it hurt and that just added to the arousal that kept him confined and straining in his pants.

Augus’ moans became deeper, throatier, and Gwyn was thrusting his tongue, lapping, whatever seemed to come naturally at the time. Now and then he would dig his fingers in too hard, he would bite too roughly, and the fleshy curves of Augus’ ass were splotched red in some places, teeth indents still showing.

He lost track of time when he blindly reached for the lubricant while fumbling his own pants open. He knelt straighter, was glad for how low the bed was. He didn’t notice the hardness of the floor beneath his knees.

The lubricant was cold when he slicked his cock with it, but it warmed under his touch.

Augus was still breathing audibly when Gwyn leaned over him, when he fisted his own cock in his hand and pressed the tip of himself to Augus’ entrance, biting at Augus’ roped forearm, having to fight with himself, struggling against the urge to just take, until Augus had no doubt who owned him, until the troubled expression that had been finding him lately was wiped clean.

He pressed forward carefully, the ring of muscle against him opening after several seconds. His eyes closed, he bit the inside of his cheek, his cock swallowed into tightness and a heat that couldn’t be imagined compared to the lukewarm of Augus’ skin.

His own blood felt like it had been heated through, his light seemed to leap in sparks beneath his skin. He couldn’t remember the last time it had been like this, and unconsciously, one of his hands gripped Augus’ wrists where they were tied together, the other gripped Augus’ hip. His fingers were causing bruises, his teeth gritted together and his own breathing harsh.

He couldn’t do this slowly and gently. Not with Augus tied up beneath him.

He pushed forwards, pulling Augus back into him, listened to the sound that Augus made in his throat, higher than usual, and Gwyn remembered that Augus had liked it, had liked being split in the wasteland, had liked being fucked against the wall and that this part – this part he didn’t have to do gently.

Augus cried out sharply when Gwyn snapped his hips forward and yanked Augus back into him.
He held himself still for several more seconds, willing himself not to come, feeling the shuddering
breaths that Augus was taking.

‘Is that good, Your Majesty?’ Gwyn managed. He pushed his hips forward even more, even though
it wasn’t possible to get deeper. Augus made a strangled noise, hissed.

‘Fuck,’ Augus bit out. ‘That doesn’t get…easier.’

‘Good,’ Gwyn said, his voice darker than usual, his fingers clenching and unclenching where they
held Augus still. ‘Arch your hips up.’

He helped, manhandling Augus into the position he wanted, chest and head flat on the mattress, his
hips tilted upwards to take him, legs spread.

He fumbled beneath Augus’ hips and felt his cock, as hard as before, rubbed his palm over the head
of him, felt Augus clench around his cock in response and had to take several moments to
concentrate, because it felt too good.

‘Let me…look after you, then,’ Gwyn managed, deciding that Augus had some gift that he was still
able to talk so smoothly when he had his cock inside Gwyn’s ass.

He abandoned words and went for actions instead. He began thrusting, the movements staying
deep, rocking bursts of power that shoved the voice out of Augus’ lungs and had Augus’ fingers
digging into his own wrists.

Keeping his own arousal away, his own need to come, was the biggest challenge. Fucking Augus
the way he wanted to, lust banded tight through him, felt horribly similar to the beginning of
muscle cramps. He groaned over the top of Augus’ needy noises, moved his hand over Augus’
cock, made himself keep the motions on Augus’ cock slow through sheer force of will.

It paid off. Augus became boneless beneath him the rougher Gwyn fucked into him, the slow
counterpoint of Gwyn’s hand on his cock. And all of that was good for Augus, but Gwyn was
gasping for breath, drowning in sensations, knowing that he didn’t have much longer at all. It was
almost embarrassing, how close he was.

‘Please don’t- Please don’t hold back,’ Gwyn said, his voice breaking. He searched for words,
found Augus’ name, and behind them a title that might help. ‘Your Majesty, please.’

‘Damn it,’ Augus bit out, his whole body jerking beneath Gwyn.

Gwyn grit his teeth together, withdrew almost all the way out, slammed back into Augus and kept
that forceful pace up, pinning Augus to the bed with the hand on his arms and the cock in his ass,
his other hand moving faster over Augus’ cock now, twisting at the head of him, doing everything
he could remember to push Augus over the edge.

Augus managed the beginning of a syllable that never resolved into a word, then Gwyn felt Augus’
cock stiffening just slightly in his hand, felt the rush of semen move through his cock before it
began pulsing over Gwyn’s fingers onto the bed.

‘Gods,’ Gwyn said in relief, moving faster, driving after his own pleasure. His own balls were
pulling up tight, his spine felt like it was being stretched like a rubber band.

It was seconds away, and his mouth hung open as he fought for breath, his mind wiped clear of
everything except sparks and light and brilliance. He pressed deep, kept his hand squeezed tight
around Augus’ cock, fell forwards and felt himself spilling, everything turning to liquid heat in the
muscles of his belly. He let go of Augus’ cock reluctantly, moved both of his hands to Augus’ hips, then his flanks, then finally – still sucking breaths down – his fingers fumbled with the ropes and untied the knots he’d made. He didn’t fully untie them before Augus was shifting his own arms free, still breathing loudly.

‘Come up,’ Augus said, shifting slowly, pulling Gwyn up onto the narrow bed. There wasn’t enough room for them to lie comfortably side by side, but Augus was already on his side, already had one leg over Gwyn’s and was dragging him close enough that Augus could grab at his hair with a still shaking hand and lick deeply into Gwyn’s mouth, stealing the rest of Gwyn’s breath away. The crown still firm on Augus’ head.

Gwyn looked up at it when he needed to shift to catch his breath. His hand trailed the shape of it, and as he did, he felt the death knell of war in the back of his head, knew that what was coming was greater than all of them; maybe even the Unseelie Court.

But this was not a moment for putting the Kingdom first, and he dropped his hand to Augus’ cheek and leaned in again, his breathing rough, Augus’ not much better.

‘That was diverting,’ Augus said, his voice lazy and warm.

‘Good,’ Gwyn said, pressing his lips to Augus’, over and over, wanting to sink into him. He felt protective, used his larger body to tip into Augus’, even though Augus was the one who had the possessive leg over his.

‘If you ever need to breach anyone’s defences, may I recommend the battering ram between your legs?’

‘Be quiet,’ Gwyn said against Augus’ mouth, and Augus smiled, then licked his way over Gwyn’s lips, taking his lower lip between his teeth and squeezing.

The kissing transformed from breathless and playful, metamorphosing into something longer, encompassing and wonderfully thorough. Augus kissed like he wanted to remind Gwyn where he belonged, and Gwyn was content to accept whatever Augus wanted to say with the movements of his mouth.

He wanted to drag his fingers through Augus’ hair, so he took the crown in his fingers and dropped it behind him, not caring at the clatter it made on the stone floor, only caring for the taste and scent of Augus. He focused on the wet mane gripped in his fingers and Augus’ lips against his own, driving away thoughts of what the future might bring.

Chapter End Notes

In our next chapter, 'Masque:'

‘I have something for you,’ Augus said, holding a wooden box in his hands. Gwyn first thought of sounds, which was ridiculous, but he couldn’t help it. He saw a wooden box with a latch on it in Augus hands, and his gut felt like ice. He blinked hard at the box and then forced himself to look away. ‘I have something for you,’ Augus said again, his voice gentling, ‘but if you want it, you must wear it tonight, publically.’
Masque

Chapter Notes

Longest chapter for a few months now! But there was SO much that needed to happen, and when can you have something bombastic but during a masquerade ball? :D No new tags, but two new characters added for this chapter.

Feedback is the food that provides the nourishment to keep me going. :) And thanks to everyone reading! *waves*

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Gwyn

There had been instructions written on paper, resting upon the clothing. Gwyn was to dress himself and Augus would come with the mask while he waited. Everything penned in Augus’ handwriting, which meant that Gwyn had to squint at a few of the words to make sure he was reading them correctly.

It was odd to be dressing himself in formal wear alone. With no servants to assist him, and several full-length mirrors in a room that held only a bench and a wardrobe and not a great deal more. Without his mother watching every movement, or Augus’ attentiveness, Gwyn found he was able to relax into it. Despite the nerves. Despite knowing that there were so many Unseelie fae already in the night gardens, enjoying themselves.

It was a rule of the masquerade ball – the opening of the Winter Court – that the monarch was to arrive fashionably late, indicating his symbolic lack of power in the Winter Court.

Gwyn had no problems with avoiding several hours of socialising.

He couldn’t guess what the mask might be from the clothing. There was a light brown, buttoned, collared shirt to go under a cream waistcoat that was embroidered in brown with a sprawling branch motif. The pants were also light brown, and there were cream leather dress boots that only covered the ankle, polished to such a shine that Gwyn caught his reflection in it and blinked. Shoes weren’t supposed to do that. Footwear was for travelling long distances, not seeing one’s reflection. But they weren’t uncomfortable, didn’t pinch.

Last, upon the bench, was some kind of paletot or redingote; the fitted overcoat far fancier than what Gwyn would ever choose for himself. But when he put it on, he felt like he was wearing a kind of armour. The fabric was heavy, a deep cream gabardine, and at the collar and hems had more of that brown detailing, like twigs or branches.

He looked at himself in the mirror and felt ridiculous. But he had to admit that it was somewhat striking. And it was comfortable, which was the only thing he cared about.

When did Augus have time to make it? Did he make it himself or get other people to make it? Gwyn winced to think of what Augus might be charging to the treasury, and yet…Gwyn hadn’t
seen any expenses coming out of the Court’s treasury and he paid close attention to expenditure these days.

An hour passed in nervy boredom, Gwyn sitting and bouncing his leg after thirty minutes of trying to calm his mind. Then, the door handle turned and Gwyn stiffened. Augus entered in full costume, carrying what must have been the mask and perhaps other items covered in fabric.

‘I’m late,’ Augus said. ‘It’s a large crowd, hard to get away.’

Gwyn stared at Augus, who had always appeared fashionable to Gwyn, but not quite like this. Augus wore a costume of a stylised blue-violet-black peacock. His waistcoat – over a gleaming black collared shirt – was embroidered with scalloped feathers of blue, and over that, a tailcoat that was decorated at the back with peacock tail feathers, the long quills embroidered, and the eyes furnished with blue-violet nacre and impressive beadwork. At his neck, Augus wore a feathered collar of royal and pavonate blues that became deep green at the base.

The mask itself was a regal peacock of the kind that were thought to be extinct now; the royal peacocks of old, who neither existed in the fae world or the human world. Leather worked finely, painted so realistically that it looked as though real feathers had been used on the mask, shimmering with beads and pigmented dust alike. At the crown, feathers crested. The mask only covered three quarters of Augus’ face, leaving his mouth clear, though deeply shadowed beneath the shape of the beak. His eyes were lined thickly with black kohl, his lashes painted to make them stand out in the brightness of his costume.

‘You turn out well,’ Augus said, looking Gwyn up and down once, critically. He gestured for Gwyn to stand.

You also, Gwyn wanted to say, but the words wouldn’t move past his tongue. He’d forgotten how fey and eldritch Augus could appear to others. But now, he thought he felt as humans might, stumbling across a fae in the woods, or one pulling himself out of a lake.

‘Close your eyes,’ Augus said, ‘face the mirror.’

Gwyn gave Augus one long, lingering look before doing as asked. A minute later he felt tooled and shaped leather sitting over three quarters of his face, and could tell there were protuberances coming out of the top, branching clear of his hair. He laughed wearily before he could stop himself.

‘Tell me you didn’t,’ Gwyn said.

‘Didn’t what?’ Augus said, and Gwyn could hear the smile in his voice. Clever fingers tied the spelled ribbon behind his head so that the mask would stay in place. The magic would make sure the mask didn’t slip and slide, not until Gwyn’s own fingers went to undo the fastening.

‘Wait until you see my armour. You’re going to laugh, too.’

‘Ah, I don’t know about that. Maybe I turned you into a moon-eyed cow.’

‘The great cow-King of the Unseelie Court.’

‘Mooing sweetly to all who come by,’ Augus said, and Gwyn caught the laugh before it spilled, surprised at the impulse. It felt easy, standing here, eyes closed. His nerves faded. ‘Perhaps I made you a moose. Or a crotchety old goat. You can open your eyes now.’

Gwyn wasn’t surprised to see the face of a stag over his own. He laughed again and shook his
head, but his eyes crept back to the fine artisanal crafting of the antlers, the wet black nose, the black outlines around the eye rims, so that his own eyes would look all the brighter. Not only that, but the stag was a creamy ivory, matching Gwyn’s waistcoat, shoes and overcoat.

‘I’m King of the Forest now, am I? I believe the position is taken.’

‘The white hart,’ Augus said, ‘I thought it fitting. Actually, I sought a more practical reminder. The Unseelie have not had a Wild Hunt in too long. Let them know it is coming, that you bring those things they love and adore most about the Unseelie Court back to them. Not the King of the Forest, perhaps his ambassador.’

‘I’m starting to fear I should expect an arrow through the heart, with all this deer magic following me around of late.’

‘Then it’s a good thing an arrow in the heart can’t kill you.’

Augus turned Gwyn to face him and then walked back to the length of fabric covering whatever else he’d brought into the room.

‘I have something for you,’ Augus said, revealing a wooden box in his hands. Gwyn first thought of sounds, which was ridiculous, but he couldn’t help it. He saw a wooden box with a latch on it in Augus hands, and his gut felt like ice. The shape was not that dissimilar. He blinked hard at the box and then forced himself to look away. ‘I have something for you,’ Augus said again, his voice gentling, ‘but if you want it, you must wear it tonight, publically.’

Gwyn looked up at Augus, confused. Augus’ eyes were softened. He looked down at the box he was holding, at the knotwork carved into the top of it. Then he unlatched it himself and drew up the lid so that Gwyn might see what was inside.

A collar, more a necklet, made of ivy leaves twining together with silvery vines. In the centre, a motif of antlers, picked out in an interlacing Celtic knot, stretching up into the ivy leaves. At the back, a loop of metal, and attached to that a long, fine chain. Too long to be anything except a leash.

He swallowed hard, couldn’t bring himself to move.

You must wear it tonight, publically.

‘But…everyone will know,’ Gwyn heard himself say. ‘Everyone will remember what I made you wear. They’ll be looking for it. They’ll-’

‘Your shirt collar will hide it,’ Augus said, his voice was firm. ‘But you’re right. Some may see it all the same.’

Gwyn tried to tell himself that it was too much of a risk. He fought an endless, huge want inside of himself, his hands shaking with the need to touch it, to see how cold it would be under his fingers, to know how the metal would warm on his skin if he gave it long enough.

He struggled with himself until he realised that he was just standing there, unable to say anything at all. He forced himself to look at Augus, and there must have been something on his face, for Augus’ eyes widened, his lips tensed and then turned up at the corners.

Augus stepped closer, until Gwyn could easily touch the collar and the chain. He wasn’t one for rings or jewellery or really anything in particular but…
'You can wear the chain so that it snakes underneath your sleeve,' Augus said, ‘but I’ll know it’s there. And I’ll be able to take it and remind you that it’s there.’

Augus’ hand came out and touched Gwyn’s chest through his clothing.

‘I do believe you’re actually speechless, Gwyn ap Nudd.’

Gwyn nodded mutely, feeling like he should be able to say something. He didn’t even know – when had Augus gone to get it made? How long ago? How long had he had this in his possession? Had he planned this all along? Even Gwyn’s lungs felt like they were shaking. He couldn’t tell if he was grateful or terrified, there was a hunger inside of him that stretched so far and wide, towered so hugely above him, he couldn’t tell if he wanted it to break over him, or if he would turn tail and flee what he couldn’t outrun.

Instead, he watched his own hand come up and hover over the box. He couldn’t touch it. He watched his own fingers tremble and then fisted his hand and lowered it to his side. Then cleared his throat.

‘You’ve wanted this so badly?’ Augus asked, and Gwyn heard himself laugh.

‘I don’t even know why.’ His voice broke. Twice. This was humiliating. He had to go out there and be King. He’d not shaken this hard before his first battle.

‘Do you need to know?’ Augus said. ‘Do you want me to put it on you?’

Gwyn was nodding so quickly that he knew he looked like a fool. Augus hushed him, his hand went flat over his sternum then, measuring the beat of his heart, and then there were warm, grounding strokes that didn’t help the feeling that he was buzzing under his skin at all.

Help me, he thought.

‘Careful,’ Augus said, like this was something entirely different. ‘Careful now. This is going to be fine. If anyone sees it, and asks about it, you simply tell them that it’s none of their business. Tell them that it’s your symbol. The ivy. The stag. How will anyone doubt you when it’s your mask? The plant of your birth?’

And now my armour.

‘Careful,’ Augus said again, putting the box down and taking the collar up in his hands, holding it in his fingers and raising it to Gwyn’s neck. The metal was shockingly cold, but it didn’t bite into him. It rested low on his neck and made silvery patterns all the way to the back where Augus locked the clasp into place. Augus then took the chain and slid it underneath Gwyn’s shirt, and it flowed naturally – snakelike – all the way down to his wrist, where Augus clipped it to the cuff. Gwyn hadn’t noticed a clip. It meant that Augus had intended this to be something he could wear often, beneath his clothing.

‘I can’t do this,’ Gwyn said, hated that those were the first words that tumbled out of his mouth upon wearing it. ‘I didn’t mean- I only mean that I-’

He was a wild creature and he wanted the collar. He wouldn’t be tame for anyone except Augus. But that a terrifying thing to be confronted with. So much easier to acknowledge when he didn’t have the real evidence of it around his neck or pinned to his sleeve. When he could just forget about it later, pretend that whatever they had between them would end in a moment. Was Augus the kind of person to leave a tame animal behind? Would he just…leave? Something like this made it harder, didn’t it?
Gwyn’s nostrils flared, he forced himself to gather tangling whirls of thought together, forced deeper breaths. He couldn’t convey it.

‘Easy,’ Augus said, stepping even closer. ‘Be easy, Gwyn. Do you want me to take it off?’

‘No,’ Gwyn said, looking at him quickly. Augus’ eyes were brighter than usual. Something about Gwyn’s reaction setting off his predatory responses, and no wonder. Gwyn needed to get a hold of himself. ‘No, leave it. But I need…a moment. I can’t- Later? Can we talk about this later?’

It was cold around his neck, and heavy, Augus had requested some solidity to its crafting. It was a weight that brought a kind of hope with it. Gwyn couldn’t fathom it.

‘I’ll see you when it’s time,’ Augus said, clasping Gwyn’s hand roughly, firmly, then letting go. ‘You look good in it.’

‘You picked it out,’ Gwyn said, by way of explanation.

Augus shook his head, rolled his eyes, settled his mask and touched sections of his clothing, double checking everything was in place. An angular jaw beneath the prim beak of a peacock, and the flares of iridescent feathers at the crown falling all the way back, shining preternaturally, some fae paint making him gleam like a metallic prince. It complemented the entire ensemble, and Gwyn felt shot through with an odd sensation. Augus would be sitting next to him, and everyone else would see that one of the most beautiful creatures he’d ever met would sit next to him and…by the time it occurred to him that he should say as much to Augus, Augus had already left the room, closing the door behind him with a quiet click.

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Gwyn moved into a larger chamber about twenty minutes before he thought he should make an appearance. There were refreshments on a table – though only that which the Inner Court drank – so this had been designated the official resting place for those running the show. Gwyn sat down in an armchair and nervously picked at his own fingers, unable to hear the sounds of all the people in the night gardens, yet able to feel a jarring against his own energy.

He wondered how much more sensitive he’d be to it, if he didn’t feed on his own glamour.

A few minutes later, Ash burst in, wearing the mask of some kind of red and black foxhound. He was brought up short when he noticed Gwyn in the room, and Gwyn wished that he wasn’t sitting, or – on second thought – that he was in another room. Dealing with Ash had been easier and certainly more predictable when he’d been giving Gwyn a hard time.

‘Hey,’ Ash said, flipping the hound mask back and picking up one of the available glasses and downing whatever fluid was inside. ‘You look good, hey. You’re coming out soon, right?’

‘Yes,’ Gwyn said.

‘Cool,’ Ash said, smiling at him. Ash’s glamour was already dropping from the intense level he’d been using with the crowd. It already felt far less overwhelming. Gwyn noticed it more every time he saw him – Ash was deliberately trying not to snow Gwyn with his glamour. ‘It’s busy. But things are…not as bad as they could be, y’know? Not as tense. They’re all a bit worried about the future, but there’s enough booze and well…pretty masks and shit, they’ll be fine. It’s a nice Winter Court.’

It was so different to listening to a Courtier about it, the bald language far more direct, even though Gwyn trusted it about as much as he’d trust any Courtier.
'I needed a breather,' Ash said. ‘You’d think I wouldn’t, right? But…ahhh…I’m trying not to drink tonight? It’s the first time I’ve been to some fae shindig and not gotten plastered, and I’ve gotta say, it’s just all a bit much sometimes. I prefer humans. They don’t all have hundreds of different types of powers and energies and dra’ocht and shit warring with each other.’

‘Just plastic and chemicals and such instead,’ Gwyn said.

‘Uh huh,’ Ash said. ‘But you get used to that. You okay with me being here? I can go.’

Gwyn frowned at Ash’s frown, and then shook his head minutely. ‘No. It’s fine.’

Ash smiled, then picked up another glass of what couldn’t be alcoholic, and drank it in four large gulps.

‘You’re not drinking?’ Gwyn said hesitantly.

‘I’m not like one hundred percent sober, one hundred percent of the time,’ Ash said. ‘I mean I’m not in AA or anything like that. I just…I thought it’d be smarter to not do it tonight. But you know, everyone wants a drink, and there’s some faux stuff that the trows are bringing me, but it’s made me realise… I dunno, really. Made me realise some things, I guess.’

Ash paused and then sighed, looking away from Gwyn and out back towards the rest of the crowd that were hidden behind walls and doors. He turned back to Gwyn and offered a wry smile.

‘I made a mistake with my costume,’ Ash said, laughing. ‘There’s been a few jokes that I’m the dog of the Unseelie Court, and I didn’t mean to- I mean I just really like dogs? I didn’t think about the fucking symbolism of it, but no, all those fuckers out there have to go and…I mean, I just wanted to pick something that kind of suited me. And it’s not like everyone is making the joke. But you know how it is with those types, if two are willing to joke about it to my face, a whole heap more are willing to joke about it behind my back.’

Gwyn made a sound of bitter agreement and then laughed. ‘If it were all about symbolism, perhaps a great deal of them should have dressed as snakes.’

Ash beamed at him, bright and sincere and Gwyn blinked at it and looked away, grateful for the mask hiding the nuances of his expression.

‘So you’re not a fan of all that?’ Ash said, waving in the direction of the crowds Gwyn hadn’t yet seen.

‘No,’ Gwyn said. ‘Well, not exactly. I think…it’s more that I don’t like the subterfuge of Courtiers. But it’s all they know. It’s considered the most effective way to gain power in the Court, if one isn’t raised to military, or doesn’t have the benefit of being a merchant. But I think some of them enjoy the game rather too much. Unseelie fae, at least, are less loathsome about it than the Seelie. Everyone expects the Unseelie to show their predatory natures, but the Seelie hide them behind simpering and circumventing the truth while appearing ‘honourable.’ Not all, and I’m reflecting upon them poorly and unfairly I suspect.’

‘Well, unfairly or not, I’m with you on that.’ Ash brought his glass up as though toasting, and sipped, before lowering it on a different section of bench and touching his hair. The gesture reminded Gwyn of Augus, and he watched Ash’s body language closely. Waterhorses didn’t tend to touch their hair unless they were self-soothing, and he caught the way Ash’s fingers drifted to the back of his own head before his arm dropped.

‘So,’ Gwyn said, feeling awkward enough that it wouldn’t be unwelcome if the ground swallowed
him up, a la the Nain Rouge’s method of teleportation. ‘You…you like dogs?’

‘Huh?’ Ash said, and then grinned. ‘Oh, they’re like…the best! I mean, in the human world there’s a lot. A lot more than here. A lot of strays and stuff that don’t get looked after. I had one for a while you know, a human dog? Named Lucky. I didn’t name him. There was…’ Ash trailed off. ‘It’s probably not a story you want to hear?’

‘You’d be surprised,’ Gwyn said. ‘I used to…I used to keep hounds. I would again, but I’m not sure this is the time or place to cultivate something like that. Go on, please. If you want to.’

‘Yeah,’ Ash said easily, ‘sure, I mean, there was this homeless guy in the human world. They don’t have territory fights like fae do, but they have…they have their own issues. A lot of people sleeping rough over there. Anyway, I used to- Uh, well I have this thing, I can’t hunt properly like Augus does? At least I didn’t use to be able to. So I tend to have like…this list of people to feed on who are like dying of cancer, or some illness, and they- and I talk to them and you know if they’ve already been looking into euthanasia, they- I basically offer my services. There was this elderly homeless guy with a young dog, and he picked up the dog after he made the deal with me. Begged me to take on the dog.’

Ash shrugged, traced the condensation on one of the glasses with his finger. ‘He’d named the dog Lucky. I spent a lot of time in the human world after that. Figuring out what Lucky needed. You know, walks and play and a decent collar and stuff. And good manners. He was the best dog.’

‘They all are,’ Gwyn said quietly, agreeing.

‘You said you used to keep hounds?’

‘Mm,’ Gwyn said. ‘Blue and Curly. Not very original names, I know. But I wasn’t ever the best at naming things. My first mare, I called her Greyness. You’ll never guess why.’

‘What were Blue and Curly like?’ Ash said.

Gwyn looked askance, thinking back. It had been far too long since he’d had any hounds of his own, but it was hard to justify the time and the expense. Even with kennels and hired fae to take care of them properly. They had their Unseelie hounds at the Court, but he had none he had an affinity to.

‘They were meant to be culled from the litter,’ Gwyn said. ‘But I was young, and I pleaded with my father that I might keep them as my own hounds, and raise them myself. He wasn’t happy with me. The An Fnwy estate had a reputation to uphold; only the finest horses and hounds and hawks. But I didn’t see anything wrong with those puppies except that one was smaller, and the other was an off colour to what my parents preferred. The latter was Blue, and the smaller one was Curly.’

Fae dogs lived longer than the human form, though still not long enough. But it hardly mattered, since both of their lives were cut short anyway.

Gwyn was frustrated at letting himself be pulled into this story. Ash was too good at reading other people, he would already know- would already sense that the story didn’t end happily.

‘What happened to them?’ Ash said, the question too precise.

Gwyn stared at him, his own jaw tight. ‘They were killed.’

‘Like…hunting or something?’ Ash said warily, as though he already knew, which was impossible.
‘No,’ Gwyn said. ‘Not hunting. Largely, because they had anything to do with me. I learned my lesson. I didn’t keep other personal hounds on the estate. Though it mattered little. If I still developed favourites, they’d…’

Ash stepped away from the table where the drinks were, stepped closer to Gwyn, stared at him. Gwyn returned the gaze and then cleared his throat. ‘This is not the kind of conversation that’s appropriate for a masquerade ball.’

‘Sure,’ Ash said, nodding. ‘Sure. Augus killed your cousin, didn’t he?’

Gwyn shrugged a shoulder.

‘And your mother?’

‘Your point?’ Gwyn said, voice cold.

‘Just…I think I get it,’ Ash said. ‘I mean I don’t, obviously. There’s a lot I don’t. I’m just saying…I mean, who does that? Who gets to their own fucking child through his fucking dogs?’

Gwyn shrugged his shoulder again and smiled, the gesture humourless.

‘Fucking champions of the Seelie people my ass,’ Ash muttered to himself, reaching behind himself to slip his mask back on. ‘I used to be jealous of the Seelie, you know. Like I used to wish so hard, I thought I would do anything to change my alignment. Because like, they were the good guys? I wouldn’t have to hunt humans anymore. But I dunno now. I still don’t like hunting humans. That’s not–I don’t know what’s wrong with me that I’m like this but you know, it’s obvious there’s something wrong because I look nothing like a waterhorse should. But I don’t think I want to be Seelie either. The more I learn…’

‘It isn’t supposed to be the way it is now,’ Gwyn said, standing himself, smoothing out his clothing. ‘There were more idyllic Seelie times, there was more goodness, there was more…of what the Seelie are supposed to be. The Court was corrupted, and whatever it is now…it’s not the way it’s supposed to be. My family- Most Seelie families aren’t like that. It’s what made it so easy for no one to see what was happening right under their noses.’

‘I know,’ Ash said tiredly. ‘I know that. I guess it’s just complicated, isn’t it? On both sides. Anyway, our masquerade balls are way more badass. See you out there soon?’

‘Mm,’ Gwyn said, as Ash put his hand on the door and looked over his shoulder.

‘Cool then. Thanks for the chat, man. I don’t feel so bad about being dressed as a dog now.’

‘The ears are a nice touch,’ Gwyn said, unsure of what to make of the entire conversation.

‘Yeah,’ Ash said, smiling, before leaving and closing the door behind him.

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Gwyn hadn’t been allowed to see the night gardens developing into a place of entertainment. Gulvi handled everything, with Ash’s and Augus’ assistance. Gulvi insisted that Gwyn had too many responsibilities, while making it clear that designing areas of leisure was not his expertise. All true.

To see the night gardens sprawling with trestle tables, thousands of tiny baubles of magical light hanging in the canopy, clinging to the underside of fungi that sprawled at the boles of trees, brought him up short. There were an immense number of fae milling around in fantastic masks and
costumes, many in hybrid form now, showing off their wings and horns and claws, raucous laughter and loud voices mingling amongst live music. Gwyn’s nostrils flared and among the myriad scents of food and liquor, he could also smell lust and the unchecked aroma of sex, knowing then that some fae were doing what they normally did at these gatherings.

Slowly, the noise quietened and many turned to look at him. One or two at first, and then in a ripple effect they all took in his clothing, the stag mask, and Gwyn was acutely aware of the collar around his neck and the chain against his arm. They couldn’t see it. He was sure. But still.

The Masque was a night of a mild reversal of roles. He was their King, but he was also their servant. He went down on one knee easily, bowed his head deeply, called back years of Courtier training that he’d loathed and wondered at how he’d never expected to feel something like awe when looking over a large group of fae like this. How it had only ever been dread and apprehension in the past.

Applause rung out, gently at first, then loudly, and then cheers, and Gwyn rolled his eyes at the ground and stood up, absently brushing the dirt off his pants as he did so. He wasn’t to make speeches tonight, this was not his domain.

Augus appeared at his side, slipped an arm through the crook of Gwyn’s elbow, his fingers poking beneath Gwyn’s sleeve and tugging on the chain. His glamour was gentled and yet sharp all the same.

‘Do you like our Winter Court?’ Augus said, tilting his head to look up at Gwyn through a peacock’s eyes.

Gwyn looked out over the night gardens. The new sculptures that had been placed of cavorting fae and fae beasts. Candles on the long tables twinkling in the night, bewitched to not go out if the winds picked up. Metallic bowls and cutlery gleaming. Insect wings on the backs of shifters contrasted with the pearlescent masks of some and the black laced tablecloths that were festooned with bouquets of night flowers. Upon blooming black roses, tiny glowing beetles crawled, red and violet and blue and jade.

‘Very much,’ Gwyn said, smiling at all that was before him. ‘Gulvi has acquitted herself well.’

This was nothing like the Summer Court of the Seelie, which was all about daytime and brightness and never feeling like he belonged, being forced into clothing he hated that never fit quite right, and masks of animals that he never got to choose for himself. Here, with the zahakhar whispering inside of him and his alignment around him, it was…perhaps what it was supposed to be while he was growing up.

‘Of course I have, darling!’ Gulvi said, stepping out from the crowd and taking Gwyn’s other hand and pulling him forwards. She wore no swan garb, but the warrior leathers of the Council of Lammergeiers. Upon her head, a well-tooled bearded vulture mask with rubies set around the eye-rims, the red beard itself a thick fringe of garnet beads. ‘Do you think I don’t know how to run a Winter Court? With Augus’ fussy tastes and Ash’s ability to charm the right kind of alcohol out of anyone, and my contacts, it’s the finest Winter Court we’ve had in such a long time. La! Do come and mingle, my King, we’ve all been so looking forward to you joining us.’

Gwyn leaned towards Augus and whispered: ‘Are they treating you well?’

Augus nodded. ‘Surprisingly, yes. There are certain groups I must avoid, but since Fenwrel has smoothed the way for my moving back into diplomacy, since the Debut…I am safer.’
‘Be safest, please,’ Gwyn said under his breath. ‘Do you have the crystal?’

‘I will summon you in an instant, if I need to.’

Gwyn’s arm muscles tightened briefly around Augus’, an acknowledgement, before he slipped away from both of them into the crowds. The music and conversation resumed, and his eyes skated over all those around him. Some fae he could pick out by their hybrid forms alone, but others he wouldn’t know until they re-introduced themselves to him. There were fantastic costumes everywhere. Fae dressing as other species of fae, as animals, as mythical beasts. His eyes slipped across a fae dressed as a crab, complete with pincers, and another who was a waterhorse of some kind, with green blossoms woven and plaited into their hair where waterweed should be.

He took a deep breath, momentarily overwhelmed by scent and sight, and then he remembered the collar, the chain, that when all of this was over, he could leave the fae and his Inner Court to their own devices and not have to show his face in the Winter Court again.

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Mingling was easier than he thought it would be. After a few rusty minutes, he slipped back into an old role made easier by the fact that he didn’t have to lie about his alignment, he didn’t have to pretend to Seelie virtues, constantly checking over every sentence before he spoke for how it might reflect on his family and their reputation. The fear that prickled at his back, the worry that Crielle was watching his every move, it was still present, but it was a ghost rather than a reality. He would look over his shoulder, and see only fellow Unseelie.

He talked to many, gathering their worries and concerns and categorising them in his head to muddle over later. They were worried about war. About trade routes being blocked. About goods and services going up in price because fewer merchants were trusting the roads now, with the Seelie military being populous. They were scared of being cut off from their Seelie cousins across the river.

But there were the odd positives, too. There seemed to be more respect overall for his Court, even amongst those who were clearly vying for power and wanted his esteem, his ear, his resources, his power. Gwyn wanted to laugh at those who thought this was the Court to try and influence and manipulate. Then again, his Inner Court had done such a good job with the Winter Court, it looked for all appearances like they were confident the Unseelie would prevail. Perhaps some fae believed it.

Some didn’t.

Iliak grasped both of Gwyn’s hands in a show of public camaraderie. His horns were covered completely in gold leaf, and his mask was that of a giant species of black Marid lion, the strands of its wild mane picked through with tiny, faceted diamonds that caught the light. Behind the mask, Iliak’s eyes burned, and he led Gwyn away through the crowds to a more private space between three large trees that held far more shadows than they did light. Nearby, Gwyn could hear fae rutting.

‘So,’ Iliak said. ‘I have something I must ask you.’

‘Then ask it of me,’ Gwyn said, keeping his voice as hushed as Iliak’s.

‘I hear disturbing news from the Seelie Court via Ambari, my wife. She is a Courtier.’

‘I’m aware,’ Gwyn said. ‘I’ve met her.’
‘Of course,’ Iliak said. ‘I’ll be quick, since I know this is neither the time nor the place for these discussions. Gwyn, should there come a day when Albion uses his power to force mixed alignment cabals to separate, would you offer asylum to the Seelie members of my family? My daughters? Ifir’s children? My wife? Others?’

Gwyn blinked at him, at the great leonine presence of a fellow King who had ruled people for far longer than Gwyn ever had.

‘Is this likely?’ Gwyn said.

‘Yes,’ Iliak said. ‘It becomes more likely with every passing day. The Seelie Court is poisoned. Do the old rules of asylum still stand here?’

‘Of course they do,’ Gwyn said. But his whole body had gone cold.

Would Albion take it that far? Would he force fae to choose between their families or the Court?

He very well could. A fae that picks family over duty or honour, could be justifiably accused of being corrupted, or not Seelie enough. A Seelie monarch could punish that, if they wished.

‘They’re welcome here,’ Gwyn said, reaching out and clasping the furs covering Iliak’s upper arm. ‘It would not only be asylum they’d receive here if it came to that, but true welcome.’

‘I hope it doesn’t come to that,’ Iliak said. ‘But I would not send my family where they’re not welcome. Nor will I put them at risk and force them to remain in a place where they might be attacked simply because they have dared love me. The Ambaros-Marid Djinn cabal is at particular risk – Albion knows we are a strategic military point of contact for you. He leans heavily upon Ambari and Ifir’s wife, Adali. He requested Ifir’s son, Eran, for a private discussion.’

‘Interrogation?’ Gwyn said, frowning.

‘Eran swears not, but he is a strong young lad and being raised to the position of chieftain, and he’d not say if it was an interrogation.’

Gwyn wondered if a particular Reader was present during the discussion, and resolved to ask Mikkel about it later.

‘I’ll not bother you more on this, Your Majesty,’ Iliak said gruffly. ‘Not during our first Winter Court in years. I thank you for your time.’

‘Of course,’ Gwyn said, and they clapsed hands again, before Iliak moved away.

Gwyn followed a couple of minutes later, and moved to a quiet table covered in drinks, picking up one and sipping at spiced mead while his eyes roved over the crowd. He tried to recall a scroll he’d read, papers he’d come across, a single parchment that spoke of a time when Seelie had needed to claim asylum in the Unseelie Court, and he couldn’t. He also wondered how it would reflect upon him to offer the Seelie asylum should they need it. Would he be accused of being too soft towards the Seelie? Would those who had lost their families to the Seelie military see one more reason to look upon his reign with malice?

It matters not. The old laws hold. Whatever fae comes to ask for asylum will get it.

He knew that to be true. That was all that mattered.

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Hours passed, Gwyn made his way over to Amaley Manytrees who was dressed as her aur tree, a
great white oak. Leaves sprouted from her scalp, and acorns in the space behind her ears, looking
almost like earrings. She wore the bark on her skin proudly, along with a gown of sewn leaves, a
dazzling green throughout, except the hems, which were the graded browns of fall. Upon her head,
she wore a mask that reminded him profoundly of the mask that the Oak King used to wear during
the Summer Court. The Green People, with their faces of oak leaves and smiling mouths, now
extinct. Amaley honoured them.

‘What a wonderful stag you make, Your Majesty,’ Amaley said, her voice somehow green and
verdant, lush vowels and completed consonants.

‘And you, my Lady, are stunning.’

‘I know,’ Amaley said, her golden eyes glowing with pleasure. ‘Though I thank you to notice it.’

‘It would be impossible for one not to,’ he said, returning her smile. ‘How is the Aur Forest? Is it
well?’

‘It flourishes, Your Majesty. You need not worry. The sink of the world’s power is nurtured and
whole, and my children keep it so. Speaking of children, you expressed an interest in my sapling
son, Mosk, the last time I saw you?’

‘Yes,’ Gwyn said. ‘Seventh son of a seventh son? An aur dryad as well? How is he?’

‘You can ask him yourself, Your Majesty. He is over there, lingering in the shadows. Some
distance from his mothertree. He is still shy and his powers have not yet blossomed.’

‘Ah,’ Gwyn said, noticing the young fae alone by several tables of refreshments, not quite hiding,
but not volunteering himself into the crowded spaces of fae either. He wore no complete mask like
many of the other fae, but instead a small thing that only hid the top half of his face. It was
constructed of scalloped falcon feathers, and looked like it might have been handmade.

‘He is at that age where he is embarrassed by me, you see,’ Amaley whispered conspiratorially,
behind a hand marked with nails made of bark.

‘I understand,’ Gwyn whispered back, in the same tone. ‘I’ll go introduce myself to him, then.’

He said a farewell to Amaley, and quietly made his way over, glad for something of a break from
politicking. Mosk had hair that was a light grass green at the base and became darker green at the
tips, his skin was pale. He had the green-grey eyes of an aur dryad who had not yet discovered their
aur tree, which meant that the lad was only a teenager. An event of this magnitude would have
been overwhelming. Even the most boisterous of young fae found so many strong energies together
in a single space cloying.

Gwyn sidled up to him and clasped his hands behind his back, looking out into the crowd as Mosk
did. He waited for Mosk to notice him, and Mosk did after about a minute, looking up at him once.
He looked back out to the crowd, then stiffened, head swinging back.

‘Oh!’ he said, his voice light. ‘Pardon me, Si- Your…Majesty? Is that…right?’

‘You can call me Gwyn, if you like,’ Gwyn said, looking at him briefly ‘I take it you find crowds
rather tedious?’

‘Ah, w-well…this is more my sister’s thing, you know. Ela loves this. But mothertree said I had to
come. She said it was the first Winter Court since the Raven Prince, and that it was a big deal. It’s
very pretty.’

‘I imagine nothing really compares though to the aur forest. Every tree species in the fae world living there? Different ecosystems and biomes to explore? It’s its own world, is it not?’

‘I love it,’ Mosk said, smiling, his eyes warming. ‘There’s always different things flowering, different things happening. I suppose. You don’t have to stay if you’re finding this conversation boring, you know.’

‘I know,’ Gwyn said. ‘It’s not boring. I thought aur dryads were pacifists and lifted no weapons, but you use a bow?’

‘What?’ Mosk hissed, looking quickly over at his mother. ‘No I don’t!’

‘Don’t lie to me,’ Gwyn said. ‘You’re not yet at an age where you’re good at it.’

‘You can…you can tell?’

‘Mm,’ Gwyn said, looking over Mosk’s arms again. ‘Good musculature for it. Recurve bow, yes?’

‘How do you do that?’ Mosk said. ‘It’s kind of a secret. I don’t hunt anything living. I promise.’

‘That’s not something you have to promise to me,’ Gwyn said, and was unable to stop the small laugh that came out. ‘Not with my reputation.’

‘Oh, yes, well…that’s true. Please don’t tell mothertree.’

‘Wouldn’t dream of it,’ Gwyn said. ‘Is it a hobby? Do you simply enjoy breaking the rules? And if you do not hunt anything living, how do you target practice?’

‘Not very well, that’s how,’ Mosk said, sounding frustrated. He looked over at his mother and then shook his head and stared back out into the crowd, his sharp jaw setting into place. ‘It’s…a hobby, I guess. But I’m not supposed to. Mothertree hasn’t banned me, exactly, but she disapproves. It’s not like I can shoot a moving target anyway. And I haven’t been doing it long.’

That wasn’t entirely true. Gwyn could tell from some of the bodily changes in Mosk’s anatomy, that Mosk had to be doing it for at least a couple of decades.

‘There’s always different things you can try,’ Gwyn mused. ‘Falling leaves that are already dead, if you are reluctant to shoot anything living, but still wish to attempt moving targets.’

‘But they’re tiny.’

‘Then you’ll become very good,’ Gwyn said, watching as Augus stopped briefly by Gulvi and mentioned something to her. They both looked out over the crowd themselves and paused when they saw Gwyn. Gulvi raised her arm in a single wave, and he raised his own hand back. They were checking on him. He resisted the urge to shake his head. ‘It’s a relief to be able to talk weapons with someone. Even if it’s illicit weapons. And the recurve bow? It’s a good choice for someone your size. But if you’re worried about being caught out by your family…are you using string silencers?’

‘What?’ Mosk said, turning to face him properly. ‘What are they?’

Gwyn frowned, wished he could take Mosk aside and show him properly. But instead, he explained how to cut the strips of fur, how to untwist the string and attach them.
Mosk watched him with excitement, and Gwyn found himself drawn into a conversation for over twenty minutes about how to maintain and look after the recurve bow best. The entire time, Gwyn was amazed at how much Mosk had managed to teach himself with no guidance, but it meant that there were gaping holes in his knowledge that Gwyn couldn’t fill in such a small space of time. Nor did he have the time available to offer to teach him. Besides, he wasn’t a teacher.

He was reluctant to leave, but he’d promised himself he wouldn’t spend more than ten minutes with any particular fae. Mosk must have sensed it, because he wound the conversation down himself.

‘Thanks ever so,’ Mosk said. ‘Really. You’ll keep it a secret?’

‘I’m good at keeping secrets,’ Gwyn said, nodding his head in acknowledgement to him. ‘Farewell, Mosk Manytrees. May your arrows fly straight and true.’

‘And yours!’ Mosk dashed off as Gwyn walked off into the crowds again.

Gwyn felt bemused. Did Mosk have any idea how much a blessing like that meant coming from a seventh son of a seventh son? Probably not. Either way, it was not such a bad blessing to have.

* 

As the night went on, Gwyn found himself noticing even more. Ocypete’s people weren’t present, not a single harpy had come; he wondered if it meant they’d lost their aerial harpy contingent in battle, and he’d have to follow that up later. The rest of his generals were there – the ones he hadn’t killed or weren’t in an Unseelie prison – and they all treated him with respect. Even Vane was eager to see him, despite still having strong discolouration on his face from where Ifir’s fire had burnt him. He was still recovering then, and wasn’t wearing as much of his wealth as he usually did.

‘As soon as you let us know how much we need to compensate you-’ Gwyn began.

‘No,’ Vane said, smiling at him behind a mask that represented no particular kind of fae, and was absolutely crusted with gems. ‘None of that. You saved my life, Your Majesty. You got Aleutia, and made sure I was taken care of. Please. I’m sure we can work out any debts later, but for now I think we’re even. Yes? And I’ve learned my lesson. No more trying to leap in front of Kings.’

Gwyn smiled awkwardly, unable to think of Augus’ amusement at what he’d asserted was flirting.

‘I notice you’re not wearing as much jewellery as usual, yet Princess Braith still wears a great deal?’

‘Yes,’ Vane said, his eyes clouding briefly. He looked away, and when he turned back his eyes didn’t glitter with happiness as they had before. ‘I could, of course. It’s not…it’s not that this is all I have. Goodness no. But I’ve not- How humiliating to say this before you, who has dealt with so much more in the field, but I’ve not had cause to be injured like that before. Even with the best of care, I find myself reluctant to wear too much of what could melt into my skin. Craven, yes. But we fie ellyllon have never been the best in the frontlines.’

‘No, you haven’t. And yet what marvellous work you still do.’

‘Gramercie,’ Vane said, forehead smoothing in relief. He reached out and placed his fingers on Gwyn’s forearm. ‘Really. It means a lot that you’d say that. It is easy to imagine that someone like yourself thinks poorly of those who do not leap out in front of a thousand swords like it’s easy.’
'It only makes what you did for me even more worthy,' Gwyn said. ‘Though I, too, recommend you do not leap in front of monarchs to save them in the future. We are after all nigh on indestructible. You are not.’

‘So I’ve learned,’ Vane said. He took a deep breath, sighed it out, smiled. His hand squeezed Gwyn’s arm before letting go. ‘I’ll steal all your time if you let me! We can’t have that, can we?’

‘It’s always time well spent, Vane.’

Vane’s eyes lit up at that, even as Gwyn excused himself. Could Augus be right after all? It made no sense. Gwyn’s reputation in the Seelie Court amongst the Courtiers was that he was a ‘dead lay.’ No point pursuing him because he knocked everyone back and was always oblivious to overtures. Vane was sweet enough, but Gwyn was certain Vane was only seeking to increase his own status.

Gwyn looked around for Augus and couldn’t see him at first, and then caught him beside his brother with a group of fae who seemed to be hanging on every word of a story that Ash was telling, arms moving animatedly. He started to move towards them, then changed his mind. Long evenings like this were tiring in a way that even battle wasn’t, and his mind was leaning towards weariness.

He was caught by several others in varying conversations before he managed to extricate himself into the greater woods of the night gardens. Even here, decorations hadn’t been forgotten. Braided paper streamers hung from some of the branches. Baubles of light guided the way into private spaces and areas of deep shadow. Here, the smell of sex was stronger, and it reminded Gwyn of the aftermath of a battle, his soldiers rutting, him sometimes among them, seeking to vent bloodlust in any way possible.

The tree against his back was gnarled, he could feel the pits in its bark even through the layers of clothing he wore. Tiredly, he untied the mask and lowered it, rubbing at his overwarm face. The temperature had increased, or perhaps he was just feeling the strain of everything now in a way that he hadn’t before.

He smelled smoke, his nostrils flaring, and he turned in alarm only to see the crab-costumed fae walking towards him. The creature wore a mask that was some abstract thing, and colourful furs all about his person, they were made from animals Gwyn didn’t recognise, or they were dyed. Gwyn blinked at him, his thoughts fuzzed and blurry.

‘Excuse me, Sir,’ Gwyn said, offering a stiff smile. ‘You’ve caught me unmasked. If you’ll just give me a moment…’

The fae lifted his mask, and Gwyn’s eyes widened, apprehension flooding through him. The entire night, this creature, this god, had been charming him somehow to make sure Gwyn hadn’t realised he was even there. Every time, his eyes had slipped over him, not taken much notice.

But now…

Wild yellow eyes and an angular face, far shorter than Gwyn and carrying far more power about him. He looked young as always, not much older than someone in their late teens. He smelled of brush fires and lava both. Gwyn’s shoulder burned. Dread skittered on spider’s legs through his limbs.

‘Now I’m unmasked too,’ Kabiri said, grinning wickedly. ‘We can both be rude together. Sir.’
'What are you doing here?' Gwyn said, mouth dry.

'I’m an underworld god, aren’t I? I have an automatic invite to any and all events I’m not invited to.'

'Does anyone else know?'

'No,' Kabiri said, scratching a couple of times at the ridges of black and red bone growing out through his cheekbones. ‘That wouldn’t do. They won’t bother us here, either. Godly powers have to be useful for something.’

'Not much,’ Gwyn said, taking several steps back from him and wishing he had his sword. He was King now, not underfae, but he owed the creature two debts. Two. ‘Not much, when you have a Mage pitting himself against you?’

'Just the one?’ Kabiri said, beaming. ‘Here I thought it was more than that. Olphix and Davix both, the ‘evil brothers of old!’ So I see you’ve scented some things out for yourself then.’

‘What’s the Red Blessing?’ Gwyn said, his voice far more stern than he felt.

Kabiri stilled just a little, just enough that Gwyn knew he’d been startled. ‘Oh,’ he said. ‘That explains it.’

Then he said nothing more, and Gwyn’s jaw ached as he ground his teeth in frustration. ‘You ruined my shoulder. You didn’t heal me. You ruined it.’

‘Uh, you look fine to me,’ Kabiri said. ‘You can still fight, can’t you? Still gut things? Don’t be such a brat. You weren’t King last time I saw you. Weren’t much of anything, really. Still a little thing though.’

‘Are you calling in a debt?’

‘I might be,’ Kabiri said, tilting his head and grinning. ‘It’s nice to have you owe me a couple of favours, you know.’

‘You have debts everywhere, I’ve heard.’

‘I do,’ Kabiri said, pursing his lips. ‘Best to keep one’s bases covered. I can’t do as much with you as I’d hoped, if the old lore has given you the Red Blessing. Maybe you can just take me into your little palace and I can double check that you’re not lying to me?’

‘I would,’ Gwyn said, feigning a lightness he didn’t feel. ‘But Davix murdered it all.’

Kabiri’s entire visage darkened. His eyes sunk, his hair seemed wilder, even his fingernails became hooked claws. But a blink later and it was gone and Kabiri appeared as himself.

‘Damn,’ Kabiri said, whistling once. ‘That’s inconvenient.’

Gwyn listened to the sound of the party beyond them, felt a rush of trapped, fettered frustration. He had his fingers in Kabiri’s furs before he was aware of it, had Kabiri up off the ground and against a tree, his nostrils flaring with rage. ‘I am not your pawn.’

‘You are exactly that,’ Kabiri said, blinking at him. ‘Every time I see you, you’re always railing against the obvious. First it’s denial about the fact you were going to die. Now denial over the fact that you went and became my pawn. You are a three year old that just shouts ‘no’ at the world.’
'Gods are not supposed to be involved in our affairs.'

'Tough shit, little thing. Because some of us are. Do you not pay attention to the stories of your own kind? It wasn’t just Mages in the fae realm that imprisoned the Nightingale the first time, it was some of us too. We didn’t want to be involved, but we didn’t have much of a choice. Everyone is the pawn of someone. Whether they know it or not.'

Kabiri’s arm moved too quickly, a blur of movement that Gwyn could hardly track, and then he felt nails in his sore shoulder and his flesh remembered the stab of it, the skewering, and he dropped Kabiri and staggered backwards, his own hand clapping over his shoulder. He felt hot points against his skin and looked down. His costume was charred where Kabiri’s nails had dug in.

‘I’m fond of you,’ Kabiri said, ‘but not that fond. If you’re going to manhandle me again, let’s make sure it’s for fun, and I’ll remind you that I’ll win. I’ve already been inside you once, King. Let’s not make a habit of it.’

Gwyn made a sound of disgust and bent down to pick up his mask where he’d dropped it. ‘Tell me what I owe you then, and be done with it.’

‘Just one thing, for now. The first favour. It’s a small thing really. You’ve got one of my people imprisoned in your Court. Let him go. Raise his status. Court, if you please. And then you can consider us clear of all but one debt.’

Gwyn stared at him, kept his features impassive. He was already going to release Ifir, so that part was easy enough. Make him Court status? Ifir important to a god?

‘One of your people?’ Gwyn said blandly.

‘Sort of,’ Kabiri shrugged. ‘He’s all about fire. I’m all about fire.’

Gwyn knew it was evasive, but he didn’t feel safe challenging him on his own in the shadows like this, knowing that Kabiri was as powerful as he was. There wasn’t a single part of him that felt as though this was supposed to be happening. It was entirely wrong to have a god in the fae realm. He wondered if the underworlds sensed the same ugliness when the Nightingale ripped a hole between their realms and came down to them.

‘What is Davix trying to do?’ Gwyn said.

‘Oh, oh no, agree to the debt first, Gwyn ap Nudd. We follow the rules here.’

‘Yes,’ Gwyn said, shaking his head in irritation. ‘I’ll release him and raise his status, within the week. You have my word. Now tell me, what is Davix trying to do?’

‘He’s just changing his mind, is all,’ Kabiri said. ‘He did something a very long time ago, and now he’s trying to reverse it.’

‘That helps me not at all.’

‘You’re not the only one who can have a geas laid upon you, creature,’ Kabiri said, smoke escaping his mouth. ‘You’re not the only one who can be cursed. Perhaps there are some things I cannot talk about, not because I choose not to, but because I cannot. We have our own magics and laws in the underworld, and you know a whole lot of nothing about them. Just because you visited briefly to lock that abomination back in our realm where he doesn’t belong, doesn’t mean you understand anything.’
Gwyn glared. ‘Anyone would think you’re betraying your usually confident demeanour. Not feeling as omniscient today?’

‘Are you flirting with me?’ Kabiri said, his displeasure transforming to delight. ‘Do you want to take this someone where even more private? You might want a healer on hand. Don’t say I didn’t warn you.’

Kabiri watched him intently and then rolled his shoulders and leaned back against the tree that Gwyn had shoved him against. After a minute, the wood started smoking. Kabiri moved away from it reluctantly and made a face. ‘The trees don’t do that where I come from.’

‘You’re a volcano god,’ Gwyn said quietly. ‘I expect the trees are a little different where you’re from.’

‘I’m such a tourist here,’ Kabiri said, looking around with something like vague interest. ‘Pay off the first debt within seven days. Please and thank you. Easy enough, isn’t it? See? It doesn’t all have to be skewers in the shoulder, does it? It can almost be nice between us.’

‘Almost.’

Kabiri smirked. But slowly, his visage transformed once more. Gwyn hazily recollected Kabiri once saying, ‘you won’t like me when I’m Cadmilus.’ The whole space around him seemed to turn into a pocket of fear, his breaths came shorter, began to shake. His whole body was cold, as though Kabiri was drawing the very life out of him. Even when Gwyn blinked, he saw only black bone jutting out of Kabiri’s cheeks, a costume of furs that looked only charred – no longer colourful. Kabiri opened his mouth and his teeth looked like nubs of charcoal.

‘You fear doom,’ Kabiri said, his voice nothing normal, rippling from a deeper place than even Augus’ true voice when it came upon him. ‘You should. You fear war. You should. Remember me, when you call the trumpet that heralds the charge and defeat both. Remember me, when you’re burning the pyre of bodies and everything smells of death.’

The words rattled inside of Gwyn, as though he’d been hollowed and existed only for that voice. He couldn’t stagger backwards, as he wanted to. He was locked in place, heard nothing of the masquerade ball beyond them, no longer smelled food or sex or anything other than flame and fire and char.

‘You’re on my side,’ Kabiri asserted. ‘You are my pawn.’

The terror that gripped him faded slowly, Gwyn – by degrees – began to feel more like himself. Kabiri’s face had become what it usually was, or perhaps it was just another mask he wore over that other image that had turned Gwyn’s guts to liquid.

‘I grow so tired of riddles,’ Gwyn said, weariness turning into something darker, heavier. All around him, he felt only captivity.

‘Then solve them,’ Kabiri said seriously. ‘I don’t know what more you expect from me. This isn’t where I belong, and if I interfere too much beyond responding to prayer and creating debts, I will fall ill. You know what I want. Don’t ignore the debt, Gwyn, or I shall come back. Perhaps I can balance you out, you know, in case your good shoulder needs a bit of character?’

Kabiri’s hand lengthened into a long, single piece of bone, smoked red hot, and Gwyn took a step backwards before he could stop himself. Kabiri laughed to himself, eyes glittering.

‘Don’t say I didn’t offer,’ Kabiri said.
‘Kind of you,’ Gwyn bit out. ‘You’ve told me what I owe you, now you’ll do us all the courtesy of leaving. This is not your world. It is not your evening.’

‘It’s not my anything,’ Kabiri said, face briefly pensive. ‘What was the name of that Mage who gave you the Soulbond for those waterhorses again? You should check if it was a nom de plume. A pseudonym. Even a…nom de guerre. If you know anyone who owes a debt like you owe me, King, you might wish to discover who they owe it to. And that is not a riddle. Farewell. See you soon.’

Kabiri replaced his mask, and then Gwyn blinked dazed when something shifted in his own mind and he could no longer see the god anywhere. He pressed the knuckles of one hand into his temples and locked his knees underneath him, his bad shoulder throbbing like a raw wound all over again. After a few minutes, he touched his fingers to it, and they came away sooty.

He trailed deeper into the forest and leaned heavily against the trunk of a tree, forcing himself to take long breaths.

The sense of captivity was too strong. He’d need to get away, soon, if he didn’t want to lose this heartsong within days – weeks – of getting it back. He laughed weakly. That would be a record, even for him.

‘Gwyn?’

Gwyn looked up and saw Augus, who was already untying the ribbon at the back of his head and sliding the mask free. Without the mask, the kohl around his eyes, the mascara on his lashes, had the effect of making the green of his irises even brighter, the concern in them sharper.

‘Are you well?’ Augus said, and then smirked. ‘Look at that, I seem to have developed your habit of stating the obvious.’

The smile Gwyn offered was lopsided and bitter. ‘Kabiri has been here the whole evening. He’s claimed one of his debts.’

‘Here?’ Augus said, looking around like he could see him. Then he squared his shoulders and walked forwards, eyes widening when he saw what Kabiri had done to his suit. ‘Did he hurt you?’

‘Threats,’ Gwyn said, dismissive. ‘Nothing more.’

‘You look like you’ve aged centuries in an evening,’ Augus murmured, peering at him, then slipping his hand beneath Gwyn’s coat and burrowing until he could measure his heart rate. ‘My exhausted King.’

‘Don’t call me that,’ Gwyn said, sighing. ‘How many times do I have to-’

‘-Apologies,’ Augus said, ‘I meant nothing by it.’

‘I imagine it’s been quite a stressful evening for you, also.’

‘Yes,’ Augus said, ‘but not as bad as I expected. Shall I rally the troops? Call a meeting?’

Gwyn shook his head, and his head bowed forwards under the weight of no crown at all. Augus hummed in thought, and then slid his other hand into the sleeve of Gwyn’s clothing, unclipping the chain and tugging on it in rhythmic pulses.

‘Here,’ Augus said. ‘Closer.’
There wasn’t much closeness to attain, but he made the shuffling step forwards anyway. He wanted to sleep for days. Kabiri’s words echoed through him. It wasn’t releasing Ifir or raising him to Court status that was the problem – it was close enough to what Gwyn wanted to do anyway, it hardly seemed like paying a debt at all. No, it was the words of doom and pyres and death, the reality they faced crowding hungry around him. He felt like an animal slipping towards shock, when its body finally recognised it was over, they were caught and their predator would only play with them now until a final breath was drawn.

‘Gwyn,’ Augus said, repeating his name again.

‘I cannot indulge this here,’ Gwyn said, the words dragged from him. He met Augus’ gaze and shook his head. ‘We will have a meeting tomorrow. But these people deserve a night where they do not think about what is coming.’

‘Talk to me,’ Augus said, ‘about what’s actually going on. Just think, you’ve had all this practice lately, might as well put it to good use, Gwyn, instead of slipping back into old habits now.’

‘I hate him,’ Gwyn said, the words falling out of his mouth before he knew he was going to say them. ‘He could have visited any time, he chose tonight. It isn’t even that he’s necessarily malicious, but I cannot look at him without remembering the fire I begged for, how close I was to death. He brings nothing good here, and he knows it. But I hate him because I think he is like us… that he has no choice in his actions. That he is desperate to preserve something dear to him as well. Augus, I know what people who are desperate to preserve something will do, what they will sacrifice. And I used to think I understood so much more than I do. I used to think having the ear of the Oak King, knowing his agendas, thinking I knew them… I used to think it meant something.’

‘It still does.’

‘No,’ Gwyn said, laughing, stepping away. ‘That’s just it, Augus, it doesn’t. It means nothing.’

‘I think it’s time for you to retire for the evening,’ Augus said.

Gwyn looked over his shoulder at him. What could he say? About Albion’s military and its numbers and how well trained they were? That even with the assistance of Ondine and Marika’s blood oath to him and more, they were crushed as a Kingdom? That they were spiralling down a drain of having to keep up appearances of being financially sound while haemorrhaging funds to pay for a military who weren’t trained enough, weren’t united enough, weren’t skilled enough to match the Seelie Court.

Kabiri spoke of something Gwyn had secretly tried to avoid looking at for some time.

You fear doom. You should.

‘I am not a good King,’ Gwyn said.

‘Albion’s not much better,’ Augus said, though the corners of his eyes were pinched and there was a tightness to the edges of his mouth.

‘I think I will retire for the evening,’ Gwyn said, not wanting the bleakness that was twining tendrils through him to sully the rest of Augus’ night. ‘You look magnificent, Augus. I should have said earlier.’

‘I can retire with you, you know,’ Augus said, scowling at him. ‘There’s no reason I cannot leave with you, right now. We can go anywhere. Places where you might set a cabin. That lake where you took me when I needed water. Anywhere. You can do that.’
‘I can,’ Gwyn said. ‘But I am not fit for company in this moment, and…’ I’ll not drag you down with me.

‘Gwyn,’ Augus snapped, the compulsion commanding his attention not because he was susceptible to them, but because Augus so rarely used them around him. Augus reached up and hooked his mask carefully on a branch, perhaps so he’d remember it later. He walked to Gwyn’s side, dug fingers into his forearm. ‘Let’s leave. I’m coming with you. Take us away from the Court. I don’t care where.’

‘You should stay.’

‘Unless you’re willing to make it a King’s mandate, you’d best listen to me.’

Gwyn was too tired to argue further. He cast about for a place to go and none appealed. In the end he made a blind stab in the dark and enfolded them in light, the mask of the stag still clutched in his hand.

Chapter End Notes

In our next chapter, ‘Redirection:’

‘There’s been another shapeshifter caught,’ Gulvi said, her voice dark. ‘One of my apprentices is patrolling the borderlands around the Court. It’s good practice for her. She found a young man, with a bow and quiver of arrows, claiming to be one Mafydd Brant. He was asking for asylum. The name…meant nothing to me, until I recalled some time ago, that you had mentioned Mafydd in passing and Gwyn had reacted poorly. I need you to use compulsions to be sure, but initially I was going to fetch Gwyn, and now-’

‘Don’t fetch him,’ Augus said sharply, stripping off the apron and the goggles and walking over to a basin of river rock and cleaning his hands. ‘Don’t tell him. I will.’

‘Who is he?’ Gulvi said. But her eyes were a little too sharp, too knowing.

‘What have you deduced?’ Augus said, turning back to her. ‘I don’t want to play this game, Gulvi. Not about this.’
Redirection

Chapter Notes

No new tags. I hope folks enjoy the chapter! For all those who have asked me about Gwyn and Augus dancing...*stares off into the horizon for no particular reason*

Feedback is love, and thanks ever so much for reading. Can't believe we're on the home stretch now!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Augus

*

It was dawn, away from the eternal night of the Unseelie Court. It was chilly, the scent of spring in Augus’ nose, which meant flowers were blooming somewhere nearby. But here, in the midst of trees and thick granite boulders, he could see none.

‘Where are we?’

‘Does it matter?’ Gwyn said, already walking away.

Augus frowned at him and followed. He reminded himself that he could marvel over how good Gwyn looked later.

‘It’s the war, isn’t it?’ Augus said, wishing that he didn’t feel some taut space inside of him when he spoke of it. ‘That he wouldn’t even let you forget, for one evening?’

‘Be quiet,’ Gwyn said, a faint thread of desperation in his voice. His strides were getting longer, and Augus had to speed up to match him, and even then he was metres behind. The feathers from his neck collar brushed against his face and he scratched at his jaw.

Augus searched his mind for something to say, something to jar Gwyn out of this apathy.

‘Do you know how many of them admired you tonight? Were glad you were their King? I bet some even wanted to fuck you.’

Gwyn turned in a single smooth step, flinging the mask away from him, his eyes hard. ‘Do you think I care about any of that? Do you think any of it matters? The Unseelie Court is broke. We’re...do you have any idea how hungry a resource a Court is? Maintaining the appearance of a Court that’s supposedly growing from strength to strength?’

Augus pretended at innocence, splaying his fingers to indicate that he had no idea. Gwyn’s eyes widened, his mouth tightened, his hands clenched into fists at his side. Augus knew he was playing an unsafe game.

‘It’s...expensive?’ Augus said, with a lightness that almost made him want to laugh when Gwyn’s jaw set stubbornly.
‘I know what you’re doing,’ Gwyn said. ‘Go on then, distract me some more from the reality that we live in, Augus. Is that how you dealt with living with the Nightingale in the Unseelie Court? How you handled being separated from your brother in the Seelie Court? Is that-’

‘Stop,’ Augus said, covering uneven, rocky ground and jabbing a hard finger into Gwyn’s heaving chest. ‘It’s sometimes pathetically easy to gauge just how upset you are. Was it your family who taught you to aim for the belly in an argument? Or all that sword training?’

Gwyn stared at him a few seconds longer, then looked away. Around them, the world was a dove grey in the pre-light of morning. The shadows a darker charcoal. Hearing Gwyn say the Nightingale’s name was just as jarring as it always was.

‘Distractions aren’t bad,’ Augus said, sighing. ‘I’m not inviting denial. As if you could ever forget all of your responsibilities for more than a few hours? But you are slipping towards despair, Gwyn. That’s not reality, either. I have just spent an evening with some of the most esteemed Unseelie fae, and I know for a fact that so many of them are not without hope. Your despair is a coup for the Seelie Court, Gwyn, and that’s all it is.’

‘You don’t see the future that I see,’ Gwyn said, knocking Augus’ hand away, taking several steps backwards and then walking through the forest once more, forcing Augus to keep up.

‘When I invited you to leave the Court,’ Augus said, ‘I didn’t think I would literally see you running away from it.’

Gwyn laughed, turned back, stalked towards Augus with a singular focus. Augus found himself halting, stepping backwards, his heel catching on a rock. He collected himself in time, but then Gwyn was there, looking down on him, looking like he wanted nothing more than to smash Augus into the ground. But that wasn’t like Gwyn either, and Augus catalogued the body language he could see. Gwyn was holding his bad shoulder more stiffly than usual, he was practically hunched. There was a muscle tic at the corner of his right eye, his jaw was tight, his forehead tense.

Augus tilted his head, never looking away from Gwyn’s face as he placed his hand carefully over Gwyn’s bad shoulder. Even through layers of clothing, he felt the flinch.

‘Careful,’ Augus said, as Gwyn made a face of disgust at his own reaction. ‘Careful.’

His other hand lifted, trailed up the waistcoat, up to the shirt, where he quickly undid several of the buttons. Gwyn looked at Augus with something that could have been disdain. A spark of rebellion in his frightened eyes.

But when Augus’ fingers trailed over the metal of the collar, Gwyn’s breath stuttered to a stop, held for several seconds before Gwyn forced his breath to evenness.

Augus’ fingers tiptoed around until he found the fine length of chain that he’d already unclipped from Gwyn’s sleeve. He pulled it carefully up, knowing it would tingle across Gwyn’s skin, until he could finally pull it out of the neck of the shirt and hold it loose, free, in his hands. He slowly twirled the length around his hand until the chain went tight and Gwyn had to lean forwards. His breath was uneven now.

‘If you break this,’ Augus said, ‘I’ll not be pleased.’

‘It’s delicate,’ Gwyn said, in some kind of protest.

Augus smiled. ‘That’s the point, sweetness. You’ll have to choose to follow me every time I pull on this chain. I’m happy to make you do whatever I like, and I know you need that. But what I
need, is to know that sometimes you’ll come where I lead you.’

Augus moved the hand looped with chain behind his back, which forced Gwyn’s body into an arch, until the crown of his head touched Augus’ chest.

‘Exactly like that,’ Augus said, staring down at him and licking his lips with the tip of his tongue. ‘Even when you’re champing at the bit and trying to run away from everything, you’ll not break this chain, will you?’

‘I don’t think now is the time, Augus, to test that theory.’

‘I think now’s the perfect time,’ Augus said, letting his voice even out. He lifted his free hand and smoothed it down Gwyn’s back, as though petting some great, exhausted beast. His own teeth felt sharper, and he had to fight with himself not to just force Gwyn’s head to the side and bite down hard into his neck, assert even more control, make Gwyn know who owned him. He couldn’t. He’d only put the collar on him a few hours ago. He hadn’t even thought about how significant it might be for him, until he’d seen it on Gwyn’s neck and had been hard-pressed to remind himself that he had to go and entertain, and that his purpose in life wasn’t to debauch Kings.

He looked around them now, taking in the woods properly. The sun hadn’t yet risen over the horizon, for the light was still soft, a lilac twilight pressing in through the canopy. The trees weren’t too closely together, birds were twittering and calling, the harmless chatter of morning song.

Wherever they were, the place was lovely.

‘I meant to do something tonight,’ Augus said, still stroking Gwyn’s back. ‘I meant to dance with you.’

Gwyn predictably tensed. Augus dragged his hand up lazily and tangled it in Gwyn’s hair, then slid his fingers underneath Gwyn’s jaw and lifted, allowing enough slack in the chain for Gwyn to look up at him, still bent over, forehead furrowed.

‘You see,’ Augus said, stroking the underside of Gwyn’s jaw, ‘I know you were trained as a Courtier. Crielle would have demanded it. I don’t like to dance in public, but I have also been trained as a Courtier. Did you shirk your lessons, Gwyn?’

‘No,’ Gwyn said, trying to stand properly, but the slack in the chain not allowing it.

‘You’re so often clumsy and awkward,’ Augus said, musing. ‘But you’re also adept with the sword, you know how to step through a drill. I’ve seen the grace of you on the battlefield.’

Augus unwound the chain slowly and let it pool against Gwyn’s neck, slipping back down beneath his shirt. Gwyn shivered, straightened, scanned the surroundings with a wary ease. Augus marvelled at how quickly the chain and the reminder that Gwyn belonged, had settled him. It had taken not hours, not days, but minutes.

‘Okay,’ Gwyn said, as though coming to some sort of decision. He straightened properly, his chin lifting as he looked down upon Augus. He held out his hand, while his other arm tucked behind his back in a formal invitation. ‘Would you?’

It was stupid that his cheeks would burn at something he’d instigated, but this was…not something he did with others. He’d learned to dance, and dance well. He practiced alone when he could, for he enjoyed the art of it. But he didn’t dance with others. Except Fluri, once, when she was drunk on passum and Augus didn’t have the heart or will to tell her no.
Augus slipped his hand into Gwyn’s and was mentally prepared for some early stumbling. Surely it would take them time to find their feet.

Gwyn took the first two steps backwards – the hand behind his back coming forwards and taking Augus’ other hand, holding it up. Not as high as was formal – above the shoulder – but perhaps Gwyn wanted no reminders of Kabiri, and Augus wasn’t about to say anything. Couldn’t, in fact, because he was having to remember some of the niches of his training as Gwyn led him into a dance; for though Gwyn moved slowly, the footwork was complicated.

‘Rusty?’ Gwyn said.

‘I actually hate you,’ Augus said, as they danced together. ‘So overcome with loathing, in fact, that I can’t concentrate.’

‘Hm,’ Gwyn said, his lips tightening on something that could have been impish.

Gwyn led for a few minutes more, as was custom, and then the steps changed so that Augus might lead. Fae had no set roles of leading and led that were determined by class or gender or sexuality. Instead, Augus and Gwyn’s dances moved from the taking and ceding of control, to lourés and passepieds where the movements were equal and slow and their hands moved in synchrony even as they didn’t touch.

They naturally moved towards a greater clearing, and when their hands came to meet again, Augus saw some fey wild light in Gwyn’s eyes. But Gwyn’s hands remained gentle, if firm. The coat he wore only served to accentuate the proper tension in his shoulders, the way he stepped not clumsily, but smoothly.

The birds were becoming louder, the sun must have crested over the horizon, though its rays didn’t yet find their way to the forest floor. Rather than stick to any one style for too long – minuet or rigaudon with one hand clasped in the other’s as they circled to an invisible beat – Gwyn seemed determined to test all of Augus’ knowledge.

‘This isn’t a competition,’ Augus said, laughing haplessly at the look of challenge on Gwyn’s face.

‘You’re keeping up,’ Gwyn said, laughing a low, quiet laugh that was nothing like his cynical or bitter noises, his hysterical ones. Something far freer, far more real. Augus’ nostrils flared as he inhaled sharply, wanted to grasp far more than Gwyn’s hands, but also that sound. Augus could tell then, Gwyn wasn’t inciting him into competition, but was instead impressed with how much Augus knew. The light in his eyes wasn’t challenge, but something fiercer, as though Gwyn knew he had met his match and delighted in it.

They lost track of time, and when Augus stumbled backwards over a rock hidden by leaf litter, he began laughing, Gwyn already there, one arm at his back, stopping him from falling.

Of course, Augus thought to himself, and then didn’t have another moment to think anything more scathing, because Gwyn’s lips were pressed to his.

Augus dug both of his hands into Gwyn’s hair and slipped his tongue between Gwyn’s lips when he gasped. He pushed forwards, and then walked Gwyn backwards into a tree, the breath pushing out of his nose against Augus’ cheek as Augus didn’t break the kiss, kept Gwyn pinned in place. Hungrily, he tasted of a faint sweetness from drinks consumed at the masquerade ball, he tasted carbon and ozone and the salty warmth of flesh and saliva. Gwyn’s tongue met his tentatively, slicked alongside his with a noise rumbling in Gwyn’s chest that broke off, and was all the needier for it.
One of Gwyn’s hands touched the side of Augus’ face, and it was a shock. The second palm curling around his other cheek, so that Augus’ face was framed, was definitely surprising. Gwyn leaned backwards though, fingers curling, so that Augus had to push himself up on tiptoe and found himself biting hard at Gwyn’s lower lip, swallowing the sharp sound he made, tilting his face and slanting his lips so that the kiss was more complete.

Gwyn breathed hard now, in a way he hadn’t when they’d been dancing. Augus, too, was beginning to forget that there was anything else that mattered except birds chirping around them and the scent of trees inhaling and exhaling all around them, the crushed mosses and earthiness of bark that Gwyn had pressed hard against his back.

‘Good?’ Augus murmured against Gwyn’s mouth, and Gwyn nodded, then moved his mouth away and panted when Augus’ fingers touched the collar and slipped back and found the chain again.

‘I don’t know how you do that,’ Gwyn said, his voice rough. ‘You make it seem easy. Would that I could…distract you, the same way.’

Augus shivered with warmth, remembering the temenos and the crown, how Gwyn had distracted him; Augus remembered the room with the small bed, the rough rope binding his arms behind him, Gwyn between his legs. ‘You have your ways, for all you think you don’t.’

Gwyn nodded, said nothing. His lips were swollen, his eyes half shut, and as Augus’ fingers walked along the outside of the collar, the metal ivy leaves warm under his touch, he took two huge breaths. Gwyn seemed half-drugged, and Augus bit at his jaw possessively, then clamped his teeth down on vulnerable skin above the collar, sucking a bruise into place and pressing his body along Gwyn’s length, riding the pulse of movement that followed.

‘We can go back and I can fuck you,’ Augus said into the crook of Gwyn’s neck, ‘or we can stay here and I can improvise.’

Gwyn was caught in indecision, but then he shook his head sharply and one of his hands slid around the back of Augus’ neck, beneath his mane, and Augus wanted to steal all of those touches and multiply them so that they no longer felt rare and precious.

‘Improvise.’

They ended up with Augus sitting with his back to a thick, smooth-barked tree. His pants pulled open and Gwyn on his hands and knees beside him, wearing every item of his clothing including the collar and the chain that Augus had wrapped around his hand once more. Gwyn hadn’t yet started, pressed his face into Augus’ waistcoat, moved as though nuzzling the shape of the feathers embroidered there.

Augus pushed up Gwyn’s thick overcoat, then realised as he began to slip his fingers beneath the hem of Gwyn’s pants that they were too tight.

‘Kneel up,’ Augus said. ‘Undo them, slide off the belt.’

Gwyn nodded, hesitated and then followed his directions, leaning towards Augus because of his grip on the chain. There were two spots of red upon his cheeks, and his lips were far more rosy than usual. The belt was placed beside them, and then Gwyn fumbled with the fastening of his own pants, biting into his top lip and then looking off into the woods.

‘I’m not ever very good at this when you distract me,’ Gwyn said.

‘There has never been a time when you weren’t good at choking on my cock,’ Augus said, tugging
on the chain gently, indicating his impatience.

Augus had to add some slack to the chain anyway, as he encouraged Gwyn into a position that allowed Gwyn to reach his cock, while Augus still had access to Gwyn’s lower back and more. It wasn’t the most graceful of positions, but Augus didn’t much care. One of his legs bent up, his heel digging into the ground as Gwyn’s fingers slipped into his pants and lifted his cock free. Augus’ mouth opened and he tilted his head back, mane catching on the faint texture of the bark, the feathers of his collar brushing his own skin sensuously.

He didn’t want slow, and he didn’t want neat and comfortable. As Gwyn’s mouth sank down Augus’ length and the suction began, Augus slid two of his fingers into his mouth and pressed his own tongue down, sucking hard enough to bring a flood of saliva forth, getting his fingers wet.

Gwyn’s pants were only halfway down the rise of his ass when Augus brought his fingers between the cleft of his ass. Gwyn stilled where he was sucking Augus’ cock, and Augus only brought the hand holding the chain to Gwyn’s neck and pushed him down, his fingers pressing roughly into Gwyn, first one, then the second, both taking advantage of that hot, tight space as Gwyn groaned around Augus’ cock and tried to push up. Augus kept his hand on Gwyn’s neck, his fingers in his ass, and took a relaxing breath and spread his legs a bit more, arching his hips up.

‘Come on,’ Augus said. ‘Work harder, Gwyn.’

He turned his fingers so that they were facing down, and then, twisting so that he could find the right angle, he shoved at Gwyn’s prostate and his teeth pressed together on a grin as Gwyn made a sharp sound that was likely pain and pleasure both. His prostate was always sensitive when they first started, and Augus enjoyed wringing all he could from him. He proceeded to rub his fingers over the spot mercilessly, saw the tremble in Gwyn’s shoulders.

‘I’ll tell you what,’ Augus said, ‘I’ll stop doing this once I’ve come. But if you come before me, Gwyn, I’m not going to stop, and it’s going to hurt. Even more than I think you like.’

Augus pressed his lips together when Gwyn started bobbing his head quickly, sucking on the upstroke, his tongue roughly pressing into the side and underside of Augus’ cock. The enthusiasm was possibly a sign of how close Gwyn was to coming, and Augus was not without his moments of cruelty, and he thrust his own fingers harder, faster, knowing that no matter how hard Gwyn worked, Augus was going to get what he wanted.

Gwyn made a sound of frustration, then a faint strangled noise when Augus let go of the chain and pushed down hard on the top of Gwyn’s head, feeling the head of his cock wedge into the tight unpredictability of Gwyn’s throat, never knowing when it would go loose or taut, when Gwyn would swallow, or his throat would try to force Augus free in spasms that were nothing but pleasure for Augus.

It was only a couple of minutes before Gwyn’s entire body began trembling and Augus inhaled between clenched teeth, wanting the spasm of release around his fingers, not even caring about the ache in his wrist at the odd angle. Gwyn was moving his head quickly now. He was trying to play the game properly at least, between all the frantic movement, he’d included a few slower strokes – trying so hard to work to what Augus liked. Those slow, powerful motions of Gwyn’s mouth around his cock, made it hard to breathe each time, but Augus held the trump card in this game. He got to choose when he came, and unlike Gwyn, he could hold his own release back for as long as he wanted – even if it would eventually become painful. Gwyn, on the other hand, had no such skill, and Augus was being ruthless with Gwyn’s prostate, each push firm and thorough and merciless.
The whimpers buzzing through Augus’ cock were very welcome.

Augus didn’t hold back when Gwyn’s entire body tensed and then jerked with his release, he didn’t even ease up when he felt a scrape of accidental teeth against his cock and hissed himself, and he didn’t stop when Gwyn finally pushed himself up off Augus’ cock and tried to twist away from Augus’ fingers, Augus’ other hand keeping him in place.

‘No,’ Augus said firmly. ‘Back to it, Gwyn. Concentrate.’

He shifted his fingers so that they weren’t directly pushing into Gwyn’s prostate for all of a few seconds, and then just as Gwyn took a shuddering, shaking breath of relief, Augus turned his fingers back and pressed hard, and laughed softly when Gwyn keened through clenched teeth.

The gaze Gwyn directed at him then was soulful, pleading, and Augus felt nothing more than glee move through him as he made a face of faux sympathy.

‘Tch, Gwyn, I’d love to stop, really, but…’ he looked down at his own cock and raised his eyebrows. ‘Whatever can I do? I haven’t come yet.’

Gwyn opened his mouth like he wanted to say something, spit out something hateful, but he wasn’t able. His face screwed up and he looked down and simply shook for several seconds, his entire body tense.

‘You know,’ Augus said, licking his lips, ‘you might want to get to it, Gwyn. I’ve done this for long enough with others before that they screamed for mercy. Do you think I gave it?’

Gwyn lowered himself on shaking arms and his breath trembled over the head of Augus’ cock, before he forced himself back down, the movements uncoordinated. It was obvious that Gwyn was having to focus very hard on shielding his teeth, not gritting his jaw together from overstimulation as he so often did when he didn’t have a cock in his mouth to occupy him.

‘It’s amazing,’ Augus said, groaning softly as Gwyn couldn’t control his breathing in the same way as before and the strangled noises came far more frequently. ‘It’s amazing how something so simple, can be so devastating, for some. Isn’t it? It probably doesn’t help that I like you like this, Gwyn. In pain for me. Work a bit harder now, come on. It’s called multitasking.’

A despairing moan around his cock and Augus dug his teeth into his bottom lip and sighed, pleased.

His fingers didn’t stop moving, though he slowed down the thrusts just a little. Even that much was enough to have Gwyn making sounds of gratitude around him. But even so, Augus varied the rhythm. Sometimes fast, sometimes slower. Sometimes slow rolls over Gwyn’s prostate, and then harder, vigorous stabs that he wouldn’t dare risk with someone at underfae class, that had Gwyn freeze and still and shake like he was going to come apart from the inside out, whining pained sounds over and over again.

Even then, Gwyn managed to drag himself back to what he was supposed to be doing, trying desperately to make it pleasing for Augus, saliva absolutely everywhere now, since Gwyn couldn’t control that too.

Augus didn’t need to keep his hand on Gwyn’s head anymore – Gwyn’s desperation to escape the overstimulation worked well enough on its own – so instead he picked up the chain again, ran his fingers around the collar, let himself edge closer to his own release, heat picking up through his body and spreading through him, tingling at the top of his neck, behind his ears, in between his
‘Soon,’ Augus said, when Gwyn’s shoulders heaved in something that could have been an attempt at breathing gone wrong, or something like a sob.

But Augus didn’t take pity on him – that could come later. Instead, he slowly increased the speed at which he pushed both of his fingers against Gwyn’s prostate, ruthlessly going after the gland inside of him, until Gwyn was keening around Augus’ cock and the vibrations were wonderful. Augus groaned softly and kept up the movement of his hand, deciding that improvising was actually far better than having absolutely every element of his life under his control at all times.

He was quite certain that Gwyn didn’t feel the same way, at this moment.

He called the heat of his own release closer, fanning it himself, when he knew that Gwyn was approaching his limits. There was only so much someone could take, before they cracked. Gwyn handled the pain of the pistillum like it was a good friend of his, but he handled this the way most clients handled the pistillum; not well.

The moment Augus’ cock jerked, the first pulse of release flooding into Gwyn’s mouth, Gwyn tried to rush up off Augus’ cock – no doubt to move away – and Augus grit his teeth together and forced Gwyn’s head back down and thrust his fingers hard into Gwyn’s ass and kept him in place.

‘Don’t be rude,’ Augus gasped through the muscle spasms of his own release. Gwyn went as limp as he could, though he still shook.

Augus slid his fingers free before he pulled Gwyn’s head up, a hand fisted in Gwyn’s hair.

Gwyn was gasping wetly, the sounds as hapless and involuntary as the spasms that had shaken through Augus’ body. His face was wet with saliva and tears, and Augus shook his head and pulled Gwyn close to him, pleased, warm and sated. Happy to be away from that awful palace.

‘Careful,’ Augus said, because now was the time to be gentle with him, to soothe. Gwyn collapsed against Augus’ chest, his breathing stuttered and weak and hitching. ‘That was marvellous.’

Gwyn slid one weak arm around Augus’ side and clung to him, his head pushed into Augus’ clothing and his legs curled. Augus began stroking Gwyn’s hair, making sure the strokes were long enough that he could unobtrusively check Gwyn’s pulse. He smelled no fear in the air. Gwyn was unmoored, but not traumatised, which meant this was also something they could do in the future.

*Oh, you poor thing, you have no idea the things I could do with you.*

Augus smiled into the side of Gwyn’s head, then kissed the top of his ear, listening as Gwyn took a deeper breath, sighed it out shakily.

‘Intense?’ Augus asked.

Gwyn nodded. Sniffed. Then laughed in a rough, broken way, though the sound was real, not forced.

‘You’re cruel,’ Gwyn said.

‘Am I?’ Augus said against his ear. ‘I have no idea where you’d get that impression. It’s not as though I’m a self-professed sadist, or anything.’

‘That hurt,’ Gwyn said, and Augus hummed, pleased. Gwyn laughed again, his arm tightening...
around Augus. ‘I’m sure that’s not the reaction you’re supposed to have, when I say that.’

‘It’s exactly the right reaction to have,’ Augus said. ‘You take pain so beautifully. And I let you come, didn’t I? Imagine the day when I get to do that to you and don’t let you come. At all. The entire day.’

Gwyn made a sound that was both dread and lust at the same time, and then he shuddered and curled tighter to Augus’ body. Dirt and leaves and twigs clung to both of their clothing. Gwyn’s coat was rumpled, his pants caught around his thighs, the collar still around his neck, loops of chain still in Augus’ hands.

‘I like this collar,’ Augus said. ‘It suits you.’

‘I like it too,’ Gwyn said absently. Augus leaned his head back and smiled at nothing in particular, because this – *this* – was what he so rarely got to have, unless he wore Gwyn out first. Augus hadn’t even needed hours and hours to get it this time. Not only that, but Gwyn was no longer scrambling to get away, to hide how much he needed this reassurance afterwards. It seemed a lifetime ago that Gwyn had denied that he needed aftercare, had been scared of it. Instead, he’d gone pliant in Augus’ arms, his breathing already levelling out.

‘You’re a good dancer,’ Augus said. ‘I’m not sure what I was expecting, but I don’t think it was that.’

‘I liked it,’ Gwyn said, quietly. ‘Learning to dance. It was like sword drills, but without the promise of violence. I… I know you must think I hated every part of my childhood, but it wasn’t quite like that, Augus. I – I surprised mother, when I requested more dance lessons. And she…for whatever reason she had, she granted that request. Perhaps because she didn’t want me to humiliate myself further in a Court environment. But it was something I enjoyed.’

‘I’m imagining it,’ Augus said quietly. ‘You as a young thing, and it always astounds me that you are the way that you are now. For you were such a gentle soul, really, weren’t you? Wanted to be a map-maker so badly you apprenticed to your Master Ethwynn. Enjoyed dance. You have a latent potential for sorcery somewhere in there. You enjoy the company of animals. In another lifetime, Gwyn, you never went near a sword, did you?’

‘Mm,’ Gwyn said, a little tense, but not as much as he would have been, had he not been exhausted and more open to this line of conversation. ‘Perhaps not. But…Augus…my light, I would have been *something*. I like the hunt. I love it.’

‘That’s also true, my wild creature. That is true.’ Augus rubbed at Gwyn’s hair and then untangled it patiently, listening to Gwyn’s breathing turn slow and even, wondering at how quickly Gwyn had let himself sink into a doze.

He turned his own head and stared out into the woods, feeling protective and territorial and relaxed all at the same time. Whatever was coming, it was bad enough to kick Gwyn into a fast downward spiral, and whatever Augus had offered him now…it was only a temporary stay, at best.

Augus quietly spent the rest of the morning imagining ways he could hurt Kabiri. He knew he’d never get a chance to get any kind of revenge against a god, but he could dream.

* 

Hours later, they returned. Augus had neated his clothing, then done the same for Gwyn, who was more quiescent than usual, though the haunted look on his face began to return even before
Augus had sighed and mentioned the palace.

The Winter Court was still in effect – as it would be for the traditional twenty one days – but Ash and Gulvi, Fenwrel and Aleutia were in the throne room. Augus walked over to Ash, noticed the strange look that Gulvi gave him. Things had been odd between them ever since Julvia’s treatment had yielded a visible sign of forward progress. Augus hadn’t actually seen Julvia since she’d attacked him, but Aleutia had assured him that things were going better than expected; though she hadn’t yet managed a shift back to human form, they were…hopeful.

But it did mean that now Augus was having to deal with weirdness from Gulvi, and it was just easier when she hated him and wasn’t conflicted about it. He sighed, turned, noticed his mask hanging from his throne and was glad that someone had picked it up for him. Then, belatedly, he realised that Gwyn’s was on a forest floor in some random forest that Augus couldn’t go back to on his own.

After Gwyn thanked the rest of them for organising the masquerade ball and the Winter Court, he called them all into a meeting. Augus found himself following at Gwyn’s side towards one of the strategy rooms.

So not tomorrow then, but now.

Not a single word that spilled out of Gwyn’s mouth was comforting. Not when Gwyn talked about Iliak’s concerns about Seelie-Unseelie cabals being split up by Albion, or the possibility of Seelie fae asking for asylum, nor the fact that Kabiri had used a debt to free Ifir and demand Court status. When Gwyn brought up his concerns regarding Davix, the old lore, Augus’ mind started to drift, and then…

‘Ash,’ Gwyn said, frowning. ‘The Mage I sent you to. For that Soulbond. What did he look like?’

‘Uh,’ Ash said, pushing his chair back. ‘About that…’

Augus looked between them quickly, eyes widening. He felt his hands tense beneath the table.

‘Tell me,’ Gwyn said.

‘Okay, this is…I didn’t- I sort of meant to say something at the time and then the opportunity just never came up probably because…because I was acting like too much of a dick but…ah. Okay. So. You know how you did that light show with Albion and his Inner Court a while back? And the Mage, Davix, was there?’

‘I do,’ Gwyn said.

‘The Mage you sent me to – Firebeard, or whatever his name is, he…they’re nearly identical, man. I- What could I say? I didn’t know what to say, you have to believe me,’ Ash turned and looked at Augus, shaking his head quickly. ‘I didn’t know what to do. You were already so mad that I had an open-ended debt with a Mage, and by that point I just wanted to forget about all of it and so I didn’t say anything like, who knows, maybe all Mages look alike after a while? You know? Something?’ Fenwrel clucked her tongue a few times and Ash smiled weakly. ‘I mean obviously I’m wrong about that too.’

‘Olphix,’ Fenwrel said quietly. ‘He’s a solitary Mage. Not a member of the Thirteen. He likes it when people forget he exists.’

‘He not only exists,’ Gwyn said quietly, ‘he’s got an open-ended debt with a member of my Inner Court, and Kabiri was firm and clear – there are two sides. Kabiri on one, and Davix and Olphix on
‘Then kick me out of the fucking Inner Court,’ Ash said, his voice tumbling forth. His eyes were bright, and Augus’ nostrils flared on an old, familiar bitterness. The scent of Ash’s fear. ‘I don’t want to be made to hurt anyone or betray anyone. Just…’

‘It’s not that simple,’ Gwyn said carefully, precisely. ‘We’ll talk more about this later. But rest assured, you haven’t been kicked out of the Inner Court yet. I don’t think a Mage taking advantage of your naivete – or a god taking advantage of my desperation – will be the final nail in that coffin.’

With that, Gwyn steered the conversation away to other matters, and Augus saw in the very still, neutral face of Fenwrel’s, and Gulvi’s concern pinching at her eyes and mouth, that things were worse than he’d feared.

‘We always knew it would be war eventually, didn’t we?’ Augus said, looking at all of them.

‘The war is a distraction,’ Gwyn said, and Augus was surprised when Fenwrel nodded in agreement across the table. ‘But it could be the end of the Unseelie. It is our biggest threat. But this? Mages, gods, more? I doubt they care very much for battle at all.’

‘La! Except what it can win them,’ Gulvi said. ‘They’re not so lofty, my darlings. If Davix has allied himself with Albion truly, a Seelie win in war must mean something to Davix and Olphix. And on that matter, what is the point, I ask you, in having oaths that should not be broken by the Thirteen, when the Thirteen won’t do anything to punish an oath-breaker in the first place? Those oaths are meaningless. Better they be etched in blood.’

Fenwrel sighed at the direct glare that Gulvi was giving her. It seemed that this was something they’d gone over before.

‘It is not that oath-breakers are not punished. It is that Davix is too powerful for the Thirteen to focus any sort of retribution upon him. The Raven Prince matched him in strength, but he is no longer here.’

Gwyn was staring at all of them, his eyes narrowed, mouth slightly open, and Augus could practically see how fast his mind was working. But after several seconds, Gwyn’s expression smoothed into neutrality, and he began talking about the success of the masquerade ball and a re-assessment of allies within the Court. Whatever he’d worked out for himself, he wasn’t going to share it with the others.

* 

‘Ash, can I speak with you for a moment?’ Gwyn said, beckoning Ash over after the meeting.

Augus was waiting by Gwyn’s side, he took a careful breath. He didn’t get many opportunities to watch the interactions between his brother and Gwyn. Knew enough to know that Gwyn behaved around Ash similarly to how he’d behaved around Crielle. All forced self-control and a careful policing of his own expression. Augus’ chest twinged to observe it, because even though he’d always known of Ash’s predatory nature, he never thought that Ash would inflict it on a fae; let alone Gwyn.

‘It’s about the open debt, isn’t it?’ Ash said, his mouth tense, his hand scrubbing hard at the back of his head.

‘Yes and no,’ Gwyn said, looking over at the wall where parchments and strategic documents were pinned. ‘To what degree were you working the crowd tonight? With your glamour?’
Ash shrugged, though he looked shamefaced. ‘I know you told me not to. But I can’t help it. I really…I– It just happens. Big group of people. You know.’

‘I suspect I do,’ Gwyn said.

Ash looked over at Augus as though for support, but Augus wasn’t sure what was happening.

‘We had several families tonight re-pledge monetary support to the Kingdom, or offer more than they have before. I think that was indirectly assisted by your influence,’ Gwyn said. ‘You offered it yourself, to assist the Court with your glamour. And you cannot work against me or the Kingdom, due to the blood-oath you’ve made. So I was thinking that perhaps you’d like more responsibility in the Unseelie Court. We could put you to good use here.’

Augus frowned. Gwyn didn’t understand Ash at all. Ash was about the human world, and getting drunk, and having good times. He wasn’t about responsibility or work. Augus shook his head.

‘I don’t think that’s a good idea,’ Augus said. ‘Not for–’

‘Really?’ Ash said to Gwyn, eyes flicking over at Augus, and then back again. ‘I just…have been feeling kind of directionless for a long time now.’

‘Ash,’ Augus said, shaking his head. ‘You hate the Court, remember?’

‘Yeah,’ Ash said, laughing. ‘I remember. I still do. But I can’t- I can’t just go to the human world and forget everything like I used to. I haven’t been able to for a long time, Augus. It sort of lost its appeal back when- I mean- Back when you disappeared. And then after that. I didn’t want to say anything. I didn’t even want to see it for myself. And I’m not saying I won’t want to go back to that some day, but I’m not safe around humans if I’m sort of…looking for sex. I’m just not.’

‘You have the trust of the Court in a way that many of us do not,’ Gwyn said to Ash. ‘Your glamour is so strong. You could do so much with that. It reminds me of Crielle’s glamour, sometimes.’

Augus’ gut felt like lead, Ash blanched.

‘That’s…not a compliment, man.’

‘Actually, it is,’ Gwyn said firmly. ‘She held that entire Seelie Court in the palm of her hand, for good or ill. The Oak King knew the benefit of having someone like her on his Court, even as he knew that she was glamouring him too. You are a powerful fae. You’ve played that down for three thousand years, but the fact remains that, like Augus, you are far more powerful than previous incarnations of the Glashtyn. Undirected, you are far more dangerous to us – and yourself.’

Ash was looking at Gwyn oddly, and then he looked aside and shrugged, nodded. Augus thought back to Gulvi telling him that she thought Ash was lost. He’d assumed that it would mean that he’d have to come up with the solution. Yet here they were, and Gwyn seemed to have it all figured out.

‘It would be nothing too taxing,’ Gwyn said. ‘Only keeping up confidence in the Court, helping others to remember that there is something like hope. The Winter Court would be an ideal place to test out how you wish to do it, and monitor what it feels like. If you could gather intelligence while talking to others in casual conversation, that would help. Though…it’s a skill, and you could talk to Gulvi to learn–’

‘Nah, I know how to do that,’ Ash said. He smiled at Augus’ expression. ‘What, brother? I’ve spent some three thousand years in the human world figuring out how to discover people’s deepest
secrets, all while making them think it was their own idea. I got that part covered.’

‘Fae are different. They will know you’re using your glamour to manipulate them.’

‘No, they won’t,’ Ash said, his eyes brightening. ‘You think I always need glamour when I’m talking to someone? You think I can’t make the glamour gentle and sweet anyway? You think Ifir had any idea that I was-’ Ash broke off and cleared his throat, his smile disappearing. ‘Sorry.’

Gwyn said nothing for a long period of time, then frowned.

‘Hey, look, I didn’t-’ Ash said, and looked like he was going to launch into an apologetic spiel, and Gwyn only held up his hand and Ash fell quiet.

‘This debt you have,’ Gwyn said quietly, ‘it cannot be helped.’

Ash pressed a hand to his face, and when it dropped, his eyes looked shadowed. The kind of expression he wore after his night terrors.

‘What is he going to ask me to do?’ Ash said, his voice hoarse.

‘I do not know.’

‘Because if he asks for betrayal. I have a blood-oath, I can’t-’

‘He cannot ask you to do anything that would cost you your life,’ Gwyn said, looking away. ‘In which case, that blood-oath may save you from certain types of betrayal. But I think it is safe to say that Olphix and Davix know they have a trump card within this Court.’

‘I don’t want to hurt anyone,’ Ash said, and then he laughed bitterly. ‘I mean I know I do it real easy, you know, but, really…I just don’t want to. And I can’t think of why else… I mean how did you even know to send me to him? Did you know who he was?’

‘No,’ Gwyn said, sighing. ‘I didn’t. There were only two names listed in an old text, Mages who might know something of Soulbonds. And I couldn’t go myself. Their names were…not specific.’

‘I don’t understand how it could work out like this,’ Ash said, his voice cracking. ‘It’s not like he could know you were going to look up Soulbonds. It’s not like…it’s not like this god or whatever, it’s not like he knew you were going to be in a situation where you’d pray for him, right?’

‘I don’t think that’s how this works,’ Gwyn said, sighing. ‘I think they’ve both been sowing debts for a long time. Longer than you or I have been alive. Perhaps it’s just dumb luck that it ended up that you’d have an open debt to one, and I’d have an open debt to the other.’

‘Yeah, cuz the fae world is so much about dumb luck over weird coincidences and epic…whatevers,’ Ash said, turning away.

Augus stretched his arm out, touched a hand to the back of Ash’s shoulder, watched him still, felt the tension in him.

‘Ash, it is what it is,’ Augus said.

‘You’re a part of this Court,’ Gwyn said, his voice stern. ‘There’s no use pre-emptively trying to guess what the debt will be when it’s called. You’ve oathed to not work against the Kingdom. It is a waste of your time and ours to lament what hasn’t yet come to pass, and may never come to pass.’
Ash turned back to face him, his expression raw. Augus folded his fingers around Ash’s wrist, and their hands fell together, tightly gripping each other.

‘If you’ll excuse me,’ Gwyn said to the both of them, ‘I need to chase up some matters.’

Augus watched Gwyn go and wanted to follow, but not as much as he wanted to stay by Ash’s side. When the door closed, Ash leaned into Augus’ side and made the kind of griping, complaining noise he used to make when he was a child.

‘I don’t like any of this,’ Ash said.

‘Me either,’ Augus agreed.

‘Giving me shit to do that I actually want to do, basically telling me that he and the Court have my back… He makes me feel like an asshole. All the fucking time. He was always like this, wasn’t he?’

‘Mm,’ Augus said. He reached up and tousled Ash’s hair. ‘You get used to it after a while. Eventually, you start feeling like you need to be noble in certain situations. But don’t listen to it. It’s a bad impulse.’

‘Ha,’ Ash said, and then he started laughing. ‘Hey, Augus? What’s my heartsong?’

Augus closed his eyes and pressed his cheek into Ash’s curly damp hair while he thought about it. They hadn’t played this game in such a long time.

‘Is there some word that sums up ‘annoying younger brother?’ Because I feel that might be apropos.’

‘You’re essentially saying my heartsong is that I’m a little shit,’ Ash said. ‘Neat. I like it.’

Augus smiled as Ash stepped away from him.

‘Anyway, bro,’ Ash said. ‘Winter Court’s still going. I’m gonna keep an eye on things. But if you need me for anything, just come grab me.’

‘Likewise,’ Augus said. ‘Truly.’

Ash beamed, and walked from the room with something that almost looked like a sense of purpose.

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Augus spent the rest of the day preparing more medication for Julvia. He’d altered the recipes now that her awareness was mostly back, ran everything by Aleutia, and she once again reduced his dosages. He thought he may have earned something like her grudging respect, but he doubted they’d ever come close to liking each other. It was a shame. Aleutia’s wealth of herbal wisdom was vast, and Augus knew he could learn so much from her.

The door opened quickly, Augus froze with a beaker in tongs and goggles over his face and a huge leather apron tied around his neck and waist. Gulvi hadn’t seen him in this kind of gear before, and he didn’t honestly need to wear this much protective clothing with most of the herbs he was using. She stared at him, her wings widening and then staying splayed, her black eyes shocked.

‘If it’s that dangerous to you, darling, then why are you giving it to Julvia?’
‘Because,’ Augus said crisply, ‘it’s not dangerous after this part of the process. Can I help you?’

He kept working as he waited, every stage time sensitive. Caustic chemicals crept up his nose, but they were no longer truly noxious now that he was Court status. He only bothered to protect his eyes both out of habit, and because he didn’t want to heal from any kind of chemical eye injury even if it would only take a few days for him to recover.

Gulvi waited too, which meant whatever she wanted to say was perhaps difficult to hear. Augus grimaced, but it was still a good five minutes later before he was taking off the heavy gloves and lifting the goggles.

‘There’s been another shapeshifter caught,’ Gulvi said, her voice dark. ‘One of my apprentices is patrolling the borderlands around the Court. It’s good practice for her. She found a young man, with a bow and a quiver of arrows, claiming to be one Mafydd Brant. He was asking for asylum. The name…meant nothing to me, until I recalled some time ago, that you had mentioned Mafydd in passing and Gwyn had reacted poorly. I need you to use compulsions to be sure, but initially I was going to fetch Gwyn, and now-’

‘Don’t fetch him,’ Augus said sharply, stripping off the apron and the goggles and walking over to a basin of river rock and cleaning his hands. ‘Don’t tell him. I will.’

‘Who is he?’ Gulvi said. But her eyes were a little too sharp, too knowing.

‘What have you deduced?’ Augus said, turning back to her. ‘I don’t want to play this game, Gulvi. Not about this.’

‘He’s young,’ Gulvi said, ‘and winsome, attractive and…barely an adult. These shapeshifters are people from Gwyn’s past. What would I find if I had one of my informants look in the Seelie Registry for information on him?’

‘I’m surprised you haven’t done it already,’ Augus said.

‘I don’t have as much free time as I used to,’ Gulvi replied, scratching at her back, where her feathers met her skin. ‘This is some childhood sweetheart? Yes?’

‘Of a sort,’ Augus said. ‘Where is he detained?’

‘I can’t…justify putting him in the prison until I can be certain he is a shapeshifter,’ Gulvi said, sounding frustrated. ‘I need your compulsions for that. I’ll take you to him? Then we can be done with this quickly.’

‘That would be best,’ Augus said.

He stored and cleaned everything up as best as he could, and he was quietly amazed that Gulvi didn’t snipe at him or tell him to go faster. He wasn’t even sure which he preferred – her patience, or her cruelty.

In the pit of his gut was a blackened, charred anger that was fanning back to life. That Crielle wasn’t yet done even though she was dead. That she had somehow managed to find a way to copy Mafydd, even though she likely had never known him that well. Hopefully that would mean that the shapeshifter would be a poor facsimile, and they could be done with this as soon as possible.

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They escorted the Mafydd-shapeshifter to a cell. One compulsion was all it took to reveal he was a
shapeshifter. And he was possibly the least knowledgeable, the least complete of all the
shapeshifters. Visually, perhaps, it was him. But how much had Crielle known truly? How much
documentation had there been about a young Reader and his personality and dialogue patterns? Not
even enough for the true shapeshifters. Even they had known that their faux-Mafydd was one of
the weakest links.

But Gwyn…that was the tricky part. Augus had seen him choke over the boy’s name. Seen him
slip into a dissociative trance and not return until Augus had promised not to speak of him again.
Seen him lose his footing after nightmares. There had been progress, yes, but progress over a
memory was very different to knowing what would happen if Gwyn insisted on seeing him in the
flesh.

Especially when Gwyn wasn’t that far away from whatever despair pulled at him.

The trows led him to Gwyn’s location – a scroll library – where Gwyn sat at a tilted table and
wearily scanned the writing. Augus blinked to see the Raven Prince’s wild scrawl, remembered a
time when he would be blowing the ink dry on a missive that the Raven Prince had given him,
wondering if whoever it was supposed to be sent to would even be able to understand it.

‘Enlightening?’ Augus said, thinking of how carefully he’d need to step, and how there were no
goggles or apron or heavy gloves to handle this situation, and yet it felt far more dangerous.

‘Depends upon your definition of enlightening,’ Gwyn said, his voice a monotone.

Augus swallowed, then walked up to Gwyn’s side, staring down at the range of scrolls. Some were
simply tallies of numbers, others were some kind of symbolic shorthand that Augus didn’t
recognise. His chest felt tight.

‘We have another shapeshifter in custody,’ Augus said. Gwyn, predictably, stiffened. ‘I think it
might be the last of them. Or one of the last.’

‘What makes you say that?’ Gwyn said, tilting his head, turning to look up at Augus’ face.

‘The shapeshifter doesn’t know a great deal. About the person he’s playing. He’s a very weak link
in what I hope is the end of the chain.’

Gwyn looked back at the scrolls, and then his whole body seemed to shudder and he stared at
Augus. Gwyn’s pupils dilated, on Augus’ next inhale he thought he smelled acid and burnt carbon
and knew it as the scent of Gwyn’s fear. But then he smelled nothing except scrolls and Gwyn’s
regular scent.

‘I don’t think you should go see this one,’ Augus said. ‘But it is of course, up to you.’

‘It’s Mafydd, isn’t it?’ Gwyn said, his voice cracking. He pushed his chair back and it scraped
across the floor. He walked towards one of the wooden shelves and stood near it. Then he folded
his arms and shook his head tightly. ‘Isn’t it?’

‘Yes,’ Augus said.

A beat, and Augus prepared about ten different responses, each one either an assertion, an order,
pleading, all along the lines of; don’t see him.

He had nothing prepared for Gwyn’s actual response.

‘I can’t see him,’ Gwyn said, squeezing his eyes shut. ‘Unless…you think I must?’
‘No,’ Augustus said.

‘I thought you’d…think I should get some kind of closure,’ Gwyn said, and he placed the heel of his hand to his forehead. He pressed himself harder into the edge of the shelving unit, he looked older and younger all at once.

‘That’s not what I think,’ Augustus said.

‘It’s just…’ Gwyn dropped his arm and then folded it around his torso. ‘Mother did this to destabilise me. Seeing him will destabilise me. I am…I am hopefully possessed of at least the shred of intelligence that tells me not to see him? I didn’t get a choice when the shapeshifters looked like you or Lludd. But I get a choice now. I want to…I…’ Gwyn made a sound that was not quite a cry, and was raw and terrible and too soft for what it conveyed. ‘I want to see him again.’

Gwyn shook his head over and over again, convincing not Augustus – Augustus knew that much. Convincing himself.

‘I can’t,’ Gwyn said, as much to himself now. ‘Because it’s not him. Because…she will have given him the words of condemnation I have imagined myself so many times. But they’re not the words he would say. I heard the words he said at the end. I know how he felt. I don’t need to hear- I don’t…’

Gwyn’s mouth opened and he blew out a breath, looking for all the world like he’d just taken a wound to the side.

‘Okay,’ Gwyn said, his voice calming. ‘I’m not seeing him. I’m not seeing that. A year ago, perhaps. Now? No.’

Augustus wasn’t sure he’d be able to make the same decision, if the roles were reversed. He knew pride when he felt it. That lifting warmth that felt like air underneath his lungs, when Ash had learned something new, when Augustus had accomplished something difficult.

‘When was the last time you ate?’ Augustus said.

‘I could eat,’ Gwyn said in response, voice still raw and vulnerable. Gwyn lurched away from the shelving towards Augustus.

‘Gwyn–’ Augustus said, holding a hand out.

‘No,’ Gwyn said, his voice shaking. ‘It’s not okay. I’m not…it’s not okay. But can we just pretend…can we just pretend that it is?’

Augustus looked at the expression on his face, wanted nothing more than to fold over him protectively. Instead, he nodded, and Gwyn closed his eyes in relief.

Gwyn was silent as they walked to the kitchens. It wasn’t until Augustus was munching on some salad leaves as Gwyn soberly made some kind monstrosity of a meat roll, that Augustus blinked and frowned; he couldn’t remember the last time he’d actually done something solely for himself, that didn’t stand to benefit someone else. It was fine for now, but if he didn’t do something about it soon…

‘So,’ Gwyn said, at what must have been a forced attempt at cheer when he sat down at the table. ‘That waterweed trick that you do, when you shoot it out of your wrists; does it hurt? It’s not like my light, is it?’
Augus couldn’t stop the quirk of his lips.

Well, if he wasn’t paying attention to himself, at least someone else was.

Chapter End Notes

In our next chapter, 'Exploration:'

‘You’re mad,’ Gwyn said.

‘Yes,’ Augus said, though his voice was quiet, there was a sharpness in it like the crack of a whip.

‘That seems very much par for the course,’ Gwyn said, as Augus’ fingers tightened in his shoulder. ‘Everyone mad.’

‘Why- Why would you say no to visiting a shapeshifter that looked like Mafydd, and then do this?’

‘It’s my estate,’ Gwyn said, knowing he sounded like nothing more than a child. ‘It’s mine and I can do what I like with it.’

‘So you decided to go and torture yourself?’
Gwyn

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Gwyn stood in the creamy foyer, bright sandstone everywhere, wealth sprawling and not a speck of dust anywhere despite the fact that the estate hadn’t been maintained for months. Fae magic kept everything preserved.

Including the bloodstains.

Gwyn’s boot went out and toed at one of the dark brown stains that was once the lifeblood of one of the servants. It was long since dried and soaked into the stone. It would be difficult to remove without contracting fae who specialised in that kind of thing, and he still wasn’t sure what he wanted to do with the An Fnwy estate.

Fenwrel returned an hour later from her check of the grounds, her staff out, her eyes sharp, ears twitching. ‘There’s a few bits and pieces here and there. Mostly just trigger spells to let someone know that you’re going into certain spaces. I’ve disarmed everything. But they may know that you’re here. Otherwise, everything is warded further as you’ve requested.’

Fenwrel’s fingers tightened on her staff and she looked around the space.

‘Gwyn,’ she said, not Your Majesty as she was supposed to, ‘are you sure that you don’t wish Augus to know about this?’

‘I’m quite sure,’ Gwyn said.

Augus had been so pleased, or surprised, when Gwyn had said he wasn’t going to see the Mafydd shapeshifter. Then, not twenty four hours later, Gwyn was seized with an impulse to visit the An Fnwy estate – it was his after all – alone. He only brought Fenwrel with him to cover his bases.

Augus had been clear he wanted to be with Gwyn when he returned.

Gwyn was just as sure he needed to do this alone.

‘Do you wish me to stay?’ Fenwrel said. ‘You’re well protected, now. There’s a warning system in the wards, also, so if two of the three magical wards are broken, you’ll hear it and be able to teleport away.’

‘Thank you,’ Gwyn said. ‘You can go.’

Fenwrel inclined her head and kept her staff out as she walked to the grand double doors of the property. She would no doubt teleport away within the gardens, and they were overgrown.
Preserving fae magic didn’t work on plants, and Crielle would have been displeased to see her garden in such an unruly state.

When Fenwrel was gone, Gwyn stood for a length of time, then cleared his throat and walked towards the kitchens. He was halfway down the servant’s corridor when he smelled the amount of blood waiting for him and he faltered and then stopped.

Delphine’s blood. He wasn’t ready for that.

He turned around and walked back the way he’d come, taking the steps one at a time, the way he’d been raised to. There were punishments for so many small transgressions. Taking the steps two at a time. Running – even to prevent lateness. Trailering one’s hand along the bannisters when it was unnecessary. Touching the walls idly for any reason.

On the second level, he stood in a corridor of bright creamy stone and thick, plush rugs and furs upon the ground. To his right, the rooms of his parents, and the rooms where Efni and Efni’s parents used to stay. To the left, his rooms, along with a great deal of storage space and some of the guest quarters. His parents did everything they could to make sure no one stayed in the storage wing, as they came to call it. Anything to not call it ‘Gwyn’s wing.’

He could scent the many fae who had come after Augus had gone through and destroyed those who had been the last to live here. He took two uncertain steps towards his rooms, then paused, looking around.

He lifted his fingers to touch the wallpaper and then stopped, his skin crawling, remembering punishments he’d not had to experience for a long time.

Crielle’s rooms called him, and he turned and walked stiltedly towards her primary bedroom that she only sometimes shared with Lludd. He looked down at the golden door handles, then placed his hands on them and turned them, tense all over, waiting for some kind of vicious magic to abrade him.

Nothing came except a plume of scent; the perfumes she used to wear, dabbed onto her wrists and underneath her ears. A mix of light nectar with a base note that was astringently woody and remained fresh after all this time. He could smell the richness of the fabrics she commissioned in glamorous garments. Even the faint sting of poison beneath his nose. Her work as a poisoner didn’t happen upstairs, but she had always stored some of them in her rooms.

Her bed was a four-poster draped with a thin, shimmering gossamer that would twinkle like the stars when evening came. Her bed was made, but rumpled, a consequence – no doubt – of the Seelie fae coming through and looking for intelligence after she was killed. There was no way the servants would leave her room like that, and he knew that Augus didn’t hurt her here. He swallowed down a bitter anger that the Seelie fae would leave her room so. It wasn’t even that untidy. They’d clearly tried to neaten it before they’d left.

He spent too long in every corner he explored. Too long in her wardrobe, touching the fabric of so many dresses that he’d never been able to touch before, because she loathed it when his body came anywhere near her. A lot of the gowns looked far softer than they felt. He’d always imagined that her dresses were all like silk, growing up, but it turned out they weren’t. Some of the lightest looking material was even coarse, underneath his fingertips.

There were fur stoles, coats, muffts. All of them from animals that had been gifted as pelts or that Lludd had caught, because whatever Gwyn had hunted for the estate wasn’t good enough. He found an entire chamber that was devoted only to jewellery, and the Seelie fae had left all of it.
Which meant that all this wealth was his.

Gwyn blinked at it all and took down a pair of earrings, looking at the alexandrite that gleamed from within. He’d never seen her wear these. But she was gifted so much jewellery and even though she’d resold a great deal of it, she kept those pieces she admired, even if they didn’t flatter her appearance.

It was mercenary, but he mentally began calculating how much it might all be worth. The numbers were high when he stopped, feeling sick to his stomach and angry with himself. The Unseelie Court took precedence. They needed the funds.

He put the earrings back and rubbed both of his hands over his face, frustrated.

Underneath a shelving unit that he pulled away from the wall, he found loosened sections of stone and levered them up. There, a wooden box with a forcibly broken lock. This was what the Seelie fae were looking for. The An Fnwy estate held parcels of land all over the world, traded in military secrets as well as those of merchants. When Gwyn opened the box, there was nothing there except the faded scent of paper and parchment.

But Gwyn knew his mother better than the Seelie fae did, and Gwyn put the box aside and knocked carefully on another layer of stone, listening out for hollows. Then, he forced his fingernails into a tiny crevice and wrenched it back, cracking the stone through accidentally. He stacked the stone and lifted out a metal box, this one with the lock preserved.

Crielle hid so much documentation and more in her home, they’d likely been tired of trying to search everything out. He knew she would have more in other rooms; a great deal more, all over the place. She didn’t trust banks, she didn’t have a personal scribe, she did so much of this herself.

The lock was magicked, and Gwyn frowned when it resisted his brute strength. Then, he closed his eyes and let his fingers run along the seams of the box until he found the hinges. The magic was almost non-existent there, so he broke the hinges instead.

Receipts here, nothing more. But Gwyn stared at the items purchased. Some of it was for precious metals and gems, some of it for poisons, and some for herbs that Gwyn had never heard of. He folded all of it and tucked the empty box back into the nook where he’d found it. He kept reaching around in the dusty dark space, but there was nothing else there.

He found several more boxes and sheafs of parchment in Crielle’s room, knocking all the way along the walls and the ceiling, pulling the four poster bed back and even crawling into the cleaned hearth and coughing at the smell of soot and charcoal. He found several items of fire-blazed jewellery in the hearth itself – stones that would flicker like flame for hours after flame had touched them. The fire kept the pieces healthy, but he was surprised to see that she had kept it stored there. He took it all out. The blue stones were dull now, hadn’t been touched by fire for months.

Hours had passed when he found a heavy chest behind a great deal of stone and panelling. He couldn’t figure out how to open it. The locks were clearly magicked to her touch. The wood was impervious no matter what he tried to do to it – which was why he now had bruised knuckles. He could hear something inside of it – books perhaps, logs of transactions?

With the hook at the back of an earring, he pierced his own finger and pressed it to the lock. A series of clicks, and the chest of polished wood was open to him. Blood magic. So Lludd wouldn’t have been able to open it, but her direct family could. He eased the lock free and opened up the chest to see at least forty leather bound journals. Each had a different plant motif tooled on the
front, so as he opened one, he expected it to be a herbarium. Instead, he saw her delicate, neat scribings. He’d tried to model his handwriting on hers, he’d always admired it.

14th day of the Capricious Moon, Wheat Cyc., Season of Turning.

Albion is King. I miss Quercus. Albion is not nearly as receptive, and his scepticism frustrates. Three times today I resisted blasting his mind, but we’ll need it later. The house is empty, and it echoes. All’eth says I am imagining things, that the servants are busy as ever, but I know this house and I know its emptiness.

I went to the creature’s room today. I don’t think I’ll ever forgive dear Lludd for not just letting me be done with it, all those years ago. He worried for my sanity, but I’ve had three thousand years and I think it is safe to say he preserved nothing of my mind when he let it live.

The T. vulgaris is growing nicely. It sent up three shoots this morning. Usually they only send up two a season. Melchor says I spoil it, but it is clearly a specimen that desires to be spoiled, and I can relate.

Gwyn snapped the journal shut, his heart racing. His eyes were wide, but he stared at nothing at all. His fingers dug into leather and slowly he looked at all the books in the chest and licked his lips and reached out. She would never have forgiven him for this violation, but he’d already destroyed so much of her, violated the integrity of her body just by existing.

I went to the creature’s room today…

‘Mother,’ Gwyn mouthed, lifting out journal after journal, until he found the earliest ones. He flicked through page after heavy page, looking at sketches of plants, designs for clothing and carriages and furniture, or jewellery she particularly enjoyed, drawn down so she could remember it later – even though she could look at the real thing whenever she wanted.

Many entries concerned the running of the An Fnwy estate, or even Seelie politics – a lot of which he already knew – and then, after flicking through page after page:

I am finally with child! No more laying with Lludd. I can sense his disappointment from here. Why can he not just let himself loose with a whore, or some Mistress? He doesn’t need me.

I feared it wouldn’t happen. I feared it so, I became sick with it, I know that now. My dearest chwaer – oh Penny – she was right to make me stand beneath that meteor shower. I wished upon my little starchild and now here he is. I already know he’s going to be a boy, and fast friends with dear Efnisien, and beloved, and all the wealth I have been accruing for so long finally feels as though it has a point.

Gwyn dropped the journal and ran to the tiled bathroom, throwing up violently, his face covered in sweat, his skin crawling. He flushed the commode – the whole thing looked like it had been carved out of some single, giant pearl – and then felt too weak to stand.

That passed, and he dragged himself upright, back to the journals. He sat down, tucked his legs against himself, leaned against the four poster bed and kept flicking through the pages.

I am so tired of morning sickness! All-day sickness! Lludd fusses, but Lludd’s fussing is about as graceful as a molosser dog. It just lacks the drool and slobber.

Gwyn smiled helplessly, imagining it. But his mouth felt wrong, and his face felt like clay. He kept turning pages, reading about ‘all-day sickness’ and Crielle’s fear that she would lose the child and
Penny’s gentle excitement for her and careful logs of how Efnisien was learning to read. Crielle’s fondness for him shone off every page. But even brighter:

_I do not mind that you make me ill, little Gwyn, starchild. You’ve not stolen my appetite from me, no, I find I am voracious! I crave the rarest of meats and Delphine says it means you will be strong and fierce, a little hunter, like his father. But I think you will delight the Court too. Though is it you giving me these nightmares? I can’t fathom them. I dream of stars in the firmament, and then an explosion of light so bright I am blinded. Is it just the best of you? Am I rendered insensate by your brilliance? I suppose I can forgive that, starchild. I wish mam-gu was here. She’d know what the nightmares meant, I’m sure._

Then, a month later:

_The nightmares are very bad, but I think of you and everything is better, my starchild. Penny brushes my hair for me, and the servants are all being so very, very good. Except for a young new one, but Penny will deal with her. Why is it that after all this time, mam-gu’s servants are still the only ones who seem to understand?_

_You’ll understand, my baby. You’re An Fnwy. You’ll understand._

Later:

_Gwyn ap Lludd. No middle name. Something simple and strong. I mean nothing against my dear nephew, but Gwyn ap Lludd is a far better name than Efnisien ap Wledig? Ah, bless, but I am going to fuss over you, bright creature. You are going to want for nothing. I have had enough nightmares of my own to know exactly what to do if you wake in the night, scared and upset._

Gwyn put the journal down and looked around the room, a kernel of self-loathing pushing down roots and sending up shoots in his body. Moving through him like any plant, budding out in small pains in his shoulders and his knees, in the back of his neck, behind his eyes.

He flicked ahead and felt sick as he realised he was going to learn his birth day after all.

_13th day of the Mournful Moon, Snow cyc., Season of Turning._

_I am in labour. Something is going wrong. Stay with me, starchild. Penny wants me to st-

Then, pages torn out viciously, one after the other. At least twenty.

Gwyn rubbed the back of his hand and wrist over his eyes and stared at the first entry Crielle made, three months later.

_My mind swims in poisons that have no name and Penny tries to help but there is no consolation. I have blamed everyone and everything but ultimately the blame only lies with one person and he pretends at innocence but he seems almost knowing when I pinch his fat little arms and legs and feet until he cries._

The next few journals had a mixture of things within them. Recipes for new poisons that Crielle was developing – she’d always been an incredible chemist – and details of small tortures and paragraph after paragraph about Efnisien’s development as a child.

She never mentioned Gwyn by name again.

_Sometimes, he was ‘that creature’ and sometimes ‘beast’ and sometimes ‘it’ and sometimes ‘him’ and there was no rhyme or reason to it._
He called me ‘mama’ today and I slapped him so hard that I think he’s still not conscious. Oh no. How utterly devastating. I spend far too long imagining how I’d explain an ‘accident’ to Quercus or Lludd.

Gwyn closed his eyes at a particular entry, but he couldn’t unsee the paragraphs that had shaken as his hands had shaken:

There’s no healer that can do for my scars. They say it is some vexatious side effect of the light itself, and that there are documents and books talking about how this maligned light produces scars that will not heal. But the creature healed from using it on me, so I asked the last healer if a blood transfusion would somehow lend me its healing ability and they said no. My desperation is such that I contemplated letting that creature’s blood inside of me.

But if I heal…

They insist over and over. No more children.

There is no old lore for this. There are few people I can truly appeal to.

Little Efnisien knows I do not like it and today I saw him hurt it, crush its fingers and look to me for approval and I gave it and felt the first swell of warmth I’ve felt in too long.

Still. If mam-gu were here, what would she say? Would she feel vindicated after what I did to her child? My parents? Penny swears it would be nothing but compassion. I remain unsure.

Mam-gu, I am so tired. This is the worst nightmare yet.

Gwyn dropped the journal and then picked it up and flung it across the room, where it hit the wall and fell, pages flapping, to the ground.

He couldn’t read anymore.

Eventually, an hour later, curiosity and some darker apprehension dragged him back to the journal and he crawled over and picked it up, hunched over it and kept flicking through the pages. Then he made his way back to the chest and kept reading.

She wrote about him less and less. There were descriptions of torments in there he hardly remembered. Things that he hadn’t realised were by her design. A horse had thrown him badly and then come at him when he was a small child, mouth foaming and its blunt teeth tearing a chunk out of his arm, and it turned out the horse had been poisoned and she was only disappointed he hadn’t broken any bones or had his head cracked open.

Years later, he knew the first time she’d given him to Efnisien for his particular type of play out in the fields, because:

I can’t tell if the best part is that he still expected me to care, or the shattered longing that followed when he realised I would never. Keep trying, maladroit, keep trying to earn some regard from me, and I’ll show you what you’ll get for it.

The only downside is that the whole house smells of his blood and the servants don’t properly understand, but they know at least not to give him sympathy.

The next time I send him out to play with Efnisien, I’ll make sure Efnisien has access to some better knives. Go on, my little nephew, pay him back for what that thing did to me. There is no pain great enough.
Gwyn kept reading the journals, and then finally, his hands feeling cold and numb, he picked up one of the earlier ones and his eyes wouldn't move away from the phrase: *my starchild*.

He clutched the journal to his chest and stared at the others, distantly knowing that he should return to the Court. He had too many things to do. He couldn’t spare this time.

The rest of the journals didn’t reveal too much of importance. Crielle spent about three years trying to make poisons that all seemed dedicated specifically to Gwyn – he remembered those years well, learning firsthand that just because Court status made one *resilient* to poison, it didn’t stop the symptoms running through his body and making him so sick he’d wished for an end to the suffering, even if that end came in the form of death.

But otherwise, she didn’t often discuss her politics here, and it was obvious that these were… personal reflections.

He placed everything back in the chest and then returned it to its hidden place, and forced the four poster bed back. He had intended to explore far more of the estate, but it would have to wait. He walked out of Crielle’s room, turned out the lights, and the house was plunged into darkness.

The sun had set.

He teleported from the estate directly back into the bedroom he shared with Augus, and then his knees loosened and he knew he had enough energy to make it to the bed, but he couldn’t be bothered, and let the floor rise up to meet him instead.

* 

‘Gwyn?’ Augus said, and then rushed to his side like Gwyn had some kind of grievous injury, which was ridiculous, because he was perfectly sound. But he was also on the ground, sitting against the bed, and he supposed he didn’t normally sit like this. At least, not for some time.

‘It’s fine,’ Gwyn said, though his voice was sluggish. ‘I did something you’re not going to like.’

‘You can’t have visited the shapeshifter, he’s already been questioned and executed.’

Gwyn smiled, lopsided, and felt drunk. Augus slipped his fingers underneath Gwyn’s chin and lifted his head, and Gwyn knew he should care more, but he didn’t. He blinked sleepily at him, felt owlish, and Augus swore and came closer, rubbed a thumb over Gwyn’s neck, cupped his good shoulder with his other hand. Gwyn remembered that he’d taken off the collar and chain before visiting the estate. It hadn’t seemed right to wear it there.

‘I’ll not be angry,’ Augus said.

Gwyn laughed. ‘Yes. You will.’

‘Tell me,’ Augus said. His voice was urgent. After the hours spent in a daze in his mother’s room, urgency felt strange. What was there that was urgent?

*Just war.*

Gwyn laughed again. This time, it was obvious that Augus didn’t share the sentiment, he looked alarmed.

‘I went to the estate,’ Gwyn said, closing his eyes and shutting out Augus’ face. ‘Looked around. Found a few things. Did you know my mother kept journals? I honestly had…not a *single* idea. She
never seemed like the journaling type. But I never did know her very well.’

For the life of him, he couldn’t seem to wipe the smile off his face. But then, if his body just wanted to pretend these were fond reminiscences, maybe it would hurt less. As it was, his bones felt fused, there was a hanging, fluttering feeling in his chest, like someone was dragging hooks through him, leaving the flesh to flap around uselessly.

Augus was silent for so long, Gwyn could feel his anger.

‘You’re mad,’ Gwyn said.

‘Yes,’ Augus said, though his voice was quiet, there was a sharpness in it like the crack of a whip.

‘That seems very much par for the course,’ Gwyn said, as Augus’ fingers tightened in his shoulder. ‘Everyone mad.’

‘Why- Why would you say no to visiting a shapeshifter that looked like Mafydd, and then do this?’

‘It’s my estate,’ Gwyn said, knowing he sounded like nothing more than a child. ‘It’s mine and I can do what I like with it.’

‘So you decided to go and torture yourself?’

‘I didn’t know she kept journals,’ Gwyn said, and wondered why the words sounded so odd. He couldn’t recall feeling this distant from his own voice for a long time. Perhaps the last time he’d been drunk. A beat, and then he missed the level of drunkenness that preceded him going to those Seelie soldiers and getting the life absolutely fucked out of him. Augus didn’t like it. Even Gwyn didn’t like it. But he would be too drunk to care, and he missed that. He missed the not caring.

Though he was close enough to it now.

Just a little bit of alcohol…

‘How are you doing, Augus?’ Gwyn said, and Augus hissed and then there was a hand in his hair and it was pulling hard enough that Gwyn felt the sting of it and winced.

‘Get up,’ Augus snapped. ‘Get up.’

‘It’s okay,’ Gwyn said, and pushed himself up, wobbling a little, and then spreading his arms. ‘King and everything.’

‘You’re in shock,’ Augus spat. ‘Damn it. How long have you been feeling like this?’

‘Not really feeling anything, actually,’ Gwyn said, smiling at Augus. ‘Just a bit…tired.’

Augus looked like he wanted to hit him. Gwyn knew that look. Had known it his whole life. It didn’t even frighten him. It wasn’t so bad, being hit. And Augus only ever did it once and then he stopped. It was just an exclamation mark with him. Not an entire essay of violence.

‘It’s okay, Augus,’ Gwyn said, and Augus’ lips pulled together and he paced several steps away and then came back with something fixed and determined on his face and Gwyn expected to be backhanded. What he didn’t expect was the hand that slid around his side tenderly, nor the fingers that rested against his jaw.

‘Sweetness,’ Augus murmured.
That wasn’t…what was supposed to happen. Gwyn flinched away, taking the word harder than he would a fist to the face.

‘No,’ Gwyn said. ‘Not now.’

He heard Augus’ swallow, felt hands upon him again, gentle, and he didn’t have time for it and he didn’t want it and this part was wrong.

‘Sweetness,’ Augus whispered, ‘I’m not angry with you. Just upset. You went and hurt yourself.’

‘I’m fine,’ Gwyn bit out, some of the focus returning to his blurry vision as he stepped away from that touch and that gaze and the awfulness of it all.

‘That’s wonderful,’ Augus said, ‘I’m glad to hear it. That means you’ll let me be near you. Because when you’re fine, you let me touch you like this, don’t you?’

Augus had followed him across the room and was rubbing gently at his arm. Then there was a careful touch in Gwyn’s hair and he felt something shift and crack in his chest and he didn’t know what Augus was doing, but Augus was definitely doing something.

‘Stop it,’ Gwyn said.

‘My dear heart, this is-’

‘Stop it,’ Gwyn snarled, shoving at Augus.

Augus grabbed at his wrists before Gwyn could make contact, and Gwyn was ready to grapple, he was, but it was hard to justify wrestling Augus to the ground when Augus was just smoothing circles into his wrists. Stepping closer.

‘We danced, remember?’ Augus said. ‘Only a couple of days ago. You’re in the Unseelie Court, and safe, and I’m not angry with you, and I don’t want to hurt you.’

‘You love hurting me,’ Gwyn said, his voice sounding far bitterer than he’d felt only minutes ago.

‘Usually only when you enjoy being hurt,’ Augus said. ‘Not now.’

‘Maybe I’d enjoy it now.’

‘There’s a difference between enjoying something, and thinking you need it, because that’s all you remember.’

‘That doesn’t even make sense,’ Gwyn said, but he trembled instead of pushing Augus away. His skin was tense and cold beneath his clothing. Even the inside of his mouth felt cold.

‘Did she lovingly detail everything she did to you?’ Augus said, and Gwyn felt like he couldn’t gather the threads of his thoughts so that they were easy to understand. Everything was tangled and knotted, and he picked over whatever words were in his head, and finally managed to say:

‘In a way.’

What Gwyn couldn’t say, the largest knot of all, was what she’d written in her earliest journals. Before she’d been pregnant. When she’d been pregnant.

All this time Gwyn thought that Augus had murdered his mother. But really, Augus had just landed a merciful killing blow. The mortal wound to her spirit was struck three thousand years ago.
'Are you going to be sick?' Augus said, and Gwyn shook his head, thinking that he’d wasted almost a whole day on this. ‘Come sit down.’

‘Okay,’ Gwyn said, and then didn’t move. Augus swore and tugged him, and Gwyn still didn’t move. Sometimes, after the longest, hardest of battles, he would straighten in his plate armour and forget how to lift one leg and place it in front of the other.

‘You don’t do things by halves, do you?’ Augus said, exasperated, and Gwyn didn’t know what he was talking about and he didn’t care, either. Gwyn took several steps away from him, went to place a hand on the hilt of a sword only to realise that it wasn’t there and he was out of the habit of wearing one.

A sharp knock at the door, and Augus swore loudly enough that Gwyn’s head swung and he looked at him.

Augus was already opening it.

‘Can’t this wait?’ Augus snapped.

‘Sir.’ It was one of the common fae servants; Anath. ‘Sir, I’m sorry for interrupting. Mikkel the Reader is here, and it seems most dire. I would not intrude, but…’

‘Where is he?’ Gwyn said, enough of his survival instinct cobbling together to remind him that this was familiar. This was something he knew how to do. ‘The night garden?’

‘With the Winter Court, no, it’s not… The obsidian antechamber.’

Gwyn could tell by the expression on Anath’s face that it was urgent and he turned back to Augus, who looked frustrated and upset and furious all at once.

‘Return,’ Augus said. ‘As soon as you’re able.’

Gwyn nodded, even though he hardly knew what he was nodding to. Then he folded himself in light, and disappeared.

* *

Mikkel paced back and forth, a nervous, amped energy. He wasn’t wearing his flatcap, his hair awry. When he saw Gwyn, his face crumpled, instead of looking pleased to see him.

‘Huh, now you’re a fucking mess as well? Gods,’ Mikkel said, his fists clenching. ‘You know how it’s usually melodramatic to go I’m doomed? It’s not. It’s not this time.’

‘Are you in danger?’ Gwyn said, feeling the parts of himself that knew how to do this swimming quickly back to the surface. ‘Ask for asylum, Mikkel. You won’t be the last, I assure you.’

‘What? Me? No. No, Gwyn, Albion’s marching. He’s marching. It’s…I can’t read him or Davix or the higher ups properly, and I’ve been- They’ve had me on these assignments and things. I keep trying to make sure I’m not discovered and I’m not, but I’m not a war strategist, I’m not in those meetings. SO I didn’t know. Gwyn, he has at least a hundred thousand. Maybe- Probably more. Maybe… a hundred and fifty?’

Gwyn stared. He cleared his throat. He felt his hands clench into air.

‘Maybe…more,’ Mikkel said.
‘Where?’ Gwyn said. ‘Why have my informants not told me of this?’

‘Because it’s happening right now,’ Mikkel said. ‘I could only get away because Albion has left the palace. He’s in the frontlines. He’s…it’s everyone. It’s the Polemarch, and Davix, almost his whole Inner Court except for Old Pete. But Gwyn, he’s…’

Not fifty thousand. Not one hundred thousand. But more. It was possible. With the navy and sea fae shoring up Albion’s military, it was definitely possible.

‘Is he going for the Courtlands?’ Gwyn said.

A force like that for the Unseelie Courtlands was overkill. Gwyn knew it. Albion knew it.

‘Not only…’ Mikkel sucked his lower lip into his mouth and bit it, and then took a great, shaking breath. ‘I think- I’m not, okay this isn’t my…this isn’t my area but I just thought- maybe you could do something. He’s going to circle the Unseelie Court. And I think he’s going to seize the Unseelie Courtlands and take all the fae there hostage. Ransom them back to you and bankrupt you, or kill them. And a ring of military all around the Court. Anyone who can’t teleport directly in won’t be able to get in or out of it. He wants to cut off the underfae and the others who won’t be able to get to you.’

Gwyn’s body numbed until it felt like ice. A Kingdom wasn’t supposed to directly attack another Kingdom. Court ground was considered sacred, as was the small band of land around it. A haven for those fae who were too vulnerable to have their own lands, or who were voluntary pacifists, or who simply needed that extra protection.

‘He’s going to suffocate the Court,’ Gwyn said, his voice wooden.

‘But you can do something, right? Because it’s early? Because I warned you early? You can do something?’

‘I don’t know how you’re asking me that, given you’re a Reader.’

‘But you have something, don’t you?’ Mikkel said, his voice taking on a hysterical edge. ‘You’ve been able to hold shit back from me before, right? So, you have some…trump card. Like…like the way you escaped from the Seelie prison. Like that. I couldn’t Read that from you then. And you’re King now! There’s gotta be something I’m not Reading from you now.’

Mikkel’s voice broke and he buried his face in his hands, his shoulders heaving.

‘I have no trump cards,’ Gwyn said.

He needed to get Ifir’s status raised, and free him. He needed to speak to Zudanna. He had no solid aerial contingent because the harpies would no longer fight for him now that he’d killed Ocypete. Gulvi might have some sway there. Albion knew exactly how the afrit and the kudlaks fought now, and they were the bulk of Gwyn’s military. Even the Mage he had in his palace had said to him – in their first meeting – that she didn’t specialise in offensive magic. Gwyn was out of practice, had not even had a chance to test his armour out against others. He’d done drills in it, which wasn’t the same. Vane wasn’t fully recovered, his confidence in himself wasn’t as hale as before. But they needed the fie ellyllon.

Gwyn smiled grimly, laughing under his breath. ‘Albion’s good. He was always better than me, at this sort of thing. I learned a lot from him. I think he knows that.’ Gwyn leaned back against the wall and folded his arms. ‘Why are you so upset, Mikkel?’
‘Cupcake,’ Mikkel said, laughing behind his hands, ‘y’know, you’re an idiot. I say it with love. It’s…this scares me.’ Mikkel looked up, his eyes red-rimmed. ‘I don’t like war. I don’t like people dying. I don’t like being told that it’s my duty to the Seelie to be present at interrogations and make liars out of good people. Y’know I can Read you, right? Y’know I can see beneath this layer of shock and shit that you’re wearing right now? You don’t think I can’t tell how much you’re shitting a brick over this? You don’t know it yet, but I know it.’

Gwyn closed his eyes. He shut Mikkel out and thought hard. He’d need to confirm what Mikkel had said on the outside chance that Mikkel was Albion’s informant also. It wasn’t likely, but he had to be sure. He needed to provide safe haven for those of the Unseelie Courtlands. How many would want to stay and protect their land? Would they have enough time to move valuables? Confidential documents? He’d need to make it clear that the Unseelie Court couldn’t provide the ransoms, which would make the Unseelie Court vulnerable to negative opinion from its own most prestigious people.

‘Were you present at Eran’s interrogation?’ Gwyn said absently.

‘What? I- Ah…yep. Good kid. Albion doesn’t like him much. He won’t leave his family just because Albion tried to convince him to do it. Not a great deal out of him though. Even as a Reader, he was mostly just scared, stubborn, annoyed. You want to know everyone that Albion’s brought in for ‘questioning’ lately?’

Mikkel’s voice was barbed, and Gwyn took a breath and shook his head. Distantly, he was aware that he wasn’t reacting the way he normally would at all. He was wasting precious minutes, lagging, talking to Mikkel. He knew from experience that seconds could decide an outcome, yet here he was, dragging his feet.

‘You need to go, Mikkel,’ Gwyn said quietly. ‘It may not be safe here any longer. The Unseelie Court should be sacrosanct, but not for you.’

‘I know, yep,’ Mikkel said, nodding.

‘Maybe I’ll see you on the other side.’

‘You’re gonna make me cry again, you asshole,’ Mikkel said, and then bared his teeth in what looked like anguish, before teleporting away.

The cold feeling in Gwyn’s gut resolved into a wash of acid at the back of his throat, and he swallowed. His heart thumped hard. Sweat prickled through his palms, across the nape of his neck, along his hairline.

A shiver of awareness made his senses heighten, and time slowed down. His blinks were sluggish, every breath seemed to take hours.

‘You need to go, Mikkel,’ Gwyn said quietly. ‘It may not be safe here any longer. The Unseelie Court should be sacrosanct, but not for you.’

‘I know, yep,’ Mikkel said, nodding.

‘Maybe I’ll see you on the other side.’

‘You’re gonna make me cry again, you asshole,’ Mikkel said, and then bared his teeth in what looked like anguish, before teleporting away.

The list of things he needed to do slotted together like a puzzle. He took a single, deep breath. He had no trump card, like Mikkel hoped. He wasn’t practiced at fighting under-resourced battles. But it was still something that he needed to respond to.
So he responded.

Chapter End Notes

In our next chapter, 'Battle:'

Gwyn took a breath and blew out the long, blasting note that saturated the air around them. Behind him, the kudlaks and other fae took up their own war cries – howls mostly, on this side of the Unseelie Court. In the distance, Gwyn heard the heavier, sonorous blast of Ifir’s great war horn, and then smaller horns echoing, repeating the sound all around.

The sword in his hands was heavy, well-balanced, still to be bathed in its first blood, but it wouldn’t take long now.

They charged to the sound of Seelie war horns.
Thanks to everyone who is reading, you're all so fantastic. And a massive thank you to the commenters, I wish I could bake you all cookies (or as we say in Australia: biscuits).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Gwyn

‘Maybe it’s the promotion back up to Court talking, but I’m feeling pretty good about this,’ Ifir said, turning a new mace in his hands. Zudanna had kept the old one and wouldn’t give it back.

‘Said almost without a trace of irony,’ Zudanna said, staring at him hard.

Gwyn looked at them both briefly, before surveying the outside of the Unseelie Court from his vantage point on a rise of land. His new sword was belted to his side. His armour heavy and still smelling of new oils and the sparks of cut pieces of metal. Around his neck hung a double looped horn of a great extinct beast, oiled black and pearly. On a viciously armoured warhorse nearby, the flag of the Unseelie Court military had been hung. A black background with a silver crown upon it.

He sent his awareness out into the landscape around them, until it became a vast, overstretched thing, and there he tracked for the energy signatures of fae and found very few. Most had been evacuated to safer ground. What ‘safer ground’ there was.

Gwyn turned his head again, scenting the breeze, eyes roving the landscape. In his ears, tiny charmed crystals had been fixed in place with magic, and he could hear background noise, talk from the inside of the palace – people scared. He could hear his Generals in the distance. This was a type of magic he was used to. No battle on this scale happened without the assistance of Mages, and Fenwrel knew very well how to charm the communication crystals so that his Generals could reach him in a moment, as well as his Inner Court.

But Augus stayed silent.

‘What do you mean?’ Augus said. ‘What do you mean it’s now?’

‘I need you to summon the Inner Court and Court members immediately. Along with all the staff and the trows.’

‘And you?’

‘I need to dress for war,’ Gwyn said grimly, looking around their bedroom. ‘And then meet you all in the throne room.’

Augus stared at him, Gwyn could scent his fear now. Like someone had stirred an oar into the
depths of a shallow lake. Silt and muck pluming to the surface.

Gwyn knew that more romantic people might say something about their feelings. He knew that he should, possibly, express something inexpressible to Augus. In case he was captured, or taken hostage, or in case Albion and his Inner Court knew how to destroy everything. Gwyn only stared at Augus and then thinned his lips.

‘Whatever happens, you are not to go out on that battlefield. Do you hear me?’

‘This is not the time or the place,’ Augus said. ‘I don’t want to be out on that battlefield, but my compulsions can sway a great number of people, Gwyn, and I’m sure-’

‘As your King,’ Gwyn said, his voice hardening to stone, ‘I command it. Tell me you’ll bide by my word now, or I’ll just as easily put you in a cell so I know you won’t disobey me.’

Augus took a step backwards, looked like he’d been struck. Gwyn felt the coldness around him that meant it didn’t matter. That coldness that would be a benefit to him later. It was better to feel this, than anything else.

No matter what roads it had led him down before.

* 

The Unseelie Court was a sacred ground, protected with the strongest enchantments ever known. It could not be intruded upon by the Seelie, and so there was no point trying to prevent the Seelie fae from forming their ring around it. Or at least, no point with the difference in their infantry numbers. Better to let them make their stand, so that Gwyn might see where the weaknesses were.

He told himself he wasn’t tired. He, Gulvi and her apprentices teleporting countless times into the Unseelie Courtlands to pressure, manipulate, request or even force people to abandon their homes and their homelands. Some of those places had been attached to a lineage for so long that the fae who lived there were almost land spirits in their own right. Some refused to leave. But those that refused to leave, who swore they would defend their homeland or die trying, they at least let Gwyn and Gulvi abscond with their sensitive documents, the bulk of what wealth could be carried away in a short period of time.

Normally, without the use of magic, it took time to get a military anywhere. Time, resources, food and water, medical staff, repair crews, more.

But Mages were employed in large scale battle for more than just offensive or healing magic, they could create portals. Those portals, which drained a Mage quickly and made large dents in a Court’s treasury, allowed the teleportation of vast numbers across great distances.

So it was only twenty four hours after Gwyn had burnt himself out trying to save those in the Unseelie Courtlands – those upper class fae and their servants and their employees and the villagers that had attached themselves to certain species and names and legacies – that the first Seelie infantry and an aerial contingent of gryphons had poured in and swarmed around the Courtlands looking for their hostages. They found some. Not what they’d hoped for. Word would be passed along to Albion that Gwyn knew what was coming.

The Unseelie fae that were captured for ransom or torture or interrogation or execution; they already knew their lives were forfeit. Gwyn had impressed upon them that much.

They’d seen the coldness in his eyes as he spoke to them and they knew he wasn’t lying.
'So it’s a siege but not really a siege,' Ifir said. ‘Is what you’re saying.’

‘Yes,’ Gwyn said. ‘What I want to know is if you’re willing to put your people on the line for this. I’ll not command anyone to war with the numbers stacked against us the way they are.’

‘We’ll fight as afrits,’ Ifir said grudgingly. ‘So don’t put any delicate little flowers near us and we’ll be fine. We’re fighting.’

‘I’m uncertain,’ Zudanna said, as she pushed the little gold blocks that represented the Seelie into place. Hundreds of little Seelie blocks, and off to the side, a fraction of the silver that represented the Unseelie. ‘I want to know your plans for retreat if we do fight. A disorganised retreat can do more damage to numbers than an organised one. If I pledge my people, their lives… Why not just relocate the Unseelie Court temporarily? Escape? Let them think they’ve hemmed us in?’

‘Because there’s a ridiculous amount of them,’ Ifir said, ‘and they’ll just split up that fancy little military they’ve got and find us, and we won’t then have the luxury of having all the Court fae in a safe haven.’ Ifir frowned at the map and then stood, his fists digging into his waist as he turned a tight circle. No one commented on his missing horn, though Zudanna had looked over at Gwyn when she’d seen it for the first time, an unreadable expression on her face. ‘I know how to get my military out if Gwyn signals it. You’ve already said your Mage will help us with portals?’

‘As much as she can,’ Gwyn said. ‘It may not be enough.’

‘Do you want us to not fight?’ Ifir said, pushing his lower jaw forwards so that his beard quivered. ‘The Seelie have fucking shat on us for as long as I’ve been alive. For as long as the Oak King’s reigned. Even if you turn tail, I’m gonna light up as many of them on fire as I can. I want it smelling like a feast, you hear me?’

Gwyn returned his gaze, felt the coldness inside of him crystallise into a brittle, hungry ice, and Ifir grinned at him and his black eyebrows lifted.

‘You want it too, don’t you? You hate them as much as I do? Hard to see how you could.’

‘Try me,’ Gwyn said, looking at the map again.

All those golden blocks, and Gwyn’s sword hand itched.

* 

Perhaps Albion’s military expected Gwyn’s military to meet them. But there was no one there to meet them.

Even so, Vane and his people had left the land around the Unseelie Court thoroughly prepared. A welcome for their enemy.

They’d left magical traps to still and slow and cause pain or voicelessness. But Gwyn heard tell that the Seelie Mages – primarily Davix – had swept through in advance, wearing their colourful motley coats astride the backs of winged horses and dismantled them easily.

But the fie ellyllon had long been canny, and they’d littered the land around the Unseelie Court with non-magical mines filled with elfshot – almost everything they’d had. The mines couldn’t be detected with magic, as they’d been additionally cloaked with Fenwrel’s Magecraft.
The mines took out several thousand with paralysis – made it harder for the Seelie to ring around the Unseelie Court as tightly as they wanted. Those fae beasts; winged horses, scaled bears with saddles on their backs, giant wyrms with metal spikes attached to their heads for sweeping Unseelie out of the way – they did not have Court status, and the elfshot was fatal for many of them.

It wasn’t enough of a blow, but it was something.

A distance away, different sectors of the Unseelie Court military waited at strategic points. They were already damaged by previous combat and knew they were outnumbered, outclassed. They were on warded land, hired Unseelie Mages – too expensive but necessary – to keep them as invisible as possible. They were far enough away that perhaps they would not be spotted.

Gwyn watched everything through the lenses of mirrors placed in the bark of trees, in pools of clear water. That, along with the many modes of communication being fed to him through his ears, meant that his head rung with an almost constant overflow of information. But he’d been trained for this type of multitasking, and he knew how to rummage through the threads of it all for what he needed. So if he saw the Unseelie Court from a distance, and up close, and the legs of hundreds of fae moving past him at ground level, and informants watching over other militaries all at once, it was pain in his forehead and at the top of his spine, but it wasn’t enough to stop him from remaining in the present, focusing on what needed to be done.

Zudanna’s military were all around him. Gwyn didn’t trust Ifir, but he did trust Ifir not to betray the Unseelie military to the Seelie, so he sent him off on his own to attack the other side of the ringed forces around the Unseelie Court.

He kept seeing gazes move to the illusioned antlers above his head. Appraising looks directed at his armour and his new sword. Zudanna had looked at him in the new plate armour and whistled and then said something about Unseelie Court budgets and how not everyone could afford to look like that.

Even that hadn’t been enough to penetrate the coldness he kept deep inside of himself. But it had been enough to send a small spidery crack of warmth across the surface of his skin. There was a part of his mind that grabbed at the words and hid them for later, so that he could feel that he and the rock fae had somehow made something great together.

He wanted it to be a sign he could achieve greatness today.

They expected miracles from him. Wasn’t that what he did? Wasn’t he Gwyn of the Stars?

*My little starchild.*

Gwyn swallowed an invisible blade in his throat and tried not to feel the giant, sucking whirlpool that was growing inside of him.

*Augus looked up past the top of his head, then down again, then back up, staring at some point above him. Gwyn resisted the urge to touch where the antlers should be.*

‘It’s illusion,’ Gwyn said.

‘Is it meant to make me feel as though we’re going to win?’

‘Possibly,’ Gwyn said, thumbing the hilt at his side and then rolling his bad shoulder. It screeched at him for doing so, tried to send shockwaves of tension all through his body, but he breathed
through them and kept himself relaxed. He needed that shoulder to work for him. Better to get used to the pain now.

‘You still won’t let me help you?’ Augus said.

‘You’ll help me by staying in here,’ Gwyn said.

‘Why do I rather feel like I’m suddenly the maiden in some human fairytale?’ Augus’ voice was harsh, even as he kept looking over the armour.

‘I don’t quite know what you mean. My decision is based on your complete lack of military expertise, the fact that Albion will likely look to come at me through my Inner Court, and that you are prone to putting yourself in harm’s way. I don’t want Ash out there either. Why it has to be about maidens, I don’t know. Gulvi and Fenwrel will both be out in the field with me. Zudanna is my Second.’

Augus glared at him. The expression sucked all the warmth from the room, but it didn’t touch Gwyn, who felt cold already.

‘I’d hoped you’d see the armour under better circumstances,’ Gwyn said.

‘It rather makes you look exactly like the killing machine I know you to be. But as it’s clunky and would take me most of the day to work out how to remove it from you, I find that I mostly just want to send you on your way so that you might come back to me dressed in something different.’

A burst of unexpected laughter, because it was so like Augus, to already be thinking of how inconvenient it might be to take off in the lead up to some kind of physical congress. He’d expected, instead, for Augus to be impressed, even awed. But it was never the armour that had achieved that with Augus, it was seeing him out on the battlefield, killing other fae.

‘So then, are you only upset not to be out on the battlefield because I’m denying you an aphrodisiac?’

‘You’ve caught me,’ Augus said drily. He touched the back of his head, not even trying to hide the gesture. ‘In truth, your reasons are sound for not letting me out there. I’ve not been practicing the invisibility so I can’t even- I am reluctant to put Ash in any kind of increased danger, and he is needed here, to help with the displaced Court fae. Is there anything I can do, Gwyn? We’ll have the crystals between us. I’ve not used them before. Will my talking to Ash distract you?’

‘No,’ Gwyn said.

‘Well, since Fenwrel said this charmed thing in my ear goes two ways for us, I will be listening to you killing things all day, I expect.’

‘I can get Fenwrel to change that.’

‘No,’ Augus said, closing his eyes, then squeezing them shut and gritting his teeth together. ‘Let me hear it. This war that I helped make.’

Gwyn blinked at him, thought about all that Augus had done to ruin the Unseelie Kingdom. Gwyn wasn’t the kind of person who would falsely reassure. Instead, he placed a gauntleted hand on Augus’ shoulder and sighed.

‘You and many, many others, Augus,’ Gwyn said. ‘You must remember that the Unseelie military is so under-resourced in part, because I’ve spent the last three thousand years of my life making sure
it was that way. So do not bear that load too heavily on your own shoulders.’

A distant tremor of fear moved through him. So distant his body didn’t move, though the weight in his gut seemed heavier.

‘Is this when we say our final goodbyes?’ Augus said, looking at the plated hand on his shoulder.

‘No,’ Gwyn said. ‘I don’t believe in them.’

‘Not even for luck?’ Augus said, lips twisting up.

‘I don’t believe in that either.’

Gwyn nodded to him formally, then teleported away.

*  

‘Maybe it’s a good thing they’re not charging at us yet,’ Zudanna said. But then she took several shaky breaths and looked at the formations of kudlaks behind her. Gwyn stood by her side, his sword withdrawn, trying not to think of metaphors like ‘a sea of people’ or ‘a veritable ocean of Seelie’ because it wasn’t helpful. He needed to think in terms of infantry and cavalry and aerial and break down the numbers.

His brain wasn’t cooperating.

It was a sea of people.

Gwyn had never commanded a force so large as the one Albion and the Polemarch commanded now, in his life.

He forced himself to find a kind of inner stillness, focused on small things in the atmosphere around him. The sound of weapons clinking against armour as fae shifted position nervously. The flapping of fabric pennants. The hushed talk of soldiers and generals conferring amongst each other under their breaths even as they waited for the battle call. His own body was far colder than it should be for the amount of armour he was wearing.

Davix was there, not in the frontlines, but hard to miss in a long-coat motley of white and blue diamonds. He had his staff out, and he had one hand around the pole of a large wooden trebuchet and leaned his whole body weight out casually, as though he went to war all the time. He gave the illusion of being an easy target for a bow-wielder.

Albion was near the front, a trident – the prongs large and broad enough that Gwyn knew he’d be using it to double as a shield as well as a weapon – and a twelve link chain with a sharp, poisoned barb at the end of it in his hands. He wore the shimmering metallic blue scale armour favoured by those that fought beneath the sea and valued streamlining above protective bulk. For all that Albion was an exceptional underwater fighter, he was excellent aboveground as well. It was one of the reasons the Oak King had brought him up so often to consult with Gwyn on his land army strategies.

The Polemarch – Alysia – was next to him, fully armoured and a helm covering her expression, wicked sharp metal fins jutting from her head. In her hand, a huge spear spontoon, and in her other hand, some kind of weaponised glove that was covered in spikes. Gwyn knew from research that she favoured gloves like this, that she had enough practice to never actually scratch herself with the venom-filled barbs.
There was no real heavy infantry of the kind that were once used centuries ago. Both Albion and Gwyn together had created strategies to destroy the spears used in the creation of a phalanx, and they were both prepared for the other to use them. Best not waste soldiers and spears on something that could easily be done away with.

‘He’s waiting for us,’ Zudanna said.

Gwyn almost reminded her that it wasn’t too late to strategically withdraw. But that would be an insult to all the commanders she’d gone to, the votes she’d pulled from her own people. Gwyn looked up at the slowly circling aerial contingents. Mainly gryphons on the Seelie side – some in hybrid form, and others in true-form, covered in the battle-armour that meant they required magic to stay airborne – and Gulvi with a small group of lammergeier shifters on theirs. It was the best they could do at short notice.

He picked up the double-looped horn hanging around his neck and held it to his lips, and in response, he heard the sound of metal zinging from sheaths, the automatic pick up in energy as fae saw and responded by further tensing, changing their stance.

Albion lifted his own horn to his mouth. One that Gwyn had blown himself countless times.

Gwyn took a breath and blew out the long, blasting note that saturated the air around them. Behind him, the kudlaks and other fae took up their own war cries – howls mostly, on this side of the Unseelie Court. In the distance, Gwyn heard the heavier, sonorous blast of Ifir’s great war horn, and then smaller horns echoing, repeating the sound all around.

The sword in his hands was heavy, well-balanced, still to be bathed in its first blood, but it wouldn’t take long now.

They charged to the sound of Seelie war horns.

* Time funnelled through some perception lapse that left Gwyn unaware that hours had passed except for the building pain in his body, the shockwaves of force as he hacked and thrust with his sword, cleaving and striking and ripping the blade back again, his hair plastered to his head with blood.

Then time would pass so slowly that Gwyn swore it didn’t matter how much power and speed he put behind a single swing, it seemed to take minutes. In those moments, his senses were so heightened that he marked every individual drop of blood and sweat flying near him. He saw individual strands of hair on the heads of some. Saw the sun glint on the body hairs of others. Felt every individual percussive thud of hooves and mailed and plated and booted feet upon the ground. It was a symphony he’d heard before, over and over, a jarring discordant web of sound and sensation that ended with the sticky dryness around his lips as they tacked together when he closed his mouth to draw a deeper breath. Ended with the feeling that his hands were soldered to his sword and he’d been born with a blade in the palm of his hand.

He kept waiting for the bloodlust to kick in, but it didn’t.

Sending the light down his sword did impressive damage, so much so that Seelie fae were falling away from him even before he could strike them down. He cut down swathes of soldiers at once, and he did so, aware of the names and the families of some of those soldiers. They’d once fought for him. He saw expressions of betrayal when his sword or light moved into them. As though he would somehow not touch them, or leave them alone. Others only looked angry. Some didn’t have
an expression on their face beyond the rictus of bloodlust.

Things were made somewhat easier by the fact that the sea fae clearly hadn’t been training on land for long. But they were still coordinated and vicious, and their weapons – usually chain-based or spear-based – meant that Gwyn was unable to get the reach to hack at them and often had to disarm them first. Though sometimes, one of the fie elyllon was able to get an arrow where Gwyn couldn’t get a sword.

All around them, the higher class fae teleported back and forth, escaping killing blows where they could. But Gwyn and Albion both had Mages employed, and one of their most brutal magic tricks was to stop a teleportation halfway through, leaving a disembodied fae to fall – instantly dead, or screaming from excruciating pain – to the ground.

Kudlaks were being cut down all around him. Every now and then they’d shout for him, and Gwyn would crouch so they could bound towards him and pounce, leaping off his shoulders in their hybrid form, sailing into masses of the enemy, claws and teeth and sabres glinting in the light.

Numbers for numbers, they were overwhelmed. The Unseelie fighters were brutal, but what chance did they stand when so many Seelie would swarm towards them, wearing them out, cutting them down, more Seelie coming to shore up their defences?

Gwyn looked at Albion in the distance, barely able to see him, but knowing his energy signature. The bloodlust still hadn’t come over him – hours later – and he was aware of his body moving as though from a distance; blocking, parrying, feinting, absorbing blows into the armour and then pivoting into range in order to disable or harm or kill. But a separate part of his awareness remained upon Albion.

Kings could kill Kings. Easily enough that Gwyn remembered how powerful he’d felt when he’d defeated Augus back when they’d both been monarchs on opposite sides. It was quite something, knowing he was the only one who could deliver an easy killing blow, knowing that Augus knew that too.

Kings can kill Kings.

Normally it would never occur to him, but normally a King was never on the battlefield at the same time that he was.

The Raven Prince was never present in his battles and Augus didn’t have the skills to be present in his either.

Albion’s right there. You’re a better swordsman than he is.

Gwyn felt sick at his own thoughts, how much sense they made. A Kingdom wasn’t supposed to attack another Kingdom directly. Court militaries weren’t supposed to fight each other unless it was in service of other species of fae, their land, their disputes.

A ring of white flags with a golden crown upon it weren’t supposed to be seen flying around the perimeter lands of the Unseelie Court.

Gwyn bought himself some more time to think, shooting light down his sword and crying out through gritted teeth at the pain of it. But even that was distant. Not his pain.

With Albion dead…

Gwyn was part of no formations. He was a rogue fighter and had been for most of his military
career; he was too dangerous and unreliable when the bloodlust finally came upon him. He had no one to answer to, no one to check with to see if it was okay.

There was no one to tell him no.

He ran and then leapt up into the air, those in front of him falling back, thinking he meant the momentum for them. He summoned his light.

A sense of rushing through the air and magic trying to touch him, and Fenwrel’s protections activating.

Then, he was falling towards the scent of blood and metal and sweat once more.

The trident met his sword, and Gwyn twisted out of the way of the spinning twelve-link chain. He moved quickly, getting the sword out from underneath the trident and pushing Albion back with a blur of movement from his sword, inside easy reach of the swings of the chain. He saw the same hard, hungry pleasure in Albion’s eyes that Gwyn felt thundering through his own body.

Albion wanted this?

Gwyn smelled the ocean around him, then stopped paying attention to anything but guarding his vulnerable spots and trying to force Albion back while looking for an opening. No talking, because there wasn’t time for verbal sparring. The chain wrapped around Gwyn’s sword wrist, and Gwyn used it to yank Albion forwards, pushing his free hand to Albion’s chest and summoning his voracious light. It was already there, leaping and furious.

Albion’s sea-blue eyes widened. Gwyn bared his teeth in the parody of a smile, felt something like vindication.

‘Davix!’ The command imperious and clear, even as Gwyn’s light pulsed through the metal of his gauntlet.

Gwyn had a moment to see blue and white motley appearing behind Albion’s back, through the prongs of the trident. Then, an awful, familiar twisting sensation in his chest. A spasm of pain. Gwyn looked down for only a second, sure someone had thrust a weapon into him, shocked out of using his light.

Then he remembered Davix in the bridge of the Seelie and Unseelie Court – where the old lore was stored – able to stop Gwyn’s light with nary more than a hand signal.

He coughed violently, shoved Albion back to get some room to think, was dragged forwards by the twelve link chain around his wrist and Albion laughed and then placed his hand on Gwyn’s breastplate. Albion’s glee disappeared, replaced by a dead, predatory expression. A sea beast stared at him. Still wearing Albion’s face, with utterly animal eyes, opaque and black, no longer reflecting the light around them.

Gwyn choked as a wetness raced through his lungs, his chest going into repeated spasm now, pain lancing. The sensation of something building, flowing, soaking areas that weren’t supposed to be soaked, and then he coughed a spray of fluid. Salt water. He coughed again, trying to clear his lungs, gripped Albion’s wrist and tried to force his hand away, wheezing.

‘You will drown,’ Albion snarled.

Albion shoved Gwyn hard enough that one of his knees buckled, then the second. Another shove, and Gwyn was down on his knees. Gwyn’s hand clenched tighter on his sword and he swung it
towards Albion’s legs, wasting breath. A loud clang. The trident blocked his swing.

Gwyn tried to summon his light again. A sound of frustration. Only cold pain inside of him, and nothing responded, as though Davix had eviscerated that core of light that lived within him. As Gwyn choked on the salt water that Albion was drawing into his own lungs, a tiny part of him whispered something about fairness. But war wasn’t fair. He almost wanted to applaud Albion for the cleverness of it. A Mage that could turn off a King’s powers.

Albion had wanted this all along. Hadn’t even been surprised to see Gwyn bearing down upon him.

You naïve…thing, Gwyn thought, a high pitched, strangled sound escaping him as it felt like his chest was convulsing.

His vision went blank. He couldn’t truly die from drowning. Augus had shown him that much.

But he could be rendered insensate. A killing blow struck when he no longer knew it was coming.

His mind flickered with red, suffocation and hunger for death both. Now the bloodlust would come, when it was too late.

He heard a swinging sound and flailed out with waning body strength, stopping whatever it was with his gauntleted hand. There was shouting. Endless shouting. Gwyn coughed mouthfuls of red-tinged fluid, foaming at the corners of his mouth. His chest burned.

I am so…out of practice, Gwyn thought. It shouldn’t have been this…easy.

‘Gwyn! Gwyn! Get up! Gwyn, I swear to you, you will get up!’

Shouting in his ear. Right in his ear. But it wasn’t his own voice telling him to move. A sharper, frantic voice with a hysterical edge to it, shouting his name over and over again. Gwyn made a sound of frustration.

Then, warmth at his back, he thought it was the heat of wet blood and realised it was magic. His light was with him again. A hot, affronted fire inside of him, burning him from the inside out. He saw a glimpse of red and orange, a peacock blue, and then commotion all around him.

‘I have bought you but seconds.’ Fenwrel’s voice, disembodied but still clear. ‘I am not strong enough to return your light to you for long. Use it.’

Gwyn’s vision whited out, not unconsciousness, but light. He didn’t use his sword, but reached up with his free hand and clutched the shoulder that was attached to the hand at his chest, the arm drowning him.

The light leapt, and then there was nothing more than a long, unending roar of agony. Gwyn coughed out fluid from his lungs, but his next breaths were easier, then the ones after that.

‘We are taking heavy casualties, Lord!’ Ifir. His deep, rumbling afrit voice. Gwyn curled his fingers into the scaled mail before him and staggered upright, coughing the bloody salted water into Albion’s face and feeling the waning of his light again. Energy and magic dancing back and forth all around him, through him. Fenwrel couldn’t fight Davix. She wasn’t strong enough. She’d just said.

A flare of colour, and the warmth at his back was gone. Gwyn took a stilted breath. Another. Saw the friendly way Davix smiled at him, like this was…a casual meeting in a castle. The Polemarch ran towards him. Albion…Albion was falling.
Gwyn teleported away, landing on his knees, shouting in anger when a sword blow landed hard on his back. He spun and cut through chainmail, another arterial burst of blood turning all he saw to confusion.

In his ear, a clamour of voices.

‘I’m calling it!’ Ifir again.

Then, in the distance, the sound of the deep resonant note of an Unseelie horn being blown.

Retreat.

Gwyn pushed himself upright and blinked blood out of his eyes, still unable to draw a full breath. He couldn’t see Albion, but Davix and the Polemarch and others standing over someone who wasn’t moving, while the Unseelie were slaughtered by the Seelie all around him. A sump of scent in his nose. He could keep going. He could kill many more.

Instead, his free hand fumbled at the horn still around his neck, and he lifted it to his lips.

Couldn’t draw a full breath to blow it. Coughed in wracking waves.

Retreat, he thought.

His next exhale was heavy, a burst of despairing sound. He turned and looked around him, staggered towards a kudlak and it was as though she was waiting for him. He had no idea who she was. A warrior with her fur plastered to her body and her claws dripping, and he thrust the horn at her, unable to get it off his own head, so that she had to lean in close.

‘Retreat,’ Gwyn gasped, and she nodded, then clasped the horn with a bloodied hand, took a deep breath and filled lungs made for howling. She blew a long, clear note.

Everywhere, the Unseelie horns blew, as though they’d just been waiting. Holding out long enough for Gwyn to make the decision for them.

The kudlak let go of the horn and pressed a hand to his side, as though holding him up. He glared. He didn’t need it. He was standing on his own power. Then, she launched away from him to cut down Seelie coming for the both of them, and he staggered from the lack of support.

A voice in his ear, swearing, relief, saying his name over and over again. Not the voices of everyone else, not Ifir organising his own retreat, nor Vane saying that they’d not lost as many people as they expected to, nor even Zudanna who was not in his ear, but now right beside him.

‘Leave,’ Zudanna said.

‘I can help,’ Gwyn said. His lungs were clearing.

Had Albion come here and thought ‘Kings could kill Kings’ all along?

‘The Unseelie can’t lose another King,’ Zudanna snarled, her voice twisted and wet. ‘And that wizard is coming for you.’

Gwyn looked past her to see the white and blue motley, the cheerful look on Davix’s face as he strode jauntily towards Gwyn, his staff out. Around him, people were either getting out of his way or being moved out of the way by magic.

‘Zudanna-’
A thousand words in his mind, not all of them his, but the ones that were threatened to spill forth. All words of weakness and apology and despair.

‘Leave!’

Gwyn nodded once, teleporting away, feeling an invisible hand yank at his power. But it was too late, he was too far away, and his light remained his own.

*

A violent coughing fit followed the teleportation; he wasn’t as well as he’d thought. He spilled mouthful after mouthful of foaming, bloodied saliva. Spilled it onto marble, only vaguely aware that there were people around him. He hadn’t thought about where he was going. He straightened after spitting the rest of the fluid from his mouth and looked around him.

The throne room.

Everywhere, the Unseelie Court fae that they could get to and save milled around, uncertain. Some stood still, stared at him. He couldn’t make out the expressions on their faces. Maybe horror. Maybe something else. His sword dripped a congealed lump of blood to the floor.

A speech. Was that the right thing to do?

‘The Unseelie…are withdrawing from battle,’ Gwyn said, his voice thick and roughened by whatever Albion had done to his lungs. ‘We are in retreat, defeated…and will redevelop new strategies soon. If you must leave the Court for whatever reason, do it by teleportation, and only if needs must. Consult with a member of the Inner Court for assistance, if required.’

He could hear the shouting of orders in his ear. Orders telling the Unseelie to retreat. Return to homeland or to the sections of the Court put aside for them. Many needed the safety of the Unseelie Court.

Whatever that meant now.

He turned and walked out of the throne room, hearing the rise of murmurs and voices behind him, and a voice in his ear that wouldn’t stop calling his name.

Gwyn focused on the footfalls of plate metal on stone. A clink-thud. Clink-thud. His lungs rattled.

He let go of the sword once he was standing under a cold spray of water. It clattered to the floor. Blood sluiced down the drain and he’d not yet taken off his armour. He stood there, limp, with his legs locked beneath him, knowing that his mind would start working again eventually.

‘Gwyn, tell me where you are!’

‘Nowhere,’ Gwyn said automatically, and then he tipped his head back and thought about how he got to stand underneath the spray of clean water, while fae out on the battlefield were still being cut down by the Seelie if they couldn’t get away in time.

He thought about the expectation of miracles, and what it might mean to be the last King of a drowning Court.

Then, he thought nothing at all, heard nothing, felt nothing more than the bubbling breaths in his chest and the pounding of water upon his head.
In our next chapter, ‘Wayward:’

‘You fight on our side now,’ Vane said, ‘and I still envy you, I think. And the Seelie their successes. I want to know when my people will stop suffering. We have never been particularly warring, and yet again and again…it seems the exchange is thus: if we want the protection of the Court, we must fight for it, and we must die.’

Gwyn lowered himself to the ground properly and folded his legs, and Vane’s hand stayed on his arm the entire time.

‘Sober thoughts,’ Gwyn said.

‘Actually, drunk ones,’ Vane said, giggling a little, and in an instant he looked the vivacious prince he usually was. But then his face turned sombre and he looked towards the flames. His curly red hair highlighted in green and blue, his freckled face aristocratic, no matter what the lighting.

Vane’s fingers crept up Gwyn’s arm, nestled in the crevice of his elbow, the soft inner skin there, and stroked. One finger after the other. Gwyn blinked at the flames and felt something delicate flutter in his chest.

‘Vane…’ he said, his voice uncertain.

‘You’re the King,’ Vane said, his voice lower than usual. ‘If you can’t collect Seelie spoils as your due, there are other spoils you could consider.’
Gwyn

He couldn’t remember racking his armour. He couldn’t remember the pain in his hands and wrists as he’d done so, his own light having turned the flesh of his palms bloody and raw.

He couldn’t remember going to Fenwrel and asking her to turn off the communication crystals, because he was getting tired of hearing his own name, and he didn’t know why, but he couldn’t be around Augus right now.

He did remember Fenwrel’s expression though. Concerned and disappointed and perhaps finally aware of how much of a useless King he was.

Pulling on new clothing was something he did remember. Along with telling the trows to send generous amounts of food to the generals and their commanders, only to be told that the trows were running out of food and doing their best, but…well…

Any merchants that couldn’t teleport – which was most of them – could no longer deliver carts of food to the Unseelie Court.

The intervals between coughing attacks were fewer and further between, but he felt sore all through his chest and lungs, and the myriad bruises he’d taken during the hours of combat were starting to intrude upon his thoughts. The wounds in his hands and wrists were beginning to knit, but the sense of raw, abraded pain didn’t leave.

He wasn’t entirely sure how he was able to present the composed face he did to his generals. That of an unhappy but rallying leader. Where did it come from? Because beneath the paper thin veneer, all he felt was a landslide of feeling and thought inside of him, all cascading down towards some central, dark point. He’d known this feeling before. After he’d killed Mafydd. After he’d killed Nwython. After certain battles he was never supposed to lose, and then did.

‘Here,’ Ifir said, handing Gwyn some roasted bones that were split to expose the marrow. ‘Eat something so that we can remember those who won’t eat flesh again.’

The marid-djinn afrit had their own rituals after a war, and this was one of them. Soberly, Gwyn scooped out the marrow with his fingers and ate it, looking around at the flickering campfires in the forest. The generals hadn’t wanted to go to the night gardens and the Winter Court. They’d sectioned out their own area. Here, they also treated their wounded. In amongst battle gear, supplies, roasting spits of meat, were tents and the occasional sharp voice of Aleutia, telling someone to back off, or telling a soldier to suck it up, or basically making sure that she could get
her work done.

The night was long. Ale and mead was provided, and then heavier spirits; whisky and vodka and more. Gwyn knew that he’d stopped and talked to Zudanna, who placed her hand on his shoulder and looked at him admiringly, which made no sense at all. He’d stopped and talked to some of the others. He knew from intelligence gathered that the Unseelie Court military didn’t exist as much more than a name now.

Vane was off on his own, metres away from his own people, looking pensively out into the blackness of the forest in the direction of the Seelie fae.

When Gwyn joined him, Vane looked up from where he was sitting on a stout log and offered a brittle smile. ‘Your Majesty.’

‘Those elfshot mines,’ Gwyn said, crouching by the small, solo fire that Vane had lit for himself – it flickered with green and blue flames, but was warming despite looking so cold. ‘They were a brilliant idea.’

‘And now we’re out of elfshot just about,’ Vane said, idly flicking a bracelet around his wrist as his pointed ears twitched. ‘And tens of thousands of them still beyond the Court.’

Gwyn sighed, nodded.

‘You didn’t know, did you?’ Vane said, looking at him sidelong. ‘You didn’t know, when you were the Seelie War General, that it would come to this, did you?’

‘No,’ Gwyn said. ‘A Court isn’t supposed to attack another Court like this.’

‘A lot of things that aren’t supposed to happen have been happening lately,’ Vane said, smiling with a kind of forced brightness. It was the sort of expression that dug beneath Gwyn’s façade, made him feel like he could be split open here, reveal something raw and awful to Vane.

He didn’t.

‘You looked magnificent in your armour,’ Vane said, voice quiet but earnest. ‘I saw you in your Seelie armour a few times. When I was a bowman for the fie ellyllon. Before I was their general. You were pale and golden like the sun. And at the end, black with blood and still so bright. I think I envied the Seelie their War General.’

‘It’s better than hate,’ Gwyn said, staring into the flames.

‘Is it?’ Vane said, chuckling. ‘Your whole family…they were all golden, weren’t they? Their colours, the gold and the blue.’

‘Yes,’ Gwyn said, thinking to his mother’s journals and swallowing.

‘You’ll need your own colours,’ Vane said. ‘Our fierce Stag King.’

A hand rested on his forearm, curled just enough that Gwyn thought he knew what Augus meant now, perhaps. Vane’s palm was warm and dry, and he rubbed Gwyn’s bare skin in a way that was a little more than friendly. Gwyn thought he was probably hypersensitive because his skin was still healing.

‘You fight on our side now,’ Vane said, ‘and I still envy you, I think. And the Seelie their successes. I want to know when my people will stop suffering. We have never been particularly
warring, and yet again and again…it seems the exchange is thus: if we want the protection of the Court, we must fight for it, and we must die.’

Gwyn lowered himself to the ground properly and folded his legs, and Vane’s hand stayed on his arm the entire time.

‘Sober thoughts,’ Gwyn said.

‘Actually, drunk ones,’ Vane said, giggling a little, and in an instant he looked the vivacious prince he usually was. But then his face turned sombre and he looked towards the flames. His curly red hair highlighted in green and blue, his freckled face aristocratic, no matter what the lighting.

Vane’s fingers crept up Gwyn’s arm, nestled in the crevice of his elbow, the soft inner skin there, and stroked. One finger after the other. Gwyn blinked at the flames and felt something delicate flutter in his chest.

‘Vane…’ he said, his voice uncertain.

‘You’re the King,’ Vane said, his voice lower than usual. ‘If you can’t collect Seelie spoils as your due, there are other spoils you could consider.’

By the gods, Augus was right.

Gwyn stared at him, and Vane stared back, then beamed, his face in shadow. The fingers at his elbow crept down towards his wrist, lifted Gwyn’s hand, then traced a long, tender line across his palm. Gwyn bit the inside of his lip. But that dark crevice inside of him opened wider, a maw of despair.

How many kin has he lost today? Look at him trying to bury his losses, ones that you caused.

Gwyn cleared his throat and drew his hand away, curling it into his lap. Vane looked disappointed, and then he sighed and stared at the fire once more. He laughed after a few seconds.

‘Vane,’ Gwyn said, ‘I cannot be… I am not-’

There had to be a graceful way to extricate himself, but he couldn’t find it. Vane didn’t let him off the hook for a long minute, and then he flicked his fingers at the fire and the flames turned violet and a deep peacock blue.

Gwyn thought of Augus’ masquerade ball costume.

And then he thought of the Winter Court cut short, and Court fae having to flee from their homes because of Albion’s actions.

‘You should ask that consort of yours if he would ever share you,’ Vane said, staring into the flames.

Gwyn swallowed. Couldn’t deny that the thought of it… Then he clamped down on his own wayward mind. Exhaustion followed quickly.

‘You deserve better, Vane,’ Gwyn said, standing and placing a hand on Vane’s shoulder, as Vane slowly turned to look at him in something that could have been incredulity. ‘You are a prince, a general, admired by the fie ellyllon for longer than I have been alive. I am a King that has just lost our most significant battle. Find better for yourself. You’ll have no trouble, looking the way that you do.’
Gwyn walked off and confusion was replaced with something far darker as he looked at the generals and the soldiers and commanders, heard the low cries of people in pain, those that might not survive even as Aleutia tried her best for them.

Gwyn thought of Kabiri as Kabiri had said he would. He felt nothing more than a dull, distant despair.

Above that, the flickering restlessness of bloodlust not properly slaked. He looked around at everyone getting drunk, at the tents, the stars above them, and sense memories stole through him.

Of being so drunk he didn’t have to think at all.

Of being shoved and yanked and pulled into all manner of positions by those who would treat him with the utmost respect the day after. As if they all had some secret code that had never been explicitly stated or agreed upon. You could only degrade Gwyn so terribly when he took it upon himself to get that drunk, and then came back to the tent after some battle and invited them. Then, and only then, would they forget his rank, and it would hurt and feel awful but also good and overwhelming and scour him out and remind him of what he was.

Self-induced correction was sometimes the only correction he had access to.

He looked around at all of them in a daze. At Ifir, at Mu, at Vane, at Zudanna and Luma.

The echo of his own name still rang in his ears. As though Augus was still shouting at him.

He sat down with Zudanna and together, with the help of some of the others, they began to make notes. He could tell that Zudanna didn’t want to think about her losses now, as opposed to Ifir, whose grieving was visible amongst he and his people.

‘I think we should give it at least twenty four hours and then reassess. There will be some strategies we can employ,’ Zudanna said. ‘But I think we all need some rest. I need sleep. Ifir is about ready to fall over. We’re safe here.’

‘You don’t think a day is too long?’ Gwyn said.

Zudanna pursed her lips and then leaned back, her claws digging into the log she was sitting upon. ‘I think we should give it two or three days, Your Majesty. I know it sounds conservative. But they cannot harm us in here. We need stealth and intelligence now. Vane and Mu, Magisakuna...even Gulvi, as much as I don’t like her methods.’

Gwyn nodded, though he was finding it hard to think of anything he could contribute. He was dazed. Zudanna looked at him like she knew it.

‘A weak leader is a poor leader,’ Zudanna said very softly, so that no one else heard her voice. ‘You need rest, Lord.’

‘Do I?’ Gwyn said flatly. He bit his tongue to stop himself from telling her how many Unseelie foe he’d absolutely destroyed on the back of almost no sleep. Now really wasn’t the time.

It was an hour later, after more half-hearted conversation – Zudanna also exhausted and worn – that Anath came to them both and presented Gwyn with a wax-sealed letter.

Gwyn opened it carefully, drawing out the parchment and looking at the writing within. It was from one of their informants still out in the field. Gwyn’s eyes tracked over the words, cobbled a kind of sense out of them.
‘Albion’s injured,’ Gwyn said, handing the letter to Zudanna as Anath walked away. ‘It’s a permanent injury. The healers cannot fix what the light has done.’

‘And what has that light of yours done?’ Zudanna said idly, and then her mouth opened as she read the letter herself. ‘Ah. The Seelie might feel vengeful then. Will he regain use of his arm?’

‘I don’t know,’ Gwyn said. He thought about his own shoulder. But that hadn’t been an injury from his own light.

Then, he thought about Crielle and how those scars had never faded, never disappeared. A wave of revulsion moved through him and he rocked as though two hands had shoved him between his shoulder blades.

‘Probably not,’ Gwyn said, his voice choked. His breath caught, and another wave of coughing shook him, making his mouth taste – momentarily – of nothing but blood. He assumed he’d be better by now, but then…Albion was a King, whatever he’d done to Gwyn’s body, held more power behind it than most attacks Gwyn faced. ‘At…any rate, Mages won’t be able to do much to heal it.’

‘Good,’ Zudanna said fiercely.

Another hour passed and Gwyn was up and drifting through the crowd of people, offering reassurance where he could, pretending he had strength to give to others.

Somehow, he ended up in the palace. Wandering through corridors. Barefoot. He walked up stairs, down them, all urgency gone, a terrible weight pressing in on all sides.

Maybe it was just the Seelie military that still surrounded them.

He had a location. A destination. He seemed to loop in circles before he committed to that strange, dark impulse inside of himself. If he could just…if he could only…

He didn’t knock before letting himself into Ash’s room.

No one seemed to be present, and Gwyn went straight to Ash’s bar and then behind it, rummaging around. He lifted out drink after drink, placing them on the bar itself, bumping his arm several times into wood.

‘Hey, what are you doing?’ Ash’s voice.

Gwyn poked his head up over the bar and Ash blinked at him several times, his frown deepened.

‘What will get me drunk the fastest?’ Gwyn said, nodding down to what he’d selected.

‘Ah,’ Ash said, and Gwyn couldn’t make out his expression at all now. The closest word he had for the pinch in Ash’s forehead was troubled. ‘Ah, are you sure you- I mean, it’s none of my business, but- I’m just… Did you know that Augus is looking for you? You don’t look the best. Are you sure you should be-’

‘It is none of your business,’ Gwyn said coldly, picking up six of the full bottles awkwardly. Once he had them secure, he began to walk towards Ash’s open door.

‘Gwyn,’ Ash said, his voice quieter, ‘you want to talk about it? Maybe?’

‘No,’ Gwyn said. He laughed a couple of seconds later.
Talk about what?

He wanted to destroy himself. Just temporarily. Just enough. There was nothing to talk about, he already knew what he wanted.

‘Gwyn,’ Ash said to Gwyn’s back, as he walked from the room and began to leave down the corridor, ‘why don’t you just wait here while I get Augus? It won’t take a moment hey.’

‘No,’ Gwyn said, and then annoyed at the conversation, found the trailing ribbons of his light and folded himself up in them, disappearing.

*

He knew it was maudlin, he didn’t care.

He had the distant recollection that Augus had told him not to do this, and he didn’t care about that either.

The Coalition he’d tried to make, it turned out the classless wouldn’t organise themselves for things like this, even if they meant well. It just…wasn’t meant to be.

He had to drink a lot. And he had to drink quickly. The liquors he’d chosen, some were so caustic that his lungs protested vociferously, and at one point he’d gotten so furious with himself for the coughing that was still plaguing him, that he’d raked fingers down his own chest, bruising skin, as though he could just hurt his lungs into listening to him. It didn’t work, but the pain…

The pain was good.

The more he drank, the more he was sure of himself, of this path of action.

When was the last time he’d gotten drunk like this? He couldn’t remember. He’d not let himself during Augus’ reign. Or afterwards. He hadn’t needed it. Unlike many fae, Gwyn didn’t often drink for fun. He drank to a purpose, which was to destroy his inhibitions enough that he could go to others and ask them to do what he was not brave enough to do to himself. He was too craven, too cowardly, but…

But with enough alcohol, he could make sure that he could remind himself of what he truly was.

The words of Crielle’s journals kept floating around in his head. They clamoured more loudly than remembered sword strikes on metal. Than shrieks or screams or harsh cries in his ears. He could even hear her voice behind them. It was as though she was still there, talking to him. Except now, it wasn’t only insults, but the depth of pain behind them.

His whole life, apparently, was about ruining others. His mother. Mafydd. Nwython and Cyledr. Entire Kingdoms.

Gwyn laughed to himself as he drank directly from the second bottle and felt harsh fumes collect in the back of his nose. When he breathed out, he felt as though he were exhaling smoke from a fire. Then he thought of Kabiri and laughed again.

He sat in a dark storage room. No one would think to look for him here. The place was lit by a single candle, Gwyn having found the matches and striking one, lighting the wick with a steady hand and then drinking in a dedicated fashion more often practiced by those who couldn’t stop themselves from seeking inebriation every evening.
Augus would expect better from him than this. But Augus was an idiot. They all were. He supposed they could be useful, in their way. Augus was too soft now. Wouldn’t…wouldn’t do what needed to be done. Put too much energy into caring, not enough into treating Gwyn as he should be treated. The others, they wouldn’t understand. Even Ash’s concerned face – had it been concern? Even that filled Gwyn with disgust.

He rumbled a sound at the silty dregs at the bottom of the bottle and blinked as his vision swam. Two bottles. It wasn’t enough. He would lose his nerve. If he could still think, he would definitely lose his nerve. He knew that from experience too. Even once his head was swimming, it wasn’t enough. He had to make sure…

If there was anything like a coherent thought left inside of him, he wouldn’t go through with it.

‘Coward,’ he muttered under his breath.

*Take a day…take several days…*

Zudanna had called him a weak leader and she didn’t even know the half of it.

At the end of the third bottle, he slumped and buried his head in his hands. His skull felt like it had been filled with rocks, he couldn’t remember a time when the ache and burn in his chest and throat didn’t seem normal. Every inhale tasted of alcohol. Every exhale made his eyes burn so that in the end, he had to drop his hands so his breath didn’t cloud so near to his own face.

Three more bottles. He probably wouldn’t need them all.

‘Come on,’ Gwyn said to himself. ‘More.’

*More.*

He opened the fourth bottle and that was when the burning in his eyes was no longer caused by the alcohol. He ignored that too, tipped his head back, drinking as though someone was forcing him to. It was easier to imagine that Efnisien was there with him, forcing the cold glass rim to his mouth, making him drink until he choked and it spilled down his neck and still the bottle was held in place.

So he did choke, and splutter, and made himself drink, because he’d lost enough coherency to remember that Efnisien was dead, and Efnisien hadn’t made him drink like this for a long time.

*He wove.*

He also couldn’t see very well.

He had one of his hands out, grazing along the wall. He’d scraped the skin raw because he couldn’t quite judge how hard he needed to lean into the stone of the corridor as he meandered his way down. No longer able to teleport. Too drunk.

But he did at least know that he needed to get out of the castle. And he knew that he needed to avoid the Winter Court and their frippery and find the generals.

They would…

They would know what to do.
His forehead furrowed. There was something not quite right about that thought, but he couldn’t puzzle it out, and he didn’t want to.

He stumbled down steps and caught himself on a railing and then forged on.

He didn’t hear the footsteps until there was a hand in his shirt and then he was being spun so hard that he fell, his knees landing with bruising force, his grazed hand catching himself on the floor. He looked up and saw a dark haired prince, and blinked to clear his vision, realised it was Augus.

That…that wouldn’t do.

‘M’busy,’ Gwyn said, and Augus’ expression seemed to rearrange itself until Gwyn thought of the word ‘apoplectic’ and nearly laughed.

‘Tell me you are not going to do what I think you’re going to do,’ Augus said, and Gwyn clung to the words and wasn’t entirely sure what Augus was talking about.

‘I need to…’ Gwyn said, and then he stopped. He couldn’t even think about what he needed to do.

Hands in his shirt, fingers digging into his shoulders, and Gwyn whined and tried to lean back weakly and Augus’ face was too close to be in focus and now there were two of him.

Gwyn laughed.

No one needed two Augus’. That was far too many. One was enough.

‘There’s too many of you,’ Gwyn said. ‘Stop it.’

And then he was being shaken, and Gwyn made several pathetic sounds of protest and tried to get Augus to let him go but his fingers felt rubbery and nothing was working properly and he just needed to get out there.

‘Let me go,’ Gwyn slurred. ‘It’s just…a night. They’ll know…what to do.’

‘They are not Seelie soldiers who understand there’s some clandestine secret between you all where they can fucking gang-rape you one night every few decades or so because your self-hatred is so phenomenal you don’t know what else to do with yourself when you fail. They are Unseelie! They will tear you apart. You’ve only gained an inch of respect with some of them and you want to throw that away, break a promise to me, because you can’t handle yourself? I can’t- I can’t handle you either, right now, Gwyn. I…’

Augus trailed off, sounded furious and then lost and now nothing. Heavy breathing. It was Augus’ and Gwyn’s together.

Gwyn felt nauseated.
Then, a fist knotting up the loose fabric of his shirt and Gwyn was being forced to his feet.

‘Stand,’ Augus snapped, shoving him with his knuckles the way that Albion had.

_You will drown._

Gwyn opened his mouth to say something about it, and then he was being dragged down corridors far faster than he could comfortably manage, and he felt a prickling of annoyance because Augus was angry but Augus was never angry enough to do what was necessary. He wouldn’t…he didn’t understand.

Augus was also talking, but he seemed to be talking mostly to himself.

‘I spend the entire…I spend however long listening to you on that battlefield and then _nothing_ at all and I knew, I _knew_… You know, it’s a good thing I didn’t get you to blood-oath that you wouldn’t do this because you’d be dead.’

‘Albion would be…so pleased, Augus,’ Gwyn said, and then he smiled amiably when Augus turned to look at him over his shoulder, his eyes ablaze. ‘Wouldn’t he though?’

‘If you were dead?’ Augus said.

Gwyn nodded, couldn’t wipe the smile off his face, and then stumbled when Augus let go of his shirt and his arm swung and then there was a blow to his cheek that was so hard that Gwyn hit the wall. His body was already loose and he sagged against the stone. Truthfully, it didn’t hurt that much. He was too numb. It didn’t even frighten him. But he did lose his train of thought. Something about Albion. Gwyn wrinkled his face. He didn’t like Albion much anymore. Or he did?

He couldn’t remember.

He missed the old Albion.

‘More of that, please,’ Gwyn said, looking at Augus, who was _trembling_. Why was he trembling? ‘Don’t be scared, Augus. The…Court is safe. At least. Isn’t it?’

Augus was shaking his head. All the Augus’ were shaking their heads at him. But not in stern disapproval like his parents. Gwyn thought Augus looked…what? He couldn’t pick it. Eyes wide, mouth slightly open. Then, his jaw clenched and he walked over to Gwyn and took up his shirt again and jerked him upright.

‘You want punishment?’ Augus said, his voice not quite as even as normal. ‘You want to know how someone can treat you when you’ve let them down?’

‘Yes,’ Gwyn said, but he was angry, because Augus wouldn’t do it. ‘Let me go. They’ll know what to do.’

‘You…’ Augus wasn’t even looking at him. ‘You will ruin us. The whole damned Court. You’ll ruin it, like this. By the gods, Gwyn. By some miracle they don’t actually hate you and they _still_ believe in you, right now, and you would just go and…’

Augus kept walking, his steps sharp and loud – too loud – in Gwyn’s ears.

‘Let me go,’ Gwyn whined.
'No,' Augus snapped.

Then, there was a dark room that smelled of carbon and burning things and wreckage. The room itself was black. It looked like...Gwyn blinked at it. It looked like the old An Fwy estate. But there was a charred saltire cross in the middle of the room. This was...he knew this space, it was where Augus had stabbed him in the shoulder.

Augus flung him down to the floor with a strength that surprised even Gwyn.

'So you’ll hurt me now?' Gwyn said hopefully, his own voice thick and not quite right in his head. 'You’ll…'

'Oh,' Augus breathed, 'fuck you, you self-pitying…' he trailed off, his mouth working, and then Augus disappeared and then he was back with two lengths of rope and took Gwyn’s ankles and bound them roughly. ‘You are going to stay here, and if you leave, Gwyn. If you leave this room before I return to it…’

Augus laughed, the sound brittle.

Gwyn’s ankles hurt. He reached down to the rope, and Augus did something with the pressure points in Gwyn’s wrist that made him yelp and jerk back, but Augus didn’t let go, and used the second length of rope to secure his wrist to the base of the saltire cross. Gwyn was sure that Augus dug his fingers into the pressure points harder than he needed to. His whole arm was numb and tingling when Augus let go of it.

‘I am not some weapon you can use against yourself,’ Augus said under his breath. ‘I will not be- But if that’s what you want? You know what? I am actually angry enough that I’m happy to oblige. But I’ll do it when you’re sober, and then you can really remember it. You want a punishment, Gwyn? You want to be punished for all of this? Sober up. I’ll be back for you later.’

A door slammed, and Gwyn was left in the dark, his night vision adjusting too slowly, everything blurred and doubling on itself.

Gwyn shifted in the ropes and then made a faint, mournful sound.

He’d been so close to the generals, hadn’t he? His head slumped. It would be too hard. Too hard to untie himself and...and then start trying to find his way back again and perhaps he’d drunk too much, because it was getting harder and harder to see, and he’d measured how much alcohol he’d imbibed because too much and he would pass out too soon and...

But he always passed out eventually. Either the alcohol or the fucking. It was always one or the other.

This time, it was the alcohol.

Chapter End Notes

In our next chapter, 'Revelation:'

‘I thought you wanted to be used up,’ Augus hissed at him, every word flaying him. ‘I thought that’s what this was about, Gwyn. You’re not supposed to like a punishment, that’s rather counterproductive, don’t you think? If you don’t want to fail next time,
don’t want to lose the war, then maybe you should just *accept* what you deserve!’
Revelation

Chapter Notes

No new tags, exactly, but disturbing themes and a brief slide into temporary noncon here.

Feedback is love! <3<3 Thanks to all who are reading. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Gwyn

* 

Hours later, after half-dozing, Gwyn’s head pounded so hard he thought the ground was moving. When he realised it wasn’t moving, a wave of nausea stampeded through him with all the grace of hungry livestock, and he shifted in ropes and retched, then vomited wretchedly, bringing up reeking, bitter bile and alcohol together, abrading the inside of his throat and mouth. The filthy concoction washed up the back of his nose so that he vomited in repeating violent waves.

He spat the remainder out and still hadn’t opened his eyes. His head hurt worse.

His wrist was scratchy sore. His ankles throbbed. He didn’t bother struggling in the bonds because it just made his whole body pulse like some animal was inside of him, trying to crawl out. He stayed as still as possible.

He dozed again.

More hours passed. He knew he was more sober than he had been hours ago, because the idea of going to all those soldiers and generals now filled him with a shame so dark and cutting that he felt like he was bleeding from it.

Minutes passed, and he kept – absurdly – thinking that Augus would know he had woken and come in and deliver some…lecture and it would be over. Not what Gwyn had been looking for when drunk, but easier to bear. Perhaps.

An hour passed and Augus hadn’t come.

Gwyn opened his eyes and looked blearily around the room he’d destroyed with his light. The cross was still standing. Parts of it had dissolved, as though Gwyn’s light had turned the material to friable dust.

His wrist twisted absently, his stomach churned. Even just turning his head slowly to look around the room had set rolling boulders off in his head and he had to stay very, very still just so he wouldn’t retch and gag and throw up stomach lining.

He ached, his body felt used up, and he felt old.

Another hour and Gwyn whimpered and pulled slightly on the rope at his wrist, the ropes around his ankles. He could have torn himself free but…
Augus wanted him to stay here, didn’t he?

Where was he?

Gwyn didn’t even know what time it was. He didn’t know what day it was. Surely Augus wouldn’t have left him here if Gwyn was needed for something important?

*Important like failing the whole Kingdom?*

Gwyn whimpered again, twitched at the ropes, began to shake.

He’d forgotten this. Forgotten how this much alcohol would leave him feeling so lost. Normally he’d be dealing with vague remembrances of a previous evening, and a body so sore he could hardly move it. Sometimes he even woke up in the healer’s tent, his own Seelie fae having dragged him there. A Court fae would eventually heal no matter how rough they were, but it didn’t mean healers weren’t sometimes necessary.

He carefully tried not to think about the events that had led him here.

He was shaking constantly when the handle clicked and then the door slammed open with a bang so loud that Gwyn cried out, flinching away from it.

Augus.

‘Wake up,’ Augus snapped, a large box of…something in his hands. He dropped the box nearby, and Gwyn didn’t look at it, only staring meekly up at Augus, who looked…who looked furious.

Augus bent down next to him, a knife flashing, and Gwyn tried to pull away and Augus dug his fingers cruelly into Gwyn’s arm until he stopped moving. Then, Augus sawed roughly at the rope around his wrist until it broke, then the ropes at his ankles. He looked at the pool of vomit beside Gwyn and the bridge of his nose wrinkled in disgust. When he turned to Gwyn, his eyes flashed with something that made the pit of Gwyn’s gut feel hollow.

‘Looking forward to your punishment?’ Augus said, his voice cold. He walked over to the box, picked it up, and dragged it so that it fell next to Gwyn. So that he had no choice but to see the contents inside. His face went cold and clammy. He broke out in a sweat that left him trembling. He looked up at Augus in confusion.

‘Oh yes, *toys,*’ Augus said viciously. ‘Because if you want to be fucked by fifty different fae, one after the other, we might as well make it realistic.’

Gwyn stared at them again, horrified, because some of them looked…some of them looked painful. Some of them definitely looked like they were designed to- to do damage. Gwyn turned his head to look up at Augus and then was shocked by a hand in the hair, shaking him, far too rough, claws scraping skin open. Augus was never normally like this. Gwyn couldn’t remember the last time Augus had treated him like this.

Even Augus’ punishments when they happened, even they weren’t-

*Just accept it, remember? You were going to let the Unseelie do far worse last night. At least be strong enough to accept your due.*

Augus slapped him with his free hand. It was hard enough that Gwyn fell backwards, his throat working on a gag. His hand went up to his cheek. The skin had split. This was no underfae treating him violently now, but someone with Inner Court status. Someone who could *really* hurt him, and
Augus for once looked like he really wanted to.

Gwyn pushed himself back on his hands, unthinking, but Augus reached into the box and fetched something out of it, and then stood over him, one of the dildos in his hand.

Gwyn was already reaching up to push Augus away, to fight back, every movement clumsy and bewildered.

They struggled, but Augus wasn’t fighting off a nasty hangover, he hadn’t been in a battle, and he’d likely fed – and Gwyn had forgotten about eating regularly again. When Gwyn ended up on his belly, he struggled hard, then howled when a knee slammed down into his bad shoulder. The pain was mind-splitting, and for a moment he gasped like a fish on a hook, his other arm moving spasmodically.

‘Suck it up, Gwyn,’ Augus said. ‘You wanted this, remember? Hm? If you can take a whole platoon of soldiers fucking you every which way, you can certainly take it from me, can’t you?’

Why are you being like this?

The hand in his hair tilted his head until his neck was exposed, and Gwyn kicked out and he still couldn’t move Augus away. There was some internal argument getting louder and louder inside of him. Some voice shrieking when it was normally only a small quiet cry. Only an unassuming thing. And now, screaming at him:

Why?! Why are you letting him do this?! It’s unfair! It’s unfair! It’s unfair!

Gwyn choked on the words he heard inside of himself, his mouth opening on a wet gasp. The next thing, something like rubber was shoved past his teeth and thrust roughly down into his mouth – not stopping – not even when he did gag and convulse on it. There wasn’t enough saliva, the material was grabby, snagging on his tongue, the roof of his mouth. Augus shoved.

No! It’s unfair! Stop it! Stop!

Gwyn’s eyes flew open and he struggled properly – uncoordinated and afraid, like he hadn’t spent his life training for this kind of grappling. His jaw sent a stab of pain into his head when Augus managed to somehow get the thing deeper down his throat.

‘I thought you wanted to be used up,’ Augus hissed at him, every word flaying him. ‘I thought that’s what this was about, Gwyn. You’re not supposed to like a punishment, that’s rather counterproductive, don’t you think? If you don’t want to fail next time, don’t want to lose the war, then maybe you should just accept what you deserve!’

Gwyn stopped focusing on Augus and tried to roll back, away. He fought to tug the thing that was choking him out of his mouth. Saliva and words were backing up in his throat and his head was splitting and he managed to get himself into a semi-upright position on his knees, but then Augus was on the floor with him, fire and fury and something else in his eyes that Gwyn hated, hated.

A high, lost sound and Gwyn finally managed to get the dildo out of his mouth and then he grabbed it out of Augus’ hand and threw it across the room, knowing that he was making noises of distress, terrified of whatever it was that was building inside of him. The shrieking was so loud, he had to- he had to-

‘I don’t want to be treated like this anymore!’

The next breath was strangled, as though the words had all stuck like tiny daggers in his throat,
even though each one had rung clear. Fresh dread shouldn’t have been able to clamber into him as quickly as it did in his state, and the fear that followed was greater, more frightening than anything he’d felt on that awful battlefield. Larger than anything he’d felt at Augus’ hands. He was shaking so badly in Augus’ arms – when had his hands come to grip Gwyn’s shoulders? – that he thought Augus was shaking.

Every word he’d ever uttered, every thought, they all spiraled away and now he was only aware that he’d said something wrong, something very **wrong**, and there was going to be- There was going to be something **awful**- and it was going to, it would **destroy** him and there would be no coming back from it and he should never have, should **never have**, didn’t they teach him anything? Didn’t they teach him? Why was he-

‘…Listen to me, Gwyn, Gwyn, it’s all right. It’s all right. I’m stopping. I’m stopping. Look at me. Gwyn, look at me.’

Gwyn stared at Augus because he wasn’t sure he could do anything else. He wouldn’t stop shaking, and he was making some stupid sound over and over again, his mouth open, on every exhale, some dry and dusty sound that was swept up from the depths of him.

‘It’s all right,’ Augus said, something serious on his face, terribly serious. No traces of rage remained and it made no **sense**. ‘It’s all right. I’ve got you. Stay with me, sweetness.’

The sounds Gwyn made became louder, and he tried to twist out of Augus’ grasp but he couldn’t manage it, so he just stayed there, feeling like he was hanging out over a cliff and Augus was the one holding him over it. And Augus would let him go, he **would**, because what was Gwyn doing? Saying that he thought it was **unfair**? It wasn’t. None of it. It was what was **supposed** to happen. Failure. Punishment. It was inevitable. It was-

‘Shhh,’ Augus said, edging closer. ‘I need to ask you some questions, and it’s going to be all right, yes? Can you nod or shake your head? Do you understand what I’m saying?’

Gwyn nodded, the movement jerky.

‘Can’t talk right now?’ Augus said quickly.

Gwyn shook his head.

‘That’s perfectly fine. It’s all right. Careful now. You don’t want to be treated like this anymore?’

Gwyn made a sound of denial, because he should never have said, he **should never have said**-

‘You’re doing so, so well,’ Augus said, each word buttery smooth and warm and the opposite of what Gwyn expected. So different to what he knew he was supposed to hear that something in him stilled – small and scared – and he stared at Augus and knew his mouth was still open like he’d been stabbed, or struck, or…

‘That’s it,’ Augus said, smiling at him, but how did the anger disappear so quickly? Where did it **go**?

Augus was rubbing the sides of his arms, Gwyn’s head pounded from more than just the hangover. His teeth began to chatter and he clenched his jaw to stop the sound. Augus nodded easily, like he knew, like he’d expected…

‘I want you to listen to me very closely,’ Augus said, ‘and I want you to be **honest** with me, and it’s going to be hard, Gwyn. I know it is. All right? I **know**. But don’t lose this, even if you can only
hang onto it for minutes. Just be strong for me a bit longer.’

Gwyn would have laughed if he remembered how. If he wasn’t hanging off some precipice. They were in this position because of weakness.

‘Do you want me to stop hurting you? No more physical pain, ever again?’

No more pistillum, no more scratches across his skin or hands yanking his hair back or feeling the bite of Augus’ teeth or even his cock when Gwyn wasn’t ready enough and no, no, no, that wasn’t- He hadn’t meant- Was that what Augus thought he meant?

‘All right,’ Augus was saying, and Gwyn realised from the rocking in his head that he was shaking it frantically. ‘That’s good. That’s wonderful. Thank you. Gramercie. The next question will be difficult. Bear with me, sweetness. Are you saying you don’t want to be treated unfairly? Punished for things that you didn’t do wrong in the first place?’

Gwyn was shuddering, over and over again, sure he was going to be sick, and this was stupid. It was stupid. All he had to do was shake his head. That was all he had to do.

No, Augus, I’m not saying that.

Punish me.

The pain wasn’t coming from Augus this time – though the questions were horrible – but from somewhere deep inside of himself. Some battle that he wanted to claw out of his very chest so he could spill it in front of himself and not have to feel it.

‘You can do this,’ Augus said, as though he knew how huge the pain of it was, which was impossible. ‘It will be our secret, Gwyn. I’ll never tell anyone else.’

Gwyn blinked and tears spilled and he had no idea they were there in the first place.

A thumb smoothing some of the tears away, and Gwyn’s breathing choked down in his throat and he tried to hang onto what Augus had said. Augus had said he could do this. Augus had said it would only be a few minutes, and that it would be hard and that he would keep it a secret and so…

And so even if Gwyn was wrong, and even if a part of Gwyn knew that he was going to give the wrong answer, there was maybe- Maybe the other part of Gwyn could say something too. The quiet part. That so rarely got to say anything.

Gwyn looked up and met Augus’ eyes, felt worse than he’d felt when Albion had tried to drown him in his own body fluids.

He nodded.

Augus’ eyes widened, a half-second of shock, before his expression seemed to transform and Gwyn had no idea how to translate at it at all except that it didn’t look angry, or mean, or cruel, and it didn’t make sense.

Augus’ head ducked, he heaved some great breath, and Gwyn was still trembling because what if- what if it was the wrong answer- Gwyn knew it was the wrong answer, he knew it was, he-

When Augus looked up, there was an expression in his eyes that Gwyn had seen parents sometimes give to their children when they’d done something impressive. Or tutors give their students. Or Crielle give his cousin.
‘A part of you knows,’ Augus said, his voice not quite as smooth as before, but even warmer. ‘A part of you knows. And you- You try and ruin it, as often as you can. And I know...I know you cannot entirely help it. I do know that. But I need that part of you, Gwyn. I need the part of you that knows that you were trying to hurt yourself with something you didn’t truly deserve, last night. The part of you that knows I have no right to punish you right now, for anything. The part of you that doesn’t want to be hurt like that anymore.’

Gwyn shook his head, because he didn’t want that part of him. He didn’t see how Augus could want it. It was an awful, greedy part of him that wanted things he wasn’t supposed to have, didn’t deserve, would eventually only hurt him if he got them.

‘I know,’ Augus said, pursing his lips, as though he knew exactly what Gwyn was thinking. ‘I once heard you say that you’d destroy him, that part of you, if you could. But you don’t want to hurt today, do you? Even if you think you should? Ignore the ‘shoulds’ and the ‘should nots’ for a few minutes, sweetness. You don’t want to hurt today, do you?’

Breaths shuddered out of him, because the questions were still bruising him somewhere he didn’t want to be bruised.

But he shook his head, and Augus slid his hand against Gwyn’s neck and then cupped his nape and edged closer.

‘Because you’re tired,’ Augus said, his voice hypnotic, ‘and because you’re sore – not just physically, but everywhere. You don’t want to be hurt when you feel like this, do you, sweetness? You hurt so much. People are supposed to be looked after when they feel like this, aren’t they? And if you can’t look after yourself and someone else is offering, you could trust them, couldn’t you?’

A thin noise, a whine that broke off when Gwyn inhaled sharply. It was too much. Augus was offering too much. It wasn’t...it wasn’t right.

But a small, greedy part of him wanted to lean into Augus’ touch or slump forwards and fall into Augus’ lap.

‘You’re so tired, aren’t you?’ Augus said, and his voice was so soft then, so understanding, that Gwyn slumped forwards anyway, his whole body shifting so that he could drag his shoulders into Augus’ chest clumsily, rest his head against the side of Augus’ arm.

If his father knew he was doing this, if he knew that Gwyn was daring to take...so much that he wasn’t supposed to have, he would take Augus away. Like he had Mafydd. Gwyn blinked at the blackened room around him. His own thoughts seemed to reverberate, as though he was hearing them for the first time.

His father was dead. Mafydd too.

Even Augus had been, briefly.

But Augus was still here.

‘My dear heart,’ Augus said, smoothing a hand down Gwyn’s back with firm, long strokes. Ones that started at the top of his neck and ended at the base of his spine. ‘Be easy, sweetness. It’s fine.’

Gwyn sagged, and though the shaking continued, it was muted; no longer sustained by the terrible tension in Gwyn’s flesh. He made a noise, one hand clutching at Augus’ shirt and the other wrapping around Augus’ waist and pressing flat to his back.
‘That’s it,’ Augus said, with the richness he sometimes used when he was especially pleased. ‘We can do this for a bit longer, and then we’re going to stand up and I’m going to help you shower, all right?’

Gwyn nodded, and Augus tousled his hair, then massaged his scalp, fingers trailing down to trace at the lines of his face. He caressed his damp cheekbone – skirting the split that was healing, the bridge of his nose, his lower lip. Gwyn’s lips parted automatically, and Augus hesitated there, dipping just slightly between lower lip and teeth, the movement as possessive as everything else was gentle. Gwyn shivered and this time the sensation wasn’t from fear.

But he still felt bruised throughout. Something had raged inside of him and he could have been cut and bleeding on the inside with how sore he felt. He was wrung out and his arms tightened. Augus cupped Gwyn’s head with one hand and rubbed at his back with the other, responding.

His mind drifted, he was too frightened to bring his thoughts back together. He was too afraid he’d see only ugliness in everything he’d just done, in the way he was behaving, and he didn’t want to. He wanted it to be fine. Wanted to be able to cling to Augus like this and not have to expect some blow or lecture because of it, even if they came from himself.

Augus seemed content to fuss over Gwyn, which left Gwyn feeling faintly perplexed, but he didn’t want to examine that too much either.

He was too sore. Augus was right, he was 

‘I’m so pleased with you,’ Augus said a few minutes later, and Gwyn’s brow furrowed, his hand shifted uneasily on Augus’ back. ‘I’m going to be careful, I know how you feel about things like this, but you did very well, Gwyn. I know you won’t be able to sustain this, I know that’s… going to be an ongoing thing with us, with you. But right now, I’m pleased. My tired, wild creature. I wonder where your collar is?’

Gwyn shivered again, and Augus laughed under his breath, the sound sultry, trickling warmly down Gwyn’s spine.

‘We’ll find it,’ Augus said, fingers dragging sensuously through Gwyn’s hair. ‘Anchor you down. Make you remember where you belong.’

Gwyn nodded, pushing a noise of agreement out of his throat.

But that was all he could manage before feeling like he was skirting dangerously close to a level of awareness he didn’t want. Too many things to think about, sort through, decipher.

Augus stayed silent with him for at least twenty minutes in the blackened room, the floor hard and unforgiving, and the smell of alcohol, bile and sweat in the room. But Augus didn’t complain, didn’t even try to fill Gwyn’s head with any more words. There was only his touch, which warmed the more he stroked at Gwyn’s back and scalp and neck and shoulders.

* *

‘Careful,’ Augus said when he helped Gwyn up, and Gwyn stumbled, his knees not yet wanting to support him.

But I haven’t done anything, Gwyn thought, muzzily. He rubbed at his face, cleared his throat, and there were two hands curved firmly around his waist, holding him steady.

Getting to the shower was not easy, but they managed. Augus undressed him, telling him to lift his
arms, to lower them. To step out of his pants. Each order was quiet, simple, and Gwyn was glad of them. Augus paused when he looked Gwyn over, frowning at bruises that hadn’t yet healed, touching the mottled violet and mauve across Gwyn’s chest where Albion had used his powers.

‘It’s taking you some time to heal,’ Augus said, squinting up at Gwyn. ‘Have you been eating?’

Gwyn closed his eyes, felt too heavy to deal with Augus’ disapproval. But Augus only thumbed another mark on Gwyn’s skin and sighed.

‘We’ll get you something to eat later.’

The presence of Augus didn’t waver, not even once Gwyn was in the shower. He stood there, still dazed, still frightened, definitely exhausted, and Augus only stood with him – having undressed while Gwyn leaned against a carved shower rail – now watching him. After some minutes passed, Augus shifted Gwyn deftly so that he was tipping his head back into the spray, and then reached for a glass bottle of product that Gwyn didn’t use because it was Augus’. Gwyn had often thought of using it, just so he’d smell like him, which he’d then dismissed as somewhat ridiculous, especially because Augus would know in an instant what Gwyn had been trying to do.

Augus’ hands massaged the green gel into his hair, working it into a thin lather, and Gwyn kept his eyes closed. He could hear his own breathing. The movements in his hair were nice. Indulgent.

‘I should be doing this myself,’ Gwyn said, his voice a shock to his own ears.

Augus hummed behind him as he dragged claw-tips over Gwyn’s scalp, and Gwyn swallowed at the tingling sensations moving through his head. How did Augus know exactly how to avoid the scratches he’d made earlier?

‘What did I say about ‘shoulds’ and ‘should nots’?’ Augus said.

‘Ig-ignore them,’ Gwyn said, feeling shaky.

‘Do you like it when I do this?’ Augus said.

Gwyn’s hand rose halfway up to his head, to rub at his forehead or pinch the bridge of his nose. His arm dropped, he nodded. Augus was silent as he tilted Gwyn’s head back underneath the hot spray, one hand protecting his eyes from runoff.

After the rinsing came a softer cream, almost waxy, and Gwyn wasn’t used to doing much more with his hair than what Augus had just done, so there being another step was off-putting. It made him come back to himself a little more, words reintroducing themselves, clumsy sentences building in his head.

‘Augus?’ Gwyn said, his voice hushed.

‘Mm?’

‘Would you-? Would you have…if I hadn’t said what I’d said, what would you have done? Would you have gone through with it?’

It was hard to forget just how rough Augus had been. All that sharp, pinpointed fury. Augus was quiet as he used the pads of his fingers to massage so deeply into Gwyn’s scalp that his head bowed.

‘No,’ Augus said, a minute passing. ‘I couldn’t.’
‘You…wanted me to react the way that I did? You…tricked me?’

‘It’s complicated,’ Augus said. ‘I was so angry. I was also hoping there was a reason you needed to be drunk to enact that behaviour. I took a risk. I hoped that…’

It wasn’t like Augus to be so lost for words, and in the end he said nothing at all and rinsed out Gwyn’s hair again, this time combing his fingers through and detangling at the same time.

After that, clever hands soaped his body and Gwyn bowed his head and rested it on Augus’ shoulder, thinking in stops and starts.

‘It was frightening,’ Gwyn said, his voice low. ‘I did do… I did do something wrong. I thought-Surely you know what I did wrong? You told me yourself.’

Augus stepped back from him and tilted his head, and Gwyn squeezed his eyes shut, working it through.

‘I- I did something wrong, I did something- I went- You said it was a rule and you’ve had…so few, and then I got drunk and I-’

‘I know,’ Augus said. Gwyn opened his eyes, Augus’ forehead was creased. ‘The loathing you carry for yourself is far larger than…than a promise like that. I think I knew that at the time, but one can hope, can’t they?’ He looked back to Gwyn and smiled ruefully. ‘I’m going to think of another way to deal with that. You don’t carry the entire world on your shoulders alone, Gwyn. I made a mistake too. What should I do? Get utterly plastered and present myself to a crew of frustrated war generals and say ‘ta dah!’ until they fuck me as punishment?’

Gwyn stared at him.

‘I’m not going to let you forget it,’ Augus said, face turning serious once more. ‘That you don’t want to be treated unfairly. That you said the words yourself. You don’t want to be treated like that anymore.’

‘Don’t,’ Gwyn murmured, looking down.

‘How many times did you think it when you were younger? When the consequences for even showing them that you thought it was unfair – one mutinous expression – meant such catastrophe for you?’

There was nothing to say in response to that. Gwyn’s shoulders dropped, his head was too heavy. He couldn’t do this. He knew what Augus wanted to do, had an idea anyway, and he just…he just couldn’t.

‘You said…you said we could stop,’ Gwyn said, sounding petulant. ‘I can’t do this, Augus.’

His voice had risen and choked up alarmingly towards the end, and Augus placed a palm flat against Gwyn’s back and scratched soothingly, maybe even in apology.

The rest of the shower passed in silence, and Gwyn reluctantly fell back into a deeper emptiness.

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Despite the fatigue, Gwyn couldn’t sleep. He sat up on the bed, his legs crossed, and Augus sat nearby, watching him. It wasn’t even intrusive. At some point, Augus had become someone who didn’t make him wary all the time anymore, wasn’t a constant source of fear or suspicion whenever
Gwyn thought about him.

Gwyn’s fingers moved slowly across the blankets, and then he touched Augus’ knee, waiting a few seconds to see what Augus would do – which was nothing – before resting his entire hand on Augus’ knee and looking at him.

When Augus didn’t move, Gwyn inched over until his knee was bumping Augus’. He took up one of Augus’ hands where it rested in his lap. Already his skin was lukewarm again, despite the heat of the shower.

‘What do you want, Gwyn?’ Augus said, his expression open.

‘I don’t know,’ Gwyn said, trying to ignore all the impulses that told him to stop doing this. To stop making himself...behave like this. He should be back with the generals. He should be taking a greater responsibility for what had gone wrong. Yes, Zudanna said that he needed a rest, that they all needed a rest, but really…

‘What do you want?’ Augus said, leaning forwards and stroking over the back of Gwyn’s palm. ‘You can tell me.’

Can I?

Gwyn hardly knew what he wanted.

There was still a part of him that wanted to be blistered apart with agony until he was screaming and unable to even remember his own name. It wanted shame and humiliation and so much painful awareness of the disgusting thing that he was. And then there was the smaller part which made him squeeze haplessly at Augus’ hand and feel as though he were drifting over turbulent water.

‘Be...kind to me,’ Gwyn said. ‘You could, if you wanted, touch me?’

Yes, very seductive. Well done.

Augus’ lips tightened at the edges. Almost a smile. He pushed up on a palm so that he was on his knees, leaned towards Gwyn and was so close now that Gwyn couldn’t keep looking at him, because his eyes didn’t know what to focus on. He closed them.

‘Mm,’ Augus said, as though thinking. His free hand slipped beneath the folds of the bathrobe and stroked too lightly over the vulnerable skin of Gwyn’s belly, so that he twitched and hissed. ‘Your definition of kindness is different to most people’s, isn’t it?’

Gwyn swallowed thickly, Augus’ cool hand trailing over his flank now, before grasping a handful of muscle and squeezing just hard enough that Gwyn’s mouth tensed. A tired heat unfurled inside of him, he opened his mouth to exhale.

‘Kindness,’ Augus speculated, ‘an interesting concept. Do you want me to be gentle with you? As I was after Tigbalan?’

Gwyn’s breath hitched at the name, and then he felt a little cold at the idea of Augus being like that with him again. So...relentless. Gwyn hadn’t experienced anything like it, and though he thought of it sometimes, it wasn’t a kind thing that Augus had done. They both knew that. Augus had done it because he needed to. Gwyn had endured it because Augus had asked him to.

‘No,’ Gwyn said. ‘Not like that.’
‘No,’ Augus said, tucking his hand into Gwyn’s armpit and then pushing him back down to the bed. ‘Kindness for you isn’t the absence of pain, is it?’

Augus bit gently at Gwyn’s throat, and Gwyn tensed at the mock threat of it, and then one of his knees bent, the heat inside of him spreading now, creeping down his spine.

Augus licked up to Gwyn’s ear, lazily pushed his tongue inside and Gwyn squirmed as Augus held him down on the bed and licked the delicate curves, angling his mouth so he could nip Gwyn’s earlobe between his canines, making Gwyn exhale hard.

‘I know what you need,’ Augus said, lips smiling against Gwyn’s ear. ‘Not punishment. Someone to take care of you. Fortunately, what you happen to enjoy, I enjoy too.’

Claws dug into his ribs, not quite breaking skin, and then scraped all the way across to his bruised sternum, and Gwyn’s back arched. He held his breath at the pain and then allowed it out, slowly, and Augus’ hands were already moving – soft palms now – until fingers could brush over his nipples enough that Gwyn’s mouth opened.

Augus’ lips pressed against his, bottom lip damp. He slipped his tongue into Gwyn’s mouth and rested it alongside Gwyn’s, before curling it, coaxing, encouraging Gwyn to do the same in return.

When Gwyn’s tongue slid past his own lips, Augus nipped at it sharply, and Gwyn groaned. But his mouth stayed open, and Augus licked softly at Gwyn’s tongue as though soothing it, and then bit down more deliberately, pulling his head backwards at the same time, until Gwyn’s breath was coming faster and the pain was prickling at the soft muscle.

Augus let go of Gwyn’s tongue and straddled him properly, opening the bathrobe as he did so. He settled down low on Gwyn’s waist, his own bathrobe a dark, vivid sap green, embroidered with ferns. Gwyn’s was white and fluffy, made out of towelling, looked ridiculous. Augus managed to look fashionable even when he was half-naked.

Two hands placed just above his hips and Augus surveyed Gwyn’s torso thoughtfully. His eyes moved back up to the bruises at Gwyn’s sternum and he reached up and pressed fingertips to it.

‘I heard it,’ Augus said, frowning. ‘You drowning.’

‘I hurt him back,’ Gwyn said, his voice weak.

‘I know.’ Augus looked up at him. ‘While you were sobering up, I’ve been with Gulvi and the others. I know what you did.’

Gwyn didn’t have a response to that, and Augus moved away from the bruise and traced the underside of a pectoral, then the sensitive skin of Gwyn’s flank. Then both of his hands moved over the bathrobe, over Gwyn’s arms, down to his wrists where he circled them.

Augus lifted Gwyn’s good arm up over his head and Gwyn felt his own hand be shaped around one of the rails on the headboard behind them.

‘Hold on tight,’ Augus said, grinning down at him, the expression toothy. Augus looked far too pleased with himself. ‘Don’t let go.’

Gwyn nodded, feeling breathless, his fingers digging into polished, carved wood.

Augus was more careful with Gwyn’s other wrist, encouraging Gwyn to bend his arm just a little so that he could tuck the other hand underneath his back. Not enough that it was truly pinned, but
enough that Gwyn could tell it was meant to stay there. Gentle enough that his bad shoulder was only whispering, not shouting its pain.

Then the bathrobe was spread even further out, and Gwyn felt a chill across his skin, Augus dragging his claws down Gwyn’s thighs, the pain of it sharper than he expected. Gwyn’s hands twitched, and he realised – belatedly – that he couldn’t cover his face anymore. Couldn’t exactly tuck it into a pillow. Could only really try and press the side of his face into the arm that raised behind him and hope that was enough.

‘Beautiful,’ Augus said, eyes sweeping the length of him, and Gwyn tucked his face into his arm and his cheeks heated and he didn’t know how to word the denial, only that it was there. ‘Wait there.’

Gwyn was alarmed when Augus slid off the bed, his body twisted and he thought Augus would say something, but Augus only disappeared through the door that led to the interlinking rooms that were their wardrobes. He watched the doorway for some time, and then sank fully onto his back and looked up at the vaulted ceiling, the exposed beams.

His eyes closed, and he experimented with not opening them when Augus came back in – partly because his eyelids felt so heavy, and partly because it was exhausting always having to watch everything, to be so suspicious.

Augus straddled him again, cupped his cheek and then slid his hand behind Gwyn’s neck.

‘Lift your head up for me,’ Augus said. ‘Just a little.’

The strain in Gwyn’s bad shoulder made itself known, and Gwyn huffed out a breath as he did what Augus asked. Then, he felt the cold of the collar around his neck, the sliding of the sinuous chain over his body, and his eyes flew open.

Augus smiled at him as he affixed the collar. ‘I think I like you in jewellery.’

The words were stolen from Gwyn’s throat – not that he had a great deal of them remaining to him. Augus looked at the collar, his eyes traced the length of the chain, and when he next met Gwyn’s eyes, his gaze had turned dark and hungry. Gwyn swallowed, felt the collar shift a little with the movement.

Augus began by dragging his claws – both hands now – in symmetrical lines down Gwyn’s torso. It was at first a cold fiery pain that soon warmed, and then became molten heat. Each time, Augus ended at the tops of Gwyn’s thighs, or the base of his hips, and then he reached up and started again. After the third pass of scratches, his claws both scraped down Gwyn’s nipples at the same time, and Gwyn’s breath hissed out of him, his legs shifted restlessly, unable to move much due to Augus sitting on them.

The same claws, the same painful scrape over his nipples and Gwyn grit his teeth together and hung onto the railing above him, his own fingers curling into his back.

Gwyn was about to open his mouth and protest when Augus did it again, when Augus bent down over him and began mouthing at his chest, kissing up to his collarbone, licking at him slowly. The claws scraped across his lower belly and one of Gwyn’s legs jerked in response, and Augus only smiled against his skin and then licked over one of Gwyn’s nipples, lapping until the flesh was stiff.

Augus reached up and pinched the skin lightly, between thumb and forefinger, and then he looked
up at Gwyn and smirked.

‘Ready?’ Augus said.

Oh no.

‘Fuck…you,’ Gwyn managed, wincing before Augus closed his fingers together, pinching hard enough that it was one sharp pinpoint of pain that radiated outwards, sent threads across his chest and into his shoulder, even his neck. He arched, and Augus kept up the pressure, didn’t stop even when Gwyn whimpered.

Augus eased off in his own time, bending down to lap again at sensitised flesh, his tongue feeling abrasive even though Gwyn knew very well that it wasn’t.

‘I thought you said you knew what I needed,’ Gwyn grumped.

Augus’ other hand reached between their bodies and wrapped around Gwyn’s cock, which was far harder than it had been minutes ago, and Gwyn decided that it wasn’t Augus that was the problem. His cock was a traitor.

Augus lazily jacked his hand around Gwyn’s cock, fingers clenching harder at the head of him, loosening on the downstroke, then squeezing at the base. Gwyn’s chest was burning, heated through, and he was sure that Augus had reddened it up. But Augus was now only kissing his skin, rubbing at his side with his free hand, soothing him, and pleasure was eclipsing the small pains over his body as well as the larger throb of his nipple, turning his thoughts into liquid.

How many times had Augus distracted Gwyn from his own mind with things like this? Gwyn had lost count. He also knew that he didn’t want to fight it this time. He was world weary, wanted whatever Augus would offer to him, to know that he was somehow pleasing Augus at the same time. For Augus so rarely radiated as much pure satisfaction and joy and predatory glee to the world as he did when he was playing Gwyn’s body like an instrument. And Gwyn wanted that; for Augus to be pleased with him, because Gwyn didn’t think he could handle anything else after the events of the past few days.

‘Is there…anything you want me to do?’ Gwyn said. His voice thicker than before.

‘No,’ Augus said against the underside of Gwyn’s ribcage. ‘Nothing beyond what you’re doing right now. Though I’d be very pleased if you kept your arms and hands in place. Otherwise, everything is going exactly as it should be.’

Augus’ hand squeezed harder around Gwyn’s cock, and Gwyn tilted his head back despite the pain in his shoulder and forced himself to focus on his breathing. Augus’ other hand came and the tip of a claw tenderly traced the flare of Gwyn’s cock, the threat of it forcing Gwyn to close his eyes.

He didn’t understand how Augus managed it, not that long ago Gwyn was convinced that he was beyond recovery.

Augus’ claw tip dipped into the slit of Gwyn’s cock, careful but still firm, and Gwyn hissed at the sharp pleasure-sting of it, his legs trying to shift where Augus straddled him. Augus laughed to himself and did it a few more times, still moving his other hand on Gwyn’s cock, teasing him.

‘Augus,’ Gwyn growled.

‘I’m going to give you a choice,’ Augus said, moving his hand away from the head of Gwyn’s cock and tracing the backs of his fingers over the vulnerable skin of Gwyn’s pelvis. ‘You can come
once, but I’m going to make you wait for it. Or you can come twice, but you’ll be…ah, sensitive.’

Gwyn didn’t have to think about it. ‘Twice.’

‘Mm, greedy,’ Augus said, though he didn’t make it sound like an insult, instead he sounded pleased, appreciative.

‘Yes,’ Gwyn said, opening his eyes and looking at his hand where it curled around the rail. Too greedy. He didn’t understand himself. Last night he’d been convinced he deserved nothing. Now, he wanted everything even though he knew better. He took too much. He could have survived on less. He could have managed with less at the An Fnwy estate instead of stealing food so often from Delphine. He could have survived without Mafydd’s regard.

Instead, he took and he took and other people suffered for it. Even Augus.

‘You should be greedier,’ Augus said, interrupting Gwyn’s thoughts as he wrapped his hand around Gwyn’s cock once more.

Gwyn lifted his head and stared at him, confused. Augus nodded, the seriousness on his face a counterpoint to the way he expertly worked Gwyn’s cock – a slow build, nothing too sharp, the ache of pleasure flooding slowly outwards, as though Augus was not only lending Gwyn his hand, but his watery powers too.

‘Greedier?’ Gwyn said, confused.

‘Much,’ Augus said, staring at him. Then he looked down at what he was doing and when he looked up again, he smiled. ‘You don’t understand, do you?’

‘What else is there?’ Gwyn said, his voice shaking. ‘For me to take?’

Augus’ expression clouded, then turned sad, and then he sighed and stretched up over Gwyn’s body and pressed lips to Gwyn's mouth, coaxing his lips further apart. He licked inside like he belonged there, as comfortable with Gwyn’s lips and tongue as he was with his own. Gwyn’s breathing was stuttered, his chest hurt from holding it, then breathing, then holding it, then gasping. The hand on his cock was still moving.

But Augus’ lips were gentle against his. Firm enough to direct, but not enough to be anything more than sweetly, safely demanding.

The hand not on his cock was smoothing over the side of his chest, then it swept up and stroked Gwyn’s bared armpit. The skin there was sensitive, vulnerable, hardly touched at all except when Gwyn was showering, and his mouth hung open in a combination of shock and want. That combined with the hand moving between his legs meant that Gwyn’s hips were already lifting helplessly into Augus’ movements.

In the background, a heavy throbbing that was his head as much as it was his cock. Gwyn realised that Augus was trying to wear him out. Trying to get him to sleep.

Gwyn pressed his lips back into Augus’ and wondered if he should apologise. What he’d be apologising for.

*I’m so sorry that of everyone you could have chosen, you chose me.*

Gwyn wasn’t aware of the sound he made, only that it was pained enough that Augus’ hand faltered and he lifted enough to shift and press his cheek to Gwyn’s cheek, facing down towards
the pillow.

‘It’s all right,’ Augus said, sounding calm, like his own chest wasn’t a mess of thorns like Gwyn’s was. ‘Try to focus on what you want, sweetness. The self-castigation, or whatever it is that’s floating around in your head, it can wait. Just focus. My hand on your cock. Or am I being too nice to you now? Do you need me to help you focus?’

Augus didn’t wait for Gwyn’s response, only tightened his hand until Gwyn hissed, and then claws were once more scraping down his sensitive flank and Gwyn gasped, the pain turning the pleasure more acute, even has it forced him away from his thoughts. He panted against Augus’ mouth, then leaned up and kissed him, his lips clumsy as Augus’ hand moved faster over him, the twist at the head of his cock shifting to a faint cruelty, just over the edge of too much friction, too much sensitivity.

‘Better?’ Augus said, sounding so polite and solicitous that Gwyn bit Augus’ lower lip. Augus smiled against his mouth. ‘Oh, it is? Wonderful. Not long now, Gwyn.’

Heat kept building, and Gwyn couldn’t concentrate on kissing anymore, only swallowing down air and how tight his spine was becoming and how the fingers of his hands were either digging into the rail or digging hard into his own back, tiny pinpricks of pain that added to everything. He was so close. Just a bit…more.

‘Isn’t it nice to know that this is doing you a kindness?’ Augus said.

Gwyn didn’t have time to open his eyes before Augus’ fingernails dug into his already sore nipple, and Gwyn shouted as the pleasure inside of him peaked and snapped and left him spilling over Augus’ hand, his own breath muffled against Augus’ hungry lips. His hips bucked helplessly, and Augus was only twisting the hand at his nipple more, forcing Gwyn to ride out a longer orgasm than he normally would, turning him to breathlessness and squirming to get away from the tight grip.

‘Easy,’ Augus said against his mouth, still moving his hand roughly on Gwyn’s cock, still forcing pain to the surface of his body. ‘Easy now.’

Gwyn whimpered, let go of the railing to try and push Augus’ hands away, and Augus pushed Gwyn down into the bed with the hand on his chest.

‘Hand back up, please,’ Augus said, his voice soft despite the firmness of the order.

Gwyn’s arm went to the rail, fingers hurting when he clenched them again. Augus’ hand hadn’t stopped moving, and Gwyn didn’t need much of a refractory period but he certainly needed more than what Augus was demanding. Everything that had been sensitive and heat and pleasure before, was a knife edge of sharpness in his gut now, and without the benefit of hands to push Augus away, he tried twisting onto his side to escape the pressure.

Augus let him move, but stopped Gwyn’s hips from meeting the mattress and instead just held him pinned, straddled sideways, hand still moving on his cock, causing him to shake and gasp, obliterating all thought out of his head. He made several pleading noises, and then squeezed his eyes shut and waited when it became clear that Augus wasn’t going to listen to him.

‘Tsk,’ Augus said, leaning up close to Gwyn’s ear once more. ‘Focus, Gwyn.’

‘I am,’ Gwyn said, his voice straining.

‘What were we talking about?’ Augus’ voice was firm and gentle, and Gwyn couldn’t think. He
was trying to bend his knees up to his chest to stop Augus that way, but of course Augus’ legs on either side of his thighs stopped it from working. ‘Gwyn?’

‘I don’t know,’ Gwyn said, the tone of his voice pleading. ‘I don’t know.’

‘Shhh,’ Augus whispered, slowing down the movement of his hand, then stopping completely. Gwyn went limp in relief, mouth open on hoarse breaths as Augus rubbed at his torso vigorously with his hand, like he was an overworked horse. ‘Deep breaths.’

Gwyn nodded, sucking down oxygen, his body still shaking. He was exhausted. If Augus stopped now, he would sleep. But at the same time his mind sent tendrils of longing through him. He wanted Augus inside of him. He wanted to not have to think about anything else for a time longer. He didn’t trust his own mind.

Augus eased off Gwyn’s thighs and lay behind him instead, then huffed out a breath.

‘Let’s get this bathrobe off you properly,’ Augus said, encouraging Gwyn to let go of the rail, and then helping him sit up. Gwyn was so dazed that he fell back weakly into Augus’ chest, letting Augus pull the robe off his arms, and twisting his hips one way and then the other so that Augus could get the rest of the material out from underneath him. Augus tossed the bathrobe off the side of the bed and pressed his chest flat to Gwyn’s back – his own bathrobe having been discarded at a point where Gwyn hadn’t been paying attention. Augus’ mouth attached to the back of his neck, licking up towards a sensitive hairline.

Gwyn’s mouth opened on an ‘oh’ that was never voiced, and Augus slid his arms underneath Gwyn’s arms and then…nothing. Just holding him. Gwyn blinked down at the contact and wasn’t quite sure what to do about it.

Then teeth digging into his flesh, right at the top of his back, just beneath the collar, hard enough that Gwyn stiffened and one of his bent legs straightened. He found himself leaning backwards instead of forwards, knowing that if he tried to pull away, Augus’ teeth would keep him pinned and his skin might tear.

His nostrils flared and he closed his eyes. His skin might tear more.

Deep, base instincts flared to life, his fingers falling open in surrender, his breathing settling. And behind him, the spill of a trickle of wet heat down his back. Blood.

Augus wrapped the chain around his fingers and kept Gwyn pressed close to him, licking eagerly at the blood that spilled, sucking more out of the wound. Gwyn winced at the pain of it, was more overwhelmed by the intimacy. Augus pressed close behind him, an arm around his torso, another holding the chain taut up by his shoulder, and Augus’ lips and tongue moving on his back.

Augus had said he should be greedier, Gwyn didn’t know what that meant but…

‘Keep going,’ Gwyn whispered.

The hand holding the chain must have clenched, because Gwyn felt the tension in his collar. Augus smiled against his back and then moved, pushing Gwyn down on his side to the bed, straddling him again, looking down, holding Gwyn with a chain so delicate it would break if Gwyn only snapped his head away.

‘Hold still,’ Augus said, eyeing him like Gwyn was a meal. ‘Let me capture you properly.’

Gwyn tensed the moment that Augus pushed his head beneath Gwyn’s chin, wet hair and
waterweed brushing against the skin as Augus forced Gwyn’s head back enough that he could place his mouth over Gwyn’s throat, above the collar. Gwyn’s pulse roared to life, fear whispering through his veins.

Too vulnerable like this. Too open. Gwyn placed a hand on Augus’ back, and Augus only said:

‘Hold the rail.’

Gwyn made a sound, half-protest, half-yearning, and clutched at the rail, feeling more bared than before.

Augus bit down gently at first, swiped his tongue over the area of skin his mouth rested upon. The ridges of Augus’ teeth felt sharper than usual. Not sharp, but Gwyn stilled when he realised that Augus was…perhaps finding his own baser instincts in this moment. But Augus didn’t bite down any harder, not straight away, only licking and then scraping his teeth, one arm holding Gwyn down, the other at his jaw, keeping Gwyn’s head up and back.

Gwyn had started to relax when Augus finally dug his teeth in. They were no longer as sharp, but the blunt shove that scraped through layers of skin was painful, threatening, and Gwyn felt himself starting to react like it was a real threat, and just as he thought maybe this was too far, too much, his whole body went quiescent. His mind didn’t go empty, exactly, but something wild and lost calmed. His heart was still racing, but there was no fear merged with it.

Augus moaned, the sound vibrating into Gwyn’s neck, and Gwyn kept one arm behind his back and the other on the rail and tilted his head even further back though it hurt his shoulder to do so. He gave more access, the pain a language that he wanted to hear spoken to him like this for the rest of his life.

He felt lulled when Augus finally withdrew. He was sure the skin had been broken, but nothing trickled from his throat, and though the skin felt bruised, it didn’t feel as scratchy-sharp at what Augus had bitten into the top of his back.

When Augus slid back behind him, Gwyn sleepily didn’t bother to panic. He held on loosely to the rail and felt pillows against his head, Augus’ skin warm, because Gwyn’s skin was warm and Augus seemed to absorb heat.

Fingers slick with lubricant slid between his legs, and Gwyn blinked sleepily at the room. They’d…had they ever done this before? Gwyn on his side and Augus behind him? Spooning?

‘Should I move?’ Gwyn said, confused.

‘Actually,’ Augus said, poking at Gwyn’s leg. ‘Bend this up a bit, I want more access to you.’

So Gwyn bent one leg and lifted it the way Augus wanted him to, embarrassed and flushing red and somewhat glad that Augus couldn’t see his face. And then Augus was pushing up behind him so that he could slide fingers between the cleft of Gwyn’s ass with his other hand, and look down at him all at once.

Gwyn made a sound of discontent.

Augus traced ticklish patterns across the back of Gwyn’s balls, and Gwyn’s face scrunched up, and then he forgot about expressions at all when Augus encircled his balls with his hand and pulled down slowly, a long tug that sent a dull ache rippling up his spine. Another tug, and then another, and Gwyn felt his cock twitch, which didn’t seem fair. It wasn’t like the pleasure was outweighing the pain, but Gwyn’s cock seemed to have a mind of its own.
Augus kept it up until Gwyn was squirming, and then slid his fingers back to Gwyn’s entrance and instead of pressing inside like he usually did, he massaged the rim of muscle. He stroked his fingers over it, wakening sensitive nerve endings and teasing, Gwyn opening his mouth and trying not to push his hips back because that would seem needy and Gwyn wasn’t sure he was ready to seem needy.

His body made the decision for him, and he pushed his hips back, biting the inside of his lip as his ears went hot at the motion.

Augus laughed under his breath and didn’t slide his fingers in, kept moving them around, sometimes over Gwyn’s perineum, sometimes back to his balls to tug slowly, and then back to Gwyn’s hole, where there was caresses and sometimes prodding, but never enough to breach.

‘I’m not…begging, if that’s what you’re looking for,’ Gwyn said, breathless, stubborn.

‘You don’t need to,’ Augus said, ‘your body is doing it well enough for you.’

Gwyn growled faintly and then Augus’ fingers disappeared and for a moment, Gwyn was sure he’d done something wrong. Except seconds later, Augus’ hips were fitting against Gwyn’s, his cock sliding between Gwyn’s ass cheeks. Gwyn felt breathless when Augus’ cock prodded where his fingers had been.

No stretching had taken place, no precursory opening, and Gwyn wanted to say something and yet…he wanted this too. He was as relaxed as he was ever likely to get, and where pleasure soothed his body, a controlled pain would soothe his mind.

Augus grasped Gwyn’s thigh and shifted it so that it was bent up towards Gwyn’s abdomen, exposing him even more.

‘Like this,’ Augus said, sounding warm and sleepy and pleased.

Gwyn hissed and then ducked his head into his shoulder as Augus breached him, feeling the stretch of it that always seemed interminable at first – it flared even sharper now. Gwyn wanted it though, digging his blunt nails into the rail and his other hand pressed flat to Augus’ chest, as Augus leaned into him with a slow and relentless pressure that turned Gwyn’s entire body to heat. Augus’ fingers dug into Gwyn’s thigh, keeping his leg bent, his body open, and Gwyn cried out into his own skin when the ache of it became overwhelming.

‘Kindness,’ Augus said quietly, ‘can be a lot of things.’

Gwyn nodded, because this was nothing as cruel as that time Augus had been ‘gentle’ with him, and it was exactly what Gwyn wanted. Pain but not too much pain, enough to steal his thoughts but not enough to make him forget that pleasure existed. Orders so that he knew what to do and would feel secure in them. Lust and pleasure that rippled through him and made his body into something more than the war machine he was supposed to be.

Once Augus had pressed in as deep as he could, leaving Gwyn groaning and shaking, Augus sighed behind him. He began to move, undulating his hips in long, fluid motions. Every motion deliberate – sharp, thorough penetration, a slow, grinding withdrawal that stimulated nerves and made Gwyn feel deliciously full.

Minutes stretched, and Augus kept up the rhythm, speeding up a little, never missing a beat. He hiked Gwyn’s thigh up a little higher, found millimetres of depth he didn’t have before, and Gwyn tried not to moan loudly into the pillow or his arm and failed. He was hard again, and not quite
close to coming, and he knew that Augus wouldn’t care about that anyway. Augus was never in any rush, he could wait, happily overstimulating Gwyn in the process.

Gwyn shifted and tightened his grip on the rail at the headboard, hard and aching, tipping his head back until Augus could rest his face against Gwyn’s, Augus’ breathing not yet shaky, unlike Gwyn’s.

‘I never thought…I’d want this with someone,’ Augus said, his voice almost steady, except for how his own thrusting hips shook it slightly. ‘Something like this. So terribly banal.’

‘Augus…’ Gwyn said, trying to concentrate, ‘my…neck is bleeding and…I can’t let go of the rail…because you said- ah, because you said. This is…your definition of banal?’

‘Yes,’ Augus said, as Gwyn lost track of everything and moaned again, because the pleasure was turning from dull to sharp, was less soothing and now tacky inside of him, grabbing at his nerve endings, shaking him loose of his relaxation and tumbling him into that vague nerviness that came when his body neared its peak. An old remnant, perhaps, of having to shove his light far down and constantly be vigilant of it. Now – exercised in battle – it was tired and sluggish inside of him, sparking loosely, but not with intent.

‘And…you want it?’ Gwyn said, seeking for something he wouldn’t normally have the courage to ask. He could blame it on Augus, the rocking movement inside of him, keeping him open and full all at once.

‘Yes,’ Augus said.

Now he didn’t sound quite so together and his hips moved faster, he shifted his grip until Gwyn’s leg was no longer being held up and Augus was digging fingers into Gwyn’s hip, pulling him back again and again to meet every thrust.

Augus kept up the rhythm while reaching between them both to take Gwyn’s arm where it was imprisoned between his own back and Augus’ chest. He drew it out carefully, muttering shaky, soothing noises when Gwyn’s shoulder attacked with thorny pain. And then Augus interlaced his fingers with Gwyn’s, squeezing tenderly, in something like reassurance, and drew his arm down, stroking over Gwyn’s chest. Then his belly. Then…

Gwyn hesitated, half-heartedly resisting, pleasure making him sluggish.

‘Easy,’ Augus said, his voice warm. ‘This will be fine. Hardly anything. It’s not you touching yourself, it’s just me…taking you along for the ride.’

Gwyn let Augus draw their hands down between Gwyn’s legs, and Augus wrapped Gwyn’s palm around his cock, but squeezed with his own fingers. Gwyn whimpered, something in his mind shut down. He didn’t have the energy for mental discomfort, so it dropped away, and in its place he realised that he was surrounded by Augus, and that he liked this position, even if Augus did call it ‘terribly banal.’

Augus was licking at Gwyn’s neck, stroking Gwyn’s cock with both of their hands intertwined, when Gwyn spilled his release several minutes later. His hitched breaths poured weakly into the bed, Augus tipping him closer to the mattress as he thrust harder, prolonging the release, seeking his own. Though this time, when Gwyn moved their hands away from his cock, Augus let him.

A shudder, and then a low cry when Augus came, and then a long moan, soft but poignant, humming against Gwyn’s skin. Gwyn could feel it, the spasms of Augus’ hips against him, one of
Augus’ feet flexing, toes scraping against the back of Gwyn’s ankle. His shaking breath. It felt as good as his own aftershocks of pleasure.

Gwyn was almost insensate where he lay, breath rasping in and out of his throat, Augus still inside of him. When a minute passed and Augus still hadn’t withdrawn, Gwyn shifted and stayed wrapped in the darkness behind his own eyelids.

A doze must have found him, for he hardly stirred when Augus slipped out of him, and he only murmured in discontent when Augus returned with a cloth and cleaned him. He didn’t move when Augus pulled the blankets up over him and joined him again, leaning into him, breathing slowly – far slower than Gwyn – against his skin.

Heavy sadness weighed Gwyn down, no longer acute, but not gone either.

He was still unable to acknowledge the situation they were in. He could hear the sound of the Unseelie horns spelling out their retreat, and yet he couldn’t believe it was so.

‘Sweetness,’ Augus whispered, ‘you need to sleep. You need to.’

‘What if they-’

‘I am quite certain that if you show your face to Gulvi right now, she will knock you out herself. I tried to remind her that unconsciousness isn’t the same as sleep, and I believe she will still see it as a worthy substitute.’

‘Is she mad at me?’

There were so many other ways he could have phrased it. So many ways that didn’t sound like a child asking a servant if his parents were mad.

The answer was almost invariably ‘yes’ or ‘we’ll see, young master Gwyn.’

‘We’ll see’ also meant ‘yes.’

‘My dear heart, she is not angry. And you need sleep.’

Gwyn nodded, willing the darkness closer, frightened of what nightmares might be waiting for him, still too tired to avoid the cloak of it. Still, when Augus reached up and stroked idly at his hair, Gwyn resisted the pull of it.

‘You can’t keep…saving me from myself,’ Gwyn murmured.

‘Perhaps,’ Augus said, stroking Gwyn’s hair, nosing against his scalp. ‘Perhaps you should just think of it as returning a favour.’

‘Because you…you…’ Gwyn yawned hugely into the bed and Augus chuckled and poked him in the shoulder. ‘Because you are the kind of waterhorse to get obliterated on liquor and whore himself out to the military. For free. I’m not a good whore.’

‘No,’ Augus whispered, ‘because I am the kind of waterhorse to – stone-cold sober – go and get myself killed – quite literally, no hyperbole at all – by a family of vengeful strangers.’

‘Point taken,’ Gwyn said, slipping closer to sleep.

There was a long pause, and then Augus’ breath grew strangely unsteady. Then, Augus began taking several deep, audible breaths, and Gwyn wondered about it, confused, but he was so tired,
and Augus was stroking his hair. Gwyn couldn’t balance one more thing inside of himself without knowing the tenuous peace he had found would fall apart.

‘You would have broken my fucking heart if I hadn’t gotten to you in time, if you had done that to yourself.’ Augus’ voice cracked, he sounded far more awake than he had any right to. ‘Gods help me, I think you’ve broken it anyway.’

Gwyn tried to turn around, hardly able to follow the thread of anything that Augus was saying except that he was upset, but Augus wrapped firm limbs around him and kept him in place, pressing so close that Gwyn couldn’t remember ever feeling cold.

Augus had told him that he needed to rest and so Gwyn willed it, the darkness that would claim him. He was almost lost to his own fatigue when he heard a wet voice exclaim:

‘How can you be so cruel to someone I love so much?’

His last thoughts were that Augus had it all wrong. But he was too far down the spiral of exhaustion, and Augus being so close was a comfort to him. He slept.

Chapter End Notes

In our next chapter, 'Unravel:'

‘It won’t oust the Seelie from circling our Court,’ Gwyn said as he straightened. ‘But it will show them that we still have teeth.’

‘Didn’t you know?’ Augus said, smiling. ‘It’s the one thing the Unseelie still have after we’ve lost everything else.’
Augus

Crying was unbecoming, so he was somewhat glad that Gwyn was – *finally* – sleeping when Augus spent twenty minutes unable to parse the fractured emotion in his chest. It was bad enough to nearly lose Gwyn out on the battlefield to Albion – he’d not even realised that it was *possible* until it started happening, and his image of Gwyn’s invincibility had been shattered in an instant.

Of all the things he hadn’t expected, it was for Ash to come find him after the battle, face blotched with fear, saying:

‘Something’s wrong with Gwyn.’

Augus clung to Gwyn’s body – which was large and muscular and seemingly *unshakeable* – and cried silently, annoyed with himself, frightened for Gwyn, hating the whole damned palace. He was glad that Gwyn hadn’t stayed awake for this, because it was one thing to cry for someone sleeping by your side, quite another to cry for someone who had no way of comprehending what it meant. Augus couldn’t handle another lost look, another bewildered glance trying to communicate only confusion when someone tried to express care for Gwyn.

Eventually, Augus settled, breathing tiredly against Gwyn’s back. He tucked his legs behind Gwyn’s legs and sweltered under blankets that were far too warm, and didn’t care.

The palace felt like a mausoleum. Augus found himself contemplating a lake-home since his conversation with Fenwrel. He didn’t want to be here. He wanted Gwyn with him, underwater and safe.

Augus spent far too long caressing Gwyn’s skin like he was as fragile on the outside as he was on the inside.

He knew that Gwyn wasn’t even *fragile*. But everyone had their breaking point, and he hadn’t foreseen that Gwyn would deal with their inevitable defeat by trying to ruin himself. Not like that.

He let himself doze, thinking of lakes and still pools of water, eventually finding something like true rest, his breathing coming deep and slow.

He was woken later by a quiet knock at the door. Augus stirred slowly, made a sound of frustration when he heard the knock again, then felt a thread of panic and quickly got out of bed. He doubted whoever was at the door was there to tell him something relaxing.

He pulled on his nightrobe and tied the sash, stroked absently at his own hair. At least it couldn’t
be Gwyn trying to destroy himself this time, because Gwyn was asleep in bed, where he should be.

Augus opened the door and Ash stood there, looking concerned. As concerned as earlier.

‘What now?’ Augus said. When had he started sounding so tired?

‘What?’ Ash said, and then shook his head and peeked past Augus’ arm where he held the door open. When he saw the lump that was Gwyn in the bed, he took a deep breath, sighed it out in relief. ‘I just wanted to check in. Is he okay?’

‘Do you want the truth?’ Augus said wearily.

‘Yeah,’ Ash said, like he didn’t even know why Augus would bother to ask the question.

‘No,’ Augus said. ‘He’s not. Better than before. Not better.’

‘What’d he do with all that booze?’

‘He drank it.’

Ash stared at him, and then looked over at Gwyn, and then back to Augus again, incredulity a broad stroke across his face.

‘Uh, he- I saw what he took? He-’

‘He drank it,’ Augus said again. ‘He threw a lot of it up.’

‘You would fucking hope,’ Ash breathed. ‘Half a bottle of that shit would’ve killed me back when I was underfae. For someone who asked me what would get him drunk the fastest, he seemed to know exactly what would do it. I didn’t know he had an alcohol problem?’

‘It seems to be a ‘once every few decades’ kind of thing,’ Augus said wryly.

Augus wondered how honest he should be. He looked over at Gwyn, grateful that he was asleep. He stepped out of the room, leaving the door ajar in case Gwyn suffered from a nightmare.

‘He got drunk with the express purpose of delivering himself to his military, so that they’d…’

Augus shook his head and lifted his hand and splayed his fingers. ‘He wanted to make himself incoherent enough that he’d let them ‘punish’ him. You heard the rumours about him when he was Seelie yes? Not the ones where he fucked like a battering ram. The others?’

Ash stared at him, then swallowed.

‘I heard some dark fucking shit,’ Ash said finally, ‘when I dug deeper into the rumours around him back when he had you prisoner. There was some stuff I didn’t believe.’

‘If the ‘stuff’ involved him being used up by his military after failed battles, you might want to lend them more credence.’

‘What the fucking shit?’ Ash whispered, his forehead creasing. ‘Dude, I know fae aren’t much for therapists, but… Come on.’

‘I know,’ Augus said, shuddering. ‘I don’t think I can do this on my own, Ash. I don’t like it here. He hardly trusts anyone.’

‘Hey,’ Ash said, reaching out and taking Augus by the sleeve, tugging so gently that Augus found
himself stepping into Ash’s space, falling against his frame. ‘Hey, bro, it’s just a really bad night – few nights – okay? Bad for all of us. But you don’t have to do this on your own. I fucking swear. And he’s here, and in bed, and sleeping. And you smell like…you have your own way of calming him down that I don’t want to hear about.’

Augus laughed weakly into his chest.

‘Do shut up,’ Augus said.

‘Oh, I’m not knocking it,’ Ash said, his voice a rumbly burr against Augus’ shoulders. ‘But he’s here, and you didn’t have to do this alone. I realised something was up. I came to you. Gulvi keeps an eye out on him too. I never realised how much. She never used to tell me because she knew it would make me mad. But…Augus, we’re the Inner Court, man, it’s our job to look after each other, and the King, and the Kingdom. Now are you gonna have a panic attack on me or what?’

‘Allow me some dignity.’

‘It’s not about dignity, bro,’ Ash said quietly. ‘You wouldn’t be the first stoic Unseelie high class fae to have a breakdown tonight. Trust me. Nights like tonight and last night, they aren’t about dignity. The shock is wearing off, you know? They’re starting to realise that…this is it.’

‘That’s comforting.’

‘Well, some of them are actually back out there in the night gardens and they’ve revived the Winter Court all on their own. You know how it is.’

Ash’s arms came around Augus’ shoulders and pressed tightly, an embrace that squeezed some of the lung capacity out Augus’ chest.

‘That’s really why he wanted all that fucking booze?’ Ash said.

‘Don’t tell him,’ Augus said.

‘Yeah, right, what the hell would I say? It’s sad though. Isn’t it? Does he even realise that, you know, for all that it’s horrible, we did better than we expected?’

‘Don’t open with that the next time you see him,’ Augus said. He stepped out of Ash’s arms and took a deep breath, sighed it out, felt less sore. ‘He needs to eat. Would it be possible to get something together for him? He doesn’t eat for days at a time lately, and I worry that’s contributing to his overall frame of mind.’

‘Yeah,’ Ash said. ‘The trows can teleport. It might not be enough to meet demand in the long-run, but we’re managing for now. Gulvi can teleport too, and a bunch of the Courtiers and stuff.’

‘I don’t want to leave him,’ Augus said, looking back towards the door.

‘Yeah, totally,’ Ash said smiling. ‘I can put something together. That’s easy. See? Is there anything else I can do?’

Augus closed his eyes, cast his thoughts about. ‘Make sure others don’t interrupt us. He needs a bit more time, Ash. Honestly, I don’t think he’d do the Unseelie Court any favours in his current frame of mind.’

‘Got it,’ Ash said. ‘And you? Anything I can do for you?’
'I feel like I should be asking you that.'

‘Nah,’ Ash said, smiling at him. ‘Not now. I’m like a ball on its side. I mean it’s like the end times, but still…’

Augus was still leaning against Ash’s chest when they both laughed. One of Ash’s broad hands petted him, and Augus wished for his old lake, his old home, his old life. If only there could have been a way for him to realise earlier how much Gwyn could be for him. Would the Nightingale have bothered him in the same way if Gwyn had been in his life back then? Would the Raven Prince?

‘How did you find out all these things about Gwyn?’ Ash said, and Augus could hear the frown in his voice. ‘He’s like a fucking brick wall when I try and get anything out of him. Like, in retrospect, I get why I thought of him as cold and mean. He can be really fucking cold.’

‘He can be,’ Augus said, shrugging. ‘Not always.’

Ash was silent for a long time and then nodded, his chin brushing against the top of Augus’ hair. ‘I get it. I’ve seen that too. Just makes it weird that he can snap back and forth like that. Guess it’s not really surprising with me being the world’s greatest dick to him. Well, if he ever comes to my room looking for booze again, I’ll get you.’

‘That would be appreciated,’ Augus said.

They hugged each other for a few minutes longer, and then Ash stepped back and braced Augus by his shoulders, looking up at him, smiling.

‘I’m really proud of you, bro,’ Ash said.

‘What? Where did that come from?’

‘I dunno,’ Ash said, laughing weakly. ‘It’s just you were kind of nuts before you were put in that cell. You’re pretty much…you’re doing really well, that’s all.’

‘You have such a diplomatic way of wording things.’

‘You love it,’ Ash said, winking in that occasionally debonair way of his. He swung away and then walked lightly down the corridor. ‘I’ll get some food sent up real soon.’

Augus sighed and walked back into the room, closing the door quietly behind him.

He would never understand how Gwyn managed to look so innocent and untroubled while he slept. Augus untied the bathrobe and slipped it off, letting it pool on the ground as he moved between the covers, pulled to Gwyn’s heat.

Augus closed his eyes and rested his head against Gwyn’s good shoulder, then kissed the curve of muscle and skin carefully.

In the end, he borrowed some of Gwyn’s strength, telling himself that it was safe enough to sleep, summoning the dark to cover him like a cloak.

*

Augus woke up with the feeling that something had interrupted his sleep cycle, except that the room was quiet and dimly lit, he was warm – too warm – and Gwyn was breathing slowly beside
him. Though…not quite evenly.

He looked over. Gwyn was lying on his back, staring up at the ceiling.

‘Was it a nightmare?’ Augus said, his voice thicker than usual. He cleared his throat, sat up, watched Gwyn shake his head.

‘Not exactly.’

*That’s hardly enlightening.*

‘What are you thinking of?’ Augus asked, his voice muted.

Gwyn took a deep breath and held it for several seconds, blinking slowly.

‘Miracles,’ Gwyn said.

‘Do you remember complete sentences?’ Augus said.

Gwyn looked over, seemed so worn that Augus didn’t have the heart to poke for anything more. There was something endlessly sad to Gwyn’s gaze. As though behind all that strength, even behind the self-pity, was a creature who couldn’t help but grieve for everything that had been lost. Not just in his own life, but in the lives of others.

‘You don’t have to talk,’ Augus said. Then, he remembered something he’d said a long time ago, and lifted his eyebrows. ‘Actually, just wait there, I’ll be right back.’

Augus didn’t bother picking up the robe again, and as he walked into their adjoining wardrobes, he noticed a hamper of food left on a side bench. Had the trows put it there? Or Ash? And had Gwyn been awake when it had happened?

He rummaged through several drawers, before finding what he wanted.

When he returned, Gwyn was back to staring up at the ceiling. Augus walked up to the bed, pulled back the blankets, and when Gwyn only turned his head slowly and looked at him with wounded eyes, Augus smiled.

‘Turn over,’ Augus said.

Gwyn’s eyes caught the bottle of oil and his brow furrowed.

‘For once, Augus, I’m not sure I actually feel like-’

‘Well, that is a miracle,’ Augus said, getting onto the bed. ‘No wonder you’re thinking about the unlikely. Now turn over, sweetness. Onto your stomach for me.’

Gwyn went, managing a sleepy, rumbling, unimpressed sound before resting his head on the pillows and looking to the side, sighing when Augus trailed fingers down the centre of his back. Augus considered the gnarled scar at Gwyn’s shoulder and moved his hand up, touching it. Gwyn stiffened with tension.

‘Careful,’ Augus said. ‘May I release the nerves?’

‘Gods,’ Gwyn said. ‘It’s been…some time.’

‘I know,’ Augus said. Hadn’t he promised himself that he’d try and do this more? Yet he was
‘Okay,’ Gwyn said, taking a breath and closing his eyes in resignation. Augus had seen that expression increasingly, and he didn’t like it. For someone who had recently had his heartsong changed, he was too close to surrender.

Augus straddled him and bent over, carefully stroking his hair, pursing his lips together as Gwyn didn’t move away from the touch, nor back into it.

Too tired? Or something else? Does he regret not being able to destroy himself as he wanted to?

When Augus moved his hands so that one was bracing the front of Gwyn’s shoulder, one pressed flat to the back, Gwyn’s breath stayed even. He wasn’t even tensing now. But he wasn’t happy, either. This wasn’t the pliant surrender he’d seen when he’d tied Gwyn to the saltire cross. It wasn’t even Gwyn deciding that Augus knew what was best.

‘Gwyn, I don’t have to do this,’ Augus said, licking his bottom lip.

‘It’s fine, Augus,’ Gwyn said.

Augus decided it would have to do. He leaned forwards when he found the pressure point that would help unknot the worst of the scrambled tension in Gwyn’s nerves. Pressing hard, Gwyn flinched and then inhaled on a strangled breath and turned his face directly into the pillows, muffling a deep, low noise. But the pain of it hummed through him. His breathing became sharp, sped up until Augus was crooning to him as he used to with Ash. But he was almost certain Gwyn couldn’t hear him over the thundering unwanted pain moving through him.

Augus risked holding the pressure point longer than usual when Gwyn didn’t fight to stop him. The longer he aggravated this pressure point, the more effective the whole treatment would be. For all that it only bought Gwyn such a short amount of relief.

Gwyn was reaching his limit of what he could take, Augus moved his fingers quickly and looked for the misplaced meridian that would unlock Gwyn’s pain. He knuckled into the pressure point, Gwyn slumped and groaned in response, the sound no longer tight with agony. Gwyn turned his head to the side, panting.

‘Easy,’ Augus said, feeling like he was gentling a horse or a wild creature. He slid his other hand from the front of Gwyn’s shoulder and rested it between his shoulder blades, pressing his awareness forwards. First finding the meridians that anchored together in Gwyn’s heart, then looking deeper for the core of him.

There, weaker than it had been before, but still pulsing, his heartsong of wildness. It seemed stable though, as tired as the rest of him.

Augus could work with that.

He picked up the bottle of oil and tugged off the cork with his teeth, pouring it into the palm of his hand where it started warming his flesh. He corked the bottle and let it drop to the side, before shimmying down Gwyn’s body and pressing his palms flat into his lower back. He closed his eyes and tried not to see muscle or tendon or bone, nor the warrior King he could tame. He saw, instead, the watery meridians of his body, some gleaming and strong, others weak or fuzzed from pain. The amount of tension that Gwyn held in his body – even when he thought he was relaxed – was almost incomprehensible.

In the Seelie Court, Augus had gotten his first glimpses of that tension when he’d used pressure
points on Gwyn. Almost every time they hurt more than they should, especially when Augus used those around Gwyn’s hips. Gwyn’s forearms were the safest target. At least there the pain would dissipate like it was supposed to. The fact that Augus had needed to sometimes release the pain that he’d started with another touch? Fenwrel would probably find it fascinating.

‘Let me do this for you,’ Augus said, his eyes still closed, sensing Gwyn’s uncertainty amongst the exhaustion.

Gwyn said nothing, didn’t protest, and Augus smoothed the oil up Gwyn’s back until his fingers curled towards Gwyn’s collarbones. Then Augus repeated the movement, each time spreading oil – at first in strokes close to the spine, and then in ones that moved closer to his flanks. The oil was warming without creating an unpleasant burn. Even Augus’ fingers felt looser as he worked the oil into Gwyn’s skin.

He didn’t leave out Gwyn’s bad shoulder, biting his lip as he felt the knotted flesh beneath his palm. He had also promised to find salves to keep the skin soft, to help the scar to fade, even some kind of localised painkiller to ease a small percentage of the pain.

*You’ve done none of it. Instead, focusing on fae you’ve never met. When are you going to realise that by concertedly neglecting yourself, you neglect him as well?*

Augus’ forehead furrowed.

His fingers bumped into the collar and he reached up and undid it, and clucked his tongue when Gwyn made a sound of complaint.

‘It’s just for now,’ Augus said.

Gwyn settled and Augus rubbed his good shoulder in gratitude, before shifting so that he could begin to move his fingers carefully around Gwyn’s hips, searching.

‘This may be uncomfortable,’ Augus said softly, keeping his voice as warm as he could – not so hard, with his legs around Gwyn’s body, no one disturbing them. ‘Bear with it for me, Gwyn.’

Gwyn nodded, his hair clinging to the pillow.

Augus used symmetrical movements, carefully kneading through muscle towards the tendons that anchored strength to bone. There, he found raw trigger points and bit his bottom lip as he dug pressure into them. Gwyn’s breathing hitched, but his hip muscles – though tensing – didn’t go into spasm, and that was sign enough that Gwyn would respond to what he was doing. Augus just had to be patient.

He had patience in droves, for this.

Rhythmically, he pressed into points of tension and then eased off, kneading as he went, using the heels of his palms to smooth out muscle fibres and lengthen tendons. Then, back into another pressure point, repeating the movement once more. He had to stay on Gwyn’s hips for a long time, the skin flushing a deep red beneath his touch, blood circulating better around areas that had been locked up too tight.

Gwyn’s breathing evened out at first, and then turned heavy. Augus knew it wasn’t quite arousal – Gwyn was, incredibly, too tired for that – but the waves of pain followed by waves of pleasure would have been hypnotising for anyone, let alone someone who appreciated dull, throbbing pain as much as Gwyn did.
An hour passed before Augus moved to Gwyn’s lower back, digging his thumbs down either side of his spine.

Gwyn groaned, didn’t even bother turning his head towards the pillow to hide the sound.

‘Good?’ Augus said, smiling.

Gwyn made a long sound of agreement that sounded like: ‘Nnnhh.’

A long time ago, Augus had thought of becoming a healer. He’d considered it back before he was in the Raven Prince’s Court, when he knew that he could put his love of herbs and fungi to good use. He’d realised it again when he began learning about pressure points under the watchful gaze of Fluri and learned just how healing it could be.

It gave him a lazy, warm satisfaction to take as much time as he wanted, Gwyn malleable beneath his hands. Gwyn’s body didn’t exactly fight what Augus was doing, but Augus could tell that it wasn’t only Gwyn’s mind reluctant to give up that constant anxiety and tension. A lifetime of flinching before blows and strikes, bearing torture, being forced to simply hold up against voluntary battle and sparring. It was a body long-neglected, punished by Gwyn as well as by others, forced to give up promises of pleasure for long-held pain. A poor substitute. Even for such a masochist.

So it didn’t surprise Augus at all when, pushing into the flesh of Gwyn’s shoulders, Gwyn’s breathing turned uneven. Gwyn held far too much locked up in his body. It wasn’t only his mind that carried layer upon layer of repressed memory.

‘It’s all right,’ Augus said, smoothing his thumbs over the centre of Gwyn’s neck, pushing up to the base of his skull, digging in carefully and dragging back down again. Gwyn made a sound that was half-pleasure, half-sadness. ‘It happens.’

Because he could smell salt in the air above the buttery thickness of the oil and the scents of their own flesh, and though he couldn’t see Gwyn’s face properly, he knew what it meant.

He eased off for a few minutes, returning to the middle of Gwyn’s back and smoothing over already relaxed areas of his body. Some were already trying to knot up again – to be expected, really – but otherwise, Augus’ work was holding. After another few minutes, Gwyn released a tired, breathless sob. Not wound up tight with misery this time, but more relaxed than usual and not fighting it.

*Even if he’s miserable, it’s still progress.*

‘We lost,’ Gwyn said, his voice soft and weak, still worn through.

‘I know,’ Augus said, glad that he was able to touch Gwyn, able to press hands flat to him and offer strength that he didn’t know he could feel at a time like this. ‘But it’s not over yet.’

‘The military is…ruined,’ Gwyn said, still crying, not bothering to repress it. He talked surprisingly clearly through the shakiness of his own breathing.

‘Not all wars are won with militaries,’ Augus said. ‘Are they?’

‘They’re won with something,’ Gwyn said. ‘We… We shouldn’t have fought.’

‘You gave them the choice,’ Augus said, moving back up to Gwyn’s neck again and drawing out more of that tension, Gwyn shuddering beneath him. ‘They chose.’
He expected further protest, but surprisingly, Gwyn nodded and said nothing else. His chest still moved in the weak movements of someone who needed to cry, but was too tired to cry properly. Augus pressed his lips to the top of Gwyn’s back where he’d bitten before – the bite already healed. He kept moving his fingers, and eventually Gwyn’s breathing evened out again.

By then, Augus was able to work on Gwyn’s arms, his forearms, even massaging each individual finger and his palms and the wrists that were ropey with strength.

‘My sad King,’ Augus said quietly, kissing the centre of Gwyn’s palm. Gwyn’s fingers curled, brushed against Augus’ cheek.

‘I don’t want this to stop,’ Gwyn said, and then made a soft sound of amusement. ‘Is this what you meant, when you said I should be greedier?’

‘A little,’ Augus said, smiling against Gwyn’s skin. ‘You’re still only seeing the tip of the iceberg.’

‘My family would think you’re ruining me.’

‘Your family are dead,’ Augus said, licking a broad stripe across Gwyn’s hand, ‘You were supposed to be their cowering, desperate, lost, Seelie son. And you are not that.’

‘Cowering,’ Gwyn murmured. Augus thought he was going to keep talking, but Gwyn only said the word and nothing else. Augus frowned and carefully stroked the inside of Gwyn’s elbows, waiting.

Gwyn gasped, made a sound of shock.

‘You were right about Vane,’ Gwyn said. ‘He asked if you would share me.’

Augus laughed to think of it. So the fiel lillyon had finally given up all subtlety, had he?

‘And?’ Augus said, smiling. ‘Do you want me to share you?’

‘You…what?’ Gwyn said. ‘That’s an option? But there were rules. And after- But I thought after-When I got drunk-’

‘Remind me, one day, to teach you the difference between self-inflicted punishment orgies, and consensual sex.’

‘I know the difference,’ Gwyn muttered.

‘It sounds like you know what you’re talking about,’ Augus said lightly, ‘but all I hear are lies. As for Vane... He wants something from us. And I’m sure it’s not just your body. Perhaps we’d best wait and see what Vane wants, instead of seeing if he can get it after leveraging sleeping with you. What do you think?’

‘I concur,’ Gwyn said, then groaned when Augus pulled carefully at his scapula, loosening tendons that were harder to get to. Augus continued that for some time. When Gwyn cleared his throat, Augus tilted his head, waiting.

‘Augus,’ Gwyn said, his voice hushed, ‘what if I didn’t want to be shared?’

Augus bit his top lip and felt a smile pulling at his lips anyway.

‘What if…’ Gwyn continued, ‘what if I just…what if – if it wasn’t too much pressure for you, obviously – but what if I only wanted to…’
Augus reached up and stroked Gwyn’s hair, waiting through the long pauses, the painful awkwardness. He waited for Gwyn to say:

*What if I only wanted to sleep with you?*

What he didn’t expect:

‘What if I only wanted to belong to you?’ Gwyn said. ‘What if I was just…yours?’

Augus opened his mouth to reply when Gwyn made a sound of frustration.

‘By the gods, I sound like a child,’ Gwyn snapped.

‘Do you?’ Augus said. ‘If you wanted that, Gwyn, you know you can have it, don’t you? Well, perhaps you don’t. But you can. But you do realise that belonging to me, being mine – of which there’s no question that you are, by the way – doesn’t preclude you sleeping with others?’

‘Perhaps,’ Gwyn said, sighing.

‘Let me explain my side of things,’ Augus said, stroking Gwyn’s neck. ‘You belong to me. I owned you all the way back in the Seelie Court and I didn’t plan on letting you go then, and I certainly don’t now. And I am possessive, yes. Territorial, absolutely. You are mine, and if you wish to argue with me about it, I will happily prove to you – again and again – where you belong. But these days I am quite confident that you know, deep down, that I have placed a mark upon your soul that you can never remove. No matter where you go, who you sleep with, I will always be there. In your thoughts, in your body, even in the workings of your heartsong. Choose another and you will be reminded that they are not me, and you will ache to return to me. I staked my claim on you some time ago, Gwyn.’

The words didn’t leave him feeling bared or vulnerable, they left him feeling confident and at ease. Something settled in his chest that had been percolating for some time. That Gwyn didn’t fight back or interrupt him, but listened. That was a balm against a wound that he didn’t know he had until it had already begun to heal.

‘Tell me not to sleep with him,’ Gwyn said suddenly, his voice deep.

Augus leaned forwards and pressed his hand to the back of Gwyn’s neck, pushing him down.

‘You are mine,’ Augus said, his voice in Gwyn’s ear. ‘And you’ll not sleep with anyone.’

‘Unless it’s bloodlust after battle,’ Gwyn clarified.

‘And not you getting drunk and punishing yourself, using other fae as weapons of your destruction.’

‘Yes,’ Gwyn said, voice fervent. ‘Okay.’

Augus couldn’t help himself then, biting down into the flesh of Gwyn’s good shoulder and closing his eyes when Gwyn groaned out something that was less pain and more bliss.

*"

The massage wound up and Gwyn was dozing by the end of it. He’d rolled onto his back. His breathing was deep and heavy and his eyelashes fluttered from time to time.

Gwyn roused when Augus gently clicked his collar back into place, sliding his hands underneath
Gwyn’s neck and finding the catches. Augus got off the bed to fetch the hamper, and Gwyn watched as Augus filled a plate for him, thick buttered bread rolls and dried meats and fruits, a wedge of hard cheese and several handfuls of nuts. Gwyn ate as politely as he could, but Augus could see how hungry he was in the way he reached for food as soon as he’d placed something into his mouth, as though he couldn’t chew and swallow fast enough.

Augus wasn’t too upset. Gwyn’s issues with food might take some time, he knew that. As long as he did manage to eat of his own volition – even if it wasn’t regularly enough – it was something.

‘I thought I’d feel worse,’ Augus said.

‘In regards to what?’

‘The world ending,’ Augus said, looking up and smiling wanly.

‘Give it time,’ Gwyn said, his own smile bitter. ‘I’m sure you’ll get there.’

‘No,’ Augus said, laughing. ‘I’ve seen how you’re dealing with it, I much prefer to be feeling like this about the whole thing.’

‘You do seem quite calm,’ Gwyn said absently.

‘I committed myself to panicking quite thoroughly when I heard you drowning, and then I tried fury and rage, and—’

‘I remember that one,’ Gwyn said, lifting a finger and nodding to himself. ‘No one can accuse you of not committing to that.’

‘And then I attempted crying myself to sleep next to my insensate bedfellow, while he snored.’

Gwyn’s eyes widened in alarm, and then he squinted. ‘I don’t snore.’

‘How would you know?’

‘I’d…sense it,’ Gwyn said, huffing. His expression became troubled. ‘Augus, you could have woken me.’

‘I didn’t want to,’ Augus said, tidying up the hamper, watching in surprise as Gwyn helped him replace all the remaining food back into the wicker space. ‘It helped, at any rate.’

Gwyn arched backwards, rolling his good shoulder, then his bad one, moving his neck from side to side. He stretched and then went lax again, looking down at the blankets in his lap. It was these small details that Augus hungered for. To see Gwyn relaxed and in his element. It was like watching an animal quarry from a distance when it wasn’t aware of its hunter.

Augus preened to see how much the massage had helped.

He placed the hamper down on the floor and then placed his hand absently on Gwyn’s ankle. Bumped his thumb over the knob of bone and then pressed into his Achilles tendon. Gwyn watched the movements, sleepy and sated. The bruise on his chest had faded during the course of eating. Food alone was enough to turn the whole mess yellowish, well on its way to no longer being visible.

‘I’m looking forward to the Wild Hunt,’ Gwyn said, lying back on the bed and looking up at the ceiling.
‘You’re going ahead with it?’

‘I’d like to see them stop me,’ Gwyn said. ‘The more I think about it… There’s no clear path, exactly, but there is a way forward. The Unseelie have rallied together and recreated the Winter Court, and it’s larger than before. They haven’t given up. I shouldn’t.’

‘Yes, Gwyn, I understand that, but—’

‘But we’re fast running out of funds and there is a giant Seelie military outside our Court. Yes. I know. I hope it’s cold tonight. Do we have any jotuns on hand? Oh, that’s right, my old Seelie companions and I killed most of them years ago.’

‘I rather like this flippant, bitter version of you,’ Augus said, getting onto his hands and knees and sliding over Gwyn’s legs, crouching over him and smiling when Gwyn’s eyes widened and he cleared his throat.

‘Do you?’ Gwyn said.

Augus looked down at Gwyn’s cock, not quite so quiescent between his legs anymore. It never took much. And Augus was in a rather suggestive position.

It didn’t stir him with the same sense of unease as it once did. The last time he’d had his mouth on Gwyn’s cock, he’d been in control, and Gwyn had been so desperately obedient.

Augus might not think much of the act itself – certainly not performing it upon others – but… perhaps…

Gwyn cleared his throat and then looked off to the side. His chest was rising and falling faster than before.

Augus leaned down and bumped his chin into the plumping length and Gwyn’s breath hitched.

‘You shouldn’t,’ Gwyn said.

‘Shouldn’t what?’ Augus said, shifting so that he was leaning on his forearm and using his free hand to trail a path up the inside of Gwyn’s thigh.

Gwyn’s lips pressed together and he shook his head. Like he couldn’t even imagine it. Augus felt suffused with mischievous glee.

Augus pressed his nose to Gwyn’s skin, the crease of thigh against torso, inhaling. Goosebumps prickled over Gwyn’s flesh. He smelled of musk and the fainter hints of Augus’ own soap and hair products. Gwyn’s body heat was already warming Augus’ face. His hair clung damply to Gwyn’s skin.

‘You can’t,’ Gwyn said, his voice hoarse.

‘Can’t I?’ Augus said, his lips lifting in a half-smile at Gwyn’s sound of naked frustration and want.

‘You don’t like to,’ Gwyn whispered.

‘I don’t like to do it the way that you like to do it,’ Augus said, moving closer to Gwyn’s cock so that the breath from every word brushed against it. Gwyn’s back arched, though Augus could tell when Gwyn caught his own movement and forced himself to stillness. Gwyn’s hands came up and
covered his face, and Augus tapped on his thigh gently.

‘Hands down, please,’ Augus said.

A long hesitation, and Augus waited for Gwyn to make a decision. Eventually, Gwyn dragged his hands away, where they fell upon his chest, which was now moving a lot faster.

The tip of Augus’ nose touched Gwyn’s cock, and the flesh twitched in response. Gwyn made a long strangled sound like he’d given up on even trying to control his reactions. Augus felt almost as powerful doing this, as he did when he had Gwyn tied up in ropes. Perhaps it was cruel, using the past to leverage Gwyn’s stillness, knowing that Gwyn was likely swimming in a morass of guilt and lust and self-hatred, but Augus didn’t mind a bit of cruelty here and there.

Gwyn’s legs shifted restlessly when Augus touched only the tip of his tongue to the base of Gwyn’s cock. Augus raised his hand and pinned the head of Gwyn’s cock down to his belly, so that the twitching wouldn’t get in the way of what he was doing. Then, he closed his eyes. This was nothing like being in the Seelie Court, not with Gwyn trying to contain helpless writhing, and then whimpering brokenly when Augus mouthed at the base, applying suction as he might to Gwyn’s neck.

‘Oh fuck,’ Gwyn said, and then raised his hand and placed it over his face again.

Augus clicked his tongue in admonishment, and Gwyn stilled and then lowered his hand.

‘Good,’ Augus said, and Gwyn shook his head and took a deep breath, going straight back to shallow breathing afterwards. ‘I don’t think anything undoes you quite as quickly. It’s fascinating.’

‘It’s not fascinating,’ Gwyn ground out, ‘it’s embarrassing.’

‘That too,’ Augus said, smiling against the sensitive flesh of Gwyn’s cock.

He bent his head again and licked firmly, gathering taste; burnt chemicals, carbon, ozone, in amongst muskiness and warmth and a saltiness that didn’t exactly sting his tongue, but reminded him that their body chemistry was different. He turned his head, bit down carefully, imprisoning sensitive flesh before dragging his teeth across it, Gwyn’s breathing caught and then became so fast it was almost like he was hyperventilating. Augus felt a pulse beneath his lips.

He could bite down hard enough to sever the organ from Gwyn’s body and even though he’d not share that with Gwyn – the things that casually ran through his mind – he enjoyed knowing how much damage he could do. He could rake his nails deep into Gwyn’s abdomen and remember how warm Gwyn’s insides felt against his fingers. He could do so much damage before Gwyn would even think to stop him.

It was heady keeping that in mind when he lifted Gwyn’s cock and placed his lips around the head, amazed at how Gwyn didn’t even attempt to touch Augus’ head, how he remembered all the rules from last time. Gwyn stayed locked up in a kind of endless tension beneath him, and Augus thought that perhaps he was ruining the massage, and then didn’t care. If he gave Gwyn a choice between this and relaxation, he knew which one Gwyn would choose.

His movements were shallow, but the suction he used on the tip of Gwyn’s cock was hard on the upstroke, soft and tender when he lowered down again, keeping his hand in place and shifting to make sure he was more comfortable.

Gwyn seemed to be slowly losing his mind. Augus heard him lift his hands to his face again, muffling his noises, and Augus stopped, lifting his mouth clear of swollen, reddened flesh.
'Gods, okay,' Gwyn said, lowering his hands. ‘Okay, okay.’

Gwyn lifted up on his arms, looked down at Augus, his cheeks flushed and his bottom lip imprinted with teeth marks.

‘I thought last time was the last time,’ Gwyn said, staring at him. ‘I don’t know why it affects me like this.’

‘Does rather good things to one’s ego,’ Augus said, lazily jacking Gwyn’s cock before kissing the tip and listening to the thin whine that followed.

‘I’m close,’ Gwyn said, laughing in that way that suggested he found the whole situation ridiculous. ‘Of all the things… I lost the war, Augus. This isn’t…this isn’t the way it should be going.’

‘Yes, well,’ Augus said, watching Gwyn lower himself back to the bed. ‘I destroyed people’s lives and you don’t see me forgetting to partake in life’s pleasures, do you? You’re Unseelie. Kindly act like you are entitled to these rewards no matter how evil you think you are.’

But Augus hesitated before he touched his mouth to Gwyn’s cock again.

Was it that simple? Could it be that simple?

Why don’t you act like you too are entitled to a lake and a home and your brother and more besides, waterhorse? If they are the things you want, then take them with the claws and teeth that have always been yours.

His true voice inside of him, growling deep.

Augus raised his eyebrows at his own thoughts as he licked generously at the head of Gwyn’s cock. He tongued at precome, and Gwyn thumped the bed with a fist and his body quivered with the attempt to hold himself still.

‘You’re doing so well,’ Augus said to him, and Gwyn managed a breath of incredulous amusement, and then he groaned when Augus lowered his mouth once more.

It didn’t take long. Gwyn was too sensitised to the idea of it, and the reality was obviously far more than he could handle, despite the fact that Augus never became rough, never inflicted pain, never swallowed him close to all the way down, didn’t move as fast he usually did. In only minutes, Gwyn was groaning repeatedly, his hips pulsing with aborted movements, Augus’ other hand holding him down firmly. Gwyn tipped his neck all the way back, his shoulders weren’t properly touching the bed anymore, and the blankets were fisted up so hard in both of his hands that he’d made tents of the fabric.

Augus watched Gwyn jerk at the first pulse of come that vibrated through his cock – Augus feeling it through his palm. It spilled milky white over Gwyn’s skin, onto his pelvis, over Augus’ knuckles, wave after wave of it, and Gwyn thumping the bed again and then trying to twist onto his side and Augus keeping his other hand in place. Holding Gwyn still, keeping him open and exposed until it was over.

‘I don’t…think I can handle that more than once a year,’ Gwyn said, rubbing a hand over his face, his hair mussed and pointing in all directions when he finally shifted and looked at Augus, still between his legs. ‘Embarrassing. Gods.’

‘Here,’ Augus said, moving up over him. ‘Taste.’
Gwyn eagerly, obediently licked over Augus’ knuckles.

Augus watched, turning his hand slowly to make sure Gwyn didn’t miss anything. He leaned down and licked into Gwyn’s mouth, then withdrew and pressed his closed mouth against Gwyn’s bottom lip.

They lingered like that, and Augus felt no urge to chase after his own arousal, letting it fade. He smoothed Gwyn’s hair and lay half on top of him, legs straddling one of Gwyn’s thighs, trailing the claw of his thumb over the collar.

Gwyn settled beneath him, content to rest his head by Augus’, his chest slowly moving Augus up and down, a little at a time. It was soothing, and Augus let his mind drift to water currents and bobbing waves, sunlight upon water when a breeze had stirred it. He thought of the tiny flashing silvery bodies of fish and the elegance of eels and the curmudgeonly turtles that always acted as though they owned every lake they’d ever lived in. His hands twitched as he remembered the angel-hair roots of water lilies against his fingers, the graceful cords of underwater stems, the soft rubbery texture of waterweed against his naked skin.

He needed a lake.

He hadn’t let himself think about it for many reasons…but now he knew the main one. It wasn’t that he missed his old, unrecoverable home. Though that was a loud, clanging reason all the same.

It was that to create the lake he knew he needed, he would have to move out of the palace. He could visit, yes, but he would have to make his home elsewhere.

He pressed closer to Gwyn. He wasn’t sure Gwyn would take Augus moving away as anything other than a rejection. Even if he had an open invitation. Even if Augus demanded that Gwyn visit.

He needed to keep thinking about it. Perhaps a solution would present itself in time. It wasn’t like he hadn’t found a measure of peace in the palace for now, and feeling Gwyn’s heart thump beneath his was its own reward.

* 

A shaking of his shoulder, and Augus withdrew from his doze and blinked up at Gwyn who was already dressed. He was no longer wearing the collar, and his hair was neatened – as much as it could ever be neatened – and he wore a shirt, pants, a sword strapped to his side.

‘Going somewhere?’ Augus said, looking him over.

‘Augus,’ Gwyn said, ‘I think I know what to do. It won’t solve everything. But…I’m going to need your help. Your compulsions.’

‘Finally,’ Augus said, rolling his eyes, pushing himself upright.

‘Ash’s too,’ Gwyn said. ‘He’s good with compulsions, is he not?’

‘Not quite as strong as me,’ Augus said, smirking, ‘but I’m one of the strongest waterhorses in existence. So…not quite as strong as me still means-’

‘Powerful,’ Gwyn said, nodding. ‘Yes.’

Gwyn leaned forwards and hesitated before pressing his mouth to Augus’ gently, his lips closed, the touch soft. Augus leaned in, their noses flush against each other, Gwyn tasting of fresh nuts, as
though he’d rummaged through the hamper on his own before waking Augus.

The thought pleased him.

‘It won’t oust the Seelie from circling our Court,’ Gwyn said as he straightened. ‘But it will show them that we still have teeth.’

‘Didn’t you know?’ Augus said, smiling. ‘It’s the one thing the Unseelie still have after we’ve lost everything else.’

*  

The path of the Gwylwyr Du stretched pale blue and haunting behind them, all the way to the Unseelie Court. Near the boundary between Unseelie Court barrier and the rest of the world, Augus and Ash stood behind Gwyn and Fenwrel, who talked quietly to each other. Fenwrel had her staff out, pointed constantly towards the Seelie military crowded densely around the entrance to the Court they couldn’t penetrate. There to stop anyone from entering or exiting, the Seelie flag flying high in front of them all.

Fenwrel steadily directed an illusion towards the Seelie fae, showing them an empty Gwylwyr Du, as the Ifir and several other afrit in hulking true-form lumbered in bodies viciously appointed with horns and crests of fur and flame-coloured scale. Their eyes glowed with active fire, their giant hands with claws displayed, as though they were ready to rip the world apart. Ifir’s one horn made him stand out, but he handled himself with the balance of someone who had learned how to live with his punishment.

Ash looked over at Augus nervously, picking at the hem of his shirt. ‘This seems kind of underhanded, bro.’

‘Good,’ Augus said, staring out towards the Seelie fae, seeing through Fenwrel’s illusion. No one on this side of the Unseelie Court was impacted by it. ‘You don’t have to be here if you don’t want to.’

‘No,’ Ash said. ‘Underhanded, sure, but…I’m pretty sure there’s nothing in the manual about the Seelie fae doing this to us in the first place. Is there?’

‘Not a thing,’ Augus said.

He looked behind him at the rest of the generals who had gathered a safe distance behind the afrit. Zudanna paced backwards and forwards, quietly bristling with nervous energy. Gwyn hadn’t wanted the assistance of the kudlaks. But Zudanna had wanted to witness this showing of teeth and claws.

Nearby, Vane held a recurve bow easily and loosely, a quiver of arrows at his side. Several of his own people were beside him, also holding their recurve bows, waiting for a signal.

Gwyn nodded decisively to Fenwrel, who stepped back until she was surrounded by the thick trunks of black trees. She kept her staff out, her ears pointed in the direction of the entrance to the Gwylwyr Du.

A single clipped gesture from Gwyn, and Augus and Ash walked forwards until they were as close to the entrance of the Gwylwyr Du as they dared get. Until Augus could feel the protection wavering.

They both looked towards Gwyn, who motioned the afrit forwards. The stones of the giant, blue-
A silent signal, Gwyn pointing to Augus and Ash with an open hand, then dropping his arm.

Ash took a breath, and Augus summoned all his hungry, furious waterhorse power that had been suppressed for too long. He focused it outwards, making sure to only direct his voice towards the Seelie, his true voice thundering to life in his throat.

‘Lower your arms!’ Augus called first.

A split second of surprise from the Seelie before them, and then everyone who’d heard the order beyond the Unseelie Court dropped their weapons. The sound of metal clattering down, bows and arrows falling, heavy polearms and axes *thunking* to the ground.

‘*Everything’s gonna be just fine, guys!*’ Ash shouted, lowering their resistance to Augus’ compulsion with a sense of wellbeing that rolled off him in palpable waves.

*I guess that trick’s good for something,* Augus thought as he and Ash both ran towards cover, getting out of the way.

Gwyn and the afrit moved together, Gwyn unintimidated despite being surrounded by the desert demons that crackled and began to smoke as they summoned their destructive, liquid fire.

Augus watched with something that he would later realise was awe, as Gwyn raised his sword and held the blade flat, point facing the Seelie. Gwyn summoned a powerful beam of light that swept brutally through the fae before them. A brief pause, and the haunted forest blazed with light once more.

Now they could hear screams from the Seelie fae as the effects of the compulsions began to wear off. Augus moved quickly through the edges of the forest, as close to Fenwrel and the entrance of the Unseelie Court as was safe.

Ash had the same idea. Together they called their compulsions again, held those Seelie fae who were breaking free captive under the spell of their voices. They couldn’t compel thousands of fae, no, but they could get their point across all the same. Dare to block the entrances to the Unseelie Court, and the Unseelie fae would respond.

It was the afrit who did the most damage. Some even moving beyond the safety of the Court only for Gwyn to call them back again with a curt:

‘*Remember* your formation! Get in line!’

They fell back, growling at him with flared nostrils and bright fiery eyes, and then threw ball after ball of hot, brutal fire out into the crowds, decimating hundreds. Screams and tortured, anguished cries soaked the air. The scent of blood and char and burnt flesh was thick in their noses.

Then, Gwyn raised his hand and the afrit paused when they noticed. When Gwyn let his hand drop, they fell back. Ifir hunkered over Gwyn, staring down at him.

‘I’m not done,’ he growled.

‘Good,’ Gwyn said, looking up at him. ‘Because we’re going to do a version of this at *every* entrance to the Unseelie Court every five minutes to half hour for the next…well, until we get tired of it. Sound good to you?’
'Very,' Ifir said, lips curling back to reveal sharp, dagger-like fangs.

Gwyn didn’t even look down at his cracked, bloodied hand and wrist when he sheathed his sword. He signalled to the fie ellyllon archers, who blurred forwards with impossible speed and began targeting specific Seelie fae who looked as though they might be in charge.

‘It’s not over!’ someone shouted from beyond the bounds of the Court.

‘Get one of the Mages! I can’t see a thing!’

Augus was close enough to Fenwrel to hear her laugh quietly. When he looked at her, she was already looking at him, something vicious in her normally warm gaze.

‘They can get as many Mages as they like,’ Fenwrel said quietly, ‘but I’m operating from within the Unseelie Court, and if magical attacks could push past these boundaries, they would have by now. They cannot do anything. This does feel good.’

Ash came up beside them and grabbed Augus’ hand. His palm was clammy, and Augus squeezed back, looking over at him and offering a frown of sympathy. Ash wasn’t made for war.

Augus looked up when Gwyn approached them. He gave a small, almost imperceptible nod to Augus and then looked over Ash critically.

‘You, back into the palace,’ Gwyn said.

‘What?’ Ash said, his eyes widening. ‘I can help!’

‘I need you well,’ Gwyn said. ‘And you help just as much – if not more – when you circulate through the Winter Court and the throne room. Don’t think that it’s any less important just because it’s not causing bloodshed.’

Ash closed his eyes briefly and looked towards Augus in naked relief. ‘Would you mind?’

‘No,’ Augus said. ‘Go back.’

‘Fuck, thank you.’ He looked between them both and squeezed hard at Augus’ hand before moving away, walking hastily back towards the palace. It was only then that Augus realised that the shrieks and cries of pain had continued, and he’d tuned them out. As he looked at Ash walking by everyone, he sighed. Ash couldn’t simply block out what he didn’t want to hear.

*I’ll have to check on him later.*

Augus was surprised to see Gwyn watching Ash looking like he was thinking the same thing.

‘Okay,’ Gwyn said, looking back at Augus in acknowledgement even as he stepped away. He faced the afrit and the fie ellyllon and pointed towards the palace. ‘Let’s break down who will hit what entrances and when.’

‘I can get more of my people behind this,’ Ifir said, already back in human-form, wearing his single horn above a head of black hair and his thick, groomed beard and moustache. ‘We can get all those entrances covered. The compulsions – helpful – but not necessary, don’t want to spread your pony too thin. What about the illusions?’

‘I can set up multiple illusions,’ Fenwrel said from Augus’ side. ‘The Seelie Mages can’t touch me, not while I’m within the protection of the Court.’
Gwyn nodded, then walked back to the Court with a confidence that was hard to believe, given how he’d come apart in Augus’ arms more than once in the past few days. But then, Augus knew how liberating it could be to unravel at times, knowing that there was someone there to help sort through all the knotted threads and make a neater mess of the soul.

‘My grandmother,’ Fenwrel said, ‘she was right about you.’

‘In what way?’ Augus said.

Fenwrel smiled enigmatically and shook her head, and Augus decided she hadn’t intended anything bad by it and they kept walking.

Fenwrel and Augus brought up the rear, lagging behind. As they walked over the blue stone, Augus looked up at the black canopies of the trees. The leaves and branches moved in a gentle breeze, untouched by the conflict going on around them.

Chapter End Notes

In our next chapter, ‘Arrow:’

‘Are you Reading them?’ Gwyn asked.

‘Am I ever not?’ Mikkel said, his voice caustic. He grimaced. ‘I’m sorry. Sorry man. Weird night, hey. Feels like a night where big things are gonna happen. Is that the Wild Hunt energy?’

‘Yes,’ Gwyn said. ‘At the very least you’ll be safe here. So if you ask for asylum, you can come straight back with us. There are already Seelie fae there, Mikkel. You wouldn’t be the first.’
Gwyn
*

The first Seelie fae to ask for asylum were the trows, who were being commanded to sever all ties with their cousins across the river, likely because their Unseelie brethren were quite proud of working in Gwyn’s castle. They refused, and were fired from many of their positions. They were teleported into the Kingdom by their Unseelie king, asking for safe haven. Gwyn granted it, then spent the next hour trying to think of what they were going to do to overcome the issues that were growing more noticeable every passing day.

It had been two weeks since the battle, and though the Unseelie Court had mostly managed to keep their entrances clear due to attacking from within, there was no guaranteed safe passage for underfae into the Court. Nor for carts and wagons and caravans. New places had to be organised for drops of goods and materials, and the Seelie had enough fae of their own leftover to hunt out those places frequently and destroy each one, so that merchants never quite knew where was safe to go to deliver their wares.

Prices rose as merchants needed to ensure their safety, and others dropped out of servicing the Unseelie Court altogether.

Some of the Courtland fae were able to teleport some distance away to pick up supplies, but they were tired, frightened, and it spoiled their good will to ask them to do too much on behalf of the Kingdom. They were not naturally self-sacrificing. The Unseelie did not put their lives in danger without expecting some sort of payment in return.

Then came the Seelie ambaros who lived with the marid-djinn afrit, citing mysterious ‘disappearances’ of their own kind and the suspicion that Albion had an elite team to deliberately fragment and fracture Unseelie-Seelie communities by hunting members. Ifir’s wife, his sons and daughters, they weren’t there in the group that begged for asylum, and when Gwyn talked to Ifir about it, Ifir had only looked off into the distance and said:

‘It’s a bad business, Gwyn, this fucking mess. I want them safer than safe. A Court’s not that place.’
Gwyn agreed, and they’d left it at that.

The section of palace put aside for Seelie guests wouldn’t be big enough, and Gwyn quietly changed the permissions of the castle one day, expanding the safe places for Seelie fae. He informed the servants and the Unseelie trows, asking them to pass the message along.

In the two weeks leading up to the Wild Hunt, the Winter Court – for the first time since the Raven Prince’s Court – included both Seelie and Unseelie fae. Tensions were high, and Ash was often there, keeping things as calm as possible. No one liked knowing the Seelie military was hemming them in, and the Unseelie had to be reminded not to feed their true appetites in the bounds of the Court. Three times, Gwyn had to be called to intervene and eject Unseelie who were too angry or bitter to keep charge of their own hungers, their own malice.

There were whispers that Gwyn was too sympathetic to the Seelie.

Seelie underfae attempted to make it into the Unseelie Court, but such pilgrimages were often fatal, given that most couldn’t teleport, and allies in the Unseelie Courtlands were no longer there to provide assistance. As quickly as Fenwrel tried to make portals for them to use to access the Gwylwyr Du, they were taken down. After all, word had to be passed around so the Seelie underfae knew where to go, and inevitably, someone of the Seelie who were allied with Albion would find out, and the portal would be removed.

Gwyn took a break from sitting in the throne room, where he’d been listening – almost non-stop, it felt like – to people talking to him, asking him questions about what was happening, what would happen, what the plan was.

Plans were in development, but there was only so much they could do. Aside from their sneak attacks on the Seelie military, they had no brute force left. Gwyn had handed over management of future plans to Gulvi, Mu and Vane, who were together especially suited to stealth. One of the solutions already being implemented was to sabotage Seelie food drops – a military had to be fed, after all – and then teleport entire caravans of food directly into Unseelie Court.

Now, Gwyn rubbed at his forehead as he stared at a blank piece of newly stretched parchment. Nearby, several fresh pots of ink that had never been opened. He’d thought to take his mind off things with cartography, but he was out of practice, and he didn’t want to ruin the parchment.

He looked up when Augus entered the room.

‘We have a full house,’ Augus said. ‘More are coming. If I didn’t know any better, I’d say it was deliberate. To bleed us of our resources.’

‘It is deliberate,’ Gwyn said quietly, ‘but not in the way you think.’

‘In what way, then?’

Augus came to stand near him, placed a hand on the back of his shoulder like it was easy. Gwyn still tensed. He couldn’t help himself. It wasn’t even that he was afraid of Augus. He was just so unused to someone offering gentle touch.

‘I need to speak with the others. My thoughts on the matter are still coming together. I don’t want to burden anyone until after the Wild Hunt. We need that inter-alignment symbol more than ever, right now.’

Augus was silent for a long time. His thumb moved over the grain of Gwyn’s shirt, stroking small, slow circles. Gwyn’s head tilted towards Augus’ hand.
'You don’t think he’s going to sabotage the Wild Hunt?’ Augus said.

‘Albion?’ Gwyn said, turning and looking up at him. ‘Augus, I know he’s broken an awful lot of rules lately, but the Wild Hunt is sacrosanct. No one’s gone after it before. I’ll be there. The Inner Court. Some of the generals. Hopefully some Seelie fae turn up.’

‘You think they will, knowing how Albion is beginning to treat Seelie who interact friendlily with the Unseelie?’

‘I don’t know,’ Gwyn said, knuckling a fist into the side of his temple to try and knead away the headache.

Augus bent down until his mouth rested in Gwyn’s hair, his nose bumping into his scalp.

‘I’m looking forward to it,’ Augus said. ‘I have my concerns. But even more than that, to be able to enjoy the Wild Hunt again, to know you’re there – it reminds me of a different time in my life. And who knows? And if I don’t take the win, I can slake my own bloodthirst in other ways, can’t I?’

Augus’ fingers crept up Gwyn’s neck, and Gwyn shivered. Smiled in spite of himself.

‘You don’t need to wait for the Wild Hunt for that, Augus,’ Gwyn said, and he felt Augus’ huff of amusement.

‘So you say,’ Augus said, ‘but I don’t see our schedules looking anything like they’re giving us free time lately.’

Gwyn groaned in acknowledgement and nodded. That was true. For about five minutes a day he managed to teleport away to a remote area, stand and breathe air that wasn’t the Court’s air, feel the zahakhar not pressing upon him – welcome though it could sometimes feel. Sometimes he thought it was the only thing keeping his heartsong in place.

He was certain the Wild Hunt would strengthen it again, as it had in the past.

* The Wild Hunt was held in a forest so eldritch that even the fae milling about felt the power of their own kind, grounded and exhilarated all at once, remembering that they were born of the land and the elements, and to both they would return. Gwyn looked over the crowd, lit by tiny lamps floating near trees, glowing in white and green and yellow. Above them, a full moon hung fat and ripe in the sky, a fruit waiting to be plucked and devoured.

Gwyn’s entire Inner Court was there with him; Augus and Gulvi, even Ash, who had never been to a Wild Hunt before, despite Augus having run it for many years. Other Unseelie fae had turned up – including Ifir, drinking a tankard of some thick black ale that looked like it had a texture of molasses. Vane sipped at green drink served in a long glass and gazed at his recurve bow with the kind of single-minded focus that made Gwyn abruptly miss being able to shoot with the bow and arrow. Gwyn had a sword strapped to his side, and nothing more. He no longer had a sure enough shot with the recurve to risk sullying the King of the Forest’s death.

Vane chose that moment to look up, giving Gwyn an odd look. Perhaps Vane was annoyed at how Gwyn had left things after the battle, but Gwyn really did think it was for the best. After a moment, Vane looked back to his recurve and seemed preoccupied with its balance and flex once more.

The air was sharp with the scent of pine, linden and birch. Around them in the understorey, cherry
trees and broom, pyrethrum and lily of the valley. The latter always flowered at night in the White Stag’s forest. The bell-like flowers shone a pale, additional light to show the way for those who might step in the sacred forest, smell the wild, hungry air and feel themselves as prey or predator.

There was a murmur, and Gwyn looked in the direction of a new arrival, and then his lips tensed on a smile.

Marika saw him and bowed formally, the appropriate response of a fae to a King – even one of an opposing alignment. Then she rose and walked towards him, seeming to glide over the ground. Her pointed ears were adorned in small pearls, and her dress was modified from the transparent silks she usually wore. Diaphanous hunting attire, and strapped to her calf, a small hunting blade. Around her long fingers glittered rings, and Gwyn had no doubt that one of them housed a sharp little spike.

‘Well met,’ Gwyn said.

The Unseelie watched until Ifir deliberately turned away and started up conversation again, and Gwyn felt a wash of gratitude. Ifir could have caused a scene. But it seemed the more that rumours went around that Gwyn was a Seelie sympathiser, the more Ifir stepped back from stirring trouble.

Perhaps he just didn’t want his other horn sawn off.

‘A Wild Hunt again,’ Marika said, holding her hands out, palms up. ‘I appreciate the normalcy at a time like this.’

‘I’m surprised you’re not out there ringed around our Court as we speak,’ Gwyn said, clasping her hands in return.

‘Do you think Albion trusts me?’ Marika said. ‘I’m lucky to not be in a cell.’

Several more fae teleported into the clearing, and Marika stepped away, gravitating towards Gulvi.

In the new crowd, a gnome with a conical red hat that Gwyn knew from previous Hunts, who bowed to him so deeply that the tip of his hat brushed the floor and his hands had to come up to hold it in place. There was a Seelie barbegazi, laden with frost and icicles, squat and clearly friends with the gnome. When the barbegazi bowed, her icicles tinkled musically. In the crowd, two common fae who Gwyn didn’t recognise, wearing merchant garb, and a small group of Unseelie goblins who carried polearms and bowed to Gwyn, then walked straight to Augus in a way that seemed menacing at first, until it was clear they knew Augus very well. Augus stepped aside to greet them all, speaking in their language fluently.

Gwyn wondered if that was a diplomatic relationship Augus had maintained from some time ago, then he was drawn into more introductions.

A few more minutes and they’d get started, the energy in the air beginning to peak, the King of the Forest sending his own silent signal through the atmosphere.

‘Hey, so, am I unwelcome or what? I’m kind of feeling like I’m unwelcome.’

Gwyn turned, his eyes widening in shock. Mikkel stood there, looking sharper-eyed than usual as he took in all the other fae, some who had turned to gaze at him. Marika’s eyes skated over him like he was just one of the crowd, but Gwyn knew – and obviously Mikkel could tell as well from the way he turned to her – that she’d seen more than she was letting on. He’d been present during her interrogation after all. At his waist, Mikkel wore a belt and a holstered gun. His shoes were a bright red leather, his flatcap smelled like it had been newly washed.
Gwyn gestured for Mikkel to follow him, and they trailed a ways into the forest, Gwyn’s blood hammering through his veins with the need to hunt.

Mikkel swallowed and looked over his shoulder. Long moments passed, and Mikkel’s shoulders hunched, his head pushed forwards.

‘Wow, it’s something, huh? Never done a Hunt before. Not like this.’

‘Mikkel, you are not a hunter. This is not safe.’

‘I’m getting tired of that,’ Mikkel said, looking up at Gwyn with a gaze that was hard and worn through all at once. ‘Just…really tired, Gwyn. I just want to do something fun, okay? With a friend? If there’s any consequences, you just let me wear them.’

‘Mikkel…’

‘They’ve seen me now so it’s too late for the warning, Cupcake,’ Mikkel said. ‘Maybe I’ll ask for asylum at the end of the night, yep, that could be a thing. Didn’t know Marika would be here.’

Mikkel looked over his shoulder again, and when he looked back his was still squinting.

‘Are you Reading them?’ Gwyn asked.

‘Am I ever not?’ Mikkel said, his voice caustic. He grimaced. ‘I’m sorry. Sorry man. Weird night, hey. Feels like a night where big things are gonna happen. Is that the Wild Hunt energy?’

‘Yes,’ Gwyn said. ‘At the very least you’ll be safe here. So if you ask for asylum, you can come straight back with us. There are already Seelie fae there, Mikkel. You wouldn’t be the first.’

‘Huh,’ Mikkel said, sighing. ‘Safe here? I’m safe as houses, Cupcake. At least here. Hey, Gwyn, if I asked you something, would you maybe take me seriously, and not think of me as some young, baby idealist?’

‘You’re not an idealist,’ Gwyn said, smiling wryly. ‘I think you’re bitterer than I am.’

‘Oh, yep, got that covered,’ Mikkel said, looking down at his feet. Some time passed, and Gwyn could feel the itch in his blood grow stronger, knew he had to get back to the clearing. The King of the Forest didn’t appear on Gwyn’s schedule, Gwyn had to make sure he was in place at the right time.

When Mikkel looked up again, his eyes were bright. Gwyn was taken aback by the nakedness in them, as though Mikkel had stripped something of his usual façade away. ‘I won’t take long, I promise. Gwyn, can you just... I know things are really hard for you guys right now. The Unseelie. And you’re probably the wrong person to ask. But you seem like a good sort. I think deep down you really want to be a hero. I’m gonna ask you to think something over before we go hunt a big deer.’

‘Stag,’ Gwyn corrected.

‘This thing that I said about you treating me like a young baby, that’s you doing it. I know it’s a stag. Let me call it a deer, okay?’

There was something so desperate in Mikkel’s gaze, in his round, drawn face, that Gwyn nodded, feeling immediately wrong-footed.
‘Can you, uh, make a refuge? For Readers? Something away from the Courts? I dunno…if it’s possible. Seems everyone wants to use us. But I just feel like maybe we need it. It gets to a guy, y’know. This life. And I think- See, you don’t even think it’s possible. You’re thinking about it and dismissing it already.’

‘Mikkel,’ Gwyn said, holding up a hand, ‘you need to give me a chance to really think about it. Yes, it seems…I’m not sure how it would work, but that doesn’t mean I’ve abandoned your idea.’

‘You’re my friend,’ Mikkel said, taking a deep breath and then looking surprised at what he’d just said. ‘Okay, I’ve picked better friends in the past. But you’re not so bad.’

‘Thank you,’ Gwyn said, shaking his head. ‘Given I know that I’m terrible at friendship, that’s actually quite a compliment.’

‘Yep,’ Mikkel said. ‘Don’t mention it. Now do we go hunt a deer or what?’

Gwyn opened his mouth to say ‘stag’ and then thought the better of it. But then as they walked back towards the crowd, Gwyn couldn’t resist saying:

‘He’s not a deer, he’s ‘the King of the Forest.’’

‘I knew you were going to do that,’ Mikkel said, without looking up at Gwyn.

‘You couldn’t know that. That wasn’t an emotion.’

‘Baby,’ Mikkel said, laughing under his breath, ‘you don’t know how strong I am, or what I know. Or how lucky you are to have had me here, helping you out.’

‘No, Mikkel. That I do know,’ Gwyn said softly. ‘You’ve saved a lot of lives.’

‘Yeah, well, shut up, because some of them are really curious about what we’re talking about, okay?’

‘Okay,’ Gwyn said.

*  

When no one else turned up, despite Augus looking on edge the entire time and clearly expecting sabotage, Gwyn let the fierce black horses with their blazing eyes into the clearing, and each of them picked its rider. Gwyn was surprised to see Mikkel entirely at ease with his horse, since he didn’t seem like the kind of person who might know anything about how to ride, let alone how to act around them. Gwyn wondered how far his Reading extended. To animals as well?

Everyone present was chosen by a horse, though Gulvi waved hers away, preferring to fly without. Before mounting, Gwyn turned and sent his awareness out prickling, seeking. When he found what he was looking for, he sent out an invisible call, a pulse of energy.

A great baying filled the air, rippled through the night sky. A howling of the cwn annwn – the hounds of the Wild Hunt – as they came streaming into the clearing, familiar with this forest, this night, this ritual. They were bred only for the Wild Hunt and they were hungrier for it than many of the fae there. They bared their sharpened fangs at each other. Their long snouts pushed into the air as though they could nudge the stars, seeking the King of the Forest’s scent. They whuffed and chuffed at each other, moved between the dancing legs of the horses.

The energy around them fizzed into a greater life, and Gwyn felt he could breathe it in like nectar
or drink it like sweet, thick blood.

They all mounted at once. Gwyn could feel Ash lulling his own horse with glamour when it was obvious he wasn’t used to riding. Gulvi laughed nearby, pushing his leg affectionately. Augus sat astride his horse and looked down at it with distaste. His rapier belted to his side. His shirt a rare black, dark green cufflinks pinned to his sleeves.

Ifir was rubbing his horse’s neck. Vane had strung his bow and looked over at Gwyn again, as though trying to figure him out. It wasn’t as awkward as if Vane had continued trying to flirt with him, so that was something.

Marika pushed up nearby, offered Gwyn a smile. The few other Seelie fae followed behind her, looking excited to be there. Pleased perhaps that the Unseelie would host the event, and the Seelie King of the Forest would allow himself to be sacrificed, only to return in an endless, eternal Hunt, reminding both alignments of their connection to each other, their place in a mysterious, treacherous world.

‘The last time I opened the Wild Hunt,’ Gwyn said, knowing the way the ritual words were meant to be spoken, ‘we had dark times upon us, and those dark times remain. This is the first Wild Hunt in many months, I know. But let that remind us that even when all seems lost, rituals return, are maintained, will flow into our futures. The Wild Hunt is not about war or battle, and it is not about bloodshed or sadness. It is about returning to what we truly are. Some of you are old friends, some new, but all of us here are here to a purpose, to reforge what it is to be fae, to breathe the magic of the world in our veins and let our aim stay true.’ Gwyn looked at everyone individually, reins wrapped around his hands and his horse tense beneath him. ‘Everyone is welcome.’

They rose into the air as one, the horses and hounds, Gulvi graceful beside them, her daggers already out.

They waited again, looking down between the dense canopies of trees into the tiny openings, some breaths held, others turning slow and steady with the focus of a hunter that knew they could not afford to forget to breathe.

The rules of the game were simple, and had never changed: the first fae to kill the King of the Forest was the victor of the evening, and everyone would race to be the first.

Sometimes the King of the Forest was never found, eluded all. Such was the way of the Wild Hunt.

Gwyn waited with a growing excitement that glowed in him until he felt suffused with it. He looked over at Augus, who was already looking at him, a pleased gleam in his eye. They’d both run the Hunt together. Lifetimes ago. Gwyn had only hoped for a connection. It felt incredible now to know that he had it, and that it was real.

‘Oh!’ Mikkel shouted, pointing through the canopy towards a place no one else could see through. Gwyn stared at him in wonder. His Reading? ‘Oh! Oh my god!’

Mikkel was staring down past his horse with the kind of awe of someone who had never met a creature such as this before.

The King of the Forest – a white stag too large to be a normal stag – appeared in a clearing below them, giant antlers branching with strength, his body muscular and streamlined. He looked up with eyes that radiated ancient wisdom, watched them all.
‘Well met,’ Gwyn said, his voice was loud enough amongst the quiet breeze blowing through the canopy, that everyone heard it. Then the wind dropped and the night seemed to hold its breath around them. Gwyn smiled down, feeling his heart rate pick up, his fingers tightening around his reins.

‘All right. The rules remain simple. We hunt!’

The King of the Forest’s hind legs bunched and then he pivoted smoothly, springing away, moving in a blur too fast to track properly.

The hounds bayed. Horses neighed and whinnied their excitement. The fae gave chase.

The hooves of the horses devoured distance as they followed, glimpsing flashes of white here and there in the forest. The hounds moved ahead, and Gwyn, Augus and Marika quickly took up the lead, with Fenwrel and many of the others already beginning to lag, though Gwyn could practically smell smoke on his heels, which meant Ifir wasn’t far behind.

They raced over the endlessness of the King of the Forest’s land, the altitude rising and lowering, crags sometimes jutting out of pine-covered land, snow-capped and immune to summer’s heat. Gales blew around them, encouraging them forwards or dragging them back. The King of the Forest manipulating the elements of his land to give himself the best advantage.

Gwyn leaned low on his horse’s back, looked down and ahead, the horse putting on a burst of speed in response. But despite the bloodlust beginning to haze his vision and make his whole body feel like it was being attacked with a feverish heat, it was Augus who drew forward, silent and leaning off his horse, staring intently ahead.

Augus didn’t often seek to take the quarry for himself, even when he’d led. He had an unusual method of hunting.

Minutes passed, Ifir drew level with Gwyn, whooping in delight. Behind them, several other fae took up the call, crowing, crying and roaring with the exhilaration of the evening. Augus was far in front of them now, Gulvi a few paces behind him.

Augus’ horse began to drop closer to the tree canopy, a controlled, fast stoop, its legs tucked up tight underneath itself.

Augus unhooked his feet from the stirrups, seemed to hold onto the horse with one hand. Quickly, the horse changed direction and instead of being unseated, Augus swung his legs over the back of the horse and then plummeted down towards the ground feet first, as heavy as stone. Gwyn’s heart felt like it was somewhere up in his throat, excitement and apprehension both. He would never get used to this.

Augus disappeared through a tiny gap in the tree canopy, and then seconds later, the heavy sound of a waterhorse’s hooves pounding at a fast gallop on the ground ahead. He would not take the King of the Forest’s life in any form but his true-form. But he refused to change where others could see him, so he had to wait until the right moment, drop and transform under the cover of the King’s forest. It was dangerous, and required complete mastery over his shifting ability.

Minutes later, the rest of the hounds and horses dropped below the canopy when a clearing appeared. Bound to the ground now, they followed the scent trail of Augus and the King of the Forest both. The wind whipped past Gwyn’s face, snuck into his shirt, cooled the crevices of his fingers. He loved the vibration of the gallop moving through his body, hooves pounding the ground instead of the air. His heartsong flared inside of him, responding, and he felt a moment of
peace that felt true and ineffable.

A single bell-like chime sounded and at once, the horses slowed their pace, the hounds called frustration and elation both.

Augus had made the killing blow, the Hunt was over.

‘He’s covered some ground,’ Ifir said, when – ten minutes later – they finally came upon the white body of the King of the Forest lying on his side, his throat torn cleanly open from a bite far bigger than Augus’ mouth now that he was back in human-form. For Augus stood by the King of the Forest’s side, a broad paint-stroke of blood clinging to his mouth and chin and moving down his neck. He had shifted back into human-form already, alternatively licking at his lips or dabbing at the wetness at his neck with a black handkerchief.

Gwyn dismounted, walked over and knelt down by the King of the Forest’s head, reaching out and feeling for a pulse. There was nothing. Gwyn could see his own reflection in that ocular curve, but nothing of life.

‘It is a just death,’ Gwyn called clearly, and Augus huffed out a breath of air, as though it could never be anything else.

Augus looked like he was wearing a costume over an intense, feral need to devour. Even now, his green eyes were lambent, as though lit from within. Every now and then he licked at the blood covering his lips. The handkerchief was held just a little too tightly between his fingers, which were white-knuckled.

The horse that had chosen him came up to him, whickering at the stag that lay upon the ground before nosing at Augus’ side. The hounds milled around the stag. They would leave his body alone now. They all would. The King of the Forest would rebirth himself in solitude, and they would wait for him back at the main clearing, refreshments waiting for them, a night of revels and conversation ahead.

Gwyn looked at the small, intimate crowd of fae. Most seemed pleased. No one seemed visibly upset that Augus had won the Hunt, even after all that he’d done. The goblins were smiling. Perhaps the Hunt itself had served as a reminder of the days when Augus had loyally served the Raven Prince, carried on the Wild Hunt for him, and was nothing more than a quiet-spoken diplomat with an odd vocation and a preference for being alone.

‘I don’t know about the rest of you,’ Ifir said, leaning his head back, ‘but I could really do with a drink.’

Agreements all around, and they all turned and made their way back to the clearing. It would take far longer now, a time for conversation and peace.

Augus wasn’t in the mood for talking, he hung back on his horse, having cleaned off his mouth. He looked like he was focusing on grounding himself, so Gwyn left him and moved up until he was a fair way behind the crowd, but not too close to bother Augus either.

Vane lagged back and pulled even with him, offering a winning smile that showed no sign of the troubled expression Gwyn had seen earlier.

‘You trust the Seelie here tonight?’ Vane said. None of the others were close enough to hear him over the sound of the hooves and running hounds. Gwyn transferred the reins to one hand and shook his head.
‘It’s not quite that simple,’ Gwyn said. ‘It’s the Wild Hunt. It’s inter-alignment. Don’t tell me that you take the same hard line against the Seelie that Albion is trying to take against us?’

‘Unlike Albion, I’d be well within my rights to,’ Vane said, his voice strangely playful. ‘You really have no idea how much the Seelie military has taken from me and my people.’

Gwyn frowned, and Vane laughed, the sound bubbling and sweet.

‘You know,’ Vane said, ‘once upon a time, the fie ellyllon used to have a very positive relationship with the Seelie ellyllon and their allies. We were known for it. The Raven Prince didn’t trust anyone, he certainly didn’t trust us.’

‘There were rumours that you were informants,’ Gwyn said, his eyes narrowing.

‘Before my time,’ Vane said dismissively. ‘We learned our lesson. Being shunned from the Unseelie Court was a blow too large. But there were consequences for our splitting from the ellyllon. We went from being mildly protected by Seelie goodwill, to being targets of a military far too resourced for us. We’ve suffered. You come to realise that everyone is out for themselves, and that it’s not just an Unseelie philosophy.’

‘So this is where the cool kids hang out,’ Mikkel called, having turned his horse to join them. Gwyn gazed over with an expression that pretended not quite at disdain, and didn’t betray how well he knew Mikkel. ‘Nice. All that jewellery must be heavy.’

‘I’m stronger than I look,’ Vane said, smiling.

‘Yep,’ Mikkel said, returning the expression, though it looked oddly forced.

‘You’re interrupting a conversation,’ Vane said. ‘Surely you’ve not forgotten the most basic of etiquette, have you?’

Mikkel’s eyes widened in shock that looked a shade put on. ‘Oh shit, huh, sorry. I just…I just wanna talk to the King about something quickly. I’ve never been good at manners, you know?’

‘Of course, with being what you are,’ Vane drawled. ‘Is it overwhelming, to be a Reader during the Wild Hunt? I’ve heard Readers cannot do their job properly when there’s too many people about.’

‘What?’ Mikkel said, looking around. ‘This is a small crowd. It’s not so bad. Everything’s a bit scrambled because of all the glamour and stuff, but that’s pretty normal. I work best in a one on one setting, don’t I, Your Majesty? You’d remember that?’

Gwyn frowned at him, and Vane made a sound of disgust and encouraged his horse into a trot, leaving the conversation and joining the rest of the crowd. Mikkel watched him go, his eyes glittering.

‘So about that refuge,’ Mikkel said, as they approached the clearing.

‘Mikkel, Vane and I were having a conversation.’

‘Huh, well, you can talk to him any time, can’t you?’

Gwyn wished he were better at these sorts of interpersonal dynamics. He cast about for something to say, and came up with nothing. Mikkel didn’t seem to be in the kind of mood to help him out either, even though he must have known Gwyn was finding things difficult.
It was only when Gwyn slowed his horse to a halt in the clearing that he realised that Mikkel hadn’t talked about the refuge – or anything – at all. Mikkel moved on ahead and dismounted, then walked over to the tables of food and looked at everything with mild interest. Gwyn dismounted and patted his horse affectionately, carefully scratching its nose while avoiding being nibbled by sharp teeth.

He watched as the other fae ate from platters offered, drinking down tankards and glasses and carved wooden cups. People were naturally sectioning off into groups. Marika was talking with Zudanna, both of them laughing. Ifir had hived off with some of the other generals, and two Seelie fae that Gwyn didn’t know. Vane offered apples to the horses, their big bodies shifting restlessly. Vane then offered jerky instead, and one of the horses snatched up the dried meat with a happy rumble. After that, he almost disappeared amongst their hungry forms as they crowded towards him, only his curly gemmed red hair visible. Ash, Gulvi and Fenwrel chatted quietly, and Augus joined them a moment later, looking over at Gwyn as though checking on him, before bumping shoulders with Ash in a familiar movement that made something settle in Gwyn’s body.

‘Hey,’ Mikkel said, coming over, standing in front of Gwyn and looking up at him. ‘You think the King of the Forest ever wakes up one day and doesn’t feel like dying?’

‘I don’t think he ever feels like it,’ Gwyn said. ‘It’s a part of his magic; this forest, this predator-prey cycle.’

‘You don’t think it’d be shit to die and wake up again?’ Mikkel said.

‘What’s going on?’ Gwyn said under his breath.

‘I’m sorry,’ Mikkel said, not looking very sorry, though he did look lost, and not quite present, as though half his mind was off listening or Reading everyone else. Perhaps he was. ‘It’s been a bad week. And I thought when I came here tonight… I just wanted to spend a night with a friend. But I’m starting to think that things aren’t really ever going to go my way. You know, sometimes there’s only bad choices, Gwyn. But you have to remember that my choices are my own, got it?’

Gwyn shook his head at him. ‘Please just ask for asylum. People will understand.’

‘Yep,’ Mikkel said. ‘In about an hour, I promise I will. I don’t really want to live in the Unseelie Court. Or the Seelie Court. I guess there’s really nowhere for me these days. There never kind of was, once my parents told me to go?’

Mikkel touched the leather around his neck and twisted it with fingers that ended with bitten fingernails.

‘You’re a good friend, Gwyn,’ Mikkel said. ‘I’d do a lot for you, it turns out. Even ask for refuge in your stupid Court. Which I’d hate. I’d hate living there.’

It sounded like he was trying to convince himself.

‘Mikkel, it’s not…evil there. We try and make it comfortable. Unseelie fae like good food and beds and furniture too. And I will do whatever I can to—’

‘Think about the refuge,’ Mikkel said abruptly. ‘Really think about it. I know you’re not now. But… Maybe. Ah, who knows— You have to be more careful, Cupcake,’ Mikkel said, looking up at him.

‘So I’ve heard.’
'Uh huh,' Mikkel said, blinking several times quickly, staring at Gwyn’s neck, like he didn’t really hear what Gwyn had said. ‘The Wild Hunt’s really sacred isn’t it?’

‘Yes,’ Gwyn said. ‘Mikkel, you’re hard enough to understand as it is, sometimes. Take pity on someone who’s not a Reader.’

‘I’m too full of self-pity tonight to have anything left for you,’ Mikkel said, his eyes meeting Gwyn’s as he smiled sadly. ‘You know how hard it is to be the best Reader? One of the very best? You didn’t know that about me, did you? You know, Cupcake, I know that you’re confused and frustrated with me, I know that your heart longs for that waterhorse over there and I know that you think you’re lost even though you’re really not. Not anymore. Not the way you think. And I know there are all sorts of things that shouldn’t be happening. And I get so tired of it. Not just how you feel. I just get so tired. You ever just want to sleep for a really long time?’

Mikkel smiled at him, the gesture pained and sympathetic.

‘Just…promise you won’t be mad, Cupcake,’ Mikkel said again, his gaze going far away, the smile remaining.

Mikkel took a single step to the side.

A spasm when the arrow went through Mikkel’s body, the arrowhead jutting out through his chest, Mikkel looking down at it and then looking back up at Gwyn with knowing on his face.

Vane stood amongst the horses, his recurve arrow drawn, hatred on his face.

Gwyn knew the arrow had been meant for him.

‘Ow,’ Mikkel whispered. ‘Fucking…hurts.’

Mikkel’s knees buckled. Everyone moved at once. Ash and Augus used their compulsions to halt Vane, and then Vane was seized by Ifir and shoved down, recurve bow ripped from his hand and flung away, hands wrenched behind his back. Fenwrel had her staff out. The goblins started shouting. Marika looked on in horror.

‘Gulvi, we need damage control!’ Fenwrel shouted.

Gwyn stared at the bloodied arrowhead, his breath coming faster, his body turning cold. Mikkel didn’t fall backwards, but onto his side, curling over the arrow like he wanted to protect it.

Gwyn dropped to his knees, and Mikkel turned his head, blood already spotting the corners of his lips.

‘Get Aleutia!’ someone shouted.

The sound of an arrow and then the thock! it made as it penetrated true, ripping through flesh and fabric both and Mafydd’s voice dying...

‘Aw, Cupcake,’ Mikkel said, his voice strained and comforting, thick with blood and something else. ‘I’m not him. This isn’t anything like that time, I promise. I promise you. My choices, remember?’

‘You knew?’ Gwyn said, his voice cracking. ‘Mikkel, I can’t be killed by an arrow, but you can.’

‘It’s…poisoned,’ Mikkel said. ‘She made it, I think. Your mother. Talk to- Fuck…’ A long whine,
and Mikkel’s eyes filmed over with tears. ‘Fuck. Vane knows. Just glad that I figured his game out, yep. Two birds with one stone, Gwyn.’

‘No,’ Gwyn whispered, staring at him.

‘You ever just want…to sleep for a really long time?’ Mikkel said. ‘Might as well have been now.’

‘No!’ Gwyn shouted at him.

Mikkel smiled at him, his teeth bloodstained. The expression was so at odds with the chaos around them. Gwyn felt a wash of impotent anger move through him. Behind it, older memories, a roaring of grief that was turning to splinters in his chest.

‘Readers get…bored,’ Mikkel said, his voice rasping. ‘We get so bored. You all feel…the same.’ Mikkel’s eyes begged Gwyn to understand, even as tears leaked from the corners. ‘Even you, Cupcake. As special as you are…to me.’

Gwyn’s own chest was a roar of pain. He stared at the arrowhead. It looked so small. But it was a true shot, it had sailed all the way through his heart, Gwyn knew. But…they’d saved Augus from worse, hadn’t they?

They’d saved Augus from death, so this would be- this would be nothing. And then he would make Mikkel understand that it didn’t have to be like this, that it didn’t have to be- that this wasn’t the way…

‘Couldn’t…have stopped me,’ Mikkel said, closing his eyes and then making a low, animal noise of pain. ‘But I really liked…having a friend, truth be told. You made me hang on longer, you… needy bastard.’

Mikkel’s breathing faltered, and Gwyn reached out to touch him, then at the last minute his hand stopped, just above a crease in his shirt. The horror inside him ruptured, revealed a suppurating mass of fury. Gwyn’s breath hissed through his teeth, his hands hurt.

Rage turned to heat inside of him, he staggered upwards and his light leapt through him in sparks so big that he flashed with it, even as he stalked over to Vane, held in place by Ifir. Vane looked up at him, looking furious and smug all at once.

‘You…’ Vane breathed, sounding nothing at all like he normally did. ‘She said it would be easy to get you into bed if I played the lost, vulnerable, young, whimsical Bowman. If I had a bow and simpered around you, asked to be tutored – if I pretended I needed your big, strong protection. Maybe I didn’t play the role well enough because you were too stupid. Watching you all these months, oblivious to everything.’

‘You saved my life,’ Gwyn said, ‘before, with the generals. When Ifir attacked.’ His voice came from a great distance, sounded breathless.

‘No, I swore a blood oath to your mother that only I would be the one to make the killing blow. She had very clear instructions, you see. There is a poison. A rare poison, so very hard to make. It takes months to get the alchemy of it right, but even then it still isn’t potent enough for what she needed. The potion only activates upon the death of a mother, and only if she thinks hatred towards her child when it happens.’

‘Mothersbane,’ Fenwrel whispered from nearby. ‘By the gods.’

‘And then,’ Vane whispered, a malevolence shining from his refined features. ‘It will kill anyone,
even if they are *King.*

Nearby, Mikkel made infrequent guttural sounds of pain. Vane looked over at him and bared his teeth.

‘There’s no cure,’ he said, smiling with an innocence that didn’t fit him, looking back at Gwyn. ‘And you’ve *always* underestimated me. Always. Could there have been someone more…ill-suited- After everything you’ve done to us. For *three thousand years.* You thought there wouldn’t be consequences? You are *hated.* And I am not…the small, weak prince you all seem to think I am.’

A burst of magic and Vane struggled to get free, even as Fenwrel used her staff and Ifir bore down with his brute strength, growling. Vane was still able to get a hand free, and in a single, blurred movement of speed that he was known for, he brushed his own hand over the tips of his arrows, breaking the skin.

*Poisoning himself.*

Vane made a sound as he was newly restrained, swallowed it down, turned back to Gwyn with his eyes narrowed so much that Gwyn could only see a sliver of blue.

‘Do you know how many of us have this poison on our arrows?’ Vane said, his voice already turning hoarse. ‘How many…have orders, if I die? We’ll be but waiting for our moment. She swore to me, Gwyn. She *swore* she could make it happen. She was one of the best poisoners in the world, and the members An Fnwy estate were always so good to us. Until you.’

Vane’s body went limp in stages. His knees loosened. His neck went limp, head lolling forwards.

Gwyn knew that he was meant to be holding things together, but he felt like a foundation stone had been ripped away.

Augus had always been sure Crielle had another plan.

‘Gwyn- Your Majesty,’ Aleutia said from nearby. When had Aleutia arrived? ‘There’s nothing we can do. It’s…’

…*Too late.*

Gwyn’s breathing was too rough. He was too tense. Flayed apart from the inside.

*Aw, Cupcake. I’m not him.*

‘No,’ Augus said from nearby. ‘No, Gwyn, *don’t-* Gwyn-’

But Gwyn had to, because his light was tearing him apart, and if he didn’t leave, he’d take them all down with him.

He teleported away.

* The Caves of Argoth, which were less caves and more a series of unstructured caverns that frequently opened to unforgiving, razor-sharp stone structures. The place where he’d dumped Efnisien’s body, knowing so few could go there to see the evidence for themselves. Above, plumes of unbreathable air for anyone that depended on oxygen to survive. The smells of sulphur and other
gases sharp and rich and scraping at Gwyn’s nose the way Albion’s salt water had.

The breath he drew was strangled for more than one reason.

The light he released was so powerful that he felt a part of him collapse beneath it. Felt it pushing up out through his ribs and out of his belly, flooding down through his legs, turning his arms into cinder. He’d not felt this bad in so long. He was a six year old child again, outraged and venting upon the An Fnwy estate, not realising that his power was going to eat him alive if he’d let it.

Because he could feel how it wanted to.

But he didn’t call it back, even as stone crumbled around him.

Didn’t call it back until he thought it really would eat him alive. Screaming through clenched teeth, exerting a willpower over himself that made him feel like he was somehow betraying himself, he pulled his light back into his body and then shoved it down towards his feet, where it leapt and fought back against him – a wild, unbridled thing that wasn’t yet done.

He wheezed as he kept it down, going down to his hands and knees, as though the physical posture would help the mental struggle.

Aw, Cupcake.

‘No,’ Gwyn said, pressing his own forehead into stone, his hands clasping at his hair.

It took a long time to get himself under control. He felt as though he was seconds away from trying to destroy the entire Seelie palace. From demanding to see Albion only to put a bolt of light through his chest. Going to the ‘new’ An Fnwy estate and razing it. All his light wanted to do was explode out of him and destroy everything it could.

His light had burnt out his capacity to cry, to feel anything but outrage and vengeance and betrayal. Just…promise you won’t be mad, Cupcake.

His lips brushed against rock as he keened.

Gwyn knew he had to go back. Knew he had to return. He couldn’t tell how much time had passed, but it was enough to know that he couldn’t leave them alone. That it wasn’t good for his reputation to run away and not return.

He pushed himself up and absently wiped at eyes that were dry.

The explosion of light had burnt the insides of him to wreckage. Or at least, that was how it felt in the emptiness of his mind.

He looked down at the cracks and crevices in the skin of his arms and hands and swallowed saliva that tasted like acid.

It was harder to keep his light under control when he called it forward for teleportation, but he managed it, returning to the White Stag’s forest with a heavy, hollow heart.

Chapter End Notes
In our next chapter, 'Fraught:

‘He made me promise not to be mad,’ Gwyn said. His voice broke, his shoulders quaked. ‘But I am. I am. I don’t want to be. I know it was so hard for him. I know I’ve tried to do the same thing so many times. I know better than most what it’s like to… But he left. Why can’t I do the same thing? Augus, why? He gets to leave. I have to stay and keep fighting, and I don’t know why anyone in their right mind would want to. I can’t keep it together and now, when it matters most, everything is falling apart. Is this you? Did you do this to me?’
‘It’s fine,’ Fenwrel said to Augus as he paced, infuriated. ‘He has a tracking spell on him too, Augus. He’s not gone to the Seelie Court like you thought. Caves of Argoth, I think.’

Augus opened his mouth to say: ‘What is he doing there?’

Then he realised that Gwyn would be venting his light. Venting something.

He nodded wearily as Fenwrel clasped his shoulder and walked off like this was the kind of crisis she handled all the time.

It was Fenwrel who made sure that everyone was looked after, assigning tasks, making sure Ifir watched over Vane – not yet dead, but not volunteering any more information either. It was Fenwrel who assured the others that they were safe and that the situation was being handled, and it was Fenwrel who suggested that certain fae pair up as they left, to ensure that everyone returned to their respective homes safely. Gulvi followed her lead and direction, though she seemed to be exhilarated even as she looked concerned. Gulvi thrived in situations like this.

Augus stared at Vane, feeling like a fool. He’d interrogated Vane with his compulsions. He’d…

He walked over on stiff legs, glared a challenge at Ifir, who didn’t seem to be in any mood to return it.

Then he looked down at Vane’s bowed head. He drew a handful of the frizzy, curled hair into his fingers. It was coarse, little gems digging into Augus’ palm as he drew his head up and then back.

Bright blue eyes looked at him through heavy eyelids, the corners marked with pain.

‘How many others have this poison?’

‘Seven,’ Vane said, and then he bared his bloodstained teeth in fury. He struggled weakly against Ifir, and Augus blinked down at him, still tasting the blood of the King of the Forest in his mouth.

‘Where are they?’

Vane fought the compulsion. Fought until he was keening out between a tensed jaw and the blood vessels in his eyes began to break, until his nose started bleeding. When Augus repeated the
question, Vane began to seize. His head snapped so violently that his hair was ripped from Augus’ claws.

Convulsions from the stress of compulsions and poison both.

Vane collapsed soon after, blood frothing out of his nose, and Augus stared at his empty face and shook his head, walking away.

He went to Ash instead, who was the only one by Mikkel’s side. Mikkel was – amazingly – not yet dead. Aleutia wasn’t by his side, however. Once she knew that he couldn’t be saved, she’d given him a pain reliever, removed the head of the arrow for further research, and gone straight back to the Unseelie castle. There were still too many Unseelie fae from the battle who had critical injuries and needed attentive care. She wasn’t the kind of healer to hold a vigil over the dying.

It had fallen, of all people, to Ash.

As Augus walked over, his face twisted. Ash was crouched close to Mikkel, even though he didn’t know him. He was working his glamour hard. It rolled off him in waves. Calming, warming, the sort of energy that stopped more conflict from building on top of what had happened.

‘You need anything?’ Ash said to Mikkel, his voice thin but friendly. ‘Yeah?’

‘Can…someone…’ Mikkel’s voice was so weak now. Augus stood by Ash’s side and looked away, giving them both the illusion of privacy. ‘Can someone just…hold my hand?’

‘Sure,’ Ash said, his voice shaking. Augus heard skin against skin and felt his claws dig into his own palms and knew that if Gwyn was there, he’d be trying to get Augus to loosen his fists. But he didn’t think he could.

‘Scared,’ Mikkel said. ‘Didn’t think…I’d be…’

‘It’s gonna be fine,’ Ash said, keeping his voice light and easy, despite the tears threatening. ‘It’s normal. But it’s gonna be over soon. You’re doing really well. Yeah?’

Augus couldn’t stop thinking about Gwyn. He still wasn’t back. It didn’t take him this long to vent his light. He could have gone anywhere.

But surely if Gwyn had gone somewhere dangerous, Fenwrel would inform him?

Augus used to think – once upon a time – that he was good at noticing subterfuge and manipulation. But he’d been blind to it when the Raven Prince had nudged him into place and narrowed Augus’ choices. He’d not thought that Vane wanted anything more than increased wealth for his people, status perhaps, a place in the Court and to sleep with a King.

But Augus also knew from the reactions of the others, that none of them had seen this coming. Even as Vane had sworn that Gwyn was hated, Ifir had stood there and kept him imprisoned with his strength. Fenwrel worked on behalf of the palace and Gulvi worked in tandem with her, smoothing over bumps even as she ate the chaos of it. Mu and Zudanna had already dispatched to send teams after any remaining fie ellylorn at the palace to put them in the cells until they could be questioned. Fenwrel had sent the cwn annwn and the horses of the hunt away.

‘Oh god this fucking hurts,’ Mikkel said, his voice breaking.

‘I’ve got you,’ Ash said, and Augus turned and watched them both in a detached manner, trying to survey everything else at the same time. Fenwrel looked over at them, concern on her face, and then she turned straight back to Mariika and kept talking. If Augus made his senses sharpen, he’d
know what they were talking about, but he let it go. ‘I’ve got you, buddy. Okay? Just hold onto my hand. You’ve got a really good grip there.’

Mikkel’s breathing turned laboured and slow, and Augus could smell it in the air. It wouldn’t be long now, his organs putrefying, his body being turned against him.

‘Fuck,’ Ash choked. ‘Can you think about someone you love? Yeah? Just…just close your eyes and imagine them. Can you do that?’

‘…Yeah,’ Mikkel said. ‘I know just the lass. That’s…’

A long, horrible choked breath, and Ash followed it up with a strangled noise of his own. Augus stood closer to him, protectively, hating that he felt lulled because Ash’s glamour was trying to calm everyone, perhaps even himself.

Augus expected Ash to break down when Mikkel took his last breath, but he didn’t. He stayed by Mikkel’s body for a little longer, and then he stood, grabbing clumsily at Augus’ arm as he did so. Augus helped him up without thinking.

When Augus looked over, Ash was still looking at Mikkel, and Augus’ heart went out to him. He wasn’t made for this. Not at all.

‘Ash,’ Augus said. ‘You didn’t need to-’

‘Someone did,’ Ash said, his voice hard. ‘People should have a witness in their last moments. I’m not…oh, Augus, don’t look at me like that. I’m not as innocent as you think I am, brother. Humans die a lot more often than we do, as hard as it is to believe these days. I’ve watched a lot of people…people I didn’t kill – I’ve been a witness a lot of times. This isn’t my first…it’s not my first rodeo.’

But Ash leaned into him, and then dropped his forehead onto Augus’ shoulder and sighed, heartsore. Augus reached up and rubbed his back, looking around the clearing, very few remaining now. Gulvi and Fenwrel, Ifir standing over Vane’s body as though suspicious he’d come back to life. Even the Seelie daoine sidhe, Marika, had left.

Augus stepped towards the glow of light in the clearing before Gwyn’s form had even resolved and become corporeal. Instantly, he saw the furrows on Gwyn’s arms and hands – felt a moment of relief to think of Gwyn venting any emotion at all. He was covered in a fine layer of soot, and though his eyes were red, they were empty.

Gwyn looked at Augus, looked over at Mikkel and then turned to Vane and Ifir.

Augus wanted to take him somewhere. Wanted to cover him protectively. Wanted to let him know that he was perfectly aware how much this mirrored Mafydd’s death. Waited with a kind of horror to see how this might make him break apart. How this might be the end of him, somehow.

‘He’s dead,’ Ifir said, nudgeing Vane with his boot. ‘I think.’

‘Yes,’ Gwyn said, looking down at him.

Fenwrel walked over and Gwyn turned to her. He listened as she reported on the aftermath. What tasks she’d allocated to which fae, and which fae might need a follow up visit to be reassured. He tilted his head at her the entire time and at the end of her account, he looked around the clearing again.
‘You managed all of this?’ Gwyn said.

‘Not alone,’ Fenwrel said. ‘Ash and Augus made sure Mikkel’s last moments were not solitary. Ifir has kept Vane in order. Gulvi’s ability to manage a crowd has been invaluable.’

‘Yes,’ Gwyn said. ‘Perhaps you’ll think me foolish, given what’s just happened tonight, but I find that I am in need of allies more than ever. Augus trusts you, and while Augus can sometimes be too free with his trust, I know Gulvi certainly isn’t. Fenwrel, will you do me the honour of joining my Inner Court in the capacity of Court Mage and Magistrate, and Court Caretaker?’

‘Yes,’ Fenwrel said, without hesitation. Her gaze unwavering as she looked up at him, staff still clasped in her hand.

‘Then, as Unseelie King of the Kingdom, I - Gwyn ap Nudd – hereby remove your status of Court, and appoint you Inner Court, to serve this reign to the best of your ability.’

‘Gramercie,’ Fenwrel said, her eyes shining at him. ‘My grandmother would be proud.’

‘More than just your grandmother,’ Gwyn said, clasping her hands briefly.

He turned to Ifir again, and something seemed to pass between them. Augus knew now that Ifir respected Gwyn. Didn’t trust him entirely, would likely try and remove him from the throne if he thought that Gwyn was doing a poor job. But right now, as it stood, Ifir certainly knew his alliance wasn’t with Vane.

‘It’s a nasty business, assassination,’ Ifir said. ‘Who was he? That one over there? More than a Reader, surely.’

Gwyn looked around, making sure no one else but the Inner Court and Ifir were present. Then he sighed.

‘He’s been an informant for months,’ Gwyn said. ‘He’s how we knew that the Courtlands were going to be taken.’

‘He took an arrow for you,’ Ifir said. ‘Stepped right into it. That’s some informant. I’m going to go and dump Vane’s body off at the palace in case he’s got any more tricks up his sleeve, and then check on my wife and children, because this seems like a night where I should. Then I’ll see you back in the Court. Yes?’

Gwyn nodded, already stepping away when Ifir disappeared – a hand in Vane’s shirt – into smoke and sparks that fell to the ground, still glowing for several seconds after they’d departed.

Gwyn made his way over to Mikkel’s body, when there was a glimmer of white that caught Augus’ eyes, and they all turned towards the King of the Forest walking towards them. None of them moved, and they all watched as the King of the Forest paused, his great head swinging towards Mikkel’s body. His throat was no longer covered with blood from Augus’ heavy, brutal bite. He was whole and alive, shimmering with power.

The King of the Forest walked over to Mikkel and nosed him with a wet, black nose.

He shuddered, then turned to look at Gwyn for a long moment, before pacing over to him with slow, measured steps.

‘There has been violence between Seelie and Unseelie on my grounds, a death has been made, and it is unjust.’
'I beg forgiveness,' Gwyn said, bowing his head and going down to one knee. ‘Your sacred ritual has been destroyed.’

‘For the first time since its inauguration,’ the King of the Forest said, his voice steady and calm, ‘the sacred bond to be maintained between Seelie and Unseelie in my forest has been broken. There will be no more Wild Hunts in my forest.’

Augus felt his lungs tighten on a hard, stressed exhale. Gwyn, amazingly, kept his head bowed, though he went still. The Wild Hunt had been around for as long as Augus knew, the stories of it written down in literature, even making their way over to the human world. It was fundamental to what it meant to be fae.

‘Lord,’ Gwyn said, ‘if I can make any reparation.’

‘You cannot,’ the King of the Forest said, turning his head and looking at each of them in turn. ‘You do not understand. I cannot explain what cannot be spoken. The ritual is broken. The Wild Hunt is no more.’

With that, the King of the Forest bowed his head towards Gwyn until his antlers touched the ground. Then he straightened and his nostrils flared, he eyed Gwyn for several seconds longer, then turned and walked sedately towards the heart of his land, leaving them.

As he left, the wildness of the evening, the eldritch quality that made their blood sing, it diminished until they could have been standing in any forest, upon any night.

The magic had left the clearing.

The fie ellyllon would not be forgiven for this. Augus knew that much. He wondered if Vane had even cared, in the end.

Gwyn stood up and it was Gulvi whose wings flared. She stepped away from Fenwrel, who tried to reach after her.

‘La! Gwyn! You should have told him you didn’t cause this!’

Gwyn turned to her and shook his head. ‘A sacred vow has been broken, Gulvi. It matters not who caused it.’

‘But it’s the Wild Hunt.’

‘Gulvi,’ Fenwrel said, sounding calm despite the swirl of colour that was pooling towards her in strands across the forest floor; the increased power of Inner Court status. ‘Gulvi, sometimes things come to an end.’

‘Not the fucking Wild Hunt!’ Gulvi snarled, turning on her, wings spreading and then snapping shut all at once.

‘Return to the palace,’ Gwyn said to them both. ‘I’ll meet you there.’

Gulvi went silent, though it looked like she did so reluctantly, staring at Gwyn like she wanted to keep arguing with him. Perhaps she wanted to perpetuate chaos. But Augus thought it more likely that she was upset, and unlike the rest of them, was not yet burnt out on her grief.

Fenwrel and Gulvi teleported away together, and Augus had caught Fenwrel’s arm sliding underneath a wing, around Gulvi’s waist, before they faded away.
Gwyn didn’t look at either Augus or Ash as he made his way to Mikkel’s prone form. He knelt down by Mikkel’s side and looked at him for a very long time, and Ash stepped closer to Augus, giving Gwyn space, Ash radiating as much worry as Augus felt.

Augus watched as Gwyn touch the red leather cording. He reached around the back for the knot. He fiddled with it for several seconds, but it was obvious that the leather had been knotted fast for years, had blended with its fellow fibres until it could no longer be picked apart. Augus almost said something, and then Gwyn simply took a breath and snapped it, drawing the cording free.

‘I’m sorry, Mikkel,’ Gwyn said. Augus couldn’t be sure if Gwyn was apologising for Mikkel’s death, or for snapping the cord. Knowing how Gwyn tended to handle these things…

*He’s very likely in shock.*

‘Gwyn,’ Augus said quietly, ‘we should go. It’s not safe here. Not now.’

‘I know,’ Gwyn said. ‘Do we take him…do we take him with us?’

‘No,’ Augus said.

Gwyn’s hands moved over Mikkel’s eyelids and lowered them, staying there for a few more seconds, everything about him far too deliberately composed. Augus could see the faint pauses in his breathing.

‘He never wanted to be in the Unseelie Court anyway,’ Gwyn said finally. ‘Being common fae, this is as good a place as any. He’s touching the soil, at least.’

‘Gwyn,’ Augus said, ‘we should return. We can’t teleport easily without your help, and none of us are safe here.’

Gwyn looked up and then pushed himself into a standing position. He walked over to them, the dark red cord wrapped tight around his fist. He looped that arm underneath Augus’, and reached out with his free hand and took Ash’s wrist.

The light, when it came, felt harsher than usual. But Augus supposed that it wasn’t surprising.

*Gwyn dropped Ash off just outside his bedroom. They exchanged no words, but Augus and Ash exchanged a look that meant they’d be talking about this later. And then Gwyn teleported again, taking them both to their bedroom. Augus waited for him to step away, to disengage, but Gwyn’s arms went lax and he stood still, staring into the room. His breath was pausing more often now. It wasn’t rough, not yet, but it was turning unsteady.*

‘Gwyn,’ Augus said, stepping in front of him, trying to meet his eyes.

He already knew that Gwyn was seeing nothing in front of him.

‘Gwyn, I know…with Mafydd, and the way things went tonight, I know-’

‘This isn’t about Mafydd,’ Gwyn said, looking down at the cord in his hand.

His breath caught and he walked over to the bed and sat down, his mouth open, eyes dazed. A few minutes passed like that, Augus listened to Gwyn’s breathing break down further. Slowly becoming audible until Gwyn noticed and caught it, and then whatever emotions were within him
resisting that self-imposed control, grief and anger trying to speak past whatever Gwyn was trying to exert upon himself.

‘It’s not about Mafydd,’ Gwyn said again. ‘You always said…she had another plan. Maybe if I’d just listened to you—’

‘No,’ Augus said. ‘No. Don’t do that.’

‘She had receipts,’ Gwyn said, staring off. ‘She had receipts for poisons, and I could have—Maybe if I’d…’

‘Don’t make me watch you blame yourself for something that Vane did,’ Augus said. ‘Because after the night we’ve just had, I’m not sure I can watch you do that to yourself.’

‘We interrogated him,’ Gwyn said, his voice empty. ‘Didn’t we? You did, didn’t you?’

‘Yes,’ Augus said. ‘More than once. Perhaps he was always inoculating himself against the compulsions.’

Augus closed his eyes and frowned, feeling a pang in his chest like something old and rusty was shifting inside of him.

‘Your mother,’ Augus said, ‘when she died. When she knew she was dying, she smiled at me. She…looked at me like I’d given her something she’d always wanted. Like she was the one who had won our interchange, not I. So, unwittingly, I helped catalyse that second plan. Do you wish me to blame myself?’

‘No,’ Gwyn said. He still wouldn’t look at Augus or, it seemed, anything in the room.

‘Then don’t do it to yourself. Try not to.’

‘I really…’ Gwyn looked down at the cord and unwound it, staring at it. ‘Maybe I shouldn’t have taken it. I really liked him, Augus.’

Gwyn’s voice choked up. The rusty thing in Augus’ chest turned again, seeking, and Augus knew it was the pain of thinking that there had just been too much. Too much loss. Too much pain. He was so tired of it. He wouldn’t be at all surprised if Gwyn had a meltdown. The timing would be terrible, but it wouldn’t be surprising.

‘I really…just…liked him,’ Gwyn said, his chest heaving, though no sobs emerged. ‘This isn’t about Mafydd, it’s about Mikkel.’

Gwyn looked up, and Augus felt the rusty thing fracture into splinters, and each of them hurt. He hated seeing that expression on Gwyn’s face. Wanted nothing more than to smooth it away. But this could not be smoothed away.

‘He never…’ Gwyn continued. ‘He never…he has never been treated fairly for what he is. He once told me that there was only one way out for him, but that he wasn’t ready to take it at the time. I suppose tonight, when he realised…when he realised what Vane had planned, he felt himself ready. He could have told me at any point. Because he knew, Augus. He knew. Gods, he knew the entire night and he didn’t tell me.’

Gwyn’s voice cracked further and his hand fist ed hard around the cord, his knuckles went white.

‘Albion was making him go against his own nature. Betraying his kind. Betraying his Kingdom
and his people. He was Seelie, Augus, and even if he thought me half-Seelie, the lying and being an informant and coming to share secrets with me the way that he did…it all hurt him. So badly. But I wish he could have just trusted me enough to know that I would have tried. And the thing that hurts the most is that he knew— he knew— he would have been able to Read it from me. Because I would have done anything, Augus. I begged him to ask for asylum. I’ve asked him more than once. And tonight he told me that he’d do it, that he’d ask for asylum, but the entire time, he… he knew.’

Augus walked closer, until he was standing close enough that Gwyn could lean into him, until his tears could press into Augus’ water-wicking shirt and run down them, instead of seeping through. Gwyn didn’t cry loudly, but he shook through it, reaching up and clutching at Augus’ shirt. Augus stroked his hair and thought about murmuring comforting words even as he knew there wasn’t any.

‘I would have done so much more for him and he wouldn’t even let me,’ Gwyn said, his voice muffled. Augus closed his eyes and nodded.

But even though he hurt, even though he ached for better times, he was also shocked to find himself feeling relief and gratitude.

This wasn’t a Gwyn having a meltdown, this was a fae expressing their hurt in ways that seemed… healthy. It was grief and it looked like grief. Whatever was going on in Gwyn’s head, he was letting Augus stand there next to him, he was leaning against someone.

Augus sighed and opened his eyes, looked down at the windswept hair that still felt faintly gritty from soot. He petted it with both hands, trying not to think of much at all. Alongside all the distress, he had the satisfaction of a successful hunt alongside the shock that there would never be another Wild Hunt.

It was some time later when Gwyn looked up at him, eyelashes wet and clumped, eyebrows pulled together. Augus bent down, tilted Gwyn’s face up by the chin and kissed him gently, tasting salt and soot and the remnants of Gwyn’s light.

‘I know what it’s like, Augus,’ Gwyn said as Augus withdrew. ‘I know what it’s like to live the kind of life where even at a young age, you begin to think there’s only one option remaining. Begin to be sure of it.’

‘I know,’ Augus said.

‘He told me that I made him hold on longer. To living. He was mad at me.’

Augus sat down next to Gwyn and leaned into him. Gwyn turned fully, so that his chest was leaning into Augus’ arm, his chin resting on Augus’ shoulder.

‘He said that sometimes there were only bad choices. I don’t think he expected to die tonight. Not until he arrived.’

‘Remind me to talk to you about why I hate the Court,’ Augus said quietly. Gwyn’s head shifted until he was resting his cheek on Augus’ shoulder, his breathing slowing. Their bedroom was well-appointed, had been a place of comfort in the past, and now felt meaningless.

‘I don’t like it here,’ Gwyn said, like he was revealing a secret.

‘We could run,’ Augus said.

‘Don’t tempt me,’ Gwyn muttered.
‘Do you want to rest?’

‘Yes,’ Gwyn said, his voice hitching. ‘But…I need to call a council. This is not- This needs to be dealt with.’

Augus sighed. But he held his tongue. He was tempted to complain, but he knew in that moment that if he pressed, he’d be able to talk Gwyn out of doing anything that was necessary. Instead, he leaned into Gwyn and placed a bracing hand at his lower back, wishing somehow that he could do more.

*

A council was called, every member of the Inner Court there. It was no different seeing Fenwrel there as a fellow member of the Inner Court as seeing her when she’d been Court status, and Augus realised her status change was a long time coming. Perhaps Gwyn always had an idea that he was going to promote her, perhaps he was just waiting to see the many ways she could prove herself to the Court.

Gwyn stood before them, both hands resting on the back of the chair he only sometimes occupied.

‘Mikkel…’ Gwyn’s voice broke and he cleared his throat, taking a few breaths.

Fenwrel looked over to Augus and they both shared troubled looks, but no one interrupted Gwyn, and Augus felt an odd wave of consolation knowing that he wasn’t the only one here who cared about Gwyn’s grief.

‘Mikkel…was my informant,’ Gwyn said. ‘He strongly disapproved of Albion’s actions and has done so for some time. The Courtlands would not have been emptied in time were it not for his warning. Tonight at the Wild Hunt he gave his life to protect mine. He wasn’t a target of an assassin, he made a choice during a difficult time.’

Though Gwyn’s voice was uneven, he forged ahead, looking up at the wall before meeting their eyes again.

‘He knew that Vane was going to do what he did, and instead of telling me and giving a chance to stop him – he felt so…trapped in the Seelie Court, that he chose to end his life and save mine in the same instant.’

Ash made a sound of shock. Augus reached under the table and clasped his brother’s hand. Ash held on tightly, squeezing a little too hard.

‘I’m going to make this announcement publically,’ Gwyn said. ‘To illustrate how that Court may be impacting the Seelie fae, and because Mikkel cared about the truth. Does anyone have any objection to this course of action?’

No one objected, though Augus knew Albion would have his own spin on events. A chaotic Unseelie Court deliberately assassinating a member of the Seelie Court, even willing to sacrifice the Wild Hunt in the process. It wouldn’t work. Fae knew that Gwyn had important Seelie informants, that he was able to clear the Courtlands in time. They were all simply waiting to find out who they were.

‘There is something else going on here,’ Gwyn said, one of his hands tightening on the back of the chair. ‘I wish you to listen to a theory and tell me what you think. Advise me, if you will.’

Gwyn let go of the chair and walked several steps backwards, leaning into the wall. His eyes were
still reddened, Augus wanted nothing more than to take him somewhere else.

Gwyn opened his mouth to speak and no words came out. He moved away from the wall and clasped at the chair again and looked so lost that Augus nearly stood and told everyone else to clear out. But he knew how Gwyn would respond to that and forced himself to stay seated.

‘Darling,’ Gulvi said, reaching her hand out towards him. ‘Whatever it is, can it not wait?’

‘No,’ Gwyn said, looking like he wished it could. He stared at her, and then shook his head again. ‘It can’t. I need to…go out there and tell them about Mikkel before Albion’s own version of events goes into effect. And I need to…get this out of the way.’

Gulvi nodded and withdrew her hand, but left it on the table, as though it was a reminder to Gwyn that he could reach out of he needed to. Augus looked away from her when she gave him an oddly open, empathetic look.

‘I think…’ Gwyn said roughly, ‘that someone – or a group of someones – is trying to remove not only faith in the Unseelie Court, but the Seelie Court as well. Overwhelming our overtaxed Court while using Albion’s instability and zealotry to drive away the Seelie.’

Gwyn pulled out the chair and sat down.

‘The Raven Prince gave away his Kingship and put it into a position where his Court would be destroyed. He did that knowingly. The Oak King left. It’s been established by more than one Mage that their leaving wasn’t a coincidence. They knew something was coming that they didn’t want to fight. And now…Davix is in the Seelie Court, and we are in this situation where…everything is destabilising and I feel it is to a purpose. Davix once said that Crielle had prepared the Seelie Court ‘nicely for him.’ I can’t help but think…’

Gwyn stared at the table and then took a breath.

‘The Nightingale was given information by Mages to access the underworlds, and then he wanted to use the subsequent power he gained from that to make a third Court. What if…the Nightingale wasn’t the only one with that idea? What if someone – let’s say…a Mage – is playing a long game to drive the fae to a point where they begin to look for new leadership?’

‘Gwyn,’ Fenwrel said, ‘the Thirteen don’t want to rule.’

‘Davix is King-in-Waiting,’ Gwyn said. ‘If I’d killed Albion on that battlefield, he’d be King and a member of the Thirteen.’

‘But Davix would face consequences for his actions if he took it that far!’

‘He’s already an oathbreaker, and there have been no consequences,’ Gwyn said tiredly. ‘It’s been said before; he’s too powerful. Not only that, but it’s a game that’s clearly been in effect for some time. I don’t have the…I can’t decipher it all tonight.’

Gwyn’s fingers dug into the table. Augus wanted to reach out to him, and to stifle the urge, he squeezed Ash’s hand, who automatically offered the same reassuring pressure in return.

‘I’ll need to make a public announcement about Mikkel,’ Gwyn said, and then he laughed under his breath. ‘Which won’t be so hard, given we’ve gone from this palace feeling like a ghost town, to being at close to maximum occupancy in the throne room and guest quarters.’

‘Gwyn,’ Gulvi said, ‘let Fenwrel make the announcement. She is level-headed and stable, and
comes across as a more impartial member of our Court. She can let everyone know she is now a member of your Inner Court at the same time. It is an easy thing, to tell them that you are chasing up multiple courses of action. They can see it is so. We are keeping the entrances clear. We are maintaining food flow into the palace. It is evident that we are coping, and that you have helped facilitate this. Let that work in your favour tonight.’

Augus tried to remember the last time he’d seen Gwyn struggle around others to keep himself presented as anything other than a cold, competent, determined King. He thought back to the meetings he’d been in, the things they’d experienced, and he knew he hadn’t seen anything like this before.

And Gwyn wasn’t a mess. He was only bowing his head over the table and staring at his own hands. Eventually, he looked up at Gulvi and nodded.

‘If that’s not too much an imposition, Fenwrel,’ Gwyn said, looking at her.

Fenwrel shook her head. ‘It’s no problem at all. Gulvi can supervise.’

Gulvi nodded, then scratched her claws across the table. ‘La! I cannot believe that is to be the last Wild Hunt. Surely it isn’t so? Gwyn, can you not talk to the King of the Forest and-’

Gwyn opened his mouth to respond, looking distressed, but it was Fenwrel who placed a hand on Gulvi’s arm and drew her attention, shaking her head.

‘There are laws,’ Fenwrel said. ‘Sometimes they aren’t fair. Tonight wasn’t fair.’

‘We are Unseelie!’ Gulvi shouted. She shoved her chair back and her wings knocked it over with a clatter. ‘We take the things that aren’t fair and we turn them to our advantage! We make them work for us. We feed upon death and despair and the humans who try to capture us and the pain of others. Don’t talk to me about fairness like you’re some Seelie mouse shifter. Va chier! I get enough of that high-mindedness from him.’

She pointed at Gwyn without looking at him, staring daggers at Fenwrel.

Fenwrel only folded her arms and gazed back at Gulvi calmly, though her lips thinned.

‘Hey,’ Ash said quietly. ‘After the speech with Fenwrel, Gulvi, you wanna go to the human world for a bit? Just…a little while. Blow off some steam, maybe, yeah?’

‘Oui,’ Gulvi said, turning to stare at him. ‘Please.’

Augus watched Gwyn closely. He was back to looking at his fingers again, his gaze distant, as though he wasn’t really in the room. And given the things he’d witnessed, the memories he had to draw from, Augus wasn’t surprised.

‘I can’t do this,’ Gwyn said.

The soft words cut through the room, everyone turning to look at him.

‘No one’s expecting you to,’ Augus said, letting go of Ash’s hand.

The expression that Gwyn gave him was worse than Augus expected. He realised that Gwyn hadn’t meant ‘I can’t handle this talk’ and instead meant – ‘I can’t handle this role.’

He almost said ‘sweetness’ right there and then, in front of everyone, but he knew it would level
Gwyn with shame to do that in front of others. There were some things that were meant to stay private. Instead he pushed out his chair and stood up, and then carefully pushed the chair back in, every step measured.

Then he moved his head towards the door, gesturing.

‘I need to talk to you about something,’ Augus said. ‘And everyone else knows what they’re doing.’

Gwyn looked over at Gulvi, who nodded, her own face strained. Gwyn stood up, didn’t push his chair in, followed Augus towards the door and out of it. He said nothing as Augus closed the door.

Augus’ mind raced as Gwyn followed two steps behind him. He listened to the shuffling steps, came up with ideas and discarded each of them. Behind Gwyn’s loss was his own. He knew the Wild Hunt was over in a way that Gulvi couldn’t yet accept. Knew it. And it frustrated him that Gwyn had so few friends, only to lose two in one evening. One to suicide, the second to betrayal.

‘Let me leave,’ Gwyn said. Augus turned to face him, his own breath coming faster. ‘One of the agreements when I became King, is that you would let me leave.’

‘Where would you go?’ Augus said.

‘Just let me leave,’ Gwyn said, voice breaking, not even looking at Augus, but staring off where the wall met the floor. Staring into shadows that still made Augus’ skin crawl.

‘All right,’ Augus said, stepping into Gwyn’s space, taking his hands in his own. ‘Let’s leave. Right now. Pick somewhere.’

‘You know what I’m trying to say,’ Gwyn said, desperately.

‘Then say it somewhere other than here,’ Augus said. ‘Pick somewhere.’

Light wrapped around them both, and then they were standing outside, under the cover of stars, a frigid wind howling through silver moonlit birches and when Gwyn went down to his knees, Augus followed him, bracing his shoulders, watching him closely. As though echoing across a cavern, Augus felt grief reverberate in his own body, sadness reflected by sadness.

‘It’s not fair,’ Gwyn said, his voice half chased away by the wind.

‘It’s not,’ Augus said.

‘I can’t keep doing this,’ Gwyn said. ‘Losing everyone. I can’t. I can’t lose you as well. Augus, I keep thinking-’

Augus leaned in and pressed his lips against Gwyn’s and felt them shaking, felt the storm of emotions that Gwyn was somehow managing to keep tamped down. Could even taste the sparks of Gwyn’s light. When he withdrew, Gwyn leaned his whole weight into the hands that Augus had at his shoulders.

‘You’re not going to lose me,’ Augus said firmly. ‘I’m not suicidal. And I’m not going to betray you. Gulvi and Fenwrel are loyal. Ash – though you may not see it – will be steadfast. You’re not alone, I promise you.’

‘He made me promise not to be mad,’ Gwyn said. His voice broke, his shoulders quaked. ‘But I am. I am. I don’t want to be. I know it was so hard for him. I know I’ve tried to do the same thing
so many times. I know better than most what it’s like to… But he left. Why can’t I do the same thing? Augus, why? He gets to leave. I have to stay and keep fighting, and I don’t know why anyone in their right mind would want to. I can’t keep it together and now, when it matters most, everything is falling apart. Is this you? Did you do this to me?’

‘Yes,’ Augus said, ‘in a way. And no, a lot of it was you. You were coming apart when you took me prisoner, Gwyn. It was already…it had caught up with you.’

‘He said…I wasn’t as lost as I thought I was,’ Gwyn said, tipping forwards, arms sliding underneath Augus’ arms, holding tightly against his back in a gesture that made Augus blink at the wildly moving branches, the leaves whipping in the brisk gusts.

‘You’re not,’ Augus said, wishing that he’d spent more time with Mikkel.

‘I don’t want this to be okay,’ Gwyn said. ‘I don’t want this to be something I learn to live with. I don’t want to be okay with it.’

‘Then don’t,’ Augus said.

Gwyn pushed Augus down to the ground, his arms tightening, his head pushing into Augus’ black shirt. The one that still held the scents of the chase and the last Wild Hunt he’d ever know. Augus’ arms wrapped around Gwyn’s body in kind and he looked up at the stars, at bats flying overhead and snapping up insects stirred in the gale.

Gwyn broke apart in his arms and Augus didn’t even know what country they were in, or where the forest was located. But what he did know was that Mikkel was right. Gwyn wasn’t as lost as he thought he was. He’d initiated the contact. He’d admitted in front of a trusted few that he needed help, even if he didn’t explicitly say the words. He’d accepted help and even as he keened into Augus’ shoulder, he’d done all the things a person was supposed to do when they’d just had to deal with something devastatingly unfair.

So it wasn’t only sadness that reverberated through Augus as he whispered soothing phrases to Gwyn, angling his body towards him and cradling him between bent legs, holding him as tightly as he could. It wasn’t only fear or anguish. There was something of hope amongst the loss and the darkness. It glimmered and flickered like a candle, but it was there. Augus held onto it, and sent a wish out to the universe that it would be enough.

Chapter End Notes

In our next chapter, ‘Refuge:’

‘I’m jealous of you,’ Gwyn said. Each word felt torn from his chest. ‘Even more than…Augus. Or anyone. That you could…make everyone like you. Without even seeming to try. And I could- I could try, and everyone saw through it to what I was beneath that.’
Ash’s breath caught, and then he released a thin exhale.

‘Jealous of me?’
‘I looked up to you,’ Gwyn said. ‘In truth, I thought – selfishly – perhaps if I could learn how to be your friend, I could…maybe share in that- whatever it was you gave to others. Maybe other fae might realise I’m not so bad.’

‘Oh Jesus,’ Ash said, under his breath, as though something had clicked into place for him.
Days passed in the eternal night of the Unseelie Court. Gwyn spent those days alternatively consulting with Generals, approving plans put forth by Mu and Gulvi, raising the status of Unseelie underfae, sitting in the kitchens while the trows brought him foods that had often been stolen from Seelie military drops that very day. He also surprised himself by the amount of time he seemed to spend wandering through the inner levels of the palace in a daze.

Augus wanted to stay in the week following Mikkel’s death, but he’d put off hunting for far too long and Gwyn sent him out into the human world. It was obvious that Augus was concerned, but though Gwyn felt heavy and tired, he was functional. Which was as much a surprise to him as it was to anyone else.

Everyone had their own take on why a Seelie fae might step into the path of an arrow intended for the King. What Gwyn hadn’t expected was for so many Unseelie fae to believe the story that Fenwrel had spoken. What he couldn’t anticipate was that Fenwrel would stand before that crowd of fae – Seelie refugees and Unseelie both within the palace – and tell them about the mothersbane poison.

It was inevitable that they’d research it and realise in a manner they hadn’t before, just how much Crielle hated her son. It hadn’t occurred to Gwyn to order Fenwrel not to mention that part. He’d lived under veils of secrecy for so long, he’d assumed that everyone would want to hide that reality.

Hard to hide from now.

He sat against a wooden wall in the empty kennels. The ground still smelled of the hounds that had occupied the space, and it reminded Gwyn of too many memories that he didn’t want to sort through. His fingers felt the coarseness of dog hair, the bumps at the top of the spine underneath skin. His palms itched as they remembered coasting over lean muscle. Gwyn’s legs were bent, his head back against the rough wood.

Thoughts of Mikkel and Vane plagued him. He couldn’t stop replaying the events of the last Wild Hunt. The fie ellyllon were unwelcome in the Court, though they attempted to assure him that Vane had been a lone agent, it frustrated him that their first concern was for themselves. Vane had seven more out there who had the poison, it could be even more now if they shared the mothersbane amongst themselves. Aleutia was tasked with going through Crielle’s receipts for herbs to try and get a sense of how much of the poison she’d made in the first place.
But, he supposed it made sense that the fey elyllon would be concerned for themselves. They were Unseelie, and as Vane said, they’d suffered. There were losses everywhere. The one thing that Gwyn couldn’t stop being aware of, was for every pang of grief inside himself, there were fae out there who had lost far more. Many of those directly because of his actions.

Ifir said assassination was a bad business, but war wasn’t better.

Gwyn stiffened when he heard voices outside the kennels. The kennel attendant and…Ash?

‘Aye, that’s right, there’s no dogs here for ye,’ the kennel attendant said. The kennel attendant was a quiet fairy who in his human-form, stood tall with long antennae fringing out and framing his face.

‘What do you mean they’re all just gone?’ Ash said, sounding dismayed. ‘Don’t they need looking after?’

‘The cwn annwn don’t need anyone to look after them,’ the kennel attendant said gruffly. Gwyn tilted his head, even though he could hear the conversation perfectly fine. They were beyond the walls of the kennels and Gwyn had sharp hearing. He hoped Ash wouldn’t decide to investigate matters for himself. It was the last thing he needed.

‘Yeah, but, they were living here. I mean, I know it wasn’t permanent like you said – a week before and a week after the Hunt, right?’

‘The White Stag has called ‘em back,’ the kennel attendant said. ‘We won’t see ‘em no more. Don’t see many people having time for new hounds neither. I hoped when I got this gig that I’d get to see Gwyn raising his own hounds, rumour is he’s good with ‘em, and it’d be an honour to keep ‘em sound and safe for him. But there’s no budget for hounds, and no time.’

Gwyn closed his eyes, sighed. He’d intended to keep his own hounds and horses when he became King again. All the very best intentions to make sure that he had time to hunt, like Augus had told him to, once upon a time. As though they could carve a better future by willing it with words. But the actions implied behind the sentences took time and effort and energy, and Gwyn didn’t have much of any of those to spare.

The conversation drifted off, Ash walking somewhere with the kennel attendant, both of them chatting about other things.

So Gwyn was surprised when ten minutes later, he heard footsteps push open the low door into the hound recreational area where Gwyn was seated. His eyes opened and Ash stood there, looking unhappy.

Gwyn thought maybe he should say something. Send Ash away. Instead, he only looked up and waited to see what Ash would do.

‘Achfor is a good guy,’ Ash said, closing the low door and entering the space, his sneakers soft on the damp sand. ‘How’d you know to hire him?’

‘In the world of breeding hounds, the Unseelie and Seelie tend to put their differences aside to produce the best dogs,’ Gwyn said. ‘I’ve known him for a long time.’

‘Even though he’s Unseelie?’

‘Even then,’ Gwyn said, trying not to cringe when Ash walked over and sat next to him. He left a good two feet of space between them, but still, it felt like he might be too close. Like Augus, he
seemed to carry a strong, incisive energy with him even when his glamour was muted.

‘Is that the same with the stable master?’

‘It is,’ Gwyn said.

Gwyn thought of about ten different sentences he could use to excuse himself and didn’t end up using a single one. He felt awkward, his melancholy peace disturbed.

‘I’m sorry about your friend, hey,’ Ash said quietly, looking ahead.

‘Thank you,’ Gwyn said, looking up at the ceiling, at the nests of tiny martins that were Unseelie in persuasion and fed exclusively upon carrion. They’d been busy, flitting beyond the bounds of the Unseelie Court. There were new mud nests still drying, bits of bone sticking out in white and brown shards.

‘I wanted to say a few things,’ Ash said. ‘Is that…cool?’

‘It is,’ Gwyn said.

Other people would know what to say to keep the conversation going, but Ash wasn’t a soldier or a general or a Courtier, and he was Augus’ brother.

Gwyn never knew what to say around him.

‘Right,’ Ash said, like Gwyn had said something far friendlier. There was even a smile in his voice. ‘I wanted to say that I’m….really sorry for everything I’ve done. To you. I look back on how I treated you, and it’s probably going to go down as a period of my life that I’m not gonna enjoy looking back on, but will have to, so I don’t let myself be like that to anyone. Ever.’

‘You had your reasons,’ Gwyn heard himself say.

Ash went silent for a long time, and then took a deep breath.

‘No,’ Ash said. ‘I know what I had, but…it doesn’t matter if I had the best reasons, there’s never any excuse for treating someone the way I treated you. Even if you were doing horrible things to him non-stop. That’s the thing, Gwyn. It reflects badly on me. On the kind of person I am. I’m sorry that I dumped so much ugliness on you and told myself it was justified because I thought you had an ugliness in you that was way worse. And all my life, all my life, I’ve never believed in that kind of behaviour. Answering hate with hate, it goes against everything I try to be. And Gwyn, all I proved to myself is that I think I became uglier inside than…just about everyone around me.’

Ash shifted, one of his bent legs stretching out. He rested both his arms on his other knee and cleared his throat.

‘This all started a long time ago,’ Ash said. ‘And a lot of it isn’t even about you. A lot of it was me blaming you for things that had nothing to do with you. You can’t know how it was, that year that Augus just…left me. And you know, selfishly, I thought he’d left me at first. And then I got worried. And then I started asking around. A year, Gwyn. He was gone a year. And I couldn’t find him. I tried…everything. And I was mad at him too, you know? Because everyone was telling me he was just on a jaunt and I kept telling myself that it wasn’t like Augus and he wouldn’t do that but what if he’d just…abandoned me? But I was a grown-ass fae. I could look after myself.’

Gwyn looked over and Ash was staring ahead, his mouth open as he took several breaths. Ash slid his gaze sideways and offered something of a cynical smile when he saw Gwyn finally looking at
‘I’ve talked to my therapist about all this, don’t worry. I’m bad at telling these kinds of stories. But I’m…reaching a point, I promise.’

Gwyn nodded, but what he really wanted to say was: *Take your time.*

‘Then he came back,’ Ash said, looking ahead again. ‘It was horrible. And it was like…validating and horrible. It would have been better if he’d just abandoned me. He was *not* himself. And Gwyn, he was never himself again after that. Like, I *tried*, man. I tried. But he started hurting people, hurting fae, hurting…everyone, even me. He was like – it was like living with a *shell* that held something else inside of it. And every now and then I’d see a glimpse of him and it would keep me by his side because I’d see how fucking hurt and ruined he was. But he wasn’t…Augus. He was some *thing* the Nightingale made. He spoke all the right words, but it wasn’t him.

‘And that was why I turned against him. In the end. Because nothing else had worked and I was desperate and Gulvi said it was the only way and he’d killed her fucking family.’

Ash’s voice broke. He took several shaky breaths and when he spoke again, his voice was even but strained.

‘You told me you’d give him back to me, and you didn’t. Looking back, I know it makes sense. But those months when he was in the cell, I was a mess. I was drunk all the time, drugged up, crying. I think I cried for like…half a year. I changed. I feel things really intensely? It’s…don’t tell Augus, but sometimes it can be a bit of a problem. Not often. Actually you know, most of my life it’s been fine. But sometimes it’s just too much, and when Augus was captured and in a cell and I didn’t even know if he was really *alive*, I just…it was like all that time of Augus and the Nightingale and trying so hard for him, it shattered something in me. And I blamed you. I just…needed a target for *all* of it, and you seemed like someone who could never be touched by how badly and intensely I felt about all of it, so I picked you.

‘And it got worse when I got *jealous.*’ Ash broke off and started laughing, a tight, frustrated noise. ‘Because you know, out of everything that happened to us, you weren’t supposed to bring *my brother* back to me, after that. You…brought him back to me. The Augus I wanted back all along. The first time I saw him again, after that horrible- *horrible* fucking Display, and he was…himself? And then it was like something in my brain broke. It couldn’t be you. Because you were like…at the time, I thought you were worse than the Nightingale, because at least people could eventually tell the Nightingale was a *monster*. And I was so jealous of you. I’d spent all those years dying to get my brother back, and then you bring him back and it turns out you and he are *something* to each other and it was like…’

Ash’s voice was breaking again, and he choked off to a halt and then sniffed loudly and wiped at his eyes. Gwyn looked ahead out of respect, but Ash didn’t seem to care that he was having the emotional reaction he was.

‘I really hated you,’ Ash said. ‘By that point I couldn’t stop. It was like a freight train. I just wanted to prove to Augus that you could be out of the picture, or at least exposed for what you were, and he would still be *fine.*’

Gwyn swallowed, because it came a little too close to how he sometimes thought about his connection with Augus.

‘But it’s *something* about you,’ Ash said. ‘It’s *something* about you that helps keep him whole. And it’s not- It’s amazing. And now I think it’s because you both have a kinship that I don’t have
with him. The things you’ve both been through. The damage you’ve both lived. Augus needs
someone who knows what it’s like to be ruined. He needs someone who strives for something
more and becomes more than what they’ve been through. You keep saying that he did it on his
own, but that’s bullshit, Gwyn. I know he did the hard work. But if his journey back to wholeness
was like him climbing a ladder, then you put the rungs in so he knew where to go.’

‘It’s not that simple,’ Gwyn heard himself say, even as his lungs felt empty.

Ash turned towards him, faced him properly. ‘It’s true. I didn’t say it was simple, but it’s true.
Maybe he did the same for you. I bet he did, because it seems like he’d know how to do that. But
you did it for him. You gave him the opportunity to leave the Court and you nearly died for it.
You’ve stood up for him. Not just in private, but in front of others. I see the way you look at him,
okay? And then on top of that, even with how I was treating you, even when I was abusing you, I
know you still insisted that he needed to spend time with me. Didn’t you? You never held him
back from seeing me.’

Now all the sentences piling up in Gwyn’s mind were along the lines of how much he didn’t want
to be having this conversation, because it was making a part of him hurt, and he honestly hadn’t
come to the kennels to hurt more.

‘I’m really, really happy he has you,’ Ash said, moving closer, still keeping some space between
them. ‘And I’m really fucking sorry that I treated you the way that I did. I don’t need you to
forgive me, okay? This isn’t about that. You can hate me forever, and I can carry that. I’m strong
enough to know what I did and not be absolved by you for it. I can seek my own peace, and it’s not
dependent on a victim telling me what I did wasn’t so fucking bad. Because it was. And because
it’s not your responsibility to make me feel better about this. And I need you to know that. That
was...that was the main reason I came in here. To remind you that you’re not obligated to be nice
to me, or forgive me, or any of that. Because you don’t owe me anything, Gwyn.’

Gwyn said nothing for a long time, and Ash didn’t intrude upon the silence again. He seemed done,
he even settled back against the wall again, his knees bending, his breath evening out. He still
sniffed now and then, but there was a kind of peace to it.

Gwyn took all the words and hid them somewhere he could look at them later. Because even
though the whole conversation was painful, he suspected there was something there that…
wouldn’t hurt. Not if he could look at it in private. He kept his breathing even and slow, wished
there were hounds here. Tails thumping and paws scuffing up the sand, noses pushing into bodies
and big gaping yawns.

‘I’m jealous of you,’ Gwyn said. Each word felt torn from his chest. ‘Even more than…Augus. Or
anyone. That you could…make everyone like you. Without even seeming to try. And I could— I
could try, and everyone saw through it to what I was beneath that.’

Ash’s breath caught, and then he released a thin exhale.

‘Jealous of me?’

‘I looked up to you,’ Gwyn said. ‘In truth, I thought – selfishly – perhaps if I could learn how to be
your friend, I could…maybe share in that- whatever it was you gave to others. Maybe other fae
might realise I’m not so bad.’

‘Oh Jesus,’ Ash said, under his breath, as though something had clicked into place for him.

Gwyn squeezed his eyes shut, because he really didn’t want to be saying this. But, at the same
time, it had been sitting inside of him for too long, and he hated that the words were calcifying inside of him. He needed to score them out before they became stone, before he couldn’t share them with anyone.

‘You would never have…been able to hurt me so much, I think, had I not…admired you so. That you would give everyone else so much, and then see in me something that…they saw in me. Because you’re not the first to have insulted me since my childhood, not…by a longshot. But I gave all your words such tremendous weight. You are Augus’ brother. Gulvi’s closest friend. The world adores you. I thought it was like a kind of magic. It’s…silly.’

‘But you thought I could give you some of that magic,’ Ash said, his voice rough.

‘I wanted you to like me,’ Gwyn said, laughing at the words as soon as he said them.

‘And now?’ Ash said.

‘Well, I don’t know, now,’ Gwyn said, looking down at his knees. ‘I don’t trust you.’

‘I don’t think you should,’ Ash said hesitantly. ‘Not because…I’m untrustworthy, but because…because of what I did. It’s- It’s probably healthier for you to take a while to come around, if you ever actually do? I mean- Augus isn’t pressuring you to…to trust me, is he?’

‘He doesn’t talk to me much, about you,’ Gwyn said, feeling tired. ‘I think it…makes him uncomfortable. I think in his ideal world, we get along fine. But no, I don’t think Augus would pressure me to trust you. Though he does seem to find quite a few opportunities to remind me that you’re a good person.’

‘Maybe I should tell him to cut it out,’ Ash said.

‘Well, you are,’ Gwyn said, shaking his head. ‘That’s clear enough.’

‘I’m a lot of things,’ Ash said. ‘Gwyn, I’m a lot of things. They’re not all good. And you don’t have to reduce me down to some common denominator like ‘good,’ just because others do. People are complicated as fuck.’

Ash pushed himself upright and dusted off his jeans. He took a few steps towards the low door and then paused when his hand rested upon the catch.

‘I do, you know,’ Ash said. ‘I like you. I don’t always get you, but I’m…getting there. It really upsets me that so many people have treated you so badly, including me. And I’m mostly really glad that you have someone like Augus. And I can never, ever express my gratitude properly that you brought him back to me. More whole then I ever knew he could be, after everything. What is it that you guys like to say? Gramercie? It’s not enough, doesn’t even come close. But…yeah.’

Ash swung open the door and Gwyn looked up, something catching in his chest.

‘Ash?’

Ash turned back, the evening light turning his bright, colourful hair to a muted dark red.

‘Yeah?’

‘Gramercie,’ Gwyn said. ‘For…what you said.’

‘Yeah,’ Ash said, ‘should’ve said it all a while ago. You ever need someone to remind you that you
didn’t deserve any of that, come find me.’

Ash closed the door behind him and walked off. Gwyn watched the space where he’d disappeared, unsure what to feel.

*

Three days later, Gwyn stood on a rocky, narrow cape that extended far into sea waters. The rocks were wet and slippery with algae and weed that never completely dried, this far out. Limpets and barnacles crusted the rocks, mussels and even oysters clung further down. White seabirds shouted abrasive calls at the world as they rested on the rocks or flew overhead. Others danced in the white crests of waves.

It all smelled of salt, spray had created a fine film of saltwater over his body, though he felt it most on his face and hair. He looked around, constantly brushing his hair out of his eyes. In his pocket was a dark red, leather cord. In his other pocket were jewels for payment.

He waited. This part of the world didn’t look like much. But the fact that there were no fae along the white sandy beaches behind him, spoke volumes to the power of the one who lived here.

Hours later, Gwyn was sitting upon the highest rock, when a huge wave came and deposited Ondine nearby. In the blink of an eye, she transformed from her true-form – a humanoid creature of complicated fins and stalks – into her human-form, wearing nothing more than a skirt made of salt-worn pale leather, and a t-shirt that clung damp to her frame, an opaque cream with bits of mica and other gems embedded into it, glinting under the sun. Her long, black hair tumbled down wetly, her skin a shade too brown to be called tan.

‘I’ve missed you,’ Ondine said, standing and walking over to him. She leaned in for an embrace, easy to do as she was on a lower level. Gwyn didn’t even have to stand. She squeezed at his shoulders, and he felt the moment that her hand lingered on his bad shoulder. When she withdrew, her eyes were narrowed. ‘You? Scars?’

‘I’d appreciate it if you didn’t make it public knowledge,’ Gwyn said.

‘Of course,’ Ondine said, smiling. ‘Why would I want to, Gwyn?’

‘Buy back favour with Albion, perhaps?’ Gwyn said, but his question was impish, and she laughed instead of taking offense.

She hopped up easily onto the broad rock where he sat, saltwater oozing from her feet. She waved at several of the seabirds that milled around them. Gwyn let his fingers trail over limpets and thought of why he’d come. The importance of it.

‘I’ve come to ask you for a favour,’ Gwyn said.

‘I’m not surprised. You never come for tea,’ Ondine said, smiling.

‘I- Do you want me to?’

‘I don’t really make tea,’ Ondine said, laughing. ‘But you could come and visit from time to time, when you don’t have pressing favours to ask of me. Come on then, out with it. It’s a lovely afternoon to work up some debt.’

Gwyn smiled in spite of himself. He brought the red cord out of his pocket and twined it around his fingers, knowing that this was important. He took several deep breaths, then looked over at Ondine,
who was looking down at the cord, curious.

‘You’ve always liked to stay separate from the affairs of the Seelie and Unseelie both,’ Gwyn began. ‘You’ve never…wanted to be drawn into great political argument or debate, and I have always respected that you so fiercely keep yourself apart from these things.’

‘Let me guess, you want me to take a side?’ Ondine said, her eyes narrowing.

‘No,’ Gwyn said. ‘This may be…worse. Do you know much about the plight of Readers?’

‘Oh,’ Ondine said, sighing. ‘Well, yes. I heard about that Reader, too. Recently. I don’t keep up much with the gossip, but Court assassinations leak through anyway. Readers are employed by the Courts.’

‘They have no choice,’ Gwyn said, his voice low. ‘They’re made to. They’re stolen from their families and forced to serve an alignment. I dread to think of their methods of training, but given that Readers are reckless, rebellious and headstrong, it must take a great deal to make them- to render them pliant enough to Read their own people and betray them to the monarch.’

Ondine said nothing, and Gwyn decided it was safe to continue.

‘They…I’ve been doing my research. They frequently suicide before their thousandth year. Over half, Ondine. The rest…are either killed when caught up in political intrigue or- Or they escape and are never heard from again, and are likely quietly put down for ‘betraying their kind.’ There’s contradicting information out there. Some papers say there’s only five in existence at any one time, others say there are five born a year, but that many of them suicide as soon as they’ve reached adulthood and realise what they are. Either way, it is a tragic life. Is it not?’

‘Very,’ Ondine said. ‘Gwyn, you’re talking to someone who knows a little of what it’s like. Being a prophetess as I am, I wasn’t exactly gently encouraged to work for the Oak King.’

Gwyn stared at her, and Ondine laughed as she looked out to sea. ‘It’s an ugly business, what goes on behind the closed doors of a Kingdom. Why do you think I never wanted anything to do with the Court? The Oak King, oh he wooed me, he was nice enough. But only because I was so powerful, and perhaps he was afraid I would lie to him about my prophecies. Even though I literally cannot. But it was obvious that had I chosen not to support him with my powers, he would have deemed me an enemy of the Court and acted accordingly.’

‘Ondine,’ Gwyn said, unsure what to say.

‘Oh yeah,’ Ondine said, her voice turning hard. ‘It’s not good to be born with…telepathy or empathy or clairvoyance, or basically anything that the Court might use to forecast a war or a political move.’

‘You don’t think it’s wrong?’

‘Of course it’s wrong,’ Ondine said, shrugging. ‘That goes without saying. I was one of the lucky ones. You employed me, you even used me, you just didn’t do it the same way that the others did. And in the end, I got my freedom. Albion doesn’t want me. But if I’m alive when another monarch comes into power… The problem I have, Gwyn, is that I am tied to this landscape and my home within it. This section of sea around you. I cannot leave it to live anywhere except the palace. And they know that. I cannot escape. To them, this is a convenient – if large – cage, where they can find me any time they like. Even you. Looking for favours.’

Gwyn’s hand closed around the red cord and though he didn’t want to burden Ondine any further,
he knew that she could say no to him. He wasn’t forcing her into anything. Nor obligating her. She had to make this choice of her own volition.

‘It perhaps makes you an even better candidate for what I want to ask you,’ Gwyn said carefully.

‘What, should I use my powers on a whole lot of Unseelie fae so you can find another Reader?’

‘No,’ Gwyn said, shocked. ‘No. Gods, I- Deserved that. Ondine, Mikkel’s last request of me – was that I try and make a refuge for Readers. A place separate from the Courts, where Readers can go and be…safe. I can’t see- Perhaps it would just be another cage. But they need the option. They need a place they can go. I will fund all of it. Its construction, the people to maintain it, in goings and outgoings, I can help. But I cannot run it. I cannot know where it is. Mikkel impressed upon me that no King or monarch could resist the appeal of a Reader, and I suspect that even with my lofty intentions to leave Readers alone, I cannot promise that I wouldn’t exploit them if the need came up.’

Ondine shifted so that her legs were folded. She looked at him, her eyebrows pulling together.

‘A refuge?’

‘I cannot decipher the logistics,’ Gwyn said. ‘How would Readers be found before the Courts found them? Would it mean betraying one’s monarch to save them from being forced into interrogations? It’s a huge…responsibility to ask anyone to take on, especially someone who has spent so long already in service of organisations that haven’t had your best interests at heart. Ondine, I could not think of anyone else who truly wants to remain separate. Nor as strong as you. For you were the only one in that poisoned Court to abstain from voting against me. Whether you hated me or not, you stood your ground and decided to make up your own mind. And I know it’s…too large an ask- A favour I cannot repay, but I swear to you-’

‘I’ll do it,’ Ondine said, her voice a rush.

‘What?’ Gwyn said, staring at her.

‘I’ll do it. I don’t know exactly how. But I’ll do it. I’m already in trouble with the Seelie palace. Let them come after me.’

‘It would likely have to be inter-alignment,’ Gwyn said.

‘Good,’ Ondine said quickly. ‘We could do with more of that too. I have my own wealth. I don’t need you to fund it. But you can’t know where the refuge is. You can’t know anything about it.’

‘I only want to know that you can do it,’ Gwyn said, embarrassed to hear his voice breaking in the sea air. ‘I didn’t think you would.’

‘Gwyn,’ Ondine said, reaching out and squeezing his knee, ‘how do you know that I am not already doing something similar for prophets born with powers like mine? Why do you think that prophets are not a regular component of the Courts? When they could do so much?’

Gwyn looked at the way she smiled at him, the strength in her gaze, even as her hand gently petted his knee.

‘There are whole worlds out there you know nothing about,’ Ondine said, her voice warm. ‘And isn’t it better that it is so?’

‘Yes,’ Gwyn said, not even having to think it over. ‘So you have…experience with this sort of
And then his voice cracked again and he buried his face in his hands, the cord pressing against his cheek and jaw. Because it meant that all this time, he could have done something. Or asked someone. And instead he’d laboured under the false impression that he had to do it all on his own. That he and Mikkel and others were only lone islands, trapped in bitter isolation until death. His eyes burned hot and he shook his head when Ondine moved closer and placed a hand on his back, crooning a watery sound at him.

‘Gwyn,’ Ondine said. ‘So the rumours are true then? He was your friend? You cared for him?’

‘I just keep thinking he didn’t have to die,’ Gwyn said, wiping angrily at his eyes and thinking that he’d been doing far too much of this lately. ‘He asked me, and he knew I’d only take him seriously if he died, if he sacrificed himself for what he was asking.’

‘Oh no,’ Ondine said. ‘Gwyn, you listen to me. You told me yourself. How many Readers commit suicide? Darling.’ Her face pressed closer to his, and then her forehead was against the side of his head. ‘Darling, it’s similar with prophets. He carried that with him for so long, it wasn’t about you. He clearly thought you could help future Readers, though. He believed in you. Maybe he sacrificed himself, but he thought it was worthy enough. But mostly, Gwyn, you just have to believe that he probably died less for a cause, and more because he was just tired of hurting.’

‘And you?’ Gwyn said, turning to her. ‘Have you ever wanted to?’

‘Die?’ Ondine said, looking surprised. She rocked back into a sitting position and shrugged. ‘Not for a long time now. But when I was younger. I am very old, despite my gorgeousness, I know. When I was younger? Yes. Reading the palms of soldiers and knowing so many of them were going to die, I can’t say I used to feel blessed by whatever gave me my powers.’

‘But you don’t think about it now?’

‘No,’ Ondine said, shifting her hair so that it fell about her shoulders. ‘I have people to look after. I have my land. I’m doing fine, Gwyn. You don’t need to worry about me. I think I’m going to be one of the old ones, you know. Like the Nain Rouge or the great Anqa. I’ll just be, forever.’

Gwyn nodded at her, still clutching the cord in his fist. He forced his hands to unclench and stared at it. He didn’t know what to do with it, but he couldn’t stop carrying it with him everywhere he went.

‘You’re already helping people,’ Gwyn said, looking at the cord.

‘It nourishes me,’ Ondine said. ‘So this will not be a favour I’m doing for you, but something I do for myself and the Readers I may manage to find. It will be a harder thing. The Courts have gone a long time without thinking they need prophets. But I can…well, leave it with me. I’ll think it over and work something out. But you owe me no debt, Gwyn ap Nudd. Not for this thing.’

‘And I brought all of these for you as a down payment,’ Gwyn said smiling, fishing the jewels out of his pocket and holding them gleaming upon his palm.

He laughed when she plucked them all up, unable to resist them.

‘Let’s just call that a gift for Ondine, prophetess of the seas,’ Ondine said, grinning at him. ‘What pretty jewels you have. If there’s any more where those came from, I’ll happily take them.’

‘There’s a whole lot embedded into the golden path leading into the Seelie palace.’
‘Gods,’ Ondine said, unable to stop laughing. ‘It’s awful! Albion’s always been that way inclined? You know, he just…likes to show everyone how sparkly he can make something. But that pathway was just so ‘yellow brick road with gems’ that I laughed the first time I saw it.’

‘It’s so gauche,’ Gwyn said, and she nodded enthusiastically.

‘Oh, yes. It’s terrible.’

Gwyn spent several more hours with Ondine as she peeled shellfish off the side of rocks. She withdrew a sharp little knife to open them for him, feeding him the fruits of the sea as they fell into easy conversation. Gwyn’s heart warmed through, even as the wind and sun together burnished his face and knotted his curls, while never making tangles of Ondine’s luxuriant hair.

*

Augus returned the following day and Gwyn updated him on everything, while Augus looked at him with that slightly absent gaze of someone who still wanted to be in a lake, or hunting. Gwyn was used to it now. There was always a period of time when Augus returned from the human realm, where he looked at Gwyn like he was a meal of a very different kind.

‘Mm,’ Augus said, once Gwyn was done. ‘You smell good.’

Gwyn watched cautiously as Augus sauntered over to him, then straddled his thighs where Gwyn sat on the bed. His hair dripped rapidly onto the floor even as Augus nuzzled at his neck, then scraped teeth against it.

‘Very good,’ Augus said, his voice turning into a pleased rumble, almost a purr.

Goosebumps danced up Gwyn’s flesh, and Augus licked wetly at the underside of his jaw where the skin was soft and tender. It still made Gwyn feel tight with tension. His breath quickened.

‘Sweetness,’ Augus whispered. ‘I missed you.’

Lips pressed against his, chaste at first, Augus’ hands clutching his shoulders and his chest pushing forwards until his hips rocked low against Gwyn’s.

Augus’ mouth opened, and Gwyn’s did the same, and then Augus licked inside, each movement sure and carnal, daring Gwyn to resist him. But Gwyn only slid his hands underneath Augus’ shirt and clung to the hem of his pants, pulling him closer and making a sound into Augus’ mouth when there was a sharp pain in his bottom lip from an unforgiving nip.

‘I missed you,’ Gwyn said against the lips that moved over his own. He felt like perhaps he shouldn’t say it, but Augus only leaned in closer, then called his waterhorse weight so that he could tip Gwyn back to the bed, groaning happily.

Augus smiled at him, hunger in his eyes, and he bent down and-

There was a knock on the door.

‘Damn it,’ Augus snarled, his hands tightening painfully on Gwyn’s shoulders. Then he slid off Gwyn’s body and stood, swaying a little, licking at his lips. Gwyn stood and adjusted himself. He wasn’t fully hard yet, but it wouldn’t have taken much.

‘I need a cabin,’ Gwyn said fervently, as he opened the door.
Anath stood there, bowing deeply before straightening again.

‘Your Majesty, the Nain Rouge is here, requesting yourself and every member of your Inner Court. It seems important.’

Gwyn groaned and ran his hand through his hair several times.

‘All right, Anath, we’ll be right there.’

‘As you wish, Your Majesty.’

‘As I wish,’ Gwyn grumbled as he pulled on boots and blew out a breath of frustration.

* *

Fenwrel, Ash and Gulvi were already there in the throne-room. The room itself was empty, fae too afraid of the Nain Rouge to want to spend time in her presence. When Gwyn teleported into the room, she dropped down from the ceiling and landed in a frog-squat in front of him, covered in stinking, poorly cured furs, guns clinking beneath her mess of clothing.

‘Bitch,’ Nain Rouge said, grinning.

‘Nain Rouge,’ Gwyn said, nodding at her in greeting.

‘You’re needed for a pretty fucking important meeting. All of you.’

Gwyn stared at her, and then he felt his throat go dry.

No, it can’t be.

‘Come along then,’ she said, jumping once onto the marble floor only for it to open into one of her disgusting, rank teleportation tunnels. Gwyn had no time to protest, they were all swallowed up immediately, tumbling through a decay-filled earth.

They were spat up into a cavern on the other side, clean, pure water surrounding a raised underground platform. Around them, twenty four classless fae sat around a circular stone counter, the ancient power in the room crushing and dizzying, feeling like endless pressure against Gwyn’s head.

Next to them, also surrounded by the circle, was Albion and what remained of his Inner Court. Albion’s damaged arm was strapped to his chest in a sling that looked carefully made; designed for him to wear in the long-term. Gwyn wondered if he’d ever get function back, found himself feeling not as sorry for what he’d done as he thought he would.

‘Welcome to the Coalition of the Classless, assholes,’ the Nain Rouge said, leaping over the stone counter into her own stone seat, where she crouched instead of sitting. ‘It’s been a long time coming, but these guys around me are harder to herd than a sackful of grumpy cats. Now. Who’s been a bad Court? Who’s been a bad Court?’

She sounded like an owner talking excitedly to their dog, and Gwyn ignored that, staring instead at those sitting or standing around them. His eyes paused on Baba Yaga and he felt his breath desert him. She was terrifying. When he was finally about to look again, he saw—Was that…Old Pete?

Gwyn realised that Albion only had Davix and Alysia the Polemarch standing beside him. Had his Court been so damaged?
‘You’ve both been bad Courts,’ the Nain Rouge snapped in her childish, squeaky voice. ‘And we’re fucking sick of it.’

Chapter End Notes

In our next chapter, ‘Islands:’

‘The Coalition of the Classless – or the Coalition of Islands – has formed under duress, during a time of great conflict,’ Marika said, her voice calm and even. ‘We are twelve Unseelie and Seelie, and despite our disparate ways, we are all cousins across the river. Some of us are even islands in the middle, remembering what it is when true cooperation between us all was part of what made the fae realms so great.

‘This cooperation has been broken. Laws of etiquette have been broken. We are all here in agreement, ready to lay sanctions, and ready to bring our powers to bear should those sanctions not be met. Seelie and Unseelie both, we will lend you our support if you listen and obey, and we will strike you down, if you don’t.’
Islands

Chapter Notes

New tag: Deus ex Coalition. ;)

Thanks so much to all who are reading. Can you believe there’s only three chapters to go after this one? alkdfjslak Anyway, feedback is all kinds of love, and an enthusiastic wave from me. You folks rock.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Gwyn

*

It was Marika who stood and moved smoothly across the stone floor, approaching a gap in the circular stonework around them. She stopped before them all – Albion, Gwyn and their respective Inner Courts. Her glittering gown shone like the dawn, her pupils narrow and vertical like a cat’s, and her grey eyes gleaming like mother-of-pearl. She looked at Albion first, then turned to Gwyn, before clasping her hands together.

‘You had something to do with this,’ Albion muttered, turning to glare at Gwyn.

Gwyn shrugged a shoulder even as his heart thundered. ‘I don’t know what you’re talking about.’

Twelve Seelie, twelve Unseelie. When Gwyn had approached the Nain Rouge and Marika, he hadn’t expected the plan to resolve into anything, let alone something like this. There were fae here he was certain had died or passed into legend. Oberon, the consort of Seelie Queen Titania, sat imperious and bedecked in the leather leaf-workings of his kind next to Yallery Brown, one of the most vicious Unseelie goblins known to fae and humans alike. Beside him, Vasilissa, Seelie maiden of the stars and night, and beside her, the almost-goddess, the Unseelie Baba Yaga, who was as ancient as the Nain Rouge – if not moreso – and aged, bent and crooked, wisdom and malevolence and a calculating intelligence shining from black eyes.

Gwyn didn’t even recognise all of them, though he knew each to be classless – felt the truth of it resonating in his bones. He wasn’t used to meeting powerful fae he didn’t know. So he focused instead on the ones he did know. Representing the Seelie classless: The Great Anqa – who in human-form still grew bird feathers the colour of flame and had a notably beaky mouth. There was Robin Goodfellow, known as Puck to most, who was leaning back in his stone chair with an expression of mischief and interest. Then Pegasus, who in human form still wore his great wings, his horse eyes betraying only a serious soulfulness. There was a Master Mage – the Ratcatcher of Hameln, who much preferred to be called the Pied Piper of Hamelin. He had his staff out – a carved wooden flute – and in his fingers, and he wore that same expression of light-heartedness that so many Mages seemed to wear at times of great seriousness.

Sitting between them, the Unseelie: the Black Annis, an old blue-faced woman with claws of iron, who went about the woods and caves looking for human and fae children to devour. Shellycoat, a creature so covered in rattling, jingling seashells that no one quite knew what sort of fae he was anymore, sat with hands encrusted in limpets on the table. Shagfoal, a spectral mule with eyes that
gleamed like coals, stared at Albion particularly hard. Beside him sat the Seelie elder, Old Pete, who was still covered in rags and cloths and bags and bells and chimes, though none of it made him look as unwieldy as Babok, the Bag Man, who sat beside him, an Unseelie predator that seemed smothered in filthy hessian and canvas sacks.

Marika cleared her throat and Gwyn stopped looking around, unable to keep his fear from being scented. There was too much power. The Nain Rouge alone was threatening enough. There were fae here that made words desert his throat. These were not just any classless fae, they were some of the most powerful players in existence.

*How* had they managed to find them all and get them to agree to meet at the same place? To form under a single purpose?

‘The Coalition of the Classless – or the Coalition of Islands – has formed under duress, during a time of great conflict,’ Marika said, her voice calm and even. ‘We are twelve Unseelie and Seelie, and despite our disparate ways, we are all cousins across the river. Some of us are even islands in the middle, remembering what it is when true cooperation between us all was part of what made the fae realms so great.

‘This cooperation has been broken. Laws of etiquette have been broken. We are all here in agreement, ready to lay sanctions, and ready to bring our powers to bear should those sanctions not be met. Seelie and Unseelie both, we will lend you our support if you listen and obey, and we will strike you down, if you don’t.’

‘I’ll not be ordered around like a child,’ Albion snapped.

‘Then stop acting like one,’ Marika said.

Albion’s jaw clenched shut, and then he turned and stared at Old Pete, shaking his head.

‘This is what you’ve been doing of late?’

Old Pete leaned back in his chair and spread his hands in the kind of shrug that Gwyn was used to Augus making. It was the kind of gesture that said: *What do you expect?*

‘By the way, Albion,’ Old Pete said, ‘I resign. Do you want to take my status from me now, or later?’

Albion shook his head, and Gwyn almost felt sorry for him. Almost. There was a larger part of him which revelled in Albion’s helplessness. He felt vibrant with glee that Albion’s Court would have sanctions laid upon it. For these fae were powerful enough to force Albion to bend to their will.

His plan was working. It was working, and hopefully this would mean a full withdrawal of troops from around the Unseelie Court. It would mean…it would mean *hope*.

‘Why?’ Albion said, his voice lower than usual.

‘Because this makes a far more interesting story, Your Majesty. Far more interesting than you trapping every creature in its bolthole, so that you may pick them off one by one.’

Albion’s sharp eyebrows pinched together, his stormy eyes darkened. Beside him, Davix bounced quietly on the balls of his feet. A combination of what looked like excitement and impatience. He placed his hand on Albion’s arm, as though to steady him. The air was beginning to smell of salt, and beside Gwyn, Augus discreetly coughed.
'You think to impose sanctions on me?' Albion said. 'After he betrayed the Seelie? The Court? I am a demigod, and if you think-

It wasn’t Marika who spoke, but Baba Yaga, who shook the room into stillness with her chthonic voice.

'You are not the only one who has been called god, Albion of the Atlantic. And those of us who choose to remain behind, agree to stay out of the affairs of the fae as much as possible. But you, recalcitrant child, force our hands. Do not push us. Even the sea can be conquered.'

'Gwyn ap Nudd has been already punished,' Marika said. 'He was condemned before his peers, his status removed, his symbols of power taken from him and imprisoned. If he then escaped your clutches, Albion, he is freed by the old laws of what it is to be fae – wiliness trumps order, amongst Seelie and Unseelie both. His betrayal has been acknowledged, and that debt of betrayal is considered cleared amongst this Council. Continue to think you have a right to punish him on behalf of the Court, instead of on behalf of your own pettiness, and there will be consequences.'

Blood leapt through Gwyn’s body, positively danced under his skin. It was warm and exultant and dizzying. He cradled it to himself, some fizzing, crackling thing. Exacerbated by the power of all the classless around him.

It was the Nain Rouge who stood on her own chair, drawing everyone’s attention.

'The sanctions upon the Seelie Court go like this: you’re gonna withdraw your fucking military from around the Unseelie Court within the week. You’re gonna not pick fights with the Unseelie military for the next ten years. A full decade, at which point we’ll all get together and decide whether you’ve fucking learned anything or not. I’m gonna go with not, but whatevs, some of these idiots still seem to think you’re capable of rational thought. This means that you can’t bring the Court military against the Unseelie Court military for any reason. You can’t pick them off one by one, you can’t send in assassins, and you and those under your order cannot kick a fucking dog while it’s down, capisce? You are Seelie. You are meant to be disgustingly noble, and about honour. So remember what it is to be honourable twats, and back off.'

The Nain Rouge cleared her throat dramatically, and then giggled.

'You are, of course, allowed to defend yourselves when necessary. Land disputes will happen. We know that. But trust me when I say we will fucking know the difference between a battle over a land skirmish, and a manufactured one designed to look like a land skirmish. Don’t think you can outsmart us. Although if you want to try, like, please, by all means. It’s been…fucking ages since I stretched my powers properly.'

Marika delicately cleared her throat and the Nain Rouge looked over, her child’s face squinting at the interruption. Her opaque, blood-red eyes widened and she turned back to Albion, grinning broken, rotten teeth.

'One more thing, Seabiscuit, stop fucking with the Seelie-Unseelie community. You know what I mean. Stop sending out your people to go mess with the communities. We can’t stop you from leaning on certain Court members to do what you want, we get that it’s your stupid sparkly twinkle-toes Court. But when you send people beyond the boundaries of that Court, that’s when we can lay down some enforcement. So cut it the fuck out.'

Gwyn silently watched everything in amazement. Classless fae had possessed the powers to put sanctions on the Courts like this before but never had, because their very natures made it hard for them to organise with others. The entire point of becoming increasingly reclusive and uninterested
in the world’s affairs as time went on was – everyone assumed – to stop the most powerful of the classless fae ruling the fae realms.

To see so many in one place, gathered and united, doing the very thing that made them so frightening and awe-inspiring to others, was something Gwyn would never forget. To hear them laying sanctions upon Albion’s Court – the Nain Rouge, no less – was the icing on the cake.

The Ratcatcher stood up and smoothed his orange, blue and yellow motley. His pale face and sharp blue eyes were accentuated with a waxed moustache and a shrewd cant to his thin lips. He walked around the circle and passed Marika in the centre, approaching Gwyn, staring beadily. Like Gwyn, he was a Caller of animals, one of the best in the world of the classless. What he’d done with rats alone had ruined an entire human village. He was Seelie through and through, but had a vein of malice through him that made him like to watch people break the rules and laws and punish them for it.

He’d been very close to Crielle, once upon a time.

‘There are sanctions for the Unseelie Court too,’ the Ratcatcher said, lifting his flute and touching it to Gwyn’s chin, as Gwyn stared steadily back at him. He tapped Gwyn’s chin several times – not hard, but enough to make bubbles of anger stir.

‘No more concerted assassinations of the Seelie’s elite. And no more calling upon life debts of the Seelie fae unless you have dire need.’

‘I had dire need,’ Gwyn said, his voice hard.

‘Well,’ the Ratcatcher said, eyes twinkling, ‘you won’t now, will you?’

Gwyn’s jaw tightened. He hadn’t expected…he hadn’t expected that sanctions would be imposed on the Unseelie Court too. He felt as though he’d acted fairly. But then, he couldn’t recall another fae who had called so many life debts at once. Nor could he think of a time when the Unseelie fae had assassinated – en masse – so many core members of the Seelie Court.

Perhaps he wasn’t playing as fairly as he felt he was.

‘You, also, and your attendant military and Inner Court and all attachments, are not permitted to send your Unseelie military – such as it is – directly against the Seelie Court military. Not that I can fathom why you’d want to, but that is how it stands. Do you understand? We are imposing a ceasefire. To last a decade. Some of these fae before you asked for a century.’

Gwyn looked to Augus, who had his hands clasped together tightly and looked tense. It was Gulvi who caught Gwyn’s eye and nodded subtly.

She agreed with the sanctions. Fenwrel, too, showed nothing but confidence on her face.

Gwyn turned back to the Ratcatcher, then looked beyond him, to Marika. He inclined his head, then met the Ratcatcher’s eyes.

‘I, Gwyn ap Nudd, accept these sanctions as they have been imposed, understanding that trying to circumvent them will result in consequences beyond my imagining. I accept the will of the Council of the Classless.’

Albion made a brief sound of disagreement, and they turned to look at him. But Davix was already whispering in his ear – completely silent, his magic able to protect them both so that only Albion could hear what he was saying. Davix had a smile on his face, a light in his eyes, and once he
leaned back from Albion and looked out into the fae around them, Albion seemed appeased.

‘I, Albion of the Atlantic, accept these sanctions as they have been imposed, understanding that trying to circumvent them will result in consequences beyond my imagining. I accept the will of the Council of the Classless.’

‘There’s one more sanction,’ Marika said quietly, as the Ratcatcher returned to his seat at the circular stone bench. ‘A requirement. You will each take into your Court a member of this Council, of the opposite alignment, to oversee your actions and to remind you both of what you have promised here.’

‘What?’ Gwyn said, staring at her in outrage.

Albion reacted similarly, taking a step backwards. ‘That goes beyond the imposition of military sanctions. This is an egregious affront to what the Courts are represent. They are wholly devoted to their own alignment. We only accept the Unseelie when they beg for asylum.’

‘If you were wholly devoted to your own alignment, as you say, Albion, then you would not have sent so many Seelie soldiers to die for something so petty.’

Gwyn shook his head at this new development. When he’d asked the Nain Rouge and Marika to-

He hadn’t expected… It was supposed to work in his favour.

‘And do you expect this fae to witness me speaking to my own people while I sit on my throne? Should they be privy to every private meeting? Exactly what am I meant to be agreeing to here?’

‘Both alignments will allow the member of the Council free access to the throne room, their guest-rooms, and public areas of the Court where most fae can visit. They must be privy to all public announcements that will be made, especially those made to Court fae and the noblesse. You are not permitted to obfuscate or deceive them so that they miss throne room gatherings. However, nor are they permitted to witness the active development of strategy, growth and material gain of your Court. Whatever you and your Inner Court do behind closed doors will remain behind closed doors, unless you choose otherwise.’

Gwyn took a slow, deep breath.

‘And which member of the Council will be entering my Court?’

He looked to Marika, hoping that it would be-

‘Me,’ Old Pete said from his chair. ‘You need a Storykeeper, and you’re not going to find a better one.’

‘You have served on Albion’s Inner Court, you’re still a member of it. How do I know you’re not leveraging this Council to serve him better?’ Gwyn sneered at him, and Old Pete rolled his milky eyes and then laughed.

‘My boy, that’s not the kind of story I want to tell these days either. You’ll hardly notice I’m there, honestly.’

Gwyn took a long, slow breath, noticed the way Gulvi was glaring at all of them, just as unhappy as he was. But if they didn’t accede to this, they didn’t get the protection of the Council. And Gwyn believed in that protection. He’d seen the Nain Rouge level buildings and cause earthquakes. He knew that Baba Yaga could call death to just about anyone she desired. Everyone knew how powerful Oberon was, Titania chose him as a consort for a reason and it wasn’t just because he was
pretty. The Ratcatcher was a Master Mage whose ability to use his magic to mess with whole cities was famed.

‘Please tell me,’ Albion said quietly, ‘that you do not want me to take that wretched thing into my palace.’

He pointed at the Nain Rouge.

‘Bitch, I wouldn’t be caught dead in your Disney bullshit,’ the Nain Rouge spat. ‘I actually have a fucking life, and I don’t want to spend it watching you all fapping about. S’not my job.’

One of the classless women behind Gwyn stood. He’d noticed her before, but wasn’t quite sure who she was. Upon her dark-skinned face she had eight, unblinking spider’s eyes. From her head grew tiny spikes, and her hands were covered in the scopular hairs of a spider. She wore a crown made of thorn and bone, and around her neck was a necklace of bone chips. Her dress was woven from sinew. Despite the aura of death she carried around her, she bore herself gracefully.

‘I am the Spider Queen,’ the woman said, looking around at them all, then meeting Albion’s eyes and holding them. Fenwrel gasped, Davix frowned – eyes narrowing. ‘I have not been needed for a long time. When my young cousin, the dear Nain Rouge, came to find me, it was only with great reluctance that I stirred. I will sit in your throne room and I will live in your Court. I will even – should you wish it – advise you. But you may not like my advice.’

‘How long are we supposed to allow this? An intruder in our Court?’ Albion said, turning his head towards Marika, unable to tear his eyes from the Spider Queen.

‘Ten years,’ Marika said. ‘At which point we will reconvene. You should also be aware – as loathsome as it is to some of us, we are going to announce our existence publically. Fae will hear of these sanctions. Fae will know that you have accepted the impositions of the Council in exchange for our protection. The Courts are fragile and need assistance. There are other forces at play.’

Marika looked to Davix boldly. ‘It is important that the Courts stand strong before those forces. At this time, the Council has decided that it is needful that the Courts remain and have agreed to protect them while their monarchs get their Kingdoms in order.’

Gwyn looked over at Old Pete, thinking it through.

‘Fine,’ Gwyn said, sighing. ‘I already have enough Seelie fae in my Court, what’s one more? I accept this sanction and invite Old Pete into the Unseelie Court, to enjoy our hospitality and gifts. You are welcome.’

‘Thank you, lad,’ Old Pete said, seeming benign and unbothered by everything happening around them.

‘And you, Lord Albion?’ Marika said, prompting him.

Albion stared at the Spider Queen. She was still sanding, her chin lifted, her black eyes shining with power. Gwyn couldn’t be certain which of them was getting the worse deal.

‘I accept this sanction,’ Albion said.

But he didn’t formally invite the Spider Queen into his Court, and he didn’t offer hospitality, and Gwyn watched Davix instead. Was it Crielle or Davix who had poisoned him against the Unseelie so much that he would not even offer the barest respect?

The Spider Queen sat down again, never looking away from Albion.
‘Please give us some time to confer amongst ourselves,’ Marika said. ‘You and your Inner Courts may both exit through those doors over there. We expect peace to be maintained. That is all.’

Gwyn bowed to Marika and turned, walking away, his Inner Court following him. He didn’t bother watching what Albion would do. He strode towards the doors, hating the way the energy of the classless clung to him. It was like tangled, sticky ropes, and he just wanted to claw it all off. In a one on one situation it was noticeable. But standing there amongst twenty four classless fae…

He’d never felt so much power in a single room.

He pushed through the double doors and moved into a long hall. Enough room for Gwyn to veer off to one side and feel as though he had his own space. There, his Inner Court crowded around him. It was Fenwrel who tilted her head at him, smiled strangely.

‘You did this, didn’t you?’

‘No,’ Gwyn said. ‘Though I may have acted as a catalyst. It is their Council, not mine.’

Augus didn’t look surprised, exactly, but he was watching Gwyn with something considering on his face. Gwyn supposed when they got back to the palace, Augus was going to ask why Gwyn didn’t confide in him.

He’d never expected the plan to work. Behind that, a muted outrage simmered. Why now? Why not weeks earlier, before the Wild Hunt?

The doors opened and Albion, Alysia and Davix entered.

‘How fascinating,’ Davix drawled, casting a desultory glance towards Gwyn before making his way towards the other side of the hall.

‘Not the word I’d choose,’ Alysia said, her voice sharp. They were some distance away, but the space was made of rock, and too small for their voices not to carry. Davix wasn’t cloaking any of the words to hide them, either. ‘Lord Albion, I think – with these sanctions – I will be far more useful to the Seelie and my people below the waters. Give me leave to remove myself from your Inner Court. I am Queen-in-Waiting under the ocean, after all. And they have no King.’

‘They have a King,’ Albion said, but his voice carried less of its imperiousness than it usually did. After a few seconds, he sighed.

‘If you will not rule them,’ Alysia said, ‘I shall. You don’t need a Polemarch on land, but you need one in the sea.’

Albion nodded, reached out and clased Alysia’s shoulder. Davix watched nearby, then looked straight ahead at the opposing stone wall with an unreadable expression. A few seconds later, a cloak of silence shrouded them and Gwyn could no longer hear what they were saying. But the conversation was short. Albion and Alysia embraced and she left soon after, vanishing in a spray of salt water and a lone piece of kelp upon the ground, out of place.

Gwyn’s Inner Court remained silent as Gwyn occasionally glanced over at the conversation happening between Davix and Albion. After several minutes, Albion looked over at him, his expression one that Gwyn wasn’t used to seeing. Bare of confidence, stripped back, so that there was only confusion and something lost remaining.

‘Is this really happening?’ Ash said, clearing his throat. ‘I didn’t go to sleep dreaming of like a way out of this mess, and wake up in my unconscious or something?’
‘Would you have dreamed the part where Old Pete joined our Court?’ Gwyn said drily.

‘I dunno,’ Ash said, looking baffled. ‘Maybe.’

Five minutes later, the Spider Queen and Old Pete entered the hall. Old Pete walked over towards Gwyn with a cheerful twinkle in his eye.

‘You’ve been cleared to leave. Albion demoted me so I’m all freshly Court status for this adventure. Hm. I’m looking forward to this,’ Old Pete said.

‘You’ll feel right at home, with the amount of Seelie refugees milling around,’ Gwyn said, raising an eyebrow. ‘I suppose we should see just how many guest rooms we have left, and get you settled in.’

‘I can sleep in a closet, if you’ll give me access to parchment and quills.’

‘We can do better than a closet,’ Gwyn said, reaching out and clasping Old Pete’s shoulder, possibly a little harder than was necessary. He nodded to Gulvi, who took Ash’s arm and extended her hand for Augus’, who laid his fingers carefully in her palm. Then, in a coalescing shift of energies, they vanished from the hall.

* 

With Old Pete settled into decently appointed rooms, there had been a subsequent meeting with the Inner Court where they had all sat and stared at each other, still quite unable to believe what had happened. They wrote down all of the sanctions on both sides and pinned them onto the wall, where they looked more like wishes, than truths. After an hour, Gulvi and Fenwrel left together, Ash followed soon after, leaving Augus alone in the strategy room with Gwyn.

‘You did this,’ Augus said, staring at him.

‘I had an idea,’ Gwyn said. ’Months ago, now.’

‘I have a headache, being in that place, all that power.’

‘It’s nauseating,’ Gwyn said, rubbing his hands over his face. ‘No wonder they’re recluses. But they did this. They organised themselves. They thought of the sanctions. I dread to think how much work went into wrangling all of them there. I’ve not heard of the Spider Queen before.’

‘I’m almost sad that the Nain Rouge isn’t living in the Seelie palace.’

Gwyn snorted, then laughed at the thought. He turned and looked at the list of sanctions on the wall and felt like none of it was real. None of it would be real until they were no longer surrounded by the Seelie military, until underfae could make safe pilgrimages to the Court again. And even then, the reparations that would need to occur…

But…but it was possible now, wasn’t it?

‘It doesn’t feel real,’ Gwyn said.

‘It doesn’t,’ Augus said, staring at him. ‘Perhaps we could spend the next few hours fucking until it settles in. At worst, we’ll be exhausted and the headaches won’t matter as much.’

Gwyn bit the inside of his bottom lip, nodded, walked towards Augus and-

A knock at the door.
'We’re cursed,' Augus said quietly, fervently, as he walked to the door. Anath, again. Gwyn raised his eyebrows and she bowed before speaking.

‘All apologies, Your Majesty, but the Nain Rouge is here to speak to you. She’s in the throne room.’

‘Again?’ Gwyn said, his voice sounding more dangerous than he’d intended.

‘She won’t leave. She says it’s urgent.’

Gwyn made a faint sound and looked over at Augus, before nodding curtly to Anath and teleporting away.

*

It was only the two of them in the small room, marble floors beneath them, a table and two chairs of warm grey wood the only furniture there. It was cloying, especially with the Nain Rouge’s malicious energy clinging to the place, the shadows seeming darker and alive in her presence.

She looked up at him, leaning against the wall. Even there, her legs were slightly bent, she never stood straight. There was an animal quality to her movements, in the quick way she took stock of her surroundings, or the traction in all of her joints that meant she was ready to spring at any moment. Her hair was a wild tangle, knotted and matted, with stray red-brown strands moving in all directions.

‘Looked good, didn’t it?’ the Nain Rouge said, staring at him. Now, she had that predatory gaze on his face, unblinking. ‘You owe me, bucko.’

‘A promotion,’ Gwyn said, swallowing, remembering their first meeting about the Council. ‘Capital status. Do you have anything planned? With that power?’

‘Gal like me always has a back-up plan,’ the Nain Rouge said, her voice deepening. There were cracks in the skin of her lips. Gwyn wondered how it must be, to always live covered in layers of dirt, in skins that stunk, to seek the dirty, filthy places and glory in them like a dog rolling ecstatically in a carcass. There was a kind of glee to her existence, she revelled where others were repulsed. ‘But I’m one of the good guys now, aren’t I? Saving the day? I’m tickled that someone still thinks I’m a threat. All this wheedling and cajoling lately, and you still look at me like I’m the fucking menace that I am.’

Gwyn stepped backwards when she launched at him. Her spring was fast and vicious, one moment she was on the other side of the room and leaning against the wall, then her knees were in his belly and her hands clung to his shoulders, her face so close to his face he could smell her fetid breath.

Despite her size, despite his strength, he couldn’t push her off him. Instead he waited, staring, attacked in his own Court.

‘We do not permit violence upon each other, on this land,’ Gwyn said steadily.

‘This isn’t violence,’ the Nain Rouge said, her voice squeaking. She let go of his good shoulder – keeping a grip on his bad one – and pressed her fingers to his throat. The place where she could suck a fae’s powers and life-force until there was nothing but a husk remaining. ‘Not yet.’

Broken, jagged fingernails scraped across his skin, and then she slid off him and stood on her own feet, looking up at him.
'Give me my due,' she said.

‘I’d prefer to wait until the sanctions have been met,’ Gwyn said.

‘Listen, asshole, the terms weren’t ‘the Nain Rouge gets a promo if the sanctions are met by the fucking Courts’, the terms were I deliver you your goddamned Council, and you give me power. You came to me. You came down to my level, in a different realm, in my fucking carpark and you gotta pay the piper and I’m not fucking interested in word games.’

For all that she was talking in her human-realm language, he could already hear the ways that interacting so frequently with fae had changed her voice. Already, there were the more formal intonations of fae etiquette, and the Nain Rouge had always been one to follow the oldest lore. He could not contravene what he’d promised her.

‘Nain Rouge,’ Gwyn said solemnly, ‘I, Gwyn ap Nudd, Unseelie King, hereby take your status of underfae, and replace it with Capital, as sworn.’

A screech of victory wrenched at his ears, but he hid his wince and watched warily as the shadows in the room grew and expanded, then flowed towards her. These weren’t the shadows the Nightingale had commanded. It wasn’t an underworld poison but an immanent darkness that swelled and churned and belonged in caves with no light sources.

‘Tell me something,’ Gwyn said, as the miasma of evil that clung to her grew. ‘Tell me why the Council formed after the Wild Hunt. Why was this meeting not held weeks ago?’

The Nain Rouge blinked at him, her face went blank, and then she leaned her head back into the wall and stared out into the room, looking beyond it.

‘Because the Seelie weren’t getting behind it,’ she said, her voice oddly quiet. ‘Because they didn’t want to support a Council that seemed to exist only to save the Unseelie fae. Marika only had about half of them, and the rest… It’s different for me. I got the world in my grabby little hands. If I want something, eventually I get it. Hell or high water, I got my fucking promotion, and I got that Council, and I got my arcade games and there’s an endlessness of pigeons and rats and cats and foxes to crunch on.’

The Nain Rouge was silent for a long time as power flowed towards her. Now – or in a few days or weeks – she would be strong enough to start eating the life-force of fae again. And the more she ate the powers of fae, the stronger she became, until eventually it wouldn’t matter what status she was. Gwyn had unlocked her cage, and they both knew it.

‘The Wild Hunt, the King of the Forest, that was the thing that got the Seelie in line,’ the Nain Rouge said. ‘The Wild Hunt made them realise that it was about them too. They realised they had something to lose. The King of the Forest spoke to some of us about it. He’s pissed. You ever see a white stag in a forest and you think it’s him, maybe run in the other direction. Or just whoosh, teleport out of there.’

Gwyn closed his eyes.

‘Ten years,’ he said.

‘It’ll pass in the blink of an eye,’ the Nain Rouge said. ‘Fart, and it’ll be gone.’

‘I can’t build a big enough military in that time, not to match Albion.’

‘That’s assuming he’s gonna be your biggest concern in ten years,’ the Nain Rouge said, smiling at
him. ‘Might be me, by then.’

‘Perhaps,’ Gwyn smiled back.

‘You could line your military up like Happy Meals and I could just suck ‘em all dry. Go on, get your military together so I can feast. Let’s make it a buffet.’

‘You’re showing your true age these days,’ Gwyn said seriously. ‘All that time away from the humans. It doesn’t take long for your true colours to come to the surface, does it?’

‘Nah,’ the Nain Rouge said. ‘It’s why I’ve gotta live there. Too long here and it’s… You know, human slang is the greatest thing. Reminds you that you have to fucking adapt. It’s where I belong.’

‘Yet you created a Council.’

‘Doesn’t that just tell you how fucked up things are?’ the Nain Rouge said, winking at him. ‘Is that not the greatest sign of the times? The Nain Rouge built something instead of tearing shit apart. But sometimes you gotta grease a few wheels to get somewhere. Or to get a cannon somewhere. Thanks for the status and all, gonna do great things.’

‘I have no doubt,’ Gwyn said, watching as she tapped on the marble to open a portal. She didn’t even leave the palace first like she was supposed to, before teleporting away. She just disappeared into the dark earth. As soon as she was gone, the shadows in the room became benign once more, and the room felt smaller without her presence in it.

Chapter End Notes

In our next chapter, 'Grief:

‘And the Coalition?’ Augus said. ‘The state of everything? Fae thinking we can’t manage ourselves?’

‘We can’t,’ Gwyn said, looking up at the sky. ‘We can’t do this alone. I don’t know who I trust, Augus. But I’m young. You’re young. Gulvi and Ash are young. The Court is a skeleton. Without a framework of support, we’re nothing. Perhaps the Coalition wasn’t the right thing to do, and I suspect it might not be enough, even now.

‘But there are things coming that I cannot fight with a sword. And I have already proven that my sword isn’t enough for what is already here. It is not a sign of my power – but the urgency we all feel – that the Coalition even came into existence. I am a pawn, Augus. I don’t know how, I don’t know in what way, but I know that I am one. Albion too. I know it as I know that you were the Raven Prince’s Pawn. Look at…Kabiri, Davix, the Mages who promised to stay separate yet are not. I have a debt with Kabiri, Ash has a debt with Davix’s brother. We have ten years of grace. How could it be enough? I will find as many allies as I can. I’m tired of…doing it the way I’ve been doing it, all these years.’

Alone.

‘I suppose we’ll just have to focus on what we have now, then,’ Augus said, sighing.
But when Gwyn looked over, he saw that Augus was smiling faintly and looking at him. He didn’t look like it was a bad thing.
Two more chapters to go after this one! Just a note that the fae tales canon will continue in The Ice Plague - bringing the conflict between Mages and the rest of the fae to a head - but that Gwyn and Augus will no longer be the core characters, though they will be a part of the ensemble.

Thanks to everyone for reading, and for leaving comments this late in the game! You folks have the most incredible stamina and I adore you.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Gwyn

* By the end of the week, the grounds around the Unseelie Court were clear of everything but corpses that hadn’t yet been moved, and a fertile ground pockmarked and churned from footsteps, elfshot mines and machinery.

News of the Coalition of the Classless had spread. By the end of the second week, fae seemed to believe the imposed sanctions would hold.

Never, in the history of fae, could anyone remember a time when someone else had to intervene on behalf of the Courts to help keep a moderate peace. Gwyn expected the downturn in the confidence of his people, and together with his Inner Court, they addressed concerns and insecurities, managing to stay stable at a time when everyone talked of instability.

The ambaros were the first Seelie fae to leave the Unseelie Court, declaring their homeland safe enough to return. Others stayed longer, hesitant. The Seelie trows seemed comfortable, and showed no signs of wanting to return to their Seelie employment – those that still had it. The Winter Court continued, and the Unseelie and Seelie trows together made it their own, cavorting and dancing freely. It brought joy to the Court, and Gwyn was glad to see that high spirits were maintained despite so many troubled glances or questioning faces.

On an evening as unremarkable as any other, Gwyn sat with Gulvi in the Winter Court, wearing a simple shirt and buckskin pants, barefooted. He had a tankard of mead, and she drank kvass – not any kind that she’d brewed herself, this time.

‘Do you think the Coalition of the Classless counts as the third Court that Davix is trying to make?’ Gulvi said, looking out into the crowd. She lifted a hand and waved at Fenwrel, who was dancing with about fifteen trows. Fenwrel waved briefly, then turned her head back down, still laughing at something that had been signed to her.

‘No,’ Gwyn said, looking into the honeyed liquid and clasing his hands around the metal. ‘I don’t think he was happy with those developments.’

Gulvi stretched one wing, then the other, yawning deeply. She looked tired, but just like Gwyn had
his own private affairs that caused him stress, so did she.

‘How are things with Fenwrel?’ Gwyn said.

Gulvi smiled down at the table, then looked up at him. ‘How much do you know?’

‘Not much. Only what Augus has told me. And what I’ve gathered for myself. Should I be…happy for you?’

‘Always,’ Gulvi said, grinning toothily. ‘In this, yes, La! I don’t know what it is we have, but I like it. She’s sturdy. But she is made of fire. It is like realising a mountain is secretly a volcano. Or not so secretly. It’s easier to live here, with her being here.’

‘And Ash? Does this mean…I don’t really know how it works. Do you get your heart back? To give to someone else?’

‘No,’ Gulvi said, laughing softly. ‘No, it does not work like that. It’s…hard to explain. How a swan-maiden gives her heart, what it means. It’s almost as though we have another soul. We only get one of them, and once we give it away, we do not get a new one. But Fenwrel taught me that there are different types of love. I knew that, but she helped me believe it. Were it not for her, I’d have left the palace already. The zahakhar is a burden, I find.’

Gwyn’s hands dropped away from the tankard. He stared at her. Gulvi seemed to realise what she’d said seconds later because her eyebrows rose and her mouth pinched.

‘Whoops,’ Gulvi said.

‘Gulvi!’ Gwyn said, his voice low but fervent. ‘You feel the zahakhar? Why didn’t you tell anyone?’

All this time, Gwyn had simply assumed that he was the only one to feel it. Ash had acknowledged he didn’t, Augus had said he’d never felt it, and they’d all just…come to the conclusion that Gulvi didn’t either because she’d never said anything about it. To know that she felt the same homecoming as he did, it meant that she was destined to rule the Court...

Gulvi was laughing like a child that had been caught in the middle of laying a prank. She placed a finger to her mouth in a gesture of silence and continued to laugh, her shoulders shaking.

‘Why, my darling, do you think the Raven Prince was grooming me to be Queen before Augus showed his daft, pretty little head? La! It wasn’t because I look like Queen material.’

‘All this time, you could have been- you should have been-’

‘No,’ Gulvi said, the amusement disappearing and her face going hard. ‘No, Gwyn. This time is not my time. I know it in my heart.’

‘You could rule with me! Side by side we could-’

‘I practically do that anyway,’ Gulvi said, her mouth lifting in a half-smile. ‘Gwyn, I know you don’t want it, but nor do I. And I think you are more self-sacrificing than I am, and I need that. I need it to be you, right now. I know that may seem cruel. I don’t care. I don’t care enough about you, or this Court, or these people, to sacrifice what I love about my life. And I know that were I Queen, I may end up sacrificing those things, I may end up caring too much. I know how I am as a bodyguard to one person, but to an entire people? So…I’m not ready. The people will have to wait until they get their swan Queen. I’ve done it once, I’m not in a hurry to do it again. And who says
I’ll need to? Perhaps I was only ever meant to serve a short term.’

‘Is that what you think?’ Gwyn said.

‘Of course not,’ Gulvi said, leaning back and blinking at him slowly. ‘Nor does Fenwrel. I didn’t ask you to make me Queen-in-Waiting, but you did. I think after you’re done, then I’ll be ready. Hopefully you’ll never be done. I’m very invested in you living forever so that I never need to be addressed as ‘Your Majesty.’ Though ‘Assassin Queen’ has a nice ring to it.’

Gwyn stared at her, unable to think of anything to say. Gulvi sipped at her kvass and then traced the rim of her glass with a finger, looking over to where Fenwrel was still capering with the trows, a band of fiddles and drums laying music thick upon the ground.

‘The Raven Prince once said that the world would need what I had to bring to it, when it was time. I had no idea what he meant. La! Did anyone? I still don’t. He was a liar when it suited him. Which was often. I thought I missed him, but I don’t.’

‘I’m not a fan,’ Gwyn said mildly, and Gulvi scowled at him.

‘You know things about him,’ Gulvi said. ‘Through Augus, yes? Do you believe Augus?’

‘Yes,’ Gwyn said, not breaking her gaze. ‘In this, implicitly.’

‘Why?’

‘Because…’ Gwyn shook his head, thinking of everything he’d been told, of that evening when Augus had broken down telling a story that he’d flayed from himself, self-loathing drenching all of his words. ‘Because he does not have the nous to manufacture the tale he told me.’

‘So Fenwrel says,’ Gulvi said quietly. ‘A part of me will always hate him. But I pity him more. He really doesn’t suit palace life. He’s not manipulative enough to be a Courtier. He plays the game because he’s clever at words, and because sometimes – when he wants to be – he’s clever at people. But beneath that is an innocence that is like Ash’s naivete. As though he is constantly surprised, over and over, by how people can lie and betray and deceive. In Ash, I admire it. In Augus…I pity him.’

‘Why the difference between the two?’ Gwyn said.

‘Ash has embraced it,’ Gulvi said, resting her head on her hand. ‘Augus rejects it. At least, this is what I have observed. Gwyn, as strange as it is to hear myself saying it, you are crueller than he is – innately, you are. You think as I do. You have a mercenary mind that I have always admired, even feared. Tell me that Augus is like you, has a mind like yours.’

‘He doesn’t,’ Gwyn said, taking several long drinks. ‘That’s what I like about him. One of the things. Though I don’t think I am as mercenary as you think. I seem to have gotten soft over the past year.’

‘His influence,’ Gulvi said insistently. ‘And not, I think, a bad one.’

‘Tell that to Mikkel,’ Gwyn said, smiling grimly.

‘Do you think any of us saw that coming?’ Gulvi said, her voice low. ‘Gwyn, you and I were always suspicious of Vane – we organised extra interrogations specifically because of issues we were having amongst the generals – Ifir and Dogwill and Vane. Being Unseelie doesn’t give you an all-access pass to knowing exactly who is betraying you, and when. Vane had the benefit of
hiding his true motives behind other devious motives – angling to become treasurer, trying to get access to greater amounts of palace knowledge, trying to slip into your pants.’

Gwyn sighed. In his pocket he could feel a coil of red leather cord.

’Say what you want, Gwyn, we all got through this – in part – thanks to your leadership,’ Gulvi said. Then she gestured towards the Winter Court with a graceful hand. ‘Look, they’re enjoying themselves, aren’t they? Stop seeing what you don’t have, and start seeing what you do. Though if you want to mope some more, I could use a night of inebriation.’

‘No,’ Gwyn said, smiling weakly. ‘I’ve had enough of inebriation to last me for a while, I think.’

*

The weather was turning warmer. Even though the sun was close to setting on the An Fnwy estate, the breeze wasn’t brisk, but balmy. It carried the distant smells of ocean salt and grass pollens, along with the deceptive nectars and mellifluous tones of the poisonous plants flowering in one of Crielle’s many gardens. Already, it had started to overgrow. Weeds had seeded with no one to maintain the beds. Grass pushed past rockeries and invaded amongst thorny roses that were covered with rosehips – no one there to snip them away to encourage new blooms.

Gwyn sat on the ground, holding a small cake in his hands. He looked up when Augus walked over to him. After an hour of requested privacy – Augus exploring the grounds – he was glad to see him return.

‘Is it strange?’ Augus said. ‘My being here, knowing that you wouldn’t be doing this if it wasn’t for my actions?’

‘It’s strange,’ Gwyn said, looking down at the cake covered in poorly made marzipan.

The trows had shown him how to do it. They’d walked him patiently through every step – it was plain that Gwyn had no natural gift of cooking and it was probably a good thing that no one would have to eat the cake. He set the cake down. Augus sat down next to him, leaned into Gwyn’s arm. The breeze shifted Gwyn’s hair, but Augus’ was too damp, and his hung long and healthy around his face.

‘Tell me about this,’ Augus said, gesturing to the cake. ‘I know so little about your time here.’

Gwyn grimaced and looked over his shoulder at the manor house itself. He’d avoided it. He didn’t want to go back inside for a long time, and the fae magic within would preserve it and keep it safe and clean. He was far more comfortable in the gardens. Could almost imagine being a young child again and taking whatever free moments he could to enjoy places away from people who were dangerous and unpredictable.

‘Delphine loved marchpane,’ Gwyn said, smiling at the cake. ‘Marzipan, as it’s called now. She could make so many things with it. Tiny little rabbits and ducks and carrots would spring from her hands. She was an artisan. I didn’t realise it at the time. But she took such care with everything she crafted from food. She used to…save me the mistakes she made. The ones that wouldn’t be fit for Crielle and Lludd and guests. She was supposed to throw them out, and instead she’d hide them in my room. I once found four little sugar carrots that had been painted the wrong shade of orange, wrapped in a napkin, stuffed into a shoe in my room.’

Gwyn smiled at the memory, but he felt heavy and he leaned into Augus, blinking at the cake.

‘It took me a very long time to realise that she didn’t make mistakes. I was maybe…nineteen or
twenty when it occurred to me that—Well, I saw it. She made the mistakes on purpose, so that—I suppose so that if she was ever caught giving me these things, she could explain it was food only fit for the pigs anyway. And she had more leeway with Crielle. But having leeway isn’t the same as—She had workers she loved be killed for…infractions. She lost people that were like daughters or sons to her. She… She risked a lot.’

‘To feed you,’ Augus said, his voice as soft as the light around them. ‘The marzipan; is that why you like sugar so much?’

Gwyn nodded, smiling a little. He’d always had a sweet tooth, but it was also easiest for Delphine to get certain types of food to him over others. A stew could spoil when hidden away, and even though he could eat spoiled foods, Delphine hadn’t liked it.

‘She couldn’t tell me she was proud of me. She couldn’t like me around others. She had to—She had to treat me the way the rest of them did. It made things harder sometimes. She could wield an insult as sharply as the rest. But there was always a look in her eye that made it…easier to bear. There were always spare crusts left out late at night when another cook would know to put them in the compost. I would be—If I was caught spending too long in the kitchens I would be reprimanded. Sometimes I didn’t have enough time to grab something to eat. But when I did—There was always something there.’

‘She gave you a cake once,’ Augus said. ‘I remember you telling me. A cake with ivy on it, so you would know your birth-plant.’

‘Yes,’ Gwyn said, his voice thickening. ‘You remember that?’

He thought of Crielle writing down the day of his birth. How everything had changed in her journals after that. Madness and cruelty turning her mind from tended plants to wild, feral things that had taken over every capacity for warmth, until finally she could only find warmth for Efnisien, and maybe Lludd.

‘You’ve shared very few details with me,’ Augus said. ‘I remember the ones you have.’

‘I know the date of my birth now,’ Gwyn said, swallowing and feeling like his throat was clogged up.

‘Do you?’ Augus said. Gwyn didn’t know how he did it, but his voice sounded careful. Like he somehow understood the heaviness in Gwyn’s body.

‘When I read her journals…’

Gwyn closed his eyes and couldn’t think of how to say it. He didn’t even want to say it. But it had been bothering him for days. It had sent poisonous roots down into his heart, and he was growing so tired of anything to do with poison. He knew he had to pull it out of himself.

‘When I was a child,’ Gwyn said softly, ‘I used to have this rare dream. It was a dream of—Of unparalleled warmth. It was gold and soft and bright. It felt—It felt so good. It was its own nightmare, because I would wake and not understand exactly where it had come from. And I used to know, somehow, it belonged to her. To Crielle. It was like—It was everything I ever wanted. Everything.’

Augus said nothing, and Gwyn wondered if he was finding it hard to stay silent. If—like always—he was silently judging Gwyn’s family and unable to understand how Gwyn could find any sort of emotion for them that wasn’t hatred.
‘I loved her,’ Gwyn said, looking down at the ground. ‘So much. I would have done anything for her. I’m quite sure she knew that. I wanted my father’s respect, and his pride, and his approval. But I wanted Crielle’s love. And I would have this dream… And I would cry, because- Because I didn’t know where it came from. But a part of me did. That part that- That you say you need. That I… can’t stand. You know that- Do you remember the time before you were born? In the lake? Do you remember that?’

Augus said nothing for a long time, and then he nodded. Gwyn felt the movement of it where Augus’ arm touched his.

‘I remember darkness,’ Augus said. ‘Water and darkness, and feeling like all I had to do was be connected to everything around me. I…find it sometimes, in the dark, when I’m digesting food at the bottom of a lake. Every time I hunt and come back to my human-form again, it’s a little like being reborn.’

‘I think…that I remember,’ Gwyn said, trying to keep his voice steady and calm and failing. ‘I think I remembered it in those dreams. And for a long time, I thought it was only my imagination. And then I found her journals. She…she loved me, once.’

His voice broke, and his breath came out in a huff of bitter laughter, because he couldn’t seem to stop doing this. He swallowed, continued, knew he’d never speak of it again if he didn’t speak of it now.

‘She loved me so much, and then I was born, and she saw me, and it all went away. She couldn’t stand me, Augus. I was everything to her, and then- And then- I think about how badly I hurt her. Just- Just through being myself. I remember- Gods, I remember that I wanted to…give her something. Before I could even really think it, I just remembered being surrounded by so much warmth and light and love and wanting to give something back to her and I don’t even know how, but when I came into the world it was just…light, and I thought it was so, so beautiful, and I ruined her.’

He pressed his fingers to his eyes as though it would help. It didn’t help. Nor did Augus’ hand on his back. Nor did any of it. His chest was shaking. He’d laugh if it weren’t for the fact that the words hurt so much.

‘I just wanted her to love me, and I took it away.’ Gwyn sniffed and then rubbed at his nose, taking several deep breaths. ‘I wish she’d killed me.’

‘Really?’ Augus said, and Gwyn nodded, and then shook his head, and didn’t know anymore. ‘You know, Gwyn, how she treated you- That wasn’t your fault.’

‘How can it not be?’ Gwyn said, his voice exploding out of him. ‘I have the proof, now. I have the proof that I could have had something real and true, and that I ruined it and I-’

‘Gwyn,’ Augus said, his voice as neutral as possible. It was the voice Augus used when he was worried that Gwyn would think he was being condescending. ‘You didn’t choose to be Unseelie. Or have a light that hurts things. Or even to be born into that family. You were trapped in a situation that-’

‘She was trapped too,’ Gwyn said, insistent.

‘By you?’ Augus said, seeking clarification.

‘By me.’
Augus laughed, but the sound was devoid of humour.

‘Gwyn, should a cage blame itself for being a cage? You were no jailer. I know that your existence manifesting the way that it did hurt her. It hurt you. But it also…has nothing to do with you. It is just as useless to blame her heartsong of appearance. She didn’t know, anymore than you did. You were both – pardon my saying so – fucked by circumstance. She took it out on you, and you took it out on yourself, and none of it reflected reality.’

Gwyn went silent for a long time. He felt resentful, and it was odd to find himself feeling it towards Augus and being able to label the feeling. Because believing Augus meant that things would get harder, not easier. It was far easier to know where to place the blame for it all than to think of things like powerlessness and chaos and chance. That was Gulvi’s game, not his.

‘Do you believe me, when I say it’s not your fault?’ Augus said.

‘No,’ Gwyn said.

He winced. He was supposed to, wasn’t he? Augus was so rarely wrong about these things. What if Augus felt like he was throwing all that…reasoned gentleness back in his face? What if he-

‘That’s all right,’ Augus said.

Gwyn looked at him, and Augus nodded.

‘Is it?’ Gwyn said.

‘You only need to be able to talk about it sometimes, Gwyn. I don’t care how long it takes for you to believe me. You don’t give yourself a chance to consider something different if you won’t share your thoughts with someone who might think differently to you and your family.’

‘Believing you…’ Gwyn said. ‘It’s harder.’

‘For a little while,’ Augus said. ‘Yes. It will be. It’s always…there’s an appeal in holding yourself at fault for something. Even the Unseelie, who don’t like to believe in regret, even we know there is consolation and blame and guilt.’

‘And the alternative?’

‘The truth,’ Augus said, rubbing at Gwyn’s arm. ‘Which would you rather have me believe? That the Raven Prince was an innocent victim and that I defeated him maliciously and had so much power, or that I was manipulated and made helpless around people cleverer than I? For one might be the truth, Gwyn, but it hurts me more.’

Gwyn swallowed, his throat hurt. He pressed his palm to the back of his neck, and Augus reached up and stroked at his hand.

He looked down at the cake again and reached out, stroking the marzipan with the tip of his finger. It had been a dream of his, as a child. To somehow miraculously be able to bake Delphine something incredible. To hide it somewhere as she hid food for him. To…to express gratitude. Baking with the trows had taught him that he might not be capable of making something incredible, but he could make something that was real.

‘Gwyn,’ Augus said. ‘That poison is still out there.’

‘I know,’ Gwyn said, shuddering.
They’d only managed to locate three of the people who Vane had entrusted with the poison and the arrows. Days of interrogations of the fie ellylon, Augus burning through his compulsions and too many prisoners in the cells, and they’d only found three.

‘If I die, Augus, I will already have had far more…goodness in my life, than I ever thought I could have.’

‘That is not as reassuring as you think,’ Augus said. ‘And, I think, sad.’

Gwyn laughed softly, covering his face, but he didn’t know how to express the truth of the matter to Augus. How fortunate he was to have had these moments with someone else. To have learned the things he’d already learned about how much better life could be. He was supposed to die on a battlefield as a soldier. He wasn’t supposed to have anything at all. Where Augus saw sadness, Gwyn felt a glow in his chest and protected it.

‘And the Coalition?’ Augus said. ‘The state of everything? Fae thinking we can’t manage ourselves?’

‘We can’t,’ Gwyn said, looking up at the sky. ‘We can’t do this alone. I don’t know who I trust, Augus. But I’m young. You’re young. Gulvi and Ash are young. The Court is a skeleton. Without a framework of support, we’re nothing. Perhaps the Coalition wasn’t the right thing to do, and I suspect it might not be enough, even now.

‘But there are things coming that I cannot fight with a sword. And I have already proven that my sword isn’t enough for what is already here. It is not a sign of my power – but the urgency we all feel – that the Coalition even came into existence. I am a pawn, Augus. I don’t know how, I don’t know in what way, but I know that I am one. Albion too. I know it as I know that you were the Raven Prince’s Pawn. Look at…Kabiri, Davix, the Mages who promised to stay separate yet are not. I have a debt with Kabiri, Ash has a debt with Davix’s brother. We have ten years of grace. How could it be enough? I will find as many allies as I can. I’m tired of…doing it the way I’ve been doing it, all these years.’

*Alone.*

‘I suppose we’ll just have to focus on what we have now, then,’ Augus said, sighing.

But when Gwyn looked over, he saw that Augus was smiling faintly and looking at him. He didn’t look like it was a bad thing.

Ten years of grace. Gwyn had already proven that he could do a great deal in only two or three, so he was confident he could achieve a great deal more in ten. But he wouldn’t tell anyone else that, just in case he failed.

*They were walking side by side, still in the An Fnwy estate grounds, but out of view of the manor now. They were in the grass fields. It was always gold or wheaten or ochre, and the grass was always long – sometimes heavy and bowing with seed, sometimes not. Gwyn didn’t know what the land was meant for. It wasn’t cultivated. Sometimes there were targets set up at the far end, but there were formal target grounds and even a sandy circular arena attached to the manor itself, where- where he’d… Where Mafydd… Gwyn closed his eyes and took a breath and Augus pressed closed to him, as though he knew.*
But out here in the tall grass, it was at once peaceful and not. The grasses bent gracefully and gently and silvered in the last of the light, looking like they were spun out of white-gold. It was quiet but for the occasionally chattering and cooing of birds. There were noises in the grass. Rabbits running to their holes, mice and rats getting out of the way of their footsteps.

Gwyn could hear screams in a younger voice. Cracking, broken sounds before he learned not to make them anymore.

‘Why this place?’ Augus said, his voice muted.

They slowly came to a stop. The ground was soft and uneven under their feet. Augus turned to face Gwyn, and Gwyn looked out over him, ghosts moving through his mind. Some were louder and brighter than others. He blinked, confused for a few seconds, sure he had seen Efnisien in the distance. Golden and bright and everything Gwyn was supposed to be.

Monstrous without being the wrong kind of monster.

Something hot and tense moved through his body. It started at his neck and flashed into the back of his spine and he moved into Augus and swept his legs. Augus fell, Gwyn’s hand moving behind his head to stop it from crashing into the broken grass, Gwyn landing on top of him, legs already spread to make sure he didn’t crush him. The breath was knocked from Augus’ lungs. His eyes were wide. But he didn’t struggle. His green gaze glittered up, and Gwyn stared back at him, feeling ghosts move inside of him, wanting to silence them.

His lips met Augus’, not gentle, not chaste, but tearing. Forcing Augus’ mouth open with his own, pushing his tongue inside clumsily, tangling his fingers in Augus’ wet, thick hair and holding him down to the ground, taking the bitter taste of him and replacing it with his own. Augus made a sound of surprise that was stifled, another sound that Gwyn couldn’t interpret, and then he was surprised by a hand at the back of his head, twisting up hair in his fingers. It hurt, but Augus didn’t tug him away.

The rough kiss continued until the sides of Augus’ mouth were wet, until his bottom lip was swollen from Gwyn biting him more than once, soothing with pointed little licks and then biting hard again, until Augus made a sound of complaint.

‘Why this place?’ Augus said, his voice less even than before.

‘Efnisien used to torture me here,’ Gwyn said, staring down at him. ‘This was his place. And mine, I suppose. Ours.’

‘Yet another thing you never talk about,’ Augus said, shifting as though getting more comfortable. His hand was still tight in Gwyn’s hair, a constant, steady pressure that was also pain.

Gwyn reached down and took Augus’ wrist and raised it above his head, pinning it to the soft earth. He stared down at Augus, knew he would never, ever hurt him. Not like Efnisien. Never like that. Augus’ eyes flashed to have his wrist pinned. If his heartsong was still dominance, he would have fought. He still might.

‘Don’t fight me,’ Gwyn said, lowering his head to Augus’ neck and licking at it. They weren’t measured or controlled movements like Augus managed, but rough and eager. He scraped his teeth across Augus’ jaw, the skin blanching white. He ducked down and bit Augus’ collarbone, and fingers tightened in his hair and pulled him up. Gwyn stared just past Augus’ face at the fertile earth beneath them.
'He did it out in the open?' Augus said idly, like they were in the middle of a different conversation. ‘Every time? The worst of it?’

‘The worst of it,’ Gwyn said. ‘Maybe it made him feel more a part of nature.’

Gwyn laughed, and Augus’ eyes narrowed enough that Gwyn thought maybe he shouldn’t be doing this. Maybe this wasn’t what any sort of rational or normal person did. Go to a place where they were tortured, pin their lover to the ground and want to do something else. He could teleport them back to a bed in an instant. But the air wasn’t cold around them, and Gwyn had tiny stinging insects inside of him, scratching and nibbling at his skin from beneath.

‘I just want…’ Gwyn said, frustrated.

He screwed up his face, annoyed, and thought Augus would interrupt him, but he didn’t. The hand in his hair gentled. Not enough to be called kind, but enough that Gwyn felt it.

‘You told me to be greedier,’ Gwyn said, accusation in his voice.

‘I did,’ Augus said.

‘You can’t say that and expect me not to be.’

‘So what do you want?’

‘I want…’ Gwyn stared down at Augus, aware of heat and the cool of the ground beneath his knees and the knowledge that there were probably hundreds of better places for this and yet a vindictive part of him just didn’t care. ‘I want…a good memory of this place.’

Augus leaned up to meet him as Gwyn lowered his head. The kiss they shared was painful and Gwyn dug Augus’ wrist harder into the ground and Augus didn’t retaliate, only let go of Gwyn’s hair and rubbed at his scalp and then moved his other arm above his head. Rested it alongside the wrist pinned to the earth.

Gwyn rose up on his arms and stared down at him, and Augus looked up with a kind of lazy expectation. It wasn’t acquiescence, it never really was with Augus. But it made Gwyn swallow roughly, and he shifted his knees on either side of Augus’ hips and then ground down to make sure Augus knew exactly what Gwyn was thinking.

The tips of Augus’ mouth quirked upwards, and he blinked at Gwyn as though they did this all the time. Outside. Here.

Augus didn’t even look worried. He didn’t say: ‘Are you sure?’ Gwyn had expected some kind of protest.

‘I could tie your wrists,’ Gwyn said, faintly goading.

‘With what?’ Augus said, raising his eyebrows.

Gwyn let go of Augus’ wrist and leaned into the grass, tearing it out by its poorly anchored roots. He stripped the roots away easily, rubbed dirt off onto his pants, and separated the hank of grass into two bundles and knotted one end to the other. Then, as Augus watched with interest, Gwyn slid the grass beneath Augus’ wrists and wound it. The grass was stronger than it looked. And bunched together as it was, twisted into shape, it did well for what he needed. Augus’ wrists tied above his head, his hands curling loosely.
When Augus didn’t protest, Gwyn dug into the tight space of Augus’ pockets until he found the small vial of lubricant – hardly enough for one encounter between them – and rested it on Augus’ chest.

After a beat and no response from Augus except for more of that lazy blinking, Gwyn shifted. He undid the laces of Augus’ pants and then the belt buckle because he wasn’t quite thinking about the order of things. He withdrew the belt and dropped it beside Augus’ head – thought briefly that it would make a fine gag but that Augus would loathe it and Gwyn would rather be tasting the leather in his own mouth and...he could bring that up later. He gripped the hem of Augus’ pants, whose hips arched helpfully. Gwyn yanked the material down, workmanlike, all the way down until they were off one ankle but not the other.

The vial of lubricant rolled into the dirt and Gwyn stared at it and then pressed his hand to Augus’ limp cock and felt the shape of it in his palm. Gwyn watched Augus closely, biting his own lip as he curled fingers and pulled from the base to the tip, feeling the skin move beneath his hand.

He let go of Augus’ cock and ran his hand up underneath his shirt. Dug fingers in and grasped a handful of his skin even though it was hard, because Augus was lean and not bulky with muscle. Augus hissed a little, but aside from flexing his wrists, he bore it.

Gwyn reached down to his own pants and drew out his half-hard cock. Without thinking, he jacked it to hardness, only realising he was doing something unusual when Augus’ eyes widened and Gwyn’s hand flew away from himself in response, his cheeks flushing. It wasn’t that strange, was it? He’d done it furtively after battle before, trying to exorcise the high edge of bloodlust.

‘Do that more,’ Augus said, trying to shift so that he could see more.

Gwyn shoved him back down into the ground.

‘No.’

He pushed Augus’ knees apart and settled between them, then bowed over himself, his spine curving sharply as he licked Augus’ cock. Then, he took his length into his mouth and sucked viciously. Augus swore and jack-knifed and Gwyn pushed him back down into the ground once more. One hand at his chest, the other at his hip, holding him still.

Augus’ legs kicked. Loose trousers whacked against the dirt, his heels thudded down, and Gwyn resisted the urge to grit his teeth because that wouldn’t be helpful and sucked harder, his mouth hurting.

‘Gwyn,’ Augus said, his voice pleading, high, ‘easy, easier, please.’

So Gwyn went easier, spots of red and white behind his eyes. Augus moaned in relief, even as his cock thickened in Gwyn’s mouth.

He licked over Augus’ cock and down into the crease of his thighs and over his balls and then nipped a patch of skin at Augus’ hip bone and then swallowed Augus’ cock down again even though it was harder now, and Gwyn had to shift position to make sure the angle was better.

Gwyn kept Augus pinned as he took his cock into the back of his throat, keeping Augus from thrusting forward, which was what he kept trying to do. His hips jerked like they wanted to tear Gwyn’s throat open. It made Gwyn’s cock throb between his legs. He drew back and sucked repeatedly at the head of Augus’ cock in sharp motions, felt Augus begin to cry out before he managed to swallow the sound down. So Gwyn kept going until the sound came out, properly.
Augus was panting after that, and Gwyn’s cheeks were flushed with effort and pride and something savage that he didn’t have a name for.

When Augus was rolling his hips up over and over again, Gwyn pulled off, saliva sticky between them. He reached for the vial of lubricant even as he tried to bite at Augus’ lips, and Augus moved his head out of the way so that Gwyn smeared his mouth against his cheek. Augus turned and bit Gwyn’s ear hard enough that his voice broke, and Augus laughed around the flesh caught in his teeth and didn’t let go.

‘Augus,’ Gwyn growled.

Lubricant was slick on his fingers and he got his ear away from Augus’ mouth and had one hand on Augus’ tied wrists and the other between his legs. It was messy, sliding two fingers into Augus with no warning. Augus’ abdomen shuddered, muscles rippled, his chest expanded and didn’t contract on an inhale as he held his breath. Gwyn pushed into heat and resistance and groaned where Augus didn’t, words tearing free of the hooks inside his throat, spilling out of his mouth.

‘You’re so good like this,’ Gwyn said. He shoved deeper, and Augus exhaled as though Gwyn had knocked the breathout of him. Gwyn withdrew and pushed hard because he wanted to hear the sound again. He didn’t, but Augus gasped instead, and that was just as good. Augus’ legs shifted restlessly around Gwyn’s bent knees, as he knelt and worked Augus open for him. ‘You’re so good.’

The viciousness inside of him pinged harder, faster, bit at him with fervour. It was like his light, but it wasn’t his light. He used that enough now that it lay quiet inside of him until he had need. He scissored his fingers and Augus grunted and turned his head to the side. Gwyn went back to thrusting in and out, pushing too hard, too fast, curling his fingers up and scraping at Augus’ prostate, so that Augus gave a full body jerk. His head tilted back and his hair clung to the ground as he groaned.

Gwyn slicked his cock and there wasn’t enough lubricant but it would have to do. He took himself in hand and shifted awkwardly because he’d not even pulled his pants all the way down and he was still wearing his shirt. But he had good aim when he notched the head of his cock into Augus’ entrance, and he forced his way into tightness, imagining the burn Augus must be feeling and biting his own tongue when he wanted to be biting Augus’.

Augus panted breathlessly, when Gwyn’s balls finally rested against Augus’. He was slotted in place, hips resting against Augus’ hips, one of his hands holding Augus down by the shoulder. His other arm rested on Augus’ torso.

Words were ripping free, falling out of his mouth, driven by the sharp, stinging sensations that wouldn’t leave him alone.

‘You’re amazing,’ Gwyn said, staring at Augus who stared back at him, mouth open. Gwyn could feel tightness around his cock, felt when Augus clenched accidentally – knew the difference between intention and Augus’ body simply responding to invasion. He rolled his hips forwards and found millimetres and Augus reacted like it was more than millimetres and his eyes squeezed shut as he grimaced and then cried out.

‘There’s always…too much of you,’ Augus managed.

‘I don’t care,’ Gwyn said, staring down. And like this, he didn’t. It felt good. It felt good enough that he didn’t have the blocks in place that normally stopped him from speaking. ‘You feel so good.’
‘I’d better,’ Augus said, out of breath and pained and indignant all at once.

Gwyn grinned. As he started thrusting, he realised that the stinging sensations inside of him, the savagery – it wasn’t fury or anger as he’d thought. It was a kind of glee he’d not known anywhere else but during the best hunts. But it was stronger and broader, a bright thing that forced his awareness to the present. Made him aware of details like the flex and shift of Augus’ thigh muscles, the way the fabric of their shirts moved together. How Augus’ right hand was still but his left hand twisted aimlessly in the grass bonds. There was a breeze that smelled of warmer days ahead and a bitterness in his own throat left there by Augus, who had likely been snacking on wormwood earlier.

He crouched down and bracketed Augus’ face with his arms, not caring about the pain in his shoulder, because the molasses thick pleasure in his cock and balls and gut was expanding. He was moving deep, hardly withdrawing before pushing back in, wanting to stay inside of Augus as much as he could. For as long as he could. Except like this, it was never very long.

‘You’re amazing,’ Gwyn said, his voice shaking. Augus was watching him, eyes open, hardly blinking. ‘I don’t tell you. But you are. You’re everything. You’re everything.’

Augus ripped his wrists free from the bondage in a single movement that had Gwyn dreading that he’d said something wrong.

Augus’ hands clutched both sides of Gwyn’s face. His hips rocked up into Gwyn’s thrusts, even though he winced. He didn’t look away.

‘You’re…’ Gwyn slowed, blinking down at him, at the scattered freckled constellations on Augus’ cheeks that were darker than they’d been a few months ago, because Augus was finally getting a bit more time outside. Looking at the faint smile in his lips and the way his nostrils flared as Gwyn rubbed over his prostate. ‘You’re the most beautiful creature I’ve ever seen.’

Augus smiled. Not cynical, nor bitter, but genuine and warm. He pulled Gwyn closer, until Gwyn’s face was tucked between Augus’ shoulder and neck. He said:

‘Oh, Gwyn. Tell me something I don’t know.’

Gwyn bit Augus’ shoulder so hard, that Augus’ body jerked and he swore, blunt claws digging into Gwyn’s scalp. He didn’t care. The fierce joy inside of him was too strong to contain, he was lost in sensation, Augus clutching him tight and Gwyn’s hips bruising Augus’.

Augus came before he did, shaking first, and then laughing in surprise before he clenched in spasms around Gwyn’s cock, his hand twisting Gwyn’s hair into knots. It lasted some time, and Gwyn followed soon after, when he felt Augus loosen around him and seemed to find his way deeper and realised that Augus was relaxed and holding him close and that was what did it. Not the tension, but the moment everything released. All he had to do was follow.

Later – Gwyn wasn’t sure how much time had passed – Augus kissed him gently. Little butterfly kisses on his cheeks, his cheekbones, the bridge of his nose, the corner of his eyes, his eyelashes.

Gwyn sneezed.

‘Stop,’ Gwyn groaned. He’d already slid out of Augus, was resting sticky between them. Augus’ shirt was stained with his come. Gwyn was almost certain there were tiny little scratches over his scalp.

Later still, they walked idly across the fields where they used to run the horses. It was dark, but
their night vision was fine, so they didn’t stumble into any holes or burrows. Augus held Gwyn’s hand. It wasn’t something Gwyn would have initiated, but he decided he liked it.

‘The most beautiful creature you’ve ever seen,’ Augus said, sounding pleased.

‘Yes,’ Gwyn said, feeling shy, after all that.

‘How fickle. So if you see a more beautiful creature in the future, I suppose that leaves me stranded on the side of a street somewhere. Poor, lonely Augus.’

Gwyn laughed, the sound surprising himself. Augus responded by squeezing Gwyn’s hand tightly.

‘The most beautiful creature I will ever see,’ Gwyn said.

‘Better,’ Augus said.

Minutes stretched out. Gwyn felt something quiet come over him. He cleared his throat, felt like he had to say it. Just once. Even if Augus didn’t want to hear it.

‘You aren’t…obligated to me,’ Gwyn said, his voice low. ‘You know that, don’t you? That- You don’t owe me- That if you wanted to find someone better or…prettier or more- or less… someone who suited you better… Augus, I haven’t brought much happiness to the people around me. I don’t seem to have the capacity for it.’

‘Most fae are supposed to bring happiness to themselves,’ Augus said, his voice steady and soft. ‘And you don’t know what you’ve brought to others. You don’t even think of those fae you rescued from…towers and impossible caves, and returned their lives to them. You literally cannot fathom what you’ve brought to others. Well. Let me clarify: You certainly have a handle on how destructive you can be. But not the rest of it.’

‘I needed you to know,’ Gwyn said, his voice small. ‘I don’t want it to go unsaid between us. In case you were only waiting to be set free. In case this is some debt and you’re just...’

Augus sighed and stopped and looped his arms up around Gwyn’s neck and stared at him.

‘I’m not obligated to you,’ Augus said. ‘This isn’t a debt. Did you not hear me when I said that I love you? Did those words literally drift into one ear and float out the other? Are you so unused to hearing them that you can’t? Because I’m starting to think I need to have it tattooed into your flesh, Gwyn. I love you. You are my anam cara, too. You’re mine. Every damned inch of you. You can doubt me, you can run from me, and you can try and make me run from you, but it won’t work.’

Gwyn told himself that he wasn’t staring at Augus like an idiot.

‘I hope I’ve given you a headache,’ Augus muttered, leaning up to peck Gwyn on the lips. ‘Because you’ve given me a sore ass, you overbearing brute.’

Gwyn’s breath burst out of him in a laugh, and it wasn’t funny, exactly, but he still couldn’t quite wrap his mind around what Augus had just said.

‘So,’ Augus said. ‘Did we make a good memory?’

Gwyn leaned into Augus, bringing his arms up and slinging them around Augus’ shoulders and hoping that one day it would feel natural. As it was, he felt greedy. But it turned out that was easier to feel around Augus, than it was other people.
'Yes,' Gwyn said.

'We should come back some time and make more,' Augus said.

Gwyn was still heartsore, but something had eased in his chest. He held Augus close to him and sighed, feeling Augus’ mane damp against his fingers. He stroked over a strand of waterweed, and Augus shivered and hummed and leaned closer. Gwyn turned his head just so and thought that if he had to put a name to it – the slow, flowing feeling that felt like a steady stream under summer sun – he’d call it contentment.

Chapter End Notes

In our second last chapter, 'Hope:'

‘That’s…’ Gwyn cleared his throat and then rubbed his face with his palm hard enough that his face screwed up. ‘That’s- Now isn’t a time to joke, Augus.’

‘Because my sense of humour has felled you many a time.’

‘Don’t joke,’ Gwyn said, his hand falling to his side, his eyes eloquent in their wide, unspoken desperation. ‘Please.’
Hope

Chapter Notes

The second last chapter, and next Friday will be the epilogue. What a journey! :D
Thank you all of you for being on it with me. (Please remember folks that the fae tales
story will continue in *The Ice Plague*, though Gwyn and Augus will no longer be the
main characters - the story will still be m/m and we'll see a lot of familiar faces in the
ensemble.)

Feedback is love. <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Augus
*

‘Your heartsong has stabilised,’ Fenwrel said, smiling. She let go of Augus’ palms and beamed at
him, eyes twinkling. She looked healthier than usual – a side effect of her Inner Court status
perhaps, or maybe she was just happier. Augus was glad to see it. He picked up his cup of tea and
sipped at it. After everything that had happened, all the close calls he’d had, it turned out his
heartsong had stabilised anyway.

‘But,’ Fenwrel said, ‘you were always listening to it.’

‘What?’ Augus said, tapping his claws against the side of the cup.

‘Balance is not an easy heartsong to live with. It sees where you don’t have balance inside you, and
it drives you towards conflict to force that imbalance to resolve. I daresay many of the things you
suspected were going to destroy it over the past months – even Gwyn banning you from the palace
– were all things that eventually made it stronger. I suspect that one is with you to stay.’

He hadn’t thought of it that way before, but it made sense. He’d assumed that if his life fell into
imbalance, it would somehow destroy the heartsong. Yet…true balance came from resolving
imbalance, so he would be more likely to harm it if he did nothing about the deep-seated issues
inside of himself.

He shuddered. It likely meant that he’d have to think about his time in captivity in the future,
among other things.

‘I used to think I was someone who would live forever without experiencing regret,’ Augus said,
settling back in his chair and looking towards Fenwrel’s bay window, towards a view of the night
gardens she’d started personalising. There were night-blooming flowers in shades of red and
orange, bright blue and deep violet.

‘And now?’ Fenwrel said, breaking a biscuit in half and nibbling on it.

‘I think I do feel guilty,’ Augus said. ‘I hate that I do. What Unseelie fae commits harm and then
feels *bad* about it?’
‘Do you regret killing humans?’ Fenwrel asked.

‘No,’ Augus said, laughing. ‘Why would I ever feel guilty about that?’

‘Think about it,’ Fenwrel said, sighing.

A long silence. Augus finished his tea and Fenwrel poured him another cup, even though Augus was happy to do it himself. She fussed over him, and it didn’t look like it was going to stop any time soon. It was odd. He’d had guests like her in his home before he’d had anything to do with the Raven Prince. He’d been the one making sure their needs were met, as they discussed herbs and medicines, talked barter and exchanged gossip. There was something familiar about seeing Fenwrel, even as he still felt on edge around her. He wondered if that would ever go away.

‘You think that I operated outside of my personal code of ethics,’ Augus said. ‘I felt so justified at the time.’

‘Did you?’ Fenwrel asked. ‘Or did you just feel that if anyone can break the rules, why not you?’

Augus laughed quietly. But he turned the words over, knowing that a few months ago, he couldn’t have even touched this conversation without panicking.

‘Did you know that my grandmother never liked the Raven Prince in the same way that she liked you,’ Fenwrel said, looking down at her cup of tea. ‘She admired and adored the Raven Prince, and she was ever so loyal to him, but she thought of him as a wayward nephew. A wise, powerful but… wayward soul. I used to love listening to her talk about him. She wove the most beautiful stories. But they were frightening stories too. A mad creature who could take away other people’s language in a fit of pique. She never had many stories about you, Augus. And she never liked to talk about what you became later. But those stories she did share… you turning up in the eleventh hour having found the documents the Raven Prince had requested – but being so sleep-deprived you could barely stay awake in the meeting that followed, making you seem incompetent at a time when the King knew you were not.’

Augus felt a small trickle of heat move through him, amusement to recall it. The Raven Prince had tasked him with finding an almost impossible document. Twelve libraries, days of research, and Augus had despaired until he’d stumbled across it underneath a stack of papers so thick they’d scraped the vaulted ceiling.

‘Look at what you did for him, even once you’d been tortured by that monster,’ Fenwrel said. ‘How loyal you were, despite everything.’

‘My evil master plan,’ Augus said, sighing. ‘I forgot about it a lot of the time. I make a terrible villain.’

‘Actually, no,’ Fenwrel said, her face entirely serious. ‘You don’t. You killed a lot of people, Augus. What you did to this Court… You were an effective villain. Perhaps not constructed of malice aforethought but all the more frightening because of it.’

Augus didn’t say anything for a little while, feeling chastened. It was Gwyn who told him over and over again that Augus made a terrible villain. At some point, he’d come to believe it. But Fenwrel wasn’t wrong, either. Just because Augus hadn’t executed his destruction with a sense of strategy; it didn’t mean they weren’t still all paying for that destruction. The niggling feeling in his chest that he’d come to understand was guilt, returned.

Perhaps not the sort of subject he should be flippant about, around Fenwrel.
'I think I need to tell him,' Augus said, changing the subject, 'about moving away from the palace.'

'Moving away? It’s about time. You don’t expect a good reaction?'

'No,' Augus said, the guilt expanding into something larger and far more pensive. Shouldn’t he be someone who could handle living in the palace? He managed it for the Raven Prince didn’t he? Why not Gwyn?

'You’ve weathered far worse than this, Augus,' Fenwrel said quietly. 'Take it as it comes.'

He didn’t know how she managed to make it sound so meaningful, given it was phrased as a platitude. But one look at her face and he knew that she’d be there with an offer of tea and refreshments, if he needed someone to talk to if it didn’t go well.

*

Augus wandered the night gardens, lost in thought. He thought about his stabilised heartsong, how he missed the old one; dominance. It was still there, it echoed inside of him, stained everything he did – a pull to self-mastery in the background, demanding that he comport himself better. He thought of the tumultuous time he’d spent over the past few years, chipping away at himself and the world and then Gwyn.

His brow creased as he walked down a narrow garden lane lit with glowing beetles lumbering about, either side of the path. It seemed like a lifetime ago that he’d had to manufacture a collar and a chain for himself, and then had to listen to the Unseelie fae talk about taking a pound of his flesh however they liked. There had been some rather explicit threats of sexual torture that evening. The Unseelie certainly knew how to express themselves.

Then, he remembered Tigbalan, the discussion relating to invisibility, and Augus shook his head in disbelief. All this time, he’d completely forgotten about it. But no wonder, he’d been so close to losing it, he’d stopped thinking of it. It was probably gone.

On a whim, he summoned the invisibility.

He disappeared. Stopped abruptly on the path and looked down at the shimmery nothingness that he’d become. It had been effortless. Easy. Like reaching for something on a table without even thinking about the energy it might require.

He took several deep breaths, his chest didn’t hurt or ache. His breathing didn’t feel constricted.

Was it supposed to be like this all along?

Augus laughed and moved his hands out in front of himself, only able to see the faintest disturbance in the air around him to indicate the position of his arms, his fingers. Others wouldn’t even be able to see that much. He reached out and touched some leaves, they seemed to move of their own volition.

He spent the next half hour using the invisibility, only towards the end starting to feel a faint throb in his chest from using it for so long. Even then, it didn’t constrain his breathing, it didn’t truly hurt. He’d have to tell Gwyn. Surely it would be useful for strategic meetings and a great deal more besides. He’d just have to remember not to tease Gwyn with it – the poor creature was far too sensitive to being touched by someone he couldn’t see.

He looked around the night gardens and saw where he’d ended up. He let himself become visible
again, invisibility falling away like a silk scarf.

Quietly, he headed to the bridge arched over a slow-flowing river. Inside, fish scaled in metallic silver and violet swam and flashed their brighter bellies on occasion. He walked onto the bridge and looked down at them, remembering a time when they leapt for the Raven Prince, when they leapt for him, when they’d leapt for Ash and Gulvi…and now Gwyn.

They’d certainly seen a lot of monarchs in their time.

An hour passed, and he knew he was putting off seeing Gwyn. Putting off the discussion he knew he had to have.

A slight shift in the atmosphere around him, Augus’ senses tingled. He turned to see a waif of a woman walking towards him. She was tall but too thin, her swan wings broad and so bright that they seemed to radiate a haze of brilliance around her. For a moment, Augus thought it was Gulvi – and then he saw that this swan-maiden wore her waist-length white hair loose down to her waist, a waterfall of soft waves. Her swan eyes were a wide black, wilder than Gulvi’s, framed with thick black lashes that were startling on her pale face. At the ends of her long-fingered hands were thick, hooked black claws. Nothing like Augus’ blunter claws. In the V of the white gown she wore, was a locket of swan feathers starting at her collarbones and leading down between her cleavage.

Augus couldn’t breathe. He stared at her. His pulses seemed to flare all at once, terror making him reach up and grip the railing hard.

The woman walked up to him, her footsteps light on the bridge, her webbed feet bare and brushed with light fabric. She had a faint, enigmatic smile on her face. When she joined him, she placed both of her hands on the railing and looked down at the fish for several minutes.

‘Hello,’ she said.

Her voice was light, warm, even friendly.

Augus stared at her. His throat was dry. He thought he might be shaking.

‘Do you know who I am?’ he said hoarsely.

‘Yes,’ she said, smiling. The smile itself lacked cynicism. It was open and knowing. Not cutting like her sister’s could be. ‘Yes. And I know what you did. I know what you did to my family. To my lover. To the one who I would have given my entire heart to.’

Augus thought he might be sick. He reached up and clung to the rail with his other hand, holding on, because for weeks now, he’d been making treatments but he’d not been able to see her, and he’d not known…

The last time he’d seen Julvia, she’d attacked him like she wanted to tear him apart.

And now…was she here to claim a life debt? More? Did she look so relaxed because she knew she held all the cards?

‘I know you have someone who you love greatly,’ Julvia said, her voice as genuine as Gulvi’s could be cutting and sarcastic. ‘My sister told me that you have given your heart to him. You took that from me. It’s why I survived. Did you know?’

Julvia was looking at him again, and all Augus managed was:
‘What?’

‘I was already in the process of giving away my heart to Ljubina.’ Julvia’s gaze went far away, nostalgic and then mournful. But when she focused on him again, she smiled. ‘I was in the process of giving my heart and so I was the strongest I could ever be. I withstood your attack because of the force of my love. My sister may never forgive you for what you’ve done. Though I think she quite likes you all the same.’

‘And…you?’

This was perhaps one of the strangest conversations he’d ever had. Even counting talking to lake spirits while trying to heal them.

‘I think that I will learn to understand you first, before I make my judgement.’

Julvia looked out over the river and smiled down at the fish. She didn’t say anything else, and Augus stared at her rudely, unable to stop himself. She looked fragile, yet there was something so strong about her.

‘She died, didn’t she?’ Augus said, his voice raw. ‘The person you were giving your heart to?’

‘Yes,’ Julvia said. ‘You killed her.’

‘I’m…’ Augus swallowed a thickness in his throat. ‘I’m sorry.’

Julvia turned to him, the smile never left her lips. After a few seconds, she shrugged her wings in a gesture that was so like her sister that Augus blinked. His eyes were burning, he realised. There was a storm happening inside of him.

‘Can you…Do you still have your heart?’ Augus said. ‘Can you still give it to someone?’

‘Yes,’ Julvia said, smiling sadly. ‘Yes, I can.’

‘I owe you a life debt,’ Augus said. ‘For what I’ve done.’

‘Did you not help save me?’ Julvia said. ‘But you’ve said the words, so it must be true. I’ll try not to misuse it.’

‘Julvia!’ That was Gulvi, and she marched towards them looking furious. All sharp edges where Julvia was a softness that radiated strength. Gulvi had both of her knives out, and Augus took a step back without thinking, and then another, because Gulvi and her knives never seemed to mean anything good around Augus. Especially now.

Julvia gave an exasperated sigh.

‘Sister, I’m just talking to him.’

‘Julvia, you will get back to your sickbed at once. We didn’t slave away trying to bring you back for you to make yourself worse talking to this scum! I swear to you, if you don’t get back in that castle in five seconds, I’ll cut your wings off!’

Julvia looked over to Augus and shook her head apologetically, and Augus felt a bubble of hysterical laughter in his chest.

‘I need to get stronger,’ Julvia said. ‘This is the only way.’
‘Not talking to him!’ Gulvi said, staring blackly at Augus. ‘Julvia, you only have an hour in this form at a time, at the moment. You cannot sustain it. Why stress yourself like this?’

‘Oh, was this stressful?’ Julvia said, smiling over at Augus. ‘Augus and I have made acquaintances, sister. Honestly, I do not need a bodyguard.’

‘Yes, you do,’ Gulvi snarled.

‘No, I do not,’ Julvia said, a hint of stubbornness entering her voice.

‘Yes, you do!’

Julvia sighed like she was put upon, and dropped her hands from the bridge’s railing, stepping towards her sister. As she did, Gulvi pointed a knife at Augus.

‘If I find out that you’ve hurt her in any way, I will get my pound of flesh from you. As often as it takes to make a point.’

‘Oh, honestly,’ Julvia sighed, touching Gulvi’s arm with her claws. ‘Are you sure you’re Queen-in-Waiting?’

Gulvi looked down at her sister in a mixture of shock and fury. Julvia only smiled at her, trailing her fingers down and placing them on the hilt of one of her daggers.

‘Besides, if anyone is going to get their pound of flesh, it’s going to be me, sister. Leave the creature alone. Should we not be heading back? I suppose I’ll be a swan again, soon enough.’

‘Darling,’ Gulvi said, her face losing its anger and turning to worry. ‘Yes, of course. Are you hungry? Do you need anything?’

Augus watched them go, his hands numb by his sides. He watched as Gulvi slid a hand around Julvia’s back, underneath her wings. Watched Julvia’s delicate, careful steps. Someone walking like they weren’t quite sure of their ability yet.

He stood there for a long time after they’d left, unable to think, fish occasionally splashing up out of the river and diving back in with a musical plink!

*

Augus knocked on the door that led to Gwyn’s office, two hours later, still reeling. He entered when Gwyn said, ‘Come in,’ and closed the door behind him, resisting the urge to fidget. He was used to mastering his nervousness, and so he walked a few steps into the room and stood in front of Gwyn’s desk, before the two chairs tucked in, looking at the swathe of paperwork in front of him. Gwyn had a feather quill poised in his fingers, writing a language that Augus didn’t recognise, a missive from some species he possibly hadn’t even heard of.

Gwyn seemed to do things like that a lot.

‘I have something to say to you,’ Augus said, clearing his throat and unable to stop himself from clasping his hands at his front.

‘May I speak first?’ Gwyn said.

Augus nodded. Anything to take his mind off what he needed to talk about. He knew now why the subject bothered him so much. He didn’t want to move out of the palace, he wanted to stay tethered
to Gwyn in some tangible, long-term way. There was no dream of his home which wasn’t complete if Gwyn wasn’t in the picture.

But Gwyn had to live in the Court.

Gwyn tapped the ink out of the quill, and then cleaned it on a small blotched rag, and then cleaned it again on a wet piece of cloth. He put it down and looked at his desk, and then took out a folder made of pressed bark and opened it, staring at what was inside. When he looked up at Augus again, his face was sombre.

Was it a diplomatic assignment gone wrong? Augus had no idea.

‘Augus, this place is toxic for you,’ Gwyn said, his lips thinning. ‘You are very brave, but I only want you to be healthy and well. I’m not sending you away. I promise. But…will you consider commuting between a lake and the palace?’

Augus stared at him. His mouth went slack.

It seemed to be the day for it.

But Gwyn’s eyes widened and he closed the folder abruptly and his cheeks flushed.

‘I mean, I only mean-’ Gwyn shook his head and looked away. ‘I’m not…I only thought that- And only if you wanted to. I’m not-’

‘Gwyn,’ Augus said, holding up a hand. Gwyn went silent immediately. ‘I was going to ask if I might spend some time away from the palace. But only if you’ll stay with me. At least some of the time. Two or three days a week? Four? Whatever you can spare. I’m afraid it’s rather compulsory. I don’t want you living here full-time anymore. The palace can have you, but it can’t have all of you.’

But only if you’ll stay with me.

He hadn’t intended to say it, but as soon as the words spilled out, he realised he couldn’t have it any other way.

Gwyn closed his eyes for a long moment, but Augus knew the expression as relief. How long had Gwyn been thinking this too? Augus walked around the table and placed a hand on Gwyn’s shoulder.

‘I thought you’d think I was rejecting you,’ Augus said.

Gwyn’s shoulders rose and fell in a single breath of laughter. ‘I thought you’d think I was sending you away.’

‘We’re a pair, aren’t we?’ Augus said, scratching the back of his neck lightly. Gwyn shivered beneath his touch.

Gwyn opened the folder and spread out three official pieces of parchment, each with a wax seal at the bottom.

‘I checked, you see,’ Gwyn said, touching each one lightly. ‘I checked and had the deeds remade, in case you’d lost them. Everything is still under your name. I’m not saying- I know you have the lake that Ash made you, but you never seemed inclined to that place.’
‘I’m not,’ Augus said. ‘It’s pretty enough, but I didn’t make it.’

‘You may not like any of these locations,’ Gwyn said. ‘But they’re prime land, and the lakes are- I did my research, Augus. This one here, an Each Uisge has been born there before. I thought perhaps…back when I got the deeds, I thought of what might appeal to you most. You said I had to gift you with what I thought it was worth. It never came close. But will you look at them?’

Augus’ heart was beating slow and steady as he leaned down and pressed his lips to the top of Gwyn’s head. Gwyn tilted back and looked up at him and Augus kissed the tip of his nose. He thought of how easy it was now. That not so long ago, even basic conversation had been such a challenge. Once, he’d worried what they would have outside of what they’d found in captivity. Now he was glad he’d waited long enough to find out.

‘I saw Julvia,’ Augus said.

‘Oh?’ Gwyn said. ‘I’d heard something about that. She’s shifting again. Only for short periods of time. Was it difficult?’

Augus wasn’t sure how to respond. He hadn’t ever thought she’d heal fully, hadn’t gone far enough to imagine the depths of her spitting hatred, only had that memory of her in swan form, attempting to tear him apart with a beak not made for rending his flesh. The reality was harder and easier all at once, made him tense to think about.

He didn’t realise how long he’d gone without answering until Gwyn cupped the back of Augus’ head and sent a shiver of warmth down his spine. Augus’ eyes narrowed, and Gwyn only stared up at him, guileless, which made Augus force down the bitterness of his spite. Instead, he pressed his head back into Gwyn’s palm and closed his eyes, sighing.

‘Can we see these bits of land you carved from the Seelie for me?’

‘Of course,’ Gwyn said, his thumb tracing the back of Augus’ skull, sounding weary, but pleased.

* * *

Augus’ doubt that any of the land would be suitable, lasted as long as it took to teleport to the first location.

He stood there in a wide clearing, turned around slowly, looking at the high canopied beech trees, the occasional oak, ash, rowan and yew. Broad leaves trembled in the gentle breeze. He turned to look at the lake, shored on one side with slate grey soil easing directly into lapping waves, and on the other side, a steep elevated bank that would make a good place to overlook his territory.

A familiarity rung within him as he walked closer to the lake, placing his hands down on damp tufts of grass, stroking up over a thicket of brambles, feeling the thorns kiss his palms. A place that was dangerous and beautiful all at once, and Ash had always liked blackberries.

‘I’ve been here before,’ Augus said quietly. But he knew he hadn’t. Not really. His bones rung with familiarity, the rest of him struggled to understand it.

‘This was the easiest parcel of land to section off for you,’ Gwyn said. ‘The Seelie seized the land a long time ago and barred any other creatures from living here for a good period of time. It was all felt to be cursed, you see.’

‘Cursed?’ Augus said, turning to look at him. Gwyn had an odd expression on his face. ‘Cursed with what?’
‘You,’ Gwyn said. ‘In a way.’

‘Ah,’ Augus said, laughing under his breath. ‘I thought you’d save this one for last.’

‘Why?’ Gwyn said. ‘When it’s the best I have to offer you?’

Augus looked towards the beech forest and then walked towards it, his nostrils flaring.

‘Bluebells,’ he said, closing his eyes to remember carpets of them at his old lake. They weren’t flowering now, but they’d left a patina of their shrivelled, worn petals behind, an azure sweetness banked and bitter to remind him of what might come the following spring. Somewhere in the human realm, humans would wander into a similar looking beech forest, seeking the eldritch beauty of endless bluebells, and Augus would wait and stalk and then drag them into the water, back to his home.

‘Damn,’ he said, pressing his fingers to his forehead. ‘I suppose I’ll have to break the news to Ash. He did put an awful lot of care into the lake he sought for me.’

‘So…here?’ Gwyn said, his fingers curling and uncurling.

‘There might be room for a cabin,’ Augus said, pointing some distance away. ‘If you felled some of the beech trees. Yes?’

‘That’s…’ Gwyn cleared his throat and then rubbed his face with his palm hard enough that his face screwed up. ‘That’s- Now isn’t a time to joke, Augus.’

‘Because I’m renowned for my sense of humour.’

‘Don’t joke,’ Gwyn said, his hand falling to his side, his eyes eloquent in their wide, unspoken desperation. ‘Please.’

What would it take? How many years until Gwyn wouldn’t look at him like that? Wouldn’t fundamentally doubt his affection on so many levels? It filled Augus with sadness and hunger at the same time. But the hunger won out. For now, having Gwyn look at him with such raw want was a reassurance he’d never had when he’d lived in the same palace as the Raven Prince, when he’d been locked in an everlasting darkness with the Nightingale. Perhaps it pierced Gwyn’s heart to feel that longing around Augus, but it healed a wound in Augus’ at the same time.

‘I’m not joking,’ Augus said, walking over to him. ‘Besides, I need a home for myself for a while, Gwyn. I don’t want you in that palace every day, but nor do I want you interfering with the energy I’ll need to build up under the water to create my home. Not often, anyway. A cabin is a good compromise, isn’t it? Grant me permission to enter your home and I’ll do all sorts of wicked things to you.’

He was close enough to Gwyn now to feel the shudder through his fingertips as he stroked Gwyn’s arm.

‘We could have had this,’ Gwyn said, ‘years ago. If you’d checked the titles I’d given you. If you’d-’

Augus sighed, he pressed his forehead to the dip between Gwyn’s collarbones and closed his eyes. He wasn’t the only one who had thought back to that time and wondered if things could be different. But it was time to put that to bed.

‘Sweetness,’ Augus said, ‘I had a home. I was happy. There are few people out there in the world
who know what it’s like to be truly content. I knew it for years. I wouldn’t have really noticed you until I’d been shaken from all that brought me joy. I would have been flattered at the titles and then left them alone. There was a time when I was sure I’d never find any measure of contentment again, but that which I clawed back for myself in tiny shreds. And I’m certain I won’t ever find that kind of contentment again. But what I do know is that by making a home here, and you building a cabin over there, it could be a step in the direction of trying to prove myself wrong, couldn’t it?’

Augus smiled as he looked down between them at their feet – Gwyn’s bare, Augus’ booted – feeling one of Gwyn’s hands rest lightly upon his shoulder, and the other rest against his lower back.

‘You weren’t ready either, my dear heart,’ Augus said, and Gwyn’s hands tightened, pressed harder. ‘It’s only since we’ve been tempered like steel that we’ve been able to stand the clash of it; our hearts meeting.’

‘Gods, Augus,’ Gwyn said, clearing his throat. ‘You can’t talk to me like that.’

‘Why? Turned on?’

Gwyn’s chest rumbled with deep laughter, his head dropped to Augus’ shoulder. Augus was halfway through draping his arms against Gwyn’s back when he felt teeth dig into his shirt, into his shoulder, stirring up a rough burst of pain.

‘Ow,’ Augus said, pushing at him.

Gwyn made a sound of protest and didn’t move, keeping his teeth in Augus’ shirt and skin, saliva beginning to make the fabric wet.

‘All right, you’ve made your point,’ Augus said, laughing, shoving at Gwyn’s good shoulder.

Gwyn wouldn’t let go, and Augus pushed at Gwyn’s forehead and he still wouldn’t let go, and it really hurt too much for Augus to be laughing like he was. He wondered how much shame he was bringing to the name ‘Each Uisge’ to be reacting as he was, in a place that had stirred fear in the hearts of fae and humans both. But he didn’t care.

‘I’ll punish you,’ Augus said, not even bothering to inject any venom into his voice.

Gwyn bit harder. Not quite breaking skin, but close enough to it that Augus hissed.

‘All right,’ Augus said, pulling hard on his hair. ‘There are other ways to ask to be hurt.’

Finally, Gwyn let go. Augus shifted his shoulder, wincing. He kept a tight grip on Gwyn’s hair, saw mischief spark in his eyes. He looked at the lake one last time before pulling Gwyn’s head down and to the side, making him arch his back awkwardly.

‘We’re going back to the palace,’ Augus said, ‘and I’m going to teach you how to bite someone properly.’

Gwyn enfolded them in light before Augus even had to ask.

* 

Hours later, Gwyn’s fists were white-knuckled upon blankets. He shuddered, cuffed with manacles and chains to the headboard. Augus pulled back on the delicate chain of Gwyn’s collar to make sure that he couldn’t bury delectable sounds into the warp and weft of the sheets. The chain was
delightful. Gwyn was so hesitant to do anything to break it, that Augus only had to pull on it lightly for Gwyn to arch his neck back until Augus could hear his breath move harshly in and out of his throat. His only protest at the harsh angle a whine, and the shifting of his good shoulder that meant he was struggling with it.

Augus had started slowly, drawing Gwyn into their bedroom, where Gwyn had looked sceptical about there being any ‘punishment’ at all. He even had the audacity to ask:

‘Why aren’t we using the other rooms?’

It was endearing, Gwyn thinking he couldn’t be broken on a comfortable bed, as though he’d forgotten all the other times that Augus had mastered him against that softness. So Augus had fetched metal cuffs and thick chains for Gwyn’s wrists and ankles – though he’d only ended up restraining one of Gwyn’s legs – and decided that it had been far too long since he’d edged Gwyn properly.

Now, hours later, Gwyn’s body littered with bruising, vicious bite marks from his Achilles tendon all the way to the edges of his wrists and the back of his neck, Gwyn didn’t have much left to him except breaths that begged for release.

Augus had drawn blood several times, but Gwyn’s speedy healing meant that only the deepest bites were still raw. The rest had healed, bruised dark, and every now and then Augus pressed his fingers into those violet-black-red spaces and rode the resulting undulation of Gwyn’s body.

Augus sat naked over Gwyn’s waist, straddling his bound form, the hand not holding the chain stroking his own cock.

Cock-rings of waterweed fitted snug around the base of Gwyn’s cock, and just beneath the flare of the head. Every time Gwyn ground his cock into the bed, Augus threatened to dig claws into Gwyn’s sensitive scrotum, resulting in an instantaneous halt in all of Gwyn’s movements.

Every twenty minutes or so, Augus would reach his hands beneath Gwyn’s hips and lazily jack Gwyn’s imprisoned cock, then complicate the sensations by finding some new untouched piece of skin to mark as deeply as he liked. When Gwyn began to get too excited, Augus leaned back and stroked himself, one hand holding the leash, the other finding a slow, lazy pace on his cock.

‘It feels good,’ Augus said, squeezing his knees into Gwyn’s flanks, ‘my hand on myself. Do you wish it was you, sweetness?’

Gwyn couldn’t talk, his neck arched at too steep an angle for language to be easy.

‘Come on,’ Augus said, smiling and then licking his own lips at the way he squeezed himself, beginning to find something of breathlessness in what he was doing. How Gwyn’s cock had to hurt by now. ‘Come on, Gwyn. Answer me.’

A strangled, weak whimper. Gwyn pulled his head forward as much as he dared against the chain. Mere millimetres.

‘Oh, sweetness,’ Augus crooned, having used the tone of voice on him for the past two hours, ‘you’re not going to answer me? Tch. I suppose you’ve learned nothing.’

Keeping the tension on the chain, he leaned forwards and bit down slowly into a patch of soft skin just behind Gwyn’s armpit, digging his canines in until Gwyn’s body jerked on an involuntary cough. Augus allowed just enough slack in the chain to make the hoarse sounds possible, and then Gwyn’s good arm tugged repeatedly at the cuff and the heavy, weighted chain connecting him to
the headboard. The sound was loud, rattling, and didn’t give Gwyn any chance to escape at all.

Augus’ teeth sunk in even more, until he could taste a hint of metal in his mouth. He lifted up and shifted his legs, shimmying down Gwyn’s body until he straddled his thighs instead of his waist. Gwyn, beneath him, already lifting his hips, his whole body taut and shaking.

‘Come on now,’ Augus said, trailing his fingers down Gwyn’s cock where it was pressed flush to his belly. The light touch against the feverish flesh was enough to have Gwyn shifting in aborted movements against the chain at his neck, trying to gain some leverage for himself while Augus gave none. ‘We can do this for hours more. I know I can. Your cock feels sore though. Are you sore, Gwyn? Are you going to answer me?’

A strained sound. And then:

‘Pl-’

The sound faded into harsh, shallow breaths. Augus clucked his tongue again and played with the head of Gwyn’s cock, pressing into swollen flesh, pushing the pad of his index finger too hard into the slit of his cock. Gwyn’s hips jerked, and then his lower body moved frantically, trying to get some slack in the chain that connected his ankle to the baseboard.

Augus would never tire of how Gwyn suffered for him, then fight, then suffer again. He once thought that he’d grow bored of it, but taming Gwyn was always like taming him the first time. He could never gracefully surrender to it – even when his heartsong had been surrender. There always had to be this fight first, this unwillingness to accept his circumstances as they were.

He wanted Gwyn’s surrender, but he wanted this greediness too. This assurance that Gwyn was so indignant about not being allowed to come, he would rattle the chains to make Augus know beyond a doubt that Gwyn wasn’t happy with the situation. Gwyn’s body was beyond sure that it deserved pleasure and satisfaction, even when Gwyn’s mind wasn’t certain.

‘A break,’ Augus said, dragging his hand away from Gwyn’s cock.

Gwyn sobbed, the tension in the neck chain grew so great that Augus thought he’d break it. But no, Gwyn’s head tipped back at the last moment, his shoulders still heaving for shallow breaths.

‘Hush,’ Augus said, stroking through the slick sweat on Gwyn’s back. He dug his thumb into a bruise and smiled when Gwyn moaned.

Then he incrementally released the tension in the chain at his neck, bowing over him as he moved back up to straddle his waist. He pressed his lips to sweaty locks of hair, the curl even more pronounced due to dampness.

‘Hush,’ Augus said again, as Gwyn’s chest rose and fell steeply, as he was finally able to press his face into the bed and keen out hours of frustration and need. Then, Gwyn went as lax as he was able, despite the stiffness of arousal and want careening through him. Augus stroked the bit of his cheek that he could see, made sure his own legs were tight against Gwyn’s sides, as though holding him, keeping him anchored. ‘Settle, sweetness.’

The chain at Gwyn’s ankle clinked quietly, his legs moving restlessly.

‘Please, Augus,’ Gwyn managed, his voice breaking.

‘Not yet.’
A long moan that went up at the end, and Gwyn’s hands opened and then fisted closed again, his body shaking in waves of movement.

‘Augus,’ Gwyn said, several minutes later, ‘I can’t do this like you think I can.’

‘You’re doing it,’ Augus said, petting his hair. ‘You’re doing very well.’

‘It hurts,’ Gwyn said, and then growled into the blanket. ‘Augus.’

‘I know,’ Augus said, idly stroking Gwyn’s hair, the curve of his ears, the corded tension in his neck. ‘Breathe through it. I know you don’t like edging. What a shame that I love seeing you like this.’

Gwyn’s breath hitched. For a moment, Augus thought he might be closer to crying outright from overstimulation than he’d first thought. But then Gwyn took several deep, shaking breaths and sighed the last one out, wrists shifting fractiously.

‘Okay,’ Gwyn said, sounding miserable. ‘Okay.’

‘Tch,’ Augus murmured, ‘it’s not much fun, is it?’

He couldn’t hide the smile on his face, and he knew Gwyn would hear it too. But instead of kicking back against him, Gwyn seemed to be focused on slowing his breathing down. Perhaps – for once – he was actually treating the break like a break? That would be new.

Augus hushed him again, stroked down the groove of his spine, traced the curves of muscles and then let his fingers tiptoe up so that he could touch the collar. Slowly, like a horse lathered to foam from being overworked, Gwyn settled in shudders and muscle twitches, his hips occasionally pulsing down into the bed, not rhythmically enough to be anything more than involuntary movement. Augus tilted his head to the side and touched him as freely as he wanted. Rubbing at his arm, then at his back, or sliding fingers along his jaw and then slipping them into Gwyn’s mouth, pressing his tongue down as Gwyn tried to suck hungrily.

He shifted down Gwyn’s back to his thighs, pressed his hands into ass cheeks and then pulled his palms apart. Gwyn didn’t like the exposure, his muscles tensing to resist what Augus was doing, and then trying to roll sideways. His deeper breaths turned shallow.

‘I think I want you like this,’ Augus said. ‘Open and unable to do anything about it.’

Gwyn made a sound of complaint, then all the chains rattled and Augus laughed.

‘Now I’m going to leave you like this for five minutes.’

‘Augus,’ Gwyn said, no longer pleading, but irritable.

Augus shifted so that he could keep Gwyn spread open with one hand, and then trailed his index finger down the sensitive, bared skin, pausing meaningfully at Gwyn’s entrance, then continuing to drag his finger down until he realised that this was why he’d kept Gwyn’s other ankle free from a cuff.

‘Spread,’ Augus said, poking Gwyn’s thigh.

When Gwyn hesitated, Augus tapped his fingernails threateningly at his balls. After that, Gwyn was a great deal more cooperative, shifting his thighs until Augus could actually reach down between his legs and nudge the base of his cock.
Augus was good to his word, keeping Gwyn spread and vulnerable, as happy to watch that tender skin open to his gaze, as he was to watch Gwyn press his face down into the blankets, only to turn to the side, open his mouth to protest, then change his mind again. Augus wondered if he was still hard, sandwiched between his own abdomen and fabric. When he reached between, Gwyn’s cock had wilted just a little, but not as much as Augus had thought for something that Gwyn had to find humiliating.

‘Please,’ Gwyn muffled into blankets, as Augus gently massaged the taut, sticky skin of his cock, deliberately pushing the rubbery waterweed into his flesh. Gwyn lifted his head, gasped several times, started a syllable that sounded like begging, then another that sounded like Augus’ name, and then another that was only longing.

When Augus slid off the bed and walked away, Gwyn’s body jerked so hard that Augus paused and watched him, knowing that he was hurting his wrists, his ankle. The bed was sturdy. Designed by Gwyn’s own imagination when he crafted the palace.

He walked back to the side of the bed and placed a hand on Gwyn’s thrashing leg. It went still immediately.

‘Are you just going to leave me here?’ Gwyn said. It wasn’t accusatory, but panicked.

‘No,’ Augus said. He squeezed lightly at Gwyn’s calf, then let go, watching him for another few seconds before walking around the bed. He’d only wanted to get lubricant, and he’d have to remember in the future that holding Gwyn’s ass exposed like that, followed by moving away, could too easily be misinterpreted as rejection. With his heartsong no longer being dominance, he disliked that he couldn’t always predict responses as easily as he used to.

Gwyn’s breathing settled when he heard the opening of the drawer, the withdrawal of the vial. It stayed calm as Augus got back onto the bed, picked up a little when the cork was removed and Augus slicked his cock lazily, closing his eyes and licking his lips and wishing that Gwyn were facing the other way because this was something he’d enjoy seeing.

Minutes passed and Gwyn began to fidget. Augus petted him on the back of his thigh, then slid a slick finger between his ass cheeks and then pushed deep into him, to the last knuckle, gripping his own cock hard at the heat he felt. He took several steady breaths.

Augus let go of himself and leaned back over Gwyn, sinking his teeth into the skin and muscle at his hip, feeling a watery warmth stretch through him at the sound Gwyn made in response. He fucked Gwyn with his finger lazily. Not enough to tip him over, but enough to keep him on edge.

He painted Gwyn’s skin with more bites, pleased with the way Gwyn moved back into his finger, or pressed hesitantly down into the bed. No doubt unsure if Augus would punish him for it, and his cock had to be aching fiercely now.

Gwyn’s neck and ears and shoulders were stained red from the flush of heat in his skin. He was moaning repeatedly into the bed, as Augus went from one finger to two, taking his time, nosing through the sweat that trickled down his back. He pointed his tongue and licked at it, painting a spiral that ended in a bite that bruised fast as Augus sucked hard enough that he had to fight with the instinct to bite through.

Another person may have been merciful. They may have taken pity on the writhing creature, pleading in sounds if not words.

But Augus dragged things out for another two hours, until Gwyn made broken rasps of noise and
Augus felt like his fingers had always belonged in the looser grip of heat that surrounded him. He bit at his bottom lip hungrily, getting entirely too much thrill from Gwyn’s body yielding to his, the shudders that quaked beneath his thighs. His chest was tight with want, and he closed his eyes and tipped his own head back, as pleased with dragging things out as Gwyn was destroyed by it.

Gwyn was too limp to do much when Augus withdrew his fingers and unlocked the cuffs at Gwyn’s ankle and wrists. He responded clumsily when Augus hooked his fingers underneath Gwyn’s torso and pulled him back onto his knees. He didn’t even get up onto his elbows, his upper half pressed flat into the blankets.

Augus took up the slender metallic chain at Gwyn’s neck and smiled when Gwyn whimpered.

‘Soon, sweetness,’ Augus said. ‘Just a bit longer now. You’ve been so good.’

Gwyn trembled, shifted his head restlessly as Augus lubricated his cock once more and slid into him on one smooth stroke, the puff of air that escaped Gwyn’s lungs forced out of him.

Augus reached beneath Gwyn and snicked the waterweed free from his cock with his claws. He pressed the hot flesh to Gwyn’s belly, holding it in place, feeling it twitch. His hips rolled easily, the rhythm thorough enough for the both of them. He didn’t need to be rough – Gwyn was overwrought already, and Augus preferred something more fluid when seeking his own release. He dropped his forehead to Gwyn’s back, kept Gwyn’s cock pinned in place, feeling the frantic pulse of blood beneath his fingers.

Gwyn’s thighs shook, his breathing was uneven, his body slick all over with sweat. Augus’ hair didn’t even feel as damp as Gwyn’s skin, as his hips slipped against Gwyn’s ass and he kept himself braced firm on the bed – knees spreading Gwyn’s legs apart.

Augus was careful when he started stroking Gwyn’s cock, and even then, Gwyn was so sensitive that he keened, bucking backwards away from the touch and only succeeding in driving Augus’ cock even deeper into himself.

He was begging again. The sounds turning into words that were little more than gusts of air on every exhale. Then:

‘Oh please, oh please, oh fuck…’

‘Any time you’re ready, sweetness,’ Augus murmured into his skin. ‘I’m not stopping you.’

Gwyn’s voice broke, he spread his legs wider, one of his hands fist into the blanket and the other came up and clenched at his own hair, tugging hard enough that Augus felt the jolt of it echo into his own body. Augus smiled, his own breathing losing its way as he leaned up and thrust deep, pressing his teeth into the meat of Gwyn’s good shoulder, finding a bite he’d made earlier and turning it livid.

Gwyn wailed and jerked forward into Augus’ hand, and then back again, his cock beginning to expand just that slight amount that meant he was so close. So close. Augus kept his teeth in Gwyn’s shoulder, flicking his tongue and then laving skin. He changed his rhythm, shoving into Gwyn with deep, sharp movements, just enough to get what he wanted.

Spasms through Gwyn’s cock as he spurted pulse after pulse of come into the blankets. His voice deserted him after a wretched whimper, and Augus’ thrusts turned lazy as he sought after his own pleasure, feeling Gwyn tighten around him in bursts, then go suddenly lax, allowing Augus even deeper than he’d been able to get before. He loved that moment, when Gwyn’s body offered itself
up to him, and he opened his mouth and panted softly as he took advantage of it, holding Gwyn’s
cock protectively, creamy spill turning his fingers sticky.

His own release came with no particular fanfare. His blood began to feel like it was boiling, his
eyes turned hot from it, and he gasped when he finally came, hips grinding down and Gwyn
groaning in relief beneath him. Augus relaxed on top of Gwyn, his arms coming up to frame
Gwyn’s shoulders, keeping him still, feeling the rise and fall of his breaths.

But Gwyn shifted, the movements sharp and fretful and he grabbed at Augus’ arms and turned
them both onto their sides and clung to him like a limpet. Augus felt words shaped by Gwyn’s
mouth, lips moving against his bare flesh, and didn’t know what they were until Gwyn got some
breath behind them.

‘…Thank you. Thank you…’

Augus slung his arms around Gwyn automatically, thinking first that it was gratitude that Augus
had let him come. Then he heard the weight in the words, the earnest way they spilled against
Augus’ flesh, and realised that this was a far deeper thankfulness. He closed his eyes, stroked
Gwyn’s hair, pushing sweaty curls back from where they’d fallen and stuck to his forehead.

Was he thanking Augus for staying by his side? For inviting him to live alongside him? Augus got
the gist well enough, even if Gwyn didn’t seem to be able to find more than those two words.

Gwyn was still muttering them when he arched up – his eyes still closed – and pressed his swollen
lips clumsily to Augus’ mouth. Still tried to say them when Augus kissed him back. Only settled
when Augus tightened his arms so much that it became more bondage than an embrace.

He shuddered into silence, and Augus kissed Gwyn’s forehead.

‘You’re welcome,’ he said.

*  

Half an hour later, when Augus thought Gwyn was dozing, he felt lips drag across his shoulder and
then his eyes widened when he felt teeth dig in over the bite mark he’d made before.

‘Have you learned nothing?’ Augus said, laughing incredulously.

Gwyn managed a sound in the negative, and Augus tugged lazily at Gwyn’s hair, trying to get him
to let go. It was painful.

‘I will cuff you to this bed, and we will go again.’

‘Mm hm,’ Gwyn managed, and Augus felt his lips curl against his shoulder, and couldn’t stop
himself from smiling in response.

‘Oh, I see,’ Augus said. ‘Well, I’m tired, and if you think you can train me to do what you like with
pain, I have an even better offer for you. Sweetness, if you don’t let go of my shoulder and kiss it
better this instant, I won’t let you come for two months.’

Gwyn let go of his shoulder straight away, licked carefully with his tongue, so gently it almost
tickled.

‘Better,’ Augus purred. ‘But that’s licking, not kissing.’
Gwyn inhaled sharply, then pressed his closed mouth tenderly to the bite mark he’d made, holding very still.

‘Ah,’ Augus said, stroking his back. ‘Good.’

Gwyn’s mouth quirked into a small smile, and he tuckted his face into Augus’ neck and sighed. They lay underneath blankets now, still a sticky, sweaty mess, but Augus liked it. The aftermath where Gwyn was boneless and relaxed and open to him. Augus had one leg over Gwyn’s hips, an arm over his back, and resisted the urge to whisper quiet praise to him until he fell asleep. Because at this point in their lives it would only make Gwyn increasingly tense and uncomfortable, and then distressed. A phrase here and there was tolerable for him. But he wasn’t ready for more. Not yet.

But in time, if he was careful, Augus knew he would be able to tell Gwyn just how beautiful he was, how strong and perfect, and even if Gwyn didn’t quite believe him – perhaps Augus could coax more of those smiles from him with the attempt.

One day.

Chapter End Notes

In our next and final chapter - an epilogue set six months in the future - 'Futures:’

‘When you came to defeat me,’ Augus said, his voice very quiet, ‘I thought you would kill me. Not save me.’
**Epilogue: Futures**

Chapter Notes

Acknowledgements and more in the end-notes. :D *screams forever*

See the end of the chapter for more notes

*Six months later…*

*

**Gwyn**

*

Gwyn floated adrift on a sea of sensation. His head was tipped back, his cock stood stiff and proud and leaking. Augus wasn’t even in the room. He had no idea. Gwyn was stealing something for himself and he wasn’t even sure if he should be doing what he was doing but he just…

He’d seen the pistillum left by the bed after a hard night of being worked over by Augus and he’d only been curious to see what it would do if he used it on himself.

Augus was surely aboveground by now, foraging for his breakfast around the lake, harvesting leaves and flowers and roots and even fungi. Gwyn knew to bring meats and breads with him when he left the palace, because even after all this time, Augus seemed convinced that Gwyn would come around to disgusting green things if he just ate enough of them. Not that Gwyn cared much for food, not right now.

He was too busy being buffeted about on waves of pain. An incoming tide of it. He held the pistillum lightly against his pelvis, just to the left of his cock, and he wasn’t sure how much time had passed since he’d started using it. He wasn’t even sure why it made him feel so good. It was the only pain he’d ever felt that he didn’t need to fight. It was a kind of bliss. It came upon him so slowly. Like a bruise he could see coming. And as soon as he moved the pistillum away, it would recede just as gently. Whispers underneath his flesh. It was almost loving.

He was dotted all over with sweat, his lips trembled every now and then. There was a strain in holding the stone thing in place, when his whole body wanted to go limp. He heaved in breaths. He’d have to move the thing soon. Even Augus didn’t tend to hold it in the same place for this long.

The tide crept closer, swept him up in foam and water until all Gwyn felt was deep bruising pain and on its heels, a pleasure that was bone deep and rattled through him. His vision went dark as his eyes closed, the hand on his face slid down onto the pillow beside him and went limp. His breathing turned uneven, and then settled into long, slow motions that made his lungs feel like they echoed the ocean.

Rounded stone dragged across his pelvis as he shifted it instinctively to a new location. Just to the other side, new puddles spilling inside of him, spreading deep. He moaned and arched his hips up. He couldn’t touch his cock, but he almost wondered if he could come from this alone. He didn’t
have the presence of mind to be bothered by it. The pain had long ago numbed all of his thoughts. There was only instinct, and a lazy seeking of this odd pleasure-pain.

‘Ohhh,’ a voice breathed above him. ‘Look at you, my dear heart. Just *look* at you.’

Another sensation, sharper, pulling him back from the deep darkness. Fingers trailing down the centre of his torso and then rubbing at the inside of his thigh. Gwyn’s legs had sprawled bent and apart some time ago.

No more words interrupted his thoughts. But the hands stayed close, stroking him. Languid things that felt just as much like the sea as the pain did. He moaned and shifted, smelling springwater and herbs and the newness of stripped bark and turned absently towards the scent, feeling like he’d come home. It made no sense. The pain was dragging him far away from everything he understood.

Frustration crept in later. He couldn’t spill from the pain, but he wouldn’t touch himself either. Not so directly. Not with Augus there. An ancient inhibition, fossilised inside of him, hiding beneath the ocean that was making him forget everything else.

He opened his mouth and said the first words that came to mind.

‘*Help me.*’

‘Always.’

Pressure on his chest holding him still, and then fingers touched his cock, first lightly, then with increasing, blessed firmness. The pleasure of it alongside the pain made him feel dizzy, the blackness beneath his eyes – containing bursts of red – began to spark in galaxies of brightness. He had enough time to gasp, and then he spiralled up into a perfect peak of visceral sensation, pleasure and pain both, blending until the blackness returned and he knew nothing else.

* 

‘That was new,’ Augus said, when Gwyn blinked his eyes open, his body still aching. Not only from the *pistillum*. Augus really had worked him hard the day and night before. ‘Are you all right?’

‘I passed out?’

‘Mm,’ Augus said, kissing him lightly. He held the *pistillum* in his own hand, then placed it down on a dark wooden chest of drawers beside the bed. He turned back to Gwyn and caressed his face. ‘You pushed yourself hard. How are you feeling?’

‘Like I don’t want to go back to the palace today,’ Gwyn complained, squeezing his eyes closed. ‘I quit.’

‘Given that’s the thirtieth time you’ve said that this month, I think it’s safe to say that you don’t mean it.’

‘I always mean it,’ Gwyn said.

Augus was silent for a long time. Long enough that Gwyn opened his eyes and saw that he no longer looked playful, but serious. This had been a subject they’d come to over and over again. It was hard for Augus to know how much Gwyn hated being King. And ever since he started spending half a week away from the palace, he’d bizarrely come to loathe it even more. There was nothing they could do. Everything was holding together under Gwyn’s leadership. It didn’t matter
how much he insisted it was Fenwrel and the others who were doing most of the work; the
Unseelie fae seemed to want *him* as their figurehead.

The more time that Gwyn stole for himself, the more he wanted to steal, until he worried his
greediness would eventually devour everything around him and he’d be left with nothing at all. Or
that the Kingdom would lose its King.

‘We talked about this,’ Augus said. ‘Do we need to talk about it again?’

‘No,’ Gwyn said, rolling his eyes. ‘Leave it.’

He wasn’t in the mood for a ‘conversation.’ Augus was far too insightful, and Gwyn far too
vulnerable to the knife-sharp insight he wielded. Augus said Gwyn was growing into himself,
Gwyn disagreed. Augus insisted that Gwyn’s true disposition wasn’t the tolerant, equitable person
he’d always shaped himself to be.

Apparently, deep down he was an irascible, ornery, resistant creature that only wanted to wander
through the woodlands hunting things, and either attack Augus when he least expected it, or be
attacked by him and dragged into bondage. Gwyn wasn’t sure how he felt about that, either.

‘It’s only paperwork today,’ Gwyn said, yawning deeply. ‘Don’t have to listen to anyone
complaining about things we can’t afford to fix.’

‘That’s perfect, that frees up the whole day for *you* to complain about things you can’t afford to
fix.’

Gwyn rolled over, his body feeling like it weighed far more than usual. Casually, he shoved
Augus’ arm to indicate he was done with the sniping.

‘Ah yes, terrifying,’ Augus drawled, getting up and petting Gwyn hard enough on the head that
each motion felt like a tiny slap. Gwyn growled. ‘Such a fearsome King. Your subjects quail before
you.’

‘You don’t,’ Gwyn said, pushing himself into a sitting position and trying to grab at Augus’ wrist
just as he danced out of range. ‘Come here, *subject*.’

‘If we don’t show up at the palace, Gulvi has threatened to come into *my home*, and drag us both
there. I’d really rather not. So up you get.’

Gwyn managed to stand for about ten seconds before he realised how truly sore his body was and
he collapsed back onto the bed like a tree falling. He let his knees hang over the edge and pressed
his hands to his face.

‘You’re going to kill me one day,’ Gwyn said, and he was very glad that Augus couldn’t see the
smile that crept into the corners of his mouth.

‘If only to make you shut up. Now, get *up*.’

‘I didn’t set you free from the Seelie prison that one time, just so that you could-‘

Gwyn felt the world tip out from under him as waterweed wrapped around his legs and dragged
him off the bed. He landed on slate tiles with a hard thump, the breath whooshing out of him. He
glared at Augus in outrage.

Augus had one hand on his hip, and shook his head at him in despair. Then he walked out of the
room as Gwyn struggled upright, untangling himself from waterweed with some difficulty and wondering if chasing Augus through his own home was worth it.

He groaned softly. It probably wasn’t. They really did have to get back to the palace today.

*

At noon, the trows brought him a hamper of cheese and small cakes and dried meat. Gwyn ate it all absentmindedly, signing his name on papers where necessary, changing the wording on treaties where needed. Augus was off in another corner of the castle, firmly having re-established himself as a diplomat. While he had to avoid working with freshwater fae, there were plenty of other clans and societies that needed assistance settling their disputes without resorting to war. Given the sanctions against both the Unseelie and Seelie Courts, and the damaged Unseelie military, they were trying to avoid battle as much as possible. That came with its own issues, including the one that meant Gwyn couldn’t quench his bloodlust as much as he used to, but those issues were far easier to manage than the situation they’d been in before the Coalition of the Classless.

He looked over requisition forms, balance sheets, tithes offered to the Unseelie Court by fae living in the borderlands around the Court. He stared at interrogation notes – they were still no closer to finding the remaining fie elyllon who had the mothersbane poison – and added some notes of his own. Suggestions of where to go next, who to approach.

For the past five months, bows and arrows had been banned entirely from the Court. They had to be surrendered at the entrance. It probably wasn’t going to be effective. Whoever had the poison could possibly switch it to another weapon if they needed. But Gwyn lived in hope that all the poison had been painted onto arrowheads already. Aleutia had concluded – going over Crielle’s notes – that his mother had only been able to make a tiny batch of the poison. A small comfort, but it was better than knowing she’d made vats of the stuff.

There was correspondence from the Seelie Court. Not from Albion – he’d never spoken to Gwyn directly since the meeting with the Coalition. But the Spider Queen sent him accounts of what she witnessed once every month on the new moon, just as Gwyn assumed Old Pete sent similar to Albion once every full moon. It grated on him to know it was happening, but he saw some sense in it, and didn’t dare ask Old Pete to stop taking notes every time he witnessed a meeting in the throne-room.

The Spider Queen’s notes were always short. The latest:

Your Majesty,

I have continued to observe the Seelie Court as requested by my peers. King Albion seems unmoored without a war to anchor him. Davix’s motives remain impure and unknown. Alysia still rules the seas and her daughter Mera-Alane remains aboveground and offers succour to the Seelie King.

Financially, they are suffering. Your assassinations struck into the heart of their society, and they are still recovering the merchants and people of power to manage their resources.

Wishing you the deepest of nights and the fairest of stars,
The Spider Queen.

Gwyn stared at the note for a long time, then filed it away with the five others she’d sent to him so far.
He dug down through letters from Seelie and Unseelie alike. All had been tested for poisons and venoms by Aleutia herself, and it was another service he had to pay her for, making her the most expensive employee in his Court. She was right when she’d said her rates were steep. But she’d saved Augus’ life once. He wasn’t willing to tell her just how much he was willing to pay her simply for existing.

A small pale blue envelope made of what looked like pressed, magical seaweed waited at the bottom of the stack of correspondence. He picked it up and sniffed it, smelling the salt of the sea, and then used a bronze letter opener to carefully lever the square envelope open.

Inside, a single piece of pearl white parchment. And on it, in a handwriting he recognised but hadn’t seen for a very long time:

*It is done. We will do the very best that we can. This is all you can know. I trust you understand.*

Gwyn absently touched the red cord in his pocket and then had to put the parchment down, because he was going to crumple it in his grip.

He drew the red leather cord out and stared at it, drawing his thumb across the texture of it.

‘You hear that, Mikkel? You got what you wanted. I suppose you’d say ‘too little, too late’ maybe, but it’s there all the same.’

He fist ed the cord and pressed his knuckles to his forehead, taking several deep breaths.

This was something else he’d started doing a few months ago. He kept it hidden from others, but he didn’t think Augus would be upset to find him doing it. But Gwyn wanted this to be private. These conversations he had with someone who wasn’t there to hear them. His way of keeping Mikkel close.

‘I think…you’d be happy,’ Gwyn said, ‘to know that things could be different for Readers in the future. And I know you’ll be glad that I don’t know where it is, and Ondine would never let me shake her down for the knowledge, even if I was desperate. She’s strong, you see. Stronger-willed than I am.’

He kept the cord in his hand even as he shifted the papers he’d gone through. He was nearly done. And this evening he would go back to his cabin or Augus’ home – whichever Augus preferred.

‘I know you can’t tell me,’ Gwyn said, ‘but I sometimes wonder if you had any idea what a knock on effect those events would have. Your death during that event. After all, Marika was there, wasn’t she? And she was the one I asked to manage the Seelie classless, and the Nain Rouge said that it was only after the Wild Hunt, after you died, that the Seelie classless all came together. Did the King of the Forest talk to Marika? Did you…Read her? Did you know it would change her mind too? Were you able to Read the King of the Forest? You told me you were so powerful, and now I just wish I knew how much you understood of what you were saving when you took that arrow for me. So much more than my life, Mikkel. So much more. You blasted hero, not even here to hear it. The whole world is beginning to settle, because of you.’

Gwyn’s eyes were wet, he thumbed tears away. This wasn’t the first time he’d stumbled across these words. How he wished he could just hear that wry, sarcastic voice again, bitterly cheerful, telling him that it didn’t matter anyway – how much Mikkel really knew – because people would always underestimate him regardless.

That was the thing that Gwyn liked most, talking to Mikkel like this. He could almost imagine the
responses. Could nearly hear his voice again and imagine the expressions he’d make, the way his eyes would glitter, or his nose would wrinkle as he disparaged something Gwyn said.

After a few more minutes, Gwyn shifted and crossed his ankle over his knee so that he could tie the cord just above his foot. It was either in his pocket, or tied around his ankle, already charmed by Fenwrel so the leather wouldn’t fall apart over time. When he lowered his leg back to the ground, he felt the cord settle.

He stroked the parchment Ondine had sent him, then decided he was being too sentimental and tucked it away. That was one note that wouldn’t go into the records. He’d destroy it later.

With a deep sigh, he returned to the rest of the paperwork.

*

At the end of the day, as the time approached midnight, the throne-room was almost empty.

Now, on the dais, five thrones rested. Gwyn’s was furthest to the left, eschewing the central role. Not the giant thing he’d commanded in the Seelie Court, but comfortable. Beside him, Augus’ throne – made of twisted vines and carved wood, slender but stable. In the centre, Gulvi’s throne hadn’t been moved since her reign. Hers was a brutal, huge thing, of leather and metal and wood melded together and almost grotesque. The back was a long narrow shape – almost like sword shaft – to give her room for her wings to rest when she leaned back against it. Beside Gulvi was Ash’s throne, which was the most out of place, clearly found in the human world and upholstered with synthetic materials. It looked comfortable enough, but it made it plain that Ash’s affiliations were just as much of the human realm as they were of the fae. And now, beside Ash, a throne of a deep red wood with orange cushioning, cobalt blue contrasting threads. Fenwrel’s throne – designed for comfort and class.

It was rare all five of them occupied the thrones at once. The Unseelie fae found it confusing, too. For so long – before Augus’ reign – both the Seelie and Unseelie Court only ever had a central, single throne. Inner Court members had to stand, or bring in temporary seating. Despite all the destruction Augus had wrought, Gwyn liked the idea of the Inner Court occupying thrones as well. He liked the decentralisation of the monarch that Augus had unwittingly thought up, and decided he wouldn’t do without it in the future. Five thrones, five voices, every member had been King or Queen at some time, except for Fenwrel, who managed herself as well – if not better – than the rest of them anyway.

Old Pete sat at a small wooden table nearby, writing quickly with a well-worn quill that looked like it might have once belonged to an ostrich. He hummed and sang, he sometimes talked to himself, and Gwyn had witnessed him become characters time and again, muttering words and sentences to himself in accents that were so accurate that it was astonishing. The first time Gwyn had heard Old Pete pretend to be Gwyn and Augus, he’d hidden nearby and listened, fascinated, to the contrast of his harder and officious voice alongside Augus’ wry, soft tones, spoken out of a throat that shouldn’t be able to shape voices so well.

Old Pete had settled well into the palace. He was unobtrusive and offered a constant source of conversation to anyone who was willing to talk with him. He was also respected and renowned enough that no one tried to harm him, and Gwyn was confident he could defend himself anyway. The Unseelie fae seemed to accept him almost as willingly as the Unseelie trows had accepted their Seelie brethren into the night gardens.

For that was something that didn’t seem to be going away. The Winter Court was long since over, but many of the Seelie trows had never left, burrowing into the soil and making homes in the
sprawling forests. Gwyn didn’t have the heart to eject them – they’d asked for asylum after all. They wandered into the fields and meadows after midnight and henked away, dancing their strange limping dances and welcoming anyone who wanted to join them. There were some Unseelie who loathed it – this blatant meeting of Seelie and Unseelie under the auspices of the Unseelie Court. But there were just as many who – after the conflict between the Courts – seemed to need whatever it represented to them.

Gwyn left the trows to their own devices. They managed themselves better than anyone else could, and he liked them. Besides, some of the Seelie trows were ones he recognised from his time ruling the Seelie Court, and that left a warmth in his chest that he wasn’t in any hurry to remove.

Augus was ready to leave, but held back, saying that they had to wait for Ash who apparently had something to tell them. Nearby, Gulvi and Fenwrel played a card game that Gwyn hadn’t seen before. All the cards were blank on both sides. One side white, one side black. The only thing that differed was that some cards were smaller than others, which seemed to indicate different values. Was it Gulvi’s game? Or Fenwrel’s? He’d have to ask later. Whatever it was, it left them deep in concentration, staring at the table where they placed the cards, or at their own hands – which the other could see. Sometimes they’d stare at each other, and their strong, intimate concentration never wavered, and Gwyn would look away and tell himself that he wasn’t the kind of person to smile at things like that.

‘He’s late,’ Augus said, shaking his head.

‘Why don’t we just come back tomorrow?’ Gwyn was ready to leave. Had been for hours. Truthfully, had been ready to leave as soon as he’d walked into the palace.

‘He said it was important. You don’t think…the debt? With Davix’s brother?’

‘No I- Gods, I hope not. Things are only just beginning to settle down. But I suppose if that’s it then…we should wait.’

Gwyn sighed and sat down on the steps leading up to the dais, one leg pulled up to his chest and the other sprawled out in front of him. He looked at the red cord at his ankle and was glad to see it.

Augus walked up the stairs and sat on his throne, stretching and then leaning his head back against it and closing his eyes. Gwyn would have to talk to him later. Sometimes the diplomatic meetings and research he did exhausted him. But he seemed to find it far more fulfilling than the common work. He’d even started healing blighted land again – for all that it chafed at Gwyn’s heart to let him do something so dangerous, it did seem to make Augus a little more whole every time he returned. He still took Gulvi as a bodyguard with him every time he left, and though she professed to find it tedious, he suspected that Gulvi was beginning to feel genuinely protective of him, something that he could tell she didn’t enjoy.

A little while later, Gwyn’s body tensed when he heard a distant, high-pitched yapping. He felt like he was in the An Fnwy estate, and then the Seelie kennels. When he remembered where he was, he looked around, confused. Had a fae come to visit the throne-room? Had they brought a dog?

Then, laughter in the distance and the sound of pounding footsteps and Ash shouting:

‘Fuck! Hang on you little shit! Hang on! No, come back here! Don’t eat that!’

‘Oh no,’ Augus said under his breath. ‘Tell me he didn’t.’
The sound of a sprinting dog running towards them, the heaviness of paws slapping the ground indicating something large. And behind it, Ash running.

Through the side entrance sprung what looked like a full-sized giant dog, except the paws were too large, the face too round and young to indicate anything other than a puppy. It wore a coat of shaggy navy blue fur, and on the generous ruff of fur on the back of its neck and shoulders, grew frost. Its cheerful, wild eyes blazed the blue of phosphorescence, and its tail – that would curl loosely over its back when it wasn’t wagging furiously – had a brilliant white tail tip, to match the white spots over its eyes.

‘Come here!’ Ash shouted, laughing as he placed his hands on his knees, catching his breath. The creature must have been tiring him out for some time.

But Gwyn could see that the puppy was only very young, despite its huge size, and he clapped his hands quickly and leaned towards it.

‘Come on,’ Gwyn said, drawing his legs together and patting his thighs. ‘Come on, boy! Come here! There’s a good boy.’

The puppy galloped over to him on clumsy paws that were so large, Gwyn half-wondered if the thing would end up the size of a bear before his growing was over. As soon as the puppy reached him, Gwyn held his hand out and was sniffed all over with a broad, wet nose. Snuffling sounds filled his ears, then the puppy looked at him and tilted his head and barked once, then again, and then was trying to crawl into his lap and pushing him back against the stairs.

‘Hang on,’ Gwyn said, chuckling. ‘Oh, hello, you’re very friendly, aren’t you? Aren’t you?’

He was patting him, scruffing his fingers through that beautiful ruff, seeking out the places the puppy liked, scratching his cheek and behind his ears and then at his sides as the puppy panted all over him and drooled a little. Wherever the drool fell, a small pool of ice formed.

Gwyn hadn’t seen a jaatikokoira – one of the fae glacier dogs – in so long. He’d never seen a puppy. And they did grow to the size of bears, living in the deep dangerous depths of glaciers, feeding on clear ice and the crushed remains of those who dared traverse them. Clearly Ash had gotten over his head with this pet.

‘You like that, don’t you?’ Gwyn said, laughing, and the puppy became riled up at all the petting, mock growling and snapping at the air around Gwyn’s face, then finally chomping down hard on Gwyn’s forearm. Hard enough to draw blood. But still he maintained that playful growl, and Gwyn didn’t jerk his arm away, instead gentling his touches, staring down at him with pride.

‘Look at you. Already so fierce. Aren’t you?’

He scratched the puppy’s head, and it stared at him – eyes twinkling – drooling ice patches onto Gwyn’s arm and not letting go. From here, Gwyn could see that its paws ended in white claws, and when the puppy was older, its neck ruff would turn into a great shaggy mane that would grow frost and ice. As a mature dog, it would even be able to summon snow. It didn’t have the shape of a sighthound or scent-hound, instead built to be lumbering and heavy; a long-haired molosser with floppy ears and a heavy, solid jaw.

‘You’re joking,’ Augus said behind him.

Gwyn realised that Ash and Augus were in the middle of a conversation, and he turned his head towards them, not looking away from the puppy at any point. Wouldn’t Ash want him back soon?
'It’s not living with *me,*’ Augus said. ‘Look at it.’

‘No, I *know* that,’ Ash said. ‘But look at them, come on.’

‘Why did it have to be so *big*?’

‘Cuz it’s so cute though. I mean…just…isn’t it the cutest thing? And I figured this way, it’d live longer and we could kennel it here and—’

Ash noticed that Gwyn was now looking at him and faltered to a stop. Over the past six months, they’d forged an odd, awkward friendship. Gwyn still didn’t know how to behave around him, and Ash always acted like that was fine. And strangely, despite Augus seeming to think that Ash was still six years old and needed near constant parental supervision, Ash had taken an almost protective role around Gwyn. Disconcerting, to say the least. But he was sticking to therapy, he hardly drank now – and he refused to drink on his own – and he’d shown no signs of becoming poisonous with hatred again.

Which was strange.

‘He’s for you,’ Ash said, swallowing. ‘Ah, kind of- I mean, I thought you’d get some hounds now that things have settled down but you haven’t? And I just thought- I mean if you don’t want him, I can look after him, and Ach’for already said we could kennel him here. But if you did, I mean—’

‘I want him,’ Gwyn said without thinking.

Augus rolled his eyes and turned around so that he was facing the wall and looked like he might be pinching the bridge of his nose in exasperation.

The puppy still had his teeth in Gwyn’s arm, now shaking it a little, like he’d just found a stick he wanted to play tug of war with.

‘Easy there,’ Gwyn said, turning back to the puppy and smiling. ‘That’s a fine grip you’ve got there, little thing.’

‘It’s not little,’ Augus snapped, turning back.

‘Yes you are,’ Gwyn crooned. ‘Aren’t you? A little baby thing. Don’t pay any attention to him, you’ll be fast friends in no time.’

Augus scoffed.

‘Darling,’ Gulvi said, now standing about ten feet away, ‘your arm is still bleeding.’

‘It’s fine,’ Gwyn said, ruffling the puppy’s ears.

He needed a name.

‘Besides, he was wild caught, wasn’t he?’ Gwyn said, looking at Ash, who nodded and looked like he was vibrating with excitement. ‘They take a while to train up when they’re wild caught.’

‘I didn’t get him direct,’ Ash said. ‘There was a dealer. She had a whole selection. Black shucks and gytrash and capelthwaite and more. But she said these guys – if you trained them right – can become super loyal and really protective. And I thought you know, with a bunch of assassins with poisoned arrows around the place, maybe you needed a dog that sensed danger pretty well. Plus I mean, it’s a *blue* fucking dog, he looks awesome!’
‘He does,’ Gwyn said, looking back at the puppy, staring into eyes that were sharp and inquisitive, puckish and cheerful. ‘I think I’ll call him Grip.’

‘You can’t be serious,’ Augus muttered. ‘We’re not taking him. Your arm is frozen.’

‘Oh,’ Gwyn said, scratching Grip’s throat and listening to him growl happily, ‘just ignore him. You can stay in the cabin with me, can’t you?’

‘No!’ Augus exclaimed, and Gwyn looked over just as Ash tried to slip a hand behind Augus’ head to soothe him. Augus smacked his hand away. But despite the irritation and scandalised expression he wore, Gwyn caught just a glimmer of amusement, and decided that was enough. He didn’t even know what to say to Ash. Only looked at him with a bruised, fluttering feeling in his heart. Ash gave the tiniest nod of acknowledgement in return.

He turned back and ignored them, pushing Grip gently onto his side and rubbing a belly of soft plush undercoat and thick guard hairs. Grip wiggled and let go of his arm and panted happily, making whining noises, a blue-black tongue lolling out of his mouth, bright white teeth – a healthy bite at least – showing as his lips pulled back on a smile.

Minutes passed, Gwyn ignored everyone else. Didn’t care if he was making a fool of himself either. Dogs didn’t deserve owners who worried about their appearance around them. And as Grip continued to make eye contact, Gwyn praised him quietly but often, giving him warm words to reward the steady attention. From there, Grip would associate looking at Gwyn with praise and warmth, and then he would come to want to give Gwyn his attention often, and that would be the beginning of their training.

No one was there now to take Grip away from him. No members of his family left alive to cut him away from what he loved.

For the first time, Gwyn realised he was happy to be an orphan. Happy to be the last surviving member of that family, the last custodian of the An Fnwy estate.

Grip wriggled back into Gwyn’s lap, his heavy head and thick skull resting between Gwyn’s thighs and his paws tucked up to expose as much of his chest and belly as possible. Gwyn calmed enough to hear more of the conversation happening around them both.

‘I mean…just look at how happy they are,’ Ash said quietly.

‘I know,’ Augus said. He no longer sounded annoyed, but affectionate and…wistful. Gwyn smiled down at Grip and refused to look up, and then blocked out the pain of his mauled arm. He’d probably have to get some arm guards made, and get some decent toys to distract that hungry teething maw.

Eventually, Gwyn looked up at Augus and bit his bottom lip.

‘So I can keep him?’

‘Oh, for the love of-’ Augus cut himself off, gesturing at Gwyn in disbelief. ‘Of course you can. But you’re going to have to put up with me complaining about that thing a lot. And it is never coming into my home and it is not allowed on our bed.’

‘But Augus-’

‘No,’ Augus said, slashing his hand through the air to emphasise his point. ‘I mean it, Gwyn. I can just see how stupid you’ll get over this. I draw the line at having another beast in my bed. One is
enough, thank you.’

Fenwrel cleared her throat, and Augus placed his hands on his hips and glared at her, as though daring her to say something.

‘He should probably stay in the kennel tonight with Ach’for anyway,’ Ash said, smiling sheepishly. ‘Guy’s gotten pretty attached in only twenty four hours, and if we’re gonna be moving Grip from place to place, maybe we should get him used to it first?’

‘Certainly,’ Gwyn said, tickling Grip’s nose and yanking his fingers out of the way when Grip tried to snap at them with a loud chomping noise. ‘But not for a little while yet? Just…well I should probably take him out into the night gardens. Just for an hour. Or two.’

‘Yeah,’ Ash said, grinning. ‘Whatever you like, hey.’

Gwyn carefully pushed himself up, Grip rolling to his giant paws and immediately trying to clamber up Gwyn’s body, his broad paws nearly reaching his chest, curled tail wagging.

‘He’s probably just going to run off again,’ Ash said.

Gwyn grinned down at Grip, because this was something they clearly had no idea about. Had none of them ever owned a puppy before? But then…he knew Augus hadn’t, Ash had only had Lucky — fully grown when he’d acquired him. Fenwrel and Gulvi didn’t seem like the type. Old Pete hadn’t even moved from his desk, though he watched them all over his quill, smiling with what looked like nostalgia.

Maybe Old Pete had owned a puppy before.

‘I think he’ll know what to do,’ Gwyn said. ‘Won’t you boy? Come on!’

With that, he turned and sprinted away, knowing the puppy wouldn’t be able to resist its own prey drive to follow a moving object. He heard galloping paws closing in on him, yelping barks of excitement and ran faster, ignoring the throbbing in his arm and remembering an ancient feeling — one he hadn’t felt in a long time. The fluttering of excitement that came from being responsible for a loving, loyal creature and the kinship that sprang from shared wildness.

* 

Gwyn looked up at the stars hours later, back at Augus’ lake. He rested with his head on Augus’ thigh, his body stretched out and his arms folded loosely over his ribs. Grip was kennelled with Ach’for, sleepily settling down with some of Gwyn’s clothing and a blanket, to get used to his scent. Dawn was coming, but Gwyn wasn’t tired. During the last six months, Augus had been far more vigilant over Gwyn’s sleep patterns, and though the constant nightmares were a drain on his resources, overall he was far more rested than he could ever remember being.

Augus seemed to be doing better for it as well.

‘I have a dog,’ Gwyn said, smiling at the constellations. Not the false magical ones that constantly hung over the Unseelie Court, but real ones.

‘If you want to call that a dog, then…I suppose you do.’

‘Are you angry?’ Gwyn said, looking up at Augus’ chin. ‘Because…because if you truly can’t bear it, I-’
‘You would, wouldn’t you?’ Augus said, sighing. ‘You’d give up something that made you that happy, for me.’

‘Of course,’ Gwyn said, frowning.

‘Sweetness,’ Augus said, looking down and stroking Gwyn’s forehead with the backs of his fingers. ‘This doesn’t work like that. It’s going to take you a long time to learn that, isn’t it? It’s all right. But if it bites me the way it bit you, I’m turning it into a rug.’

‘His name is Grip,’ Gwyn said, and Augus smiled at him briefly, as though something about what Gwyn said was pleasing, not infuriating.

‘I’ve never introduced a rug by a name before, but if you insist.’

Gwyn hummed, amused – and only a little alarmed – and closed his eyes as Augus gently touched his face all over, as though checking that everything was still where it was supposed to be. A thumb brushing over his lips, fingertips on his eyebrows, a palm resting on his throat – over the collar that rested there so often now.

He had huge words in his chest. Giant, meaningful words that he couldn’t say without feeling like he was being crushed. But he could think them, and he could imagine that Augus knew they were there.

‘When you came to defeat me,’ Augus said, his voice very quiet, ‘I thought you would kill me. Not save me.’

Gwyn’s heart started thumping fast, stealing his breath.

‘When…I came to you all those years ago,’ Gwyn said, clearing his throat, ‘I was already defeated. I was ready to kill myself. And you- You saved me.’

‘You let me,’ Augus said, as Gwyn pushed himself up onto his knees and leaned his forehead against Augus’. ‘I think that’s the most important thing of all. That even back then, you let me. Even then. When you hated yourself so fiercely.’

‘You too,’ Gwyn said, opening his eyes and seeing Augus’ eyes so close to his. ‘I could never have…I could never have saved you if you hadn’t let me. Over and over again. You’re so strong. And so much braver than they’ll ever know.’

‘You know,’ Augus said, touching his fingers to Gwyn’s jaw and kissing him lightly. ‘That’s all that matters to me.’

Then, they were kissing, only stopping to rest their cheeks together, before starting again. Gwyn thought of all the things he knew about Augus that no one else did. That Augus was a romantic at heart, that amongst his cruelty and his intelligence, was someone who wished to share tenderness with someone else. He thought of Augus’ bravery and what he’d survived, felt fury that the Nightingale had seen Augus at his worst. But he’d never seen Augus at his best, and so he’d missed out on the truth of Augus as well.

He still sometimes feared – now more than ever – that one day Augus would come to his senses and leave Gwyn behind. He feared bows and arrows in ways that he’d never needed to before; even after Mafydd’s death. He feared the greediness in his heart and the neediness that clung to his bones and the deep terror that no amount of love would ever be enough to make up for all the wounds that were trying to heal inside of him.
He remembered a snatch of conversation, from back during a time when he’d been floating high above himself, trusting that Augus would give him the heartsong he wanted. Augus had cradled Gwyn’s heart even as he’d tormented his body:

‘I always…took the things I shouldn’t. I want a lot of things.’
‘Do you? Like what?’
‘You. Like that.’
‘What else? What else do you want?’
‘Forests. Hounds. Good food. People who…know me and then still…like me.’

He squeezed his eyes shut, because he had it all. Everything that had seemed so impossible at the time. A forest surrounding them, a puppy waiting for him back at the Unseelie Court, good food whenever he wanted it, and Augus…who knew him, and still liked him.

What amazed him more than anything was the possibility that there could be more.

‘Anam cara,’ Gwyn said against Augus’ lips, and they paused. Gwyn could hear his own breaths, and Augus’. ‘Even if you left me tomorrow, nothing could replace the things you’ve shown me, given me.’

‘I’m not leaving tomorrow,’ Augus whispered. ‘Or the next day. Or the day after that.’

‘I can’t even imagine it,’ Gwyn said, his chest hurting like something was being torn inside of him. It was too much, too good. His voice broke.

‘Try, my dear heart. You can try. Here, you’re getting overwhelmed. Let me help you. I want you to imagine the beautiful new rug I’m going to have. I’ll introduce it as ‘Grip.’”

Gwyn laughed, his eyes were wet, he wrestled Augus down to the ground and his chest was still shaking when he pressed his lips back to Augus’ mouth.

‘Can you imagine it?’ Augus said, tilting his head back, eyes gleaming.

‘I can,’ Gwyn said, pressing his hand to Augus’ chest and feeling his heart beating slowly, a resonant thump.

‘Then I’m not leaving tomorrow.’

‘Or the next day,’ Gwyn whispered against Augus’ mouth.

‘Probably ever,’ Augus said.

Gwyn knew challenges would come. Felt it in his bones – it was a Season of Turning and the fae realm was being destabilised, repositioned, its marrow of magic shifting and writhing. But he’d never had a perfect day before. A day that was almost wholly good from start to finish. Now that he knew it was possible, he wanted more of them. That alone would give him the strength to face whatever was coming.

He pressed his lips to Augus’ lips, lost himself in the texture of it and his thoughts disappeared into vapour. He let the huge feelings in his chest drown his fears, leaning against Augus’ length. He didn’t have anything to fear – not right now – Augus would bring him safely back to himself when it was time.
He no longer feared the future or even the past quite like he used to. Not when the present was more of a gift with every passing day.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all endlessly for reading *The Court of Five Thrones*. Feedback is love! Please consider commenting :D

The political and magical adventures of the team aren’t over, and will continue at a yet-to-be-determined point in *The Ice Plague*, with two new heroes (or antiheroes) taking to the stage. Consider becoming an AO3 member and subscribing to my author name or series name for email updates! (Also if you haven’t already, now is a great time to press Kudos, or bookmark the story!)

Please take a minute to consider posting a review or rating over at Goodreads. Word of mouth is how this story is found. :) I can also be found on my not-poignant Tumblr – extra tidbits, snippets and drabbles are posted there! Some of my new Fae Tales stories won’t be published on AO3, and the best way to discover what’s coming out is to check me out there. I also have an official writerly Tumblr.

* Notes on The Ice Plague:
Continuing the saga in 10 years after *The Court of Five Thrones*, Unseelie dryad Mosk Manytrees and Seelie fire fae Eran Iliakambar find themselves devastated in different ways by a plague of destructive, sentient ice that sunders fae communities. Eran is convinced that Mosk is the cause of such destruction, binding Mosk to him and forcing him to the Courts to account for his actions. But the world has become more threatened than ever, and Eran and Mosk must make a pilgrimage – along with Gwyn and Augus – to discover what or who may be behind increasing instabilities that threaten everything the fae have come to take for granted.

*It's been released!*

*

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Works inspired by this one

[Poigdom Week Poem Series](#) by simariethehawk

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!