Familiar lovers pull their curtains back

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Familiar lovers pull their curtains back

by logicalcomplexity

Summary

Neither of them feel sane after the war. Eugene can’t stand civilian life and Merriell is losing touch with reality. If post-war peace is an ocean, they’re sinking fast, unable to breathe without taking on water. Eugene thinks he’s found the solution, needing Merriell like a buoy to keep him afloat. But Merriell isn’t so sure, because Eugene is an anchor—grounding him in reality and dragging him down.

Notes

This Beautiful Creatures AU is now a series because I joined the fandom for the fix-it fics. That being said, this won’t make any sense if you don’t read ‘No one won the war’ first. If you’re coming straight from there, here’s my attempt to fix it! FYI, this story will get weirder as it progresses and there is a fuck-ton of original characters but their appearances will be minor.

Specific warnings for this chapter include minor blood and violence, a panic attack, implied/referenced oral sex, consensual anal sex with an original male character, and suicidal thoughts/actions.
Prologue: Less and less

When Eugene purposely flunked out of officer’s school and enlisted, his father ushered him into his study to talk. He expected to be chewed out for upsetting his mother, who was currently crying and tippling sherry in the parlor, but the aura in the room told him his father was concerned about more than that. Perhaps ‘concerned’ was the wrong word for it. Strong emotions permeated his barrier, changed the air in a way that Eugene had always struggled to describe. Feelings were a smell, but also a color, and sometimes a taste. His father’s study felt misty white, a chilly fog, overly floral like a funeral home. Standing in front of his father’s desk, he shivered.

“Eugene,” His father looked at him sorrowfully over his wire-framed glasses. “The worst part about treating soldiers in the Great War was not their broken bodies. It was their souls. They’d been torn out. Now, I’m not going to stop you, but I want you to know that I don’t want to look in your eyes one day and see no light, no love.”

Those words left a great impression on him. So much so that if he was still a light caster he would have been scared to come home and show his father just how irrevocably the war had changed him. But he wasn’t, so when Sidney dropped him off, he looked his father dead in the eye and shook his hand. To feel another’s emotion was a conscious decision now—a resolution to reach out and understand. He could taste the grief, crematorium ash and week-old roses in the back of his mouth when he touched his father, but he didn’t feel bad about it. He moved on to kiss his mother’s cheek in greeting, her joy and relief bursting like citrus on his tongue.

As if to bookend his journey, Eugene’s father beckoned him into his study after dessert. Eugene stood in parade rest as his father paced. In the past, Eugene would have waited for whatever eloquent speech his father was forming, but he wasn’t a patient man anymore and his fingers itched to pack his pipe.

“Don’t tell Mother,” Eugene requested, staring intently at the inkwell on his father’s desk. He realized, with an odd sort of fascination, that he hadn’t seen an inkwell in nearly four years.

“I–I wouldn’t dream of telling your mother about this,” His father stammered, ceasing his pacing to gape at Eugene. “Unless—can you even step into a church anymore?”

Eugene scoffed. “I use dark magic, I’m not the devil incarnate.”

“So, you can go to church?”

Eugene sighed with exasperation. “Why does it matter so much?”

“Because,” His father ran a hand through his thinning hair in distress. “Your mother’s had a tough time with both you and Junior gone and I don’t think she can handle any more stress. Did Junior tell you he ran off to Boston and married a nurse he met in the war? Can you imagine how upset she is? How much worse it’d be if you couldn’t go to church?”

Eugene closed his eyes. He fought the urge to scream, to run around his father’s study, smashing his fancy trinkets and ripping apart his books. He’d been home for barely five hours and already everything was about Edward Jr., like always. “It’s not my intention to upset Mother.”

“I know and I’m not mad at you, Eugene. I’m sure you had your reasons for doing it.” His father backpedaled. He approached Eugene, hesitantly putting his hands on his shoulders. Eugene clamped down the reflex to reach out with his magic and see how he was feeling. He could only take so much
bitter disappointment. “You don’t have to talk about it unless you want to, but I do have to ask if there’s anything else I need to know.”

Merriell’s face rose to the forefront of his mind; eyes verdant and electric in the dark of night, pale as sea glass in the sun or under bright fluorescent lights. Merriell reminded Eugene of apple pie; sugary but tart, rich, and spiced. He tried so hard not to love Eugene, but slipped into it anyways, begging for praise, for a chance to show him how good he could be. For the first time in his life, Eugene was glad that his type of magic was an anomaly in the Sledge bloodline, for his father couldn’t sense how he missed Merriell’s affection, acidic and sweet like white clover between his teeth.

“No, there’s nothing else.”

Accustomed to a more rugged lifestyle, Eugene adjusted to his parent’s routine like a poorly trained dog. He did what they asked for exactly one day out of the week. On Sundays, he let his parents drag him to church and then to some upper crust lady’s house for brunch. There he’d pick at some mysterious meat aspic and tiny pastries as the church ladies gossipied far too loudly about who was respectable and still single in Mobile. On the drive home, his mother rambled on about what parties he should go to this week, should he feel like going out and meeting a girl. And there were, of course, some lovely debutantes being presented at the cotillions this summer if he didn’t find anyone suitable this spring.

To refrain from strangling his mother, Eugene left the house at sunrise and returned to smoke on the porch at sunset during the rest of the week, rain or shine. He spent the days driving through the county in his old Ford sport coupe or wandering the family property, soaking in the sight of spring transitioning to summer. He had forgotten how alive everything was here. Lush moss covered the northside of all the trees, mixed in with chartreuse and blue-green lichens. Flowers bloomed in the fields, the forest undergrowth, and the canopy, enticing a myriad of pollinating insects. Eugene liked to keep record of the things he saw each day, marveling at how he’d never perceived these details before. He noted when plants flowered and senesced and sketched to the best of his ability any bird, beast, or plant whose name he didn’t know. He looked them up in his father’s collection of natural history books and almanacs in the evening, smoking his pipe and thinking of Merriell.

Eugene never meant to, but the surly gunner strolled into his thoughts as though he owned the place. Merriell was a fly in the ointment, an itch he couldn’t scratch, the weight of his gun missing from his belt. All it took was a glance at the unintelligible scrawl above a drawing of a paper wasp and he remembered Merriell, grinning in the ocean with that incredibly deadly octopus cupped in his hands. Eugene never understood him, was even more confused by him now. Merriell loved him, so why did he leave without saying goodbye?

As the days lengthened and warmed, his mother became less tolerant of his introverted lifestyle.

“I don’t mind that you’re not working,” his mother began one Sunday morning after brunch.

“Mary Frank,” his father warned, shooting her a sharp look.

“What? I said I don’t mind,” his mother hissed back. At normal volume, she spoke to Eugene, who slumped in the back seat of the car. “I just think you’d feel a little more like yourself if you went out with some friends. Now I know you haven’t gone to any of the gatherings I suggested, but I heard Sidney Phillips is having a bachelor party next Saturday. I expect you’re going?”

Eugene rolled his eyes. “I’ll think about it.”

His mother huffed angrily. “Eugene, I know for a fact that you are Sidney’s best man. You’d best be going!”
“I was joking, Mother,” Eugene placated, watching his father’s hands tighten on the steering wheel. “I wouldn’t miss it.”

True to his word, Eugene showed up on the Phillip’s doorstep next Saturday night, feeling stuffy and overdressed in the tweed jacket and argyle sweater vest combo that his mother insisted he wear. It was the middle of May for Christ’s sake.

Phillip’s sister, Joan, opened the door, face flushed with excitement. For a moment Eugene didn’t recognize her, so familiar with a prim and proper Joan in her Sunday best that this new creature was completely foreign to him, carefree and giggling in a carnation pink linen dress.

“Let me get you a drink.” She ushered him inside and into the parlor, where Sidney and several friends from high school stood and chatted. “Ol’ fashioned alright?”

“Yes, time you showed up, Eugene!” Sidney waved him over, introducing him to the four men grouped in front of his parent’s fireplace. “You remember Rob Turney and John Knack, they played baseball with me. And this here’s Joan’s boyfriend, Peyton Pastor, and last but not least, Mary’s brother Michael.”

Eugene shook their hands but failed to associate the names and faces. “Sorry I’m late.”

“Nonsense, the show’s not for another two hours—thanks again, Michael, for the tickets—relax, have a drink.” As if on cue, Joan pushed a tumbler into his hands, darting away before Eugene could thank her. “Ran into your mother at the department store last week. She sounded real worried about you.”

“Don’t you start too.” Eugene sipped at his drink as Sidney chuckled and turned his attention to the rest of the men, informing them of Eugene’s service as a Marine. Eugene’s stomach churned at any mention of the war. Every man in the room had served though only Eugene and Sydney had been in the Pacific. They’d also returned to the US far sooner than Eugene, he learned as he stayed silent and drank, listening to them converse. All but Peyton had wives, and they teased Sydney about the less glamorous parts of marriage. Eugene was so bored he would have taken the nervous tedium of waiting between bouts of combat over another hour of this. Thankfully, Joan kept refreshing his glass.

The night dragged on and they moved from the Phillip’s house to a classy looking bar downtown. Seated on a bench at a crescent-shaped table, one of the men ordered a round of beers. Eugene put in his own order for a whiskey. He lost track of time, head muddled by the alcohol, as guys in three-piece suits came onto the stage and told jokes. The audience laughed and maybe Eugene laughed too, but he could not overcome the fact that this whole night was so absurd. This time last year he’d been trudging through the mud of Okinawa, soaked through with the blood of the Japanese and his fellow Marines. To be back in Alabama now, drinking and listening to some stand-up comedian, seemed blasphemous somehow. A slap in the face to all the men who didn’t make it home. How did the other veterans not feel this?

Hate boiled up in him as he sipped at his whiskey and looked around at their wide, laughing mouths. They acted like the war had never touched them, as if the fear and death had stayed wherever they had served. Eugene couldn’t understand how they were able to leave it all behind. War was this unstoppable force of human nature, all-consuming and omnipotent. War stripped a man of his humanity. It left a mark, indelible and vile, etched upon a creature’s very soul. Eugene had sensed the madness from the moment he stepped onto Pavuvu, charcoal grey and ferrous metal like a mouthful of bloody bullets. He’d never felt anything like it and initially the taste was nauseating, but he grew to like it as the war dragged on. Even missed it, now that he was back in Mobile, where the world spun on, fresh and bright, like a seedling pushing up out of the fire-scorched earth.
He felt alien—an imposter of a living thing amidst all those reaching upwards, towards this
glimmering, safe future that he could not see.

Eugene relived the Pacific in his dreams. He knew he talked and whimpered in his sleep, having
woken up several times screaming and reaching for his gun, but he never tried to fight it. His father
offered him pills that guaranteed a dreamless sleep, but the bottle sat untouched on his nightstand. It
didn’t seem right to forget. To forget was to forgive, to mellow in the face of what the Japanese had
down to them, to him.

Peleliu appeared particularly brutal and frequent, perhaps because he used light magic back then or
because the constant stress of Japs infiltrating their line at night made rest near impossible. In reality,
Merriell had never let a Jap anywhere near their foxhole, but Eugene often dreamed that he failed on
watch. He watched a fiend stick a knife through the Cajun’s throat before he could get his revolver
out. Eugene cradled him as he died, blood bubbling from the wound, slick and hot on his hands as he
tried to stem the flow. Other times Eugene woke to the fetid breath of an enemy in his face, holding
him close as they slit his belly open with a katana.

Most nights, Eugene dreamt about things that had actually happened. The injuries and death raced
through his mind as devastating as they were in real time. He soothed Leyden’s pain after he’d been
burned by a grenade while clearing out a bunker, shuddering with the rawness of the fear, flashing
red as a warning sign. The deaths of Hillbilly and Ack Ack were rusted iron and black rock, all salt
and gunpowder. The straw that broke the camel’s back. Merriell’s hand in his, that night in their
foxhole, was warm and full of promise; tranquil like the sea on a calm, sunny day. He never realized
how safe he felt with Merriell at his side until he wasn’t there anymore.

Eugene thought that the Pacific stayed out of his waking hours until he went dove hunting with his
father one autumn morning. Part of him had been waiting anxiously for the season to start, for the
comfortable weight of a gun over his shoulder. Eugene felt at peace marching through the misty
fields, watching the salmon-colored sunrise climbing above the tree line. Then he shot a bird. It was
still alive when he retrieved it. His vision started to tunnel as he held it in his hands, suddenly
squeamish at the blood trickling through his fingers, feeling its heart beat fast and arrhythmically. His
breath hitched, lungs spasming, and he felt supremely sick. Dropping the bird, he knelt in the long
grass and retched. He panted and squeezed his eyes shut to block out the sight of the dove and its
suffering. There was not enough distance, in either time or space, that could erase the blood-red
agony of the wounded and dying from Eugene’s memory.

“Gene!” His father cried out in concern, falling to his knees next to him, hugging him to his chest as
he hyperventilated. Like a child, Eugene tucked his head under his father’s chin and wept, shaking
uncontrollably. His father’s love washed over him; a beam of sunlight, unconditional and pervasive.
They didn’t talk, stayed quiet as Eugene’s panic subsided, as they walked back and returned the guns
to the shed. His father finally spoke again as Eugene rinsed the blood from his hands in the mudroom
by the kitchen. “You can talk to me about anything.”

Eugene nodded, absorbed in scraping the dried gore from underneath his fingernails. He couldn’t
decide if he wanted to talk. The other veterans in town seemed to cope by ignoring the war
altogether, busying themselves with wives and children. He wondered if Merriell had done the same;
tried to imagine him with a woman on his arm and startled at the recollection of Merriell’s lips around
his cock. The soap bar clattered at the bottom of the wash basin. Swallowing down another wave of
nausea, Eugene gripped the edge of the sink and assured his father. “I know.”

Telling his father something about the horrors of Peleliu and Okinawa was unthinkable but
inevitable. They’d always had a close relationship, despite how Eugene suspected that Edward Jr. was his parents’ favorite. That evening, as Eugene packed his pipe on the porch, his father joined him with a decanter of scotch.

“I think it goes without saying that I have never judged you for anything you’ve done,” His father said as he poured Eugene a generous portion of the spirit. “You and that rascal Sidney Phillips were clever, but I know you caused those summer traffic jams at the street car tracks. Now I never got mad at the pranks you pulled in high school. I wasn’t even mad when you got yourself kicked out of the military institute. I’m not about to start now. Your mother and I care about you, Eugene, and we’re worried about you. I see you drowning under the weight of what you’ve done, and I just want to help in any way that I can.”

Methodically, Eugene brushed the excess tobacco from his pipe and lit it. The first hit was bright and peppery, nicotine fizzing in his veins. He couldn’t look his father in the eye. “I don’t know how to describe it to you. All I did was kill and try to survive.”

“You’ve always been sensitive.” His father placed a hand on his knee. “It’s understandable to struggle with the concept of mortality.”

“It’s not that. I didn’t have any problem with killing. I don’t regret any of that. I don’t think I’d even mind dying. It’s the surviving that I’m having trouble with.” Ever since he’d turned dark, he had these thoughts, like some other man should be here in place of him. He was already dead inside. Someone could open him up and find him not just cold but empty. No heart or lungs or glistening viscera, just a big black hole.

His father withdrew his hand and sipped his scotch, expression pensive. “Well, have you tried those sleeping pills I gave you?”

Eugene shook his head vehemently. “I don’t want to forget.”

“It’s not about forgetting, Gene, it’s about getting some sleep. You can’t dwell on this forever. You need to get it out of your system. You need to find a way to move on.”

Eugene ground his teeth. If he couldn’t dwell on the war during and couldn’t dwell on it after, when would there ever be time for him to process it? “I was a soldier for four years. Think I’m owed a little more than eight months to learn how to move on.”

“I’m not saying you aren’t allowed some time to heal, but you have to at least try. Wandering around outside for days, not working, avoiding everybody in town—you’re not even attempting to cope.”

His father replied in a poor attempt to pacify him. “And I’m not shaming you, I just think your mother is on to something when she suggests that you find a distraction.”

“Is that what a wife is? A distraction?” Eugene chuckled darkly, taking a swig of scotch. He relished the burn, thinking of a muggy, moonlit night in Okinawa; Merriell’s pale heavy-lidded gaze and plump, chapped lips.

“I don’t mean that in a derogatory fashion,” his father clarified. “But your mother thinks that having someone to take care of would motivate you and I agree.”

Eugene scoffed, echoing a sentiment he’d felt since the end of Peleliu. “No Mobile high-society girl can make me forget what I’ve seen.”

“Well then what about a college educated girl? Take advantage of the G.I. Bill and go back to school.” His father countered, peering at Eugene over the rim of his glasses like he did when he was
about to get the final word in. “You’re smart, Eugene. Don’t let the war ruin the rest of your life.”

“I’ll think about it,” Eugene muttered. His father ruffled his hair and went back inside, bidding him goodnight.

Eugene smoked and drank, mulling over his father’s suggestion. He liked school, had wanted to study medicine once upon a time, but couldn’t see the point in going back now. Having spent the last four years brainlessly following orders, he doubted he had any original thoughts left in his head. Every aspect of the boy he’d been, the man he might have become, had been torn up and buried in the battlefields of the Pacific, leaving a stranger behind. He was unrecognizable to himself, filled to the brim with longing, nameless and dark.

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Joan Phillips and Peyton Pastor got married in late October. Eugene attended with his parents. They arrived late to the ceremony, having spent hours arguing over whether or not Eugene would attend in his dress blues. Stubbornly, Eugene dug his heels in and left the house in a horrendously short brown plaid blazer and vest that were most certainly relics from high school. From the back of the church, Eugene observed the couple. Peyton, a classic G.I. Joe in his Navy full dress whites, and Joan, slim and stunning in her wedding gown. A matched set, like they’d stepped right out of an advertisement for the American Dream.

His mother cried daintily throughout the ceremony and the cocktail hour, commenting wistfully over a hot toddy. “It’s a shame Junior eloped. I would have loved to have seen him in his Army uniform on the happiest day of his life.”

“Oh ma’am, you still have Eugene,” Anna, Sidney’s cousin, assured his mother soothingly. Someone, most likely his mother and Mrs. Phillips, had arranged for the Sledge family to sit with all of the available Phillip women in their twenties. “I’m sure he looks incredibly handsome in dress blues.”

Eugene pretended not to hear her and excused himself to fetch another drink. His father shot him a warning glare—it was his third bourbon on an empty stomach—which he ignored. He very nearly crashed into a tall, blond man in Army greens at the bar.

“Eugene Sledge, nice to see you out and about!” The man clapped him on the shoulder grinning. Eugene hadn’t the faintest idea who he was or how he knew him. “I see Sid’s mother seated you at one of the bachelorette tables.”

“One of?” Eugene repeated dumbly.

The man rolled his eyes jovially and pointed out three more tables, all full of women. “I’m seated with the Pastor cousins. That one’s the Adams side of his family. And then there’s the Donnelly cousins.”

“Oh hell, my ma’s gonna have a field day,” Eugene groaned, sidling up to the bar.

“Tell me about it. My mother and Mary have been throwing every single female in Mobile at me for months.” They chuckled conspiratorially, and the gears clicked in Eugene’s head. The blond was Mary’s older brother Michael. “Here, let me buy you a drink for your troubles.”

“Oh, you don’t have to—”

“I buy this round you buy the next one. What’s your poison?” Michael insisted with a wink, turning to catch the bartender’s attention.
Eugene chewed his lip, glancing back at his parents and the smartly dressed women surrounding them. Michael was as domestic and cookie-cutter as the rest of the company, but at least he wasn’t trying to rustle up a husband. “Bottom shelf bourbon, neat.”

“Boy, you’re easy to please.” Michael smirked, sliding his eyes over Eugene so quick he was sure he imagined it. He relayed the order to the bartender. “And a vodka tonic for me.”

“Weren’t you married just last May?” Eugene asked, searching his mind for anything he may have learned about Michael Houston during Sidney’s wedding. Unfortunately, the alcohol stripped all rules regarding polite conversation from his head.

“Freshly divorced as of August,” Michael replied with a roguish grin.

“My condolences.” Eugene didn’t even know if that was an appropriate response.

Michael waved his hand dismissively. “I left her. She was too vapid for my tastes. They all are, honestly. My parents don’t get it, I want someone who can do a little work. Someone who doesn’t mind sweating a bit, putting their back into it.”

The bartender placed their drinks on the counter and Eugene grabbed his with a grateful nod to Michael. They clinked glasses and Eugene nearly drained his drink, trying to push down the hazy memory of a certain gunner ‘watching the new guys sweat’.

“So, why aren’t you settled down yet? Most boys throw a ring onto some gal’s finger after two months Stateside.” Michael sipped at his vodka tonic, blue eyes trained on Eugene’s face. Eugene felt oddly like a bug under a microscope.

He swirled the remainder of the bourbon around in the glass, losing his nerves in the fuzzy, amber colored reflections in the liquid. “I don’t know. Can’t let go of some of the things I did during the war, I guess. Seems indecent to subject a lady to my bad habits.”


“Drinking’s definitely one of them,” Eugene laughed. Before he could say more, a reception hall attendant announced that dinner would be served shortly and asked that everyone return to their seats.

Michael nudged Eugene in the arm, eyes sparking with mischief. His touch felt curious, flirtatious and wanting. “I expect you to buy me that drink after dinner.”

Eugene nodded reflexively, a tad shocked by the emotions he’d picked up on. He walked slowly back to his assigned table. His stomach flipped at the idea that some man other than Merriell found him desirable. What transgressed between him and his foxhole buddy lived and died with the war, and Eugene had not considered continuing such actions with men that were not Merriell. To do so might erase him somehow, overwrite the phantom sensation of his touch with some other man’s hands or mouth. But as he sat down beside his father again, the chatter of women springing up around him, he thought about the darkness, the hunger, and considered that this may be his only chance to sate it.

His resolve fortified throughout dinner and, as he danced politely with a veritable carousel of girls in candy-colored dresses, he realized that his disinterest in taking a wife ran deeper than the wounds the Pacific had inflicted on him. He didn’t desire women. He held their dainty hands, cupped their tiny waists in his palm, looking down into their immaculately painted faces and at their soft, white breasts,
and felt no spark, no interest. He thought of Merriell, hunched at the foot of his cot in China, smoking like a chimney and grumbling about his magic, how the foresight was making him crazy. He watched the sweat drip down his spine, bronze skin washed out and yellow under the harsh lights, and wanted to catch the drop on his tongue. The memory of him—laying between his legs, lips hovering over Eugene’s cock; big, square hands clutching at his thighs—had lust blooming in his chest.

Hastily, Eugene excused himself from the dancefloor and headed towards the bathrooms. As if they were on the same wavelength, he glimpsed Michael extract himself from a pretty brunette and follow him. He let Michael catch him near the bathroom door.

“Hitting the head?” Michael asked with a breathless laugh.

“Actually,” Eugene paused, licking his lips. “I was hoping to get you that drink now.”

Michael grinned. “Right, well I want to go for a smoke first. Care to join?”

Eugene nodded and followed him down a side hallway, away from the main entrance and groups of people. In a shadowy part of the building, Michael yanked open a closet door and hustled Eugene inside. He pulled Eugene close. “I was hoping you were inclined.”

“Don’t know if I’d say that,” Eugene muttered, even as he fumbled with Michael’s belt buckle.

Michael chuckled, moving his face close to Eugene’s like he wanted to kiss him. Eugene kept his own turned away, his stomach swooping uncomfortably. “I want you to fuck me.”

“Okay,” Eugene agreed, mind whirring at the mechanics of such an action. But Michael didn’t seem to expect him to do anything, shucking his pants and taking a tube of Vaseline out of his pocket. He slicked up his fingers before reaching behind himself. Feeling overwhelmed and rather useless, Eugene pumped at Michael’s cock and kissed at his throat in what he hoped was an appealing manner.

“You done this before? You seem nervous.” Michael leaned down, breathing in his ear, and Eugene became self-conscious about their height difference. The top of his head barely scraped the other man’s chin.

“I’ve been with a man, just not in this way.”

Michael laughed, so soft it was almost inaudible. Lips pressed to his skin, Eugene felt his vocal cords vibrating. “So, I’m popping your cherry.”

He pushed Eugene back and turned around, bracing his hands against the doorframe. Eugene let his instincts take over. He thrust in, taking in the wrongness of the man before him, too big and broad, too sturdy. If it were Merriell, he would have grabbed him by his neck and held him close, pressing against his back like he was trying to disappear inside of him. Merriell would shudder and sigh with the pace of his thrusts, bite at the meat of his palms or forearms until he left marks in an effort to stay quiet. If it were Merriell, he would hiss in his ear, urging him to be loud, to let go. Merriell, helpless to obey any of Eugene’s requests, might whimper or moan, would squirm with embarrassment because he liked being humiliated. If it were Merriell, the taste would be green, herbal and bitter with shared sadness, not red—cloying, juicy, sticky-sweet like cherries. If it were Merriell, Eugene wouldn’t feel so detached.

Michael came first, tensing so tight that Eugene had to slip out of his slick heat and finish himself off, unable to bear the situation much longer. Thankfully, they’d ducked into a cleaning supply closet and
there were plenty of rags handy to wipe away the evidence of their coupling. As they cleaned up, Michael tried to kiss him again and Eugene dodged him with a finality that had them both blushing.

Clearing his throat, Michael jerked his head in the direction of the door. “You head back first. Don’t want to raise suspicion by arriving together.”

Eugene nodded, giving his appearance one last appraising look before slipping out the closet door. The hallway was empty, light and laughter drifting in from the left. On the right end, a set of doors led outside, the parking lot lights visible through narrow windows. There was no way Eugene could go back to the reception, not with the noxious anxiety bubbling in his chest, so he left.

Outside in the cool night, Eugene walked to the nearest gas station and bought a pack of unfiltered cigarettes. Then he hopped on the last street car heading out of downtown. His parents lived several miles outside of the main city and it would take a few hours and many cigarettes until Eugene made it to their house. He reveled in the long walk, strolling along the dirt roads at a leisurely pace. He didn’t regret what he had done—rarely felt remorseful about anything anymore—but the persistent emptiness that he experienced in the aftermath puzzled him. He’d done something morally bad by his standards, he should feel full. The first drag of the cigarette burned his lungs fiercely, accustomed as he was to smoking a pipe, but he considered it a comfort. He wanted to feel something, anything, even pain.

Pain was the root of the problem, the end and the beginning. Acrid, sharp, and blood red or a persistent ache, clouding the eyes like gun smoke; Eugene had felt so much of it on Peleliu that he was sure he would die if he didn’t find a way to shut it out. The dark magic formed a hard shell around him, an impenetrable fortress to protect him. At first, he’d enjoyed the silence, finally able to sleep, finally able to breathe without some errant panic bleeding over from some other man into his brain. Now it isolated him, the lack of pain loud in its absence, shrill with apathy and an overwhelming assertion that this life just did not matter.

Dawn was barely breaking when Eugene made it back. His feet blistered in his dress shoes and his throat felt particularly raw from chain-smoking, but the discomfort was familiar, soothing even. The porchlight was on, as was a light in his father’s study. Eugene poked his head into the study to find his father asleep in his armchair, Bible open and tilted against his belly. He knocked on the door, startling him awake. “Mother make you wait up for me?”

Blearily, his father regained his bearings, rubbing his neck and peering at his watch. “Gene, it’s almost five in the morning. Where’d you disappear to?”

“Just needed a walk to clear my head.”

“A walk? You walked all the way home?” Abruptly, his father was wide awake. “We were worried sick about you!”

Leaning up against the doorjamb, Eugene realized that his parents would never understand what he had been through. They did not know the true limits of the human body; had never marched for days on end, never carried half their weight’s worth of equipment in the scorching heat, never subsisted for months on tainted water and little food. The thought of walking less than ten miles in dress shoes was unfathomable to them.

“Look, I can take care of myself. You don’t need to worry about me anymore. Go to sleep.” Eugene retreated, heading up the stairs before his father could protest.

Eugene felt distinctly changed by the night’s events, more alien than ever. Shutting himself in his childhood bedroom, he took in the paraphernalia of his younger years with a startling sense of clarity.
The sports and hunting trophies, the baseball cards, the pictures of him with his family or Sidney or at church—all things that failed to define him now and never would again. He didn’t belong here. Perhaps he didn’t belong anywhere.

Resolutely, Eugene dug into the back corner of his closet, where the help had stashed all evidence of his enlistment. Brushing aside the uniforms, he picked up a box labeled ‘Gear’ and set it on his desk to open it. As he moved it, something small and round fell off the top, dropping to the ground with a dull ping. Eugene glanced around the floor for it but didn’t see anything. It was probably just a loose button.

Opening the box, Eugene found a hodge-podge of weapons and tools; his Ka-Bar and a few small knives, gun holsters, and slim wooden cases that surely housed the matching guns. He had collected a few Japanese pistols in Okinawa and the sight of them brought bile crawling up the back of his throat. He snatched up the revolver his father had sent him before Peleliu, opening the case and inspecting the condition of the gun. It could do with some cleaning, considering there was a touch of rust around the chamber, but otherwise the handgun looked and felt as solid and trustworthy as it had back in the Pacific. He had missed holding it and to have it in his hand again released a pressure that had been steadily growing inside him from the moment he got off the train.

After rifling through the box for his cleaning kit, Eugene cleared his desk and meticulously dismantled and polished the revolver, wiping away the rust and oiling the junctions and levers. He supposed he should leave a note, although he wasn’t sure what it should say. He settled on blaming it all on survivor’s guilt, if only to free his parents from the notion that there was something they could have done. He wondered if he should write a letter to Merriell but decided against it. The poor bastard probably knew already.

Loading two bullets in the chamber, Eugene stood and stared out the window. There was a lone oak tree in the field just behind the house that looked as good a place to end it as any. As he turned to leave the room, he stepped on a small, round something. It creaked under his weight in a way that sent shivers up his spine. Lifting his foot and looking down, Eugene froze. It was Merriell’s ring; slim and wooden, cracked and stained with water damage, humming with light magic.

Hesitantly, he picked it up, letting the wooden ring roll from his fingertips into his palm. Magic radiated from it, earnest and achingly familiar, lapping at his palm like an ocean wave. There was a beacon spell on the ring, similar to the one his father had cast on the family ring that Eugene had worn during the war, faded but clinging stubbornly to the wood. It felt decades old, sustained by a bottomless well of devotion and tinged with a grief so deep it brought tears to his eyes. Eugene pressed the ring to his lips, taking in the well-known taste of ash and salt. The magic sizzled against his mouth, calling out to him.

Looking out at the oak tree and the blazing orange sunrise, Eugene decided to answer it.
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

Warnings for implied alcoholism and non-consensual oral sex (kind of graphic in my opinion so I bumped up the rating).

People got up to all sorts of mischief during Samhain in New Orleans. Earlier in the evening, there’d only been children darting from household to household, begging for candy, but now the teenagers had come out to play, egging cars and stealing just about anything that wasn’t nailed down. Seated on a sagging wicker chair on his apartment balcony, Merriell smoked and watched the devils, ghosts, and tricksters run amok through his street. He wasn’t getting any sleep tonight anyways.

His magic had gotten stronger in a creeping way since he’d been home. It started with his cousin Jean, or rather Jean’s younger twin siblings, Margie and Bennie. Aunt Celeste had sent them by to help clean his mother’s boarded up apartment. Bennie passed Merriell a mop, their hands brushed, and he saw with startling clarity that Jean had died in Iwo Jima. Up until that moment, he hadn’t even known that his cousin had served. His family weren’t talkers and they would rather rip out their own tongues than discuss the eight Sheltons his age who’d been drafted and killed in the war. Merriell learned about them all piecemeal, through flashes of the past so intense he might as well still be in the Pacific. Sad as their deaths were, Merriell felt it was a tad ironic that they had mocked him for enlisting while he was the only one who lived.

Of course, the visions weren’t so debilitating that Merriell couldn’t function. In fact, he adjusted well to civilian life. There was plenty of work in construction, as whole sections of the city were being re-zoned for housing, and Bennie had gotten him a job at an air conditioning installation and repair company. The man who owned the company, Louis Liggett Jr., lost his only son in Europe and embraced Merriell like he was a suitable replacement. Merriell tried his best to be a good and reliable worker, and he did well when putting units into new houses, but some days were worse than others. He played the visions off as migraines, claiming a mortar had gone off too close to his head and scrambled his brain a bit, because staring mute and unresponsive at some peeling wallpaper in someone’s living room tended to bring about some questions.

Some days Merriell couldn’t manage it at all, had to call in sick and resign himself to spending a day drinking and talking to his mother. He watched himself grow up with a morbid fascination, counting every time young Merriell broke her heart, listening to her worry.

“Red is an unlucky color for you, cher.” She cautioned him more than once. Merriell cursed himself for never heeding her warning.

Samhain was a particularly bad day filled with cigarettes, cheap whiskey, and the chatter of city ghosts. Merriell remembered how his mother complained about Samhain, something about the veil between world’s wearing thin, letting all sorts cross over. Bleary eyed and tired, afraid to sleep, he blinked away the vision of a pale redheaded man crossing the street below. Such images didn’t make his heart race anymore, for he saw Eugene everywhere and nowhere at all, a silent specter in everything Merriell did. He stopped paying attention to him months ago, hadn’t dreamed about him in any capacity for weeks. He took it as a sign of healing.

Someone knocked at his door. Merriell turned his attention languidly from the sodium orange streets,
looking into his dimly lit apartment. The main entrance was next to the kitchen window and Merriell had kept his lights off to discourage trick or treaters. They knocked again, and he considered whether any neighborhood teens had the gall to mess with him. With a sigh, Merriell stood, flinging a hand out to steady himself on the balcony railing because he was well and truly shitfaced at this point in the night. He fumbled with the screen door, fingers clumsy and stained from cigarettes. Whoever was on the other side of his front door seemed determined to wake the whole block up, knocking again with increased fervor.

“Fuck! Hold your goddamn horses!” Merriell shouted, wrenching open the screen door and stumbling through. He banged his shin on the coffee table as he crossed the living room and fetched up against the front door, swearing. He took a moment to breathe, composing himself before opening it.

Eugene Sledge stood on his front step, looking nothing like how Merriell remembered. He wore civilian clothes instead of faded and ripped utilities, a plain white button up and tan tweed jacket which clashed horribly with his red hair. His regulation crew cut had grown out, the coppery strands flopping into his eyes, no longer stiff with sweat and mud. He grinned cockily, clean and whole. On reflex, Merriell tried to shut the door but Eugene put a hand out to catch it. “Merriell, what the hell? That any way to greet an old war buddy?”

His voice made Merriell pause. Phantom Eugene never talked, just stood and stared and filled him with such longing that he wanted to throw himself off his balcony. “Are you real?”

“Still can’t tell the difference, can you?” Eugene pushed the door open and Merriell took in details that he hadn’t noticed before. First, the sea bag slung over his shoulder then the revolver holstered at his hip. This Eugene was a weird mix of the future and the past and Merriell didn’t know what to make of him.

“You’re not supposed to be here.” Merriell said, body at odds with his head as he stepped aside to let Eugene in. “You’re supposed to be in Mobile, dancin’ at a cotillion or some shit.”

“What you read that in your Tarot cards?” Eugene chuckled, dropping his sea bag on the floor next to the couch and looking around. “You know, I didn’t expect to find you in such a nice place. The way you talked—hell, the way the other men talked—I thought I’d find you in a cardboard box.”

Merriell shut the door and slouched against it, watching Eugene inspect his apartment. Hope sprang up in his chest, the memory of achingly domestic visions surging up all at once. “Ma owns the place rightfully.”

“Owned,” Eugene corrected, walking slowly through the kitchen. “Though I’m not surprised you don’t even know what year you’re in.” He let one hand skim the worn countertops until his fingertips bumped up against Merriell’s collection of empty whiskey bottles. He looked over his shoulder at Merriell disapprovingly. “Drinking yourself into an early grave?”

“What do you care how I kill myself?” Merriell scrubbed his hands over his face. His eyesight was going grainy, like bad film, like it did when a vision was coming on. If he went to sleep, maybe he would wake up. Eugene’s footsteps clicked on the linoleum and the rustle of the gun holster sobered Merriell up briefly. He stared at Eugene, at the revolver in his hand. Eugene flipped the chamber of the gun open, counting the bullets.

“What do you care how I kill myself?” Merriell scrubbed his hands over his face. His eyesight was going grainy, like bad film, like it did when a vision was coming on. If he went to sleep, maybe he would wake up. Eugene’s footsteps clicked on the linoleum and the rustle of the gun holster sobered Merriell up briefly. He stared at Eugene, at the revolver in his hand. Eugene flipped the chamber of the gun open, counting the bullets.

“If you want to die, there’s more efficient ways to go about it. I’ve got two rounds,” he announced, brown eyes black in the low light. “One for you, one for me.”

“Jesus, Gene, I’m jokin’.” Galvanized by the sight of the gun, Merriell rushed over to him, grabbing
his wrist and angling the revolver down towards the floor. The action brought them closer than Merriell had been to anyone in the last eight months. The touch electrified him, a wave of sorrow and wanting.

Eugene smiled like he planned this. “Me too.”

Twisting out of Merriell’s grip, he brushed past him and set the gun on the coffee table, taking a seat on the moth-eaten couch. He looked up at Merriell, chewing his lip, evaluating, but said nothing. Surely there was some test of will that Merriell was supposed to be participating in, but he swayed on his feet, more relaxed now that the gun was out of Eugene hands, and sat down next to him.

“What are you doin’ here?” Merriell asked after a beat of silence, slumping against the frayed upholstery. It reeked of cigarette smoke and sage incense. “You shouldn’t be here.”

“So you’ve said.” Eugene fiddled with his left hand, fingers stroking over the knuckles. “I found something of yours and I thought, at the very least, I should return it.”

Eugene wore Merriell’s willow wood ring on his left ring finger. He removed it, let it fall from his fingertips to the center of his palm, and held it out for Merriell to take.

Merriell’s heart wrenched at the sight; the tiny water stained circlet stark against the pale ivory of Eugene’s slender palm, the image so familiar although he’d never seen it person before. He closed his eyes and drew in a steadying breath. “Shouldn’t be here, Gene.”

“What are you, a broken record? If you’re going to keep saying that, you best tell me why. Why shouldn’t I be here?”

There were a million reasons why, none of which Merriell could possibly articulate. He never had the words to describe what Eugene meant to him during the war, couldn’t explain the impetus behind his need to protect him, to see him whole and safe at the end. Maybe the ‘why’ was his red hair or his brown eyes or copper freckled skin. There could be a ‘why’ in his dry humor and clever mind, the way his wide, smart mouth curled in a smile. Might be a ‘why’ in his elegant hands, swift and sure and deadly on a gun or around Merriell’s neck.

Heaving a sigh, Merriell dismissed the question. “Don’t matter why, just shouldn’t be. Don’t need to return my ring either.”

“Well, I’m not just gonna keep it,” Eugene huffed. “Not until I understand why you gave it to me.”

Merriell had to laugh at that. Blinking blearily, he watched Eugene’s eyes narrow angrily. “Why do you think I gave it to you?”

“I don’t know, I never understood a damn thing you did.”

“I did it ’cuz I saw it.” Sluggishly, Merriell reached out, brushed the pad of his pointer finger over the ring. The magic sparked at him, sweet and warm like late spring rain. “Couldn’t see how you could have it if I kept it.”

Eugene caught Merriell’s hand in both of his. The blank touch unsettled him, for he could still remember a time when Eugene’s feelings and magic bled through, fizzling and alive. His hands were warm and smooth, fingers free from callouses, scars just silvery lines upon the skin. “Didn’t you ever think about why you saw it? Ever think that what we had didn’t have to end with the war? That I wanted you too?”

Merriell stared at their entangled hands. He had to be dreaming. “I gotta go to bed.”
Eugene blinked at him. “What?”

“It’s Samhain an’ the devil’s fuckin’ with me,” Merriell muttered, standing up. The room spun around him, but he wobbled resolutely in the direction of his bedroom.

Eugene sprang up to steady him, hand on his back. “What the hell are you going on about? How much have you had to drink?”

“Not enough to forget you, apparently.” The bedroom wasn’t far from the living room, since the apartment was nice but small, made for one person or a childless couple at most. Merriell collapsed onto his creaky bed with a groan.

“What should I do then? Return your ring and leave?” Eugene sounded anxious but Merriell was too exhausted, his head too muddled to care.

“Do what you want,” Merriell sighed, closing his eyes. “Not like you ever listen to me anyways.”

In the morning, Merriell’s head pounded with the mother of all headaches. Feeling tremendously hungover, he shuffled shirtless into the kitchen to make a pot of coffee. He nearly had a heart attack when he noticed Eugene smoking his pipe out on his balcony. He pressed his fingers to his temples, trembling. “It’s just the foresight, ya fuckin’ loon.”

He continued setting up the percolator, determined to ignore Eugene until he went away, fading into the background like he always did. He blamed Samhain and heavy drinking for last night’s vision. But Eugene seemed to have other ideas, creaking open the balcony door and stepping back into the living room. Merriell didn’t want to look at him, but his presence drew his eyes like a magnet.

Eugene looked worn out, dark circles heavy under his eyes signifying that he hadn’t slept, head bowed like he spent time ducking people’s gaze. He was a shade of himself, not proud and angry like he was eight months ago.

“Are you real?” Merriell’s voice quivered over the question. He hated how weak he was, hated that he fell prey to his magic time and time again, like it was determined to never let him forget about the price he paid.

Eugene tipped his head like a curious bird and licked his lips. He squinted against the morning sunlight streaming through the kitchen window. “What do I have to do to prove to you that I’m real?”

“I don’t know,” Merriell admitted. “I see you all the time. I dream about you—sometimes you’re with me, most times livin’ well without me. I don’t know if you could do somethin’ that I ain’t seen.”

“You always see me alive?” Eugene shoved his hands into his trouser pockets and approached Merriell. He looked uncharacteristically coy.

“You’re alive. Ain’t seen you dead since Okinawa.” Eugene hummed at Merriell’s response, eyes drifting off towards the living room. Merriell followed his gaze to the revolver on the coffee table. A chill raced up his spine. This might be real. “You weren’t gonna, were you?”

Eugene sighed, close now, breath warm on Merriell’s cheek. “I was. Still might.”

“Why, Gene? You were home, you got so much goin’ for you.” Frozen in shock, Merriell let Eugene cup his head in his hands and tip their foreheads together. He was searching for comfort and Merriell wanted to give it to him but first he had to understand. Despite being brought up with a
silver spoon, Eugene always seemed so solid, even when things were going to hell around them. What had tipped him over the edge?

“Didn’t feel right to be there anymore.” Eugene brushed his thumbs over Merriell’s cheekbones tenderly. His hands felt foreign against Merriell’s face, smooth and slightly cold. The wooden ring rested on his jawbone; a small, warm, rough spot. “Everyone kept expecting me to move on and I just can’t. I don’t know how.”

Merriell’s jaw tightened with anger. It was so typical of Eugene to just avoid emotions that he didn’t like instead of dealing with them. “So you’re just givin’ up? Runnin’ away?”

Eugene released him, stepping back, eyes on the stovetop. “I think the percolator’s done.”

Rifling through his cabinets, Merriell found a clean mug and a teacup and poured them each some coffee. Merriell took cream with his, liked to indulge in little things where he could, but Eugene drank his black. They sipped at their coffee in silence, seated at the round kitchen table, until Merriell’s disappointment and curiosity got the better of him. “What about your parents?”

“Merriell.” Eugene set his mug down, eyes narrowed warningly. Merriell knew better than anyone that parents were a touchy subject, but he felt very strongly that Eugene should not be here. If he was real, then he should be in Mobile, wooing some pretty young girl at a fancy event. He shouldn’t be in New Orleans, drinking shitty coffee and trying to seduce Merriell in his own kitchen.

“They love you,” Merriell countered, patting down his pockets for his cigarettes. He had a sense they were about to get into an argument and he hadn’t even had his morning smoke. “Did you even let ‘em know you were leavin’?”

“I left them a note,” Eugene replied breezily, watching Merriell search his pockets. “Although, it may read like a suicide note.”

“I left them a note,” Eugene replied breezily, watching Merriell search his pockets. “Although, it may read like a suicide note.”

Merriell gaped at him. “Eugene. Go to the phone booth down the street and call your parents.”

Eugene shook his head, reaching into one of his back pockets and producing a pack of cigarettes. The packaging wasn’t crumpled enough to be Merriell’s, but it was his favorite brand. “I wouldn’t want to be hasty.”

“Eugene,” Merriell growled, eying the cigarettes.

“I’m kidding, Merriell. Maybe.” Eugene tapped the pack against his palm and chewed his lip, staring at Merriell appraisingly. “I’ll call if you give me a kiss.”

Merriell’s face flushed at the request, cheeks burning even hotter at Eugene’s answering smirk. He wanted nothing more than to kiss him. They hadn’t kissed for real before, as far as Merriell could remember. There may have been a moment in Okinawa, after the Japanese surrender, but Merriell’s magic had been so new to him then that he was quite sure he’d dreamed the whole thing up. They hadn’t dared in China, too focused on getting off without getting caught. The desire felt juvenile, too innocent for a couple of twenty-something veterans.

“Come on,” Eugene coaxed, propping an elbow on the table and resting his chin on the back of his hand. The cigarettes dangled from his fingertips. “Just one kiss and I’ll call them and give you a cigarette.”

Merriell bristled. “Ain’t right to hold a man’s smokes hostage, Eugene.”

“Don’t be salty, these are mine. Yours are out on the balcony.” Eugene spoke softly, calmly, like he
was addressing an unruly child. The tone got Merriell’s blood up. He hated being treated like he was stupid.

“I’m not playin’, Eugene,” he spat through gritted teeth. “Call your fuckin’ parents and go the fuck home.”

Eugene sat back in his chair, arm sliding off the table into his lap, but he didn’t look hurt or even startled. He smiled, pleasant but frigid. “You are a piece of work, Merriell. You always do the opposite of whatever a normal person would do. You love someone, but you leave without saying goodbye. They show up on your doorstep, wanting to be with you, and you tell them to fuck off. Unbelievable but typical Snafu.”

The words cut deep and precise. He knew he shouldn’t rise to the bait, but Eugene got under his skin in a way that no one else could. Merriell stood up, shaking with rage and nausea, and leaned over the table, keeping his voice low and threatening.

“I’m not playin’,” he repeated, meeting Eugene’s dispassionate gaze. “You’re better off without me an’ I mean it. It ain’t a walk in the park to be queer. It ain’t safe an’ it ain’t legal, not here, not anywhere. Go home and live a normal life.”

There were other, more pertinent warnings that Merriell could have given, but to say them aloud might give them power. First and foremost was the price of his magic. Pining after Eugene from afar seemed a fair fee, but to have him here, to actually love him, was to court death. But Merriell had a decent poker face and he hoped that Eugene still feared his mortal god, somewhere deep down.

“Allright,” Eugene assented, too quickly in the wake of Merriell’s outburst. His jaw was set with determination as he rose from his chair and rounded the table. Merriell met him halfway, unsure if he would make a break for the gun in the living room. Eugene glared at him as they stood face to face.

“I still want one kiss.”

Merriell frowned but nodded. He considered demanding that Eugene make his call first, but the dark caster grabbed the back of his neck before he could say anything and pulled him in. Eugene kissed like he argued; determined, persuasive, and forceful. Merriell tried to keep it chaste, a dry press of lips and nothing more, but Eugene brought his other hand up to the joint of Merriell’s jaw and pressed, opening his mouth. It hurt, but Merriell always expected a bit of pain when it came to Eugene. Eugene crowded him against the kitchen table, slipping one of his thighs between Merriell’s legs.

“Gene,” Merriell gasped, breaking the kiss. He intended to tell him off, but Eugene ground his hip into Merriell’s crotch and all rational thinking deserted him.

“I’m not delusional,” Eugene whispered, kissing down his neck. Merriell fist ed his hands in Eugene’s shirt, limbs weak from his hangover and desire. “I tried the normal life and I can’t hack it. I need you.”

Eugene knelt slowly in front of him, licking and biting gently at his collarbone, his pectoral muscles, pectoral, nipples. He nuzzled down Merriell’s ribs, pink tongue darting out to taste his skin every once and awhile. His nimble hands made short work of the button and zipper on Merriell’s trousers. Merriell jumped at the first cold touch of Eugene’s hand on his erection. Eugene apologized with a coquettish smirk. “Sorry, poor circulation.”

Merriell bit into the palm of his hand to stifle a whine when Eugene took his cock into his mouth. He’d forgotten how good it felt to sink into a warmth so soft, wet, and willing. Eugene, as virginal as he appeared, had a forgiving gag reflex and was therefore naturally talented at giving head. Merriell
braced himself on Eugene’s shoulders as the redhead bobbed along his length a few times before taking him in deep and swallowing. Merriell shuddered with pleasure at the sensation of Eugene’s throat squeezing rhythmically around the head of his cock. It’d been so long since he felt anything like this and he began to tense up embarrassingly quickly. Eugene pulled off, leaving him teetering on the edge.

“Gene,” Merriell whimpered, running a hand through Eugene’s silky hair, cradling the back of his head, trying to entice and not push him back onto his cock. Eugene glanced up at him through his lashes and kissed Merriell’s hibones, careful not to touch where Merriell wanted him the most.

“I tried,” Eugene rasped between kisses, rough voice sending a shiver up Merriell’s spine. His hands slid up the back of Merriell’s thighs and grabbed his ass, pulling him closer somehow. “I even fucked a man, but it didn’t help with the hunger. I kept thinking about you—how you’d feel around me, how you’d moan and sigh, how you’d let me wreck you. I want you, need you more than anything.”

Merriell squirmed in Eugene’s tight grip. Eugene always knew exactly what to say to rile him up. He felt incredibly dizzy from jealousy, dehydration, and all the blood in his body continuing to rush south. “Please, Gene.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll take care of you,” Eugene hushed him, rubbing his cheek along Merriell’s cock before taking it into his mouth again. A smear of precum glistened pearlescent over the freckles on his cheekbone. Merriell sighed in relief, the heat of Eugene’s mouth a stark contrast to the chilly air of his apartment. The reprieve didn’t last long, as Eugene seemed to be in a mood for torture, removing his mouth each time Merriell came close to release. His retreats were well timed, not so late that Merriell might still come, and not so often that he was more frustrated than aroused. Merriell credited his golden eyes, glimmering through his copper lashes, observing Merriell’s reactions carefully.

Desperation had Merriell babbling, a steady stream of ‘fuck’, ‘Gene’, and ‘please’. He shivered under Eugene’s attention, sagging against the kitchen table, hearing the wood creak under his white-knuckled grip. He tipped his head back, staring at the ceiling, and the watermarks there had a bolt of déjà vu running through him. Eugene’s knees would be pink after this, his smile wide and wolfish, and Merriell would let him stay. The thought electrified him and, prompted by Eugene’s plush lips against the head of his cock, he orgasmed. It took him by surprise, blurring his vision and leaving him breathless and shaky.

“Well, I think I’ll have to shower before making that call.” Merriell looked down to see Eugene’s face, neck, and shirt were splattered with cum. Thick droplets clung to his hair and dripped down his chin onto his white button up. Delicately, Eugene wiped a glob off his eyebrow, expression supremely smug. “If that’s alright with you.”

“Bath, no shower,” Merriell panted. Eugene rose to his feet, hands skimming along Merriell’s sides, making his muscles twitch. Merriell’s brain felt fuzzy and deranged in the afterglow, mollified by the affection but disgusted with how easily he let Eugene play him.

Eugene kissed his cheek, lips tacky with cum and saliva. “I’ll make it work, if you let me.”

“I know.” Merriell wrapped his arms around Eugene’s waist, giving in to the wanting. He’d spent so many hours telling himself that Eugene would never be his, was prepared to build a life on the foundation that they’d never see each other again. Even thought about asking out his boss’s niece just to start moving on. Sinking into Eugene, feeling him breathe, warm and alive next to him, felt like a giant step backwards. Keeping him was dangerous and wrong, but Merriell never had much self-control in the first place and Eugene had hit him at a low point. Whatever strength he had to push him away right now was gone. “I’ll let you.”
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Again, there’s a bit of French (with an in-text translation). Warning, there’s a brief gory description.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Eugene disrupted Merriell’s life less than he expected. After he showed up, Merriell hardly knew he was there, for he disappeared to God knows where just as Merriell got up for work and returned quite late in the evening to smoke silently with him on the balcony. He stayed up late too. Not that Merriell would know since he made Eugene sleep on the couch. It was highly likely that the redhead didn’t sleep at all. Still, their coexistence was rather tense and Merriell was relieved to see Eugene passed out on his ratty old couch on Sunday morning.

“Thought you’d be in a casket the next time I’d see you with your eyes closed,” Merriell commented loudly as he walked past on his way to the kitchen. The kitchen and living room were essentially the same room, the transition from linoleum to scuffed hardwood floors the only dividing line between them. He didn’t care about waking Eugene up. In fact, he hoped he had because he was about to start making a racket in the kitchen.

Most days, Merriell didn’t consume much more than coffee, whiskey, and the occasional glass of lemonade or bologna sandwich provided by his boss’s wife or some kind company patron around lunchtime. However, Sundays had a history, a memory of coming home from fishing to find his mother cooking in this same kitchen, whipping up a grandiose breakfast out of nothing more than scraps and fresh caught seafood. He’d gone trawling with Bennie and some other young cousins yesterday, and a decent collection of shellfish sat plump and whole in the icebox. He sifted through them, picking out the shrimp to cook for breakfast.

“What are you shufflin’? Rocks?” Eugene groaned tiredly. He sat up, arms crossed over the back of the couch, head resting in the crook of his elbow. He looked exhausted, eyes puffy, red hair wild and matted down on the left since Eugene tended to curl on that side when he slept.

“Makin’ shrimp and grits,” Merriell grunted in response, crouching to dig through the cabinets near the stove for a pot and pan. “Surprised to see you’re still here. Usually you’d a gone out by now.”

Eugene yawned. “Didn’t have work today.”

Merriell jolted, smacking his head on the edge of the counter as he scrambled upright to stare incredulously at Eugene. “Work?”

“Yeah,” Eugene rubbed at his eyes. “Gotta earn my keep, don’t I?”

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“Work where?”

“At Trahan’s grocery store. It’s just a block away but they got me fetching the seafood in the morning so I gotta leave here real early. Thought I told you?” Eugene turned away, getting up off the couch and stretching. Despite the chilly autumn air, he’d slept shirtless and the morning sun highlighted the way his back muscles flexed under his pale, freckled skin. He glanced at Merriell,
who refocused quickly on the shrimp, peeling the shells and throwing them in the pot. Eugene’s quiet chuckle let him know that he’d definitely been caught staring.

“An’ you been workin’ there since when?” Merriell’s head spun. Something about this interaction felt off. He thought of Eugene’s presence in New Orleans as transient; just a few weeks or months and then he’d get bored and go home. But a job meant this might be something more serious—or not, or Merriell was jumping to conclusions, it was just a job at a grocery store after all. Men like Eugene did that kind of work in high school, if he meant to settle down then he’d get a career.

Eugene yawned again and padded into the hallway, shouting over his shoulder at him. “I gotta hit the head. You can interrogate me in a minute.”

Merriell scowled at the remark, which brought to mind the image of a nagging wife. He stewed over the heinous domesticity of their current scenario as he viciously shelled and deveined shrimp. He couldn’t deny that there were some similarities between himself and the average dissatisfied housewife. Here he was, slaving over breakfast while Eugene literally pissed the morning away. Then there was Eugene’s dismissal of a fair question. And the fact that he had exiled Eugene to the couch. Fuck, he was a wife, wasn’t he?

“You got the coffee going?” Eugene asked innocently when he’d finished his business.

“Make your own damn coffee,” Merriell snapped, filling the pot of shrimp shells with water.

“Geez, I forgot how grumpy you are in the morning.” Eugene jumped as Merriell slammed the pot onto the stovetop. “Christ, don’t worry about the coffee.”

Merriell ground his teeth in annoyance but concentrated on his shrimp stock, eyeballing the amount of seasoning to throw in before leaving it to simmer while he rooted through his kitchen for a package of quick-grits.

“Hey, is this going to be spicy?” Eugene asked, peering into the pot as he set the percolator on a neighboring burner.

“If you don’t like it you can make your own damn food.”

“Okay,” Eugene replied, the hard edge to his voice indicating he was fed up with Merriell’s moodiness. “What’d I do to piss you off?” Merriell pretended not to hear him, still searching for the grits. “Is this about me working? Because you can’t expect me to just sit on my ass all day.”

“I don’t give a shit what you do with your day.”

“Then exactly is your problem with me, Merriell?”

Merriell shut the latest cabinet he’d been rummaging through with a loud bang. “Not everythin’ is about you, Eugene! I thought I had some fuckin’ grits!”

“You do,” Eugene pacified, stepping away from the counter and revealing the package of grits. “They were next to the coffee, I brought ‘em out for you.”

Merriell’s eye twitched as he reined in the urge to sock Eugene in the face. Eugene picked up on his resentment and jerked his head in the direction of the balcony. “How ‘bout you head out for a smoke? I’ll keep an eye on things.”

Merriell cracked his knuckles but nodded woodenly. “Stock’s gotta simmer for twenty more minutes.”
Outside, Merriell’s bad mood dissipated like the smoke from his cigarette. He’d always been quick to anger and quick to forget. The nicotine helped immensely, steadying his jangled nerves. The street below bustled with cars and pedestrians going to and from church. He closed his eyes and basked in the sun and the noise, the rumbling automobile engines and parents shouting at their children. The wind picked up a bit, swirling fallen leaves along the pavement, and Merriell shivered from the chill it brought. It never got truly cold in New Orleans, not like the weather in China, but winter seemed to be coming quick this year.

Even though his irritation with Eugene had faded, Merriell couldn’t shake the feeling that something was wrong. The world seemed warped somehow, stretched and streaked at the edges, like someone had run their fingers through a wet painting. It made him nervous, like the magic was closing in on them, waiting for the moment to strike and take what was owed. He’d worked too hard to keep Eugene alive during the war to have him die here in New Orleans. Already he could imagine how—simple, stupid accidents like a car crash or a mugging, or maybe he’d get mixed up with Merriell’s family, lose himself in the dangerous side of the business. Merriell flicked ash off his cigarette, picturing with ease an interaction with the mob gone wrong; Eugene splayed motionless on the pavement with a bullet hole in his broad forehead. There was no solution for this other than the one Merriell had come up with on the train so many months ago. He needed to keep Eugene safe, and for that, he had to get him to leave.

The balcony door creaked open and Eugene stepped through, bearing his mother’s star-patterned teacup. “Coffee with cream, how you like it.”

Merriell chewed his lip, staring out into the street, intent on ignoring him. Eugene set the cup down on the little balcony table, next to Merriell’s ashtray and lighter. He lingered for a moment, sucked in a breath like he had some speech on the tip of his tongue then released it. He turned and went back inside. Merriell relaxed in his absence, suddenly aware of how his muscles tensed. Back in the Pacific, Merriell used to panic without Eugene by his side, a low-level hum of needling worry that made him grind his teeth just thinking about all the ways Eugene could die without him there. He’d never considered that one day Eugene’s presence would feel like a threat.

Leisurely, Merriell finished his coffee and had a second smoke before going back inside. Eugene sat at the kitchen table, a manila folder and some paperwork spread out before him. He glanced up at Merriell quickly, mouth drawn into a long, thin line, like he was holding back words.

Merriell poured himself another cup of coffee and continued making breakfast. He strained the shells out of the shrimp stock and put the grits in to boil. He sautéed the shrimp in butter and wild garlic. He wasn’t an amazing cook but running around in nature from a young age meant he had a sense for good ingredients, which in turn made for good food. Simple food, his Uncle Roman would say, and as close to free as you could get was better than anything fancy.

“I’ll make dinner,” Eugene said when Merriell placed a bowl of shrimp and grits in front of him.

“I don’t believe for a second that you can cook.” Merriell replied wryly, eying the papers Eugene was scribbling on. The redhead swept them back into the folder before he could read them.

“Well, I can learn. I gotta do something to convince you to keep me around.” Eugene lifted his chin in defiance, his eyes tracking Merriell’s movements like a hawk. Merriell’s skin prickled under the scrutinizing gaze but he sat down and dug into his own portion, determined to get through breakfast without another argument. “I meant what I said about making this work, but I can’t help but think that you don’t want me here.”

Merriell speared a shrimp with his fork, noting from the toughness that he’d slightly overcooked it. “I did say you shouldn’t be here.”
“That’s not the same as not wanting me here, Merriell. I’m asking if you want me here.” Eugene’s voice was tinged with a familiar sort of desperation, the need to be held in some regard by someone who mattered.

With a resigned sigh, Merriell looked at Eugene. He appeared tired and drawn, hair still an absolute mess, auburn stubble aging him beyond his twenty-some years of age. A sadness lived in his brown eyes, bone deep and coal black, so guileless that Merriell’s heart thudded at the sight of it. He hadn’t seen Eugene so open in years. “Eugene, do you care about me?”

Eugene tilted his head, furrowed brow smoothing out at Merriell’s question. “I want to.” His hands twitched on the table, like he craved to reach out and touch him. “I didn’t understand what you were asking me back then and maybe I still don’t, but I want to try. You’re the only one who knows what happened to me, Merriell. That means something to me. I know it means something to you.”

“If you really cared, you’d listen to me and leave.”

“I’ll leave if you say you don’t want me here.” Eugene leaned forward, voice steadily rising in volume. “Don’t tell me it’s not safe, because I know that. Don’t tell me that I deserve a normal life, because I’m just as fucked up as you. And don’t tell me that you don’t love me, because I know you always will.” Merriell dropped his gaze. He felt caught out, paralyzed in the midst of Eugene’s emotional tirade. “Tell me that you don’t want me. Look me in the eye and say you never saw me here, trying to love you. Tell me you don’t want me to love you.”

The words hung in the still autumn air.

“Your grits are gettin’ cold,” Merriell responded after a beat, shoveling a forkful into his mouth. Eugene’s lips twisted in displeasure, but he turned his attention to his own food.

They finished breakfast in silence then Eugene offered to wash up, shooing Merriell out onto the balcony again. He went without protest, leaning against the railing and lighting another cigarette. He pressed his fingers to his temples, unsure of what to do.

When it came to Eugene, Merriell often felt downright hysterical. Torn between some half-feral need to keep him safe, yet devour him whole, and a deep-rooted fear of holding him close. Every time he set eyes on the redhead, he heard his mother’s warning, the memory of the horrible price that she’d paid settling like a cold weight in his stomach. He wanted him to stay but needed him to leave. He wished there was some way to make Eugene understand that, but any attempt at conversation devolved quickly into bickering. Eugene got under his skin so bad and so quick, like flicking a lit match into a puddle of gasoline. Merriell could see how earnestly Eugene wanted this to work, how he idled at Merriell’s side, afraid to upset him, careful not to do anything he didn’t want. Eugene had crossed a line that first night and he seemed determined to walk it back. Merriell had yet to process the event though, stuck somewhere between fading dreams and the knowledge that Eugene carried through with things that he knew would hurt him.

“Tu sais quoi j’aurais fait, if I were in your shoes, cher.”

Merriell glared at his mother. She was young, thin and worn down from working too much in a time when money was hard to come by. She sat and smoked, one hand brushing idly through the curls of the toddler sleeping in her lap.

“I said it a million times, I don’t speak your language.” He tsked.

She hummed, a snippet of some sweet old jazz song. She looked over her shoulder; her eyes, heavy lidded but luminous and pale as sea glass in the sun, fixed on Eugene as he did the dishes. “You
know what I would have done, if I were in your shoes.”

“Mama, it’s not the same.”

“Isn’t it?” Her gaze flicked over to him, her head still turned, square jaw contrasting prettily with her long, swanlike neck. He wondered if he looked like her sometimes, regal and wise, smirkingsecretively.

“I know the price,” he reminded her, blunt fingernails tapping a tinny, nervous rhythm against the iron railing. “I’m not gonna be reckless like you were.”

She pursed her lips, displeased but not quite pouting. “Every time I look at you, I think I see myself, but then you open your mouth and every day you sound a little more like him. He always bid me to be cautious, though in the same breath he’d say he loved how crazy I made him.”

Merriell clenched his jaw. “It’s not the same,” he repeated. Details about his father always stressed him out. In life, his mother had kept quiet about him, never letting on about who he was or how he acted. Death seemed to be revealing more, and vision by vision she’d drop hints. She met him when they were sixteen, teenage sweethearts in a golden age before the Great Depression. He came from money and was charmed by her vivacity. Merriell was waiting for the moment he’d finally see him.

“Don’t that boy make you crazy?”

Crazy—what an oddly simple word for this skittish, heart-pounding, chaotic, mind-bending anxiety. The insanity had been burrowing through his brain since the aftermath of Peleliu and Merriell blamed the intensity of it on the light wrapped tight around his soul. Every moment was bathed in this butter yellow glow, even the memories of blood-flecked hands and dirt-stained faces and fleas and rotting coconut crabs. Dreams of gleaming viscera and vacant, maggoty eye sockets had nostalgia welling up in him. Merriell drowned in crazy, found living near impossible as it flooded him, creeping up his sides and threatening to burst out his skin. Eugene’s presence shook him up, pressure fizzing like a can of soda until he needed to vomit crazy.

But crazy wasn’t a good enough reason.

—

Being a successful hustler required an intimate understanding of human psychology. Quick and steady hands helped steal a wallet, but it took a keen eye to determine the best target. The Sheltons had their tricks and tells. Merriell knew them all by heart; detection, distraction, deception.

Easy targets had problems—not necessarily addictions because those people didn’t have money—but they were worried or dissatisfied with their lives in a way that manifested physically. They talked too fast or too slow or not enough. They fiddled, bit their nails, chewed the inside of their cheeks, played with hair or jewelry, collars or cuffs. Their eyes cut to the side or stared, desperate for some connection missing from their lives. An anxious or sad person smelled faintly of pickled onions, ripe with sweat kicked up by their rapid pulse. Undetectable by mortals but not to a Shelton.

The distraction fit the problem, played on it as accurately as possible, redirecting attention to the thing they feared or craved. Staged fights, physical or verbal, drew in the paranoid, the noble Samaritan, the gossip. One on one confrontations paralyzed the socially withdrawn, the unhappily ostracized, the ones with a loneliness that just couldn’t be filled no matter how hard they tried. The frustrated and bored fell hard for flattery, the thrill of the chase, or some puzzle fabricated just for them. A braggard or risk-taker could be lulled into a false sense of security with close games and criminally good deals.
The last trick was the hardest—sticking to the lie. Never let a person know you duped them, keep track of the deception and uphold it. Even as a dark caster, Merriell had struggled to remember the things he’d done. Head like a sieve, his family mocked, so he kept to simple things. Rigged poker and pool and played parts for his aunts and cousins.

“You got big, pretty eyes,” Aunt Celeste croaked at him the first time, her sharp nails digging in to his jaw as she turned his head this way and that. “Walk ‘round in the back and lift shit once in a while. Girl comin’ by wants a man real bad. She’ll pay more if she sees you.”

“Don’t Marty do that?” Marty was the oldest cousin; solid, suave, and popular. He died two years before the war, leaking blood into an alleyway after a bad deal with the local mob.

“She a rich girl. Smart girl. Girl like that don’ want a dirty Créole. She want somethin’ pure, innocent lookin’. You lucky you take after you mama. You look jus’ sweet enough, Merry. Doux et perdu.” She pinched his cheeks, hard enough to bruise.

Aunt Celeste always made him feel small, insignificant, and weak under her piercing amber gaze. She read people like books, their fears and hopes betrayed by their body’s physiology. All she had to do was get a hand on somebody, feel their heartbeat through their wrist, count their breath, taste their sweat, and she knew everything. She’d called him sweet his whole life. Sweet and lost, just like his mother, not made for this life.

“It’s your eyes,” Jean explained as they passed a joint back in forth in the alley behind the family shop. “No one else in the family has green eyes, ‘cept you and your mama.”

“Color of your eyes don’t mean nothin’,” Merriell griped. “Superstition’s for the clients. That shit ain’t real.”

Jean laughed. “Ever seen light magic claim a caster?”

“No, but you ain’t either.” They were just boys, sheltered still by the grown-ups despite how much they worked.

“Don’t matter if I’ve seen it. I heard from Maman, light magic is green. You’re light, Merry, you just don’ know it.”

To be called light was an insult. To be light was to be vulnerable, to open your soul to the world, put your heart on display and scream at the circling vultures to take it; to tear it out and peck your ribs clean. Merriell knew that and he let it happen anyways. It had tricked him—Eugene had tricked him—and Merriell blamed his own empty, sweet, stupid head for falling for it.

“I can fix this.”

“Can you though?” Jean sprawled against the side of the building, suddenly bigger and dirtier than Merriell had ever seen him, wearing Marine utilities caked with mud. “Seems to me you’re too far gone.”

“Fuckin’ hell.” Merriell started to shake. This was a dream. This wasn’t real.

“Hell’s alright,” Jean grinned, eyes swollen and bloodshot. “I’m dead, Merry. You’re gettin’ too strong if you’re talkin’ with ghosts. ‘Course, if I was you I wouldn’ waste time with me, I’d talk to Maman.”

Merriell scrubbed his hands over his face. He paid the price, of course his magic was growing. Each time he thought about making Eugene leave so he could be safe and normal, the pool swelled and
overflowed. It scared him. He didn’t know what would happen if Eugene stayed, if Eugene tried. Would it weaken, or would it demand some other payment? “I’m done with the past. I wanna see the future.”

“You don’t control this, Merry. The universe controls you.” Merriell watched Jean’s skin fry and peel back from his skull, eyeballs liquefied, running down over his exposed bone and tendons like candlewax. He’d been caught in the blast of a civilian suicide bomber. His blackened hands curled over Merriell’s wrists, crackling, still burning.

Loud knocking startled him awake. He tumbled out of his chair, palms hitting the gritty iron grate floor of the apartment balcony. He knelt there, panting, staring through the grate at the pitted brick sidewalk below, dim and slightly orange in the glow from the streetlamps. When did night fall?

The knocking persisted. Someone was at the door. Merriell wobbled as he stood and braced himself against the walls as he teetered through his apartment. He felt feeble, his legs as reliable and gangly as a newborn deer’s. Slumping against the front door, bile rose in the back of his throat. He’d lived through this moment already. He took a slow breath and unlocked and opened the door.

Eugene looked pale in the shadows of the front step, hair and eyes almost black in the absence of light. He was different from what Merriell expected; no revolver holster around his hips, wearing a forest green cabled sweater under his tweed jacket. He was also the same, eerily blank expression plastered on his face and a sea bag slung over his left shoulder. Merriell spied the wooden ring on the ring finger of his left hand, wrapped tightly as it was around the strap of the bag. “Evening, Shelton.”

Mutely, Merriell stepped back to let him in. He couldn’t speak, or he’d barf all over Eugene’s brown oxford shoes. He inhaled shakily as Eugene walked past, nose filling with a complicated scent at once foreign and familiar. Ozone and the charcoal of a forest fire muddied by petrol fumes, old leather, and dusty paper. Merriell missed the grime; all the sweat, salt, and metal-soaked earth.

“Sorry for showing up so late.” Eugene spoke softly, as if a quiet conversation could reabsorb the obnoxious noise he’d made at Merriell’s door. He stood just inside, seemed to be waiting for directions as Merriell closed the front door.

But Merriell still couldn’t talk. Everything remained locked inside his jaws, roiling and sick. And he was tired. Tired of fighting, of hurting, of missing Eugene, and of hating himself. He pressed his face into Eugene’s neck, arms slipping around his back, hands fisting in that stupid jacket, the texture plush and thick between his fingers. Eugene’s bag fell to the floor with a thump as he embraced Merriell, one arm folding around his waist, pulling their hips and chests flush together. His other hand swept firmly up Merriell’s neck, ran through the short curls at his nape and stopped there, spread wide and protective at the base of his skull. His lips and nose were cold when they brushed against Merriell’s temple.

“Everything’s alright,” Eugene whispered, breath warm and humid in the shell of his ear. “I’m here now.”

His words flicked a switch, releasing the pain that Merriell had buried when he stepped off that train eight months ago. Tears streamed down his cheeks, making the skin of Eugene’s neck damp and slightly sticky. His chest spasmed at the taste of salt but he held in the sobs. He wanted to maintain some semblance of dignity, even as Eugene felt him shatter.

This better be real, he thought, because he couldn’t take anymore.

Chapter End Notes
I like unreliable narrators, how about you?

Also, if you like my writing and want to chat about some of the behind the scenes magic, I finally made a Tumblr! I mostly did it because I’ve come up with a grand new fic idea and I’m way in over my head so if you have an interest in becoming a collaborator of mine (or even if you just want to talk) you can check out my latest, and probably only, help wanted ad here: https://logicalcomplexity.tumblr.com/ ...(Can you tell I'm technology inept? Like, I can't even figure out how to hyperlink this shit)
Eugene was still there when Merriell woke up, the warm line of his thigh solid against Merriell’s back. He rolled over, shivering as Eugene’s knobby knee dragged over his middle vertebrae. Eugene sat propped up against the headboard, reading a book in the weak morning light. Merriell drank in the sight of him; summer tan fading into freckles, the soft roll of his stomach, blueish bags under his eyes signaling a lack of sleep. He could probably grow a decent beard now, judging from the auburn stubble shading his jaw and upper lip.

“How do you ever sleep?” Merriell asked, bumping the back of his hand against Eugene’s. Like a reflex, Eugene caught his hand, lacing their fingers and pressing their palms together. Eugene’s skin was so pink compared to his, the creases of his knuckles red where Merriell was brown, veins blue instead of green.

“I get nightmares,” Eugene replied, setting the book down on his lap. The open pages rasped gently against Merriell’s shoulder. “Sometimes I stay awake until I’m so exhausted that I don’t dream.”

“That ain’t healthy.”

“I don’t do it often.” Eugene’s thumb stroked over his knuckles. “I don’t really mind the nightmares. Just thought I should watch out for you last night.”

Merriell brought their hands to his mouth. He kissed Eugene’s wrist and knuckles; the tendons flexing under his smooth skin, the wooden ring. He liked how the rough wood grain felt against his lips, the magic pricking and stinging like nettles. “Ain’t at war anymore. No need to keep watch.”

Eugene chuckled and tossed the book on the floor, pulling his hand out of Merriell’s grasp. He shifted down on the bed, shuffling and pushing at him until they lay side by side, facing each other. His hands curved around the sides of Merriell’s jaw; strong, warm, and alive. One quick twist and he could snap Merriell’s neck. Merriell never felt safer, never sensed his magic so quiet until Eugene put his hands on him.

“Thought we talked about you lying to me,” Eugene chastised, bestowing a chaste kiss to Merriell’s forehead.

The war had been over for a full year, would be two next September, and yet Eugene was right. The war was over for the world, but some part of them hadn’t escaped it. Their bodies weren’t there anymore but the marks lingered. Not just scars but hair-trigger instincts, the pulse pounding at the crack of a firework or the pop of a car back-firing. Reaching for the gun at your belt or knife under your pillow after a nightmare, nerves so fried it was impossible to imagine ever being healed.

“Why are you here, Gene?”

Eugene removed his left hand from Merriell’s face, fingertips dragging along his jawbone. He held his hand up, wiggling the ring finger, drawing attention to the water-stained wooden ring. “You
called me.”

Merriell frowned. “What do you mean?”

“The spell on this ring, it’s a beacon. It called me to you.” Eugene searched Merriell face for understanding. He didn’t seem surprised when he didn’t find it. “You didn’t cast the spell on the ring.”

Merriell shook his head, reaching one finger up to prod at it. “Don’t even know what it does.”

“A beacon spell is for one-way communication. You use it to enchant an object, usually a personal effect. Most times people use it on things they don’t want to lose, but you can modify the spell, so the object sends a message to your loved ones. It can carry a message for the bearer or send one out. Not words or anything, just a feeling. Remember the family ring I wore during the war? My father put a beacon spell on it, so he would know if I was alive and well. Now yours is faded, so weak you can’t tell what it’s saying unless you’re concentrating, but it still sends out a message.”

Merriell heartbeat pounded in his ears. “What’s it say?”

“Says ‘don’t be sad’,” Eugene drew his lower lip between his teeth, gaze falling to the ring. He nudged it with his thumb. “Says ‘I’ll be home soon’.” His brow furrowed. “I guess the message doesn’t make sense when I think about it. But it felt like your magic.”

“The ring was my father’s.”

Eugene’s eyes widened a fraction, but they didn’t glow gold. He placed his hand on Merriell again, this time cupping his neck, palm against his rapid pulse. Merriell gripped Eugene’s forearms and tried to squirm forward. He hadn’t meant to say it. They didn’t talk about family before, they didn’t need to start now. If he could just kiss Eugene, erase the sadness with affection, then they could get past this, forget this.

Eugene held him fast, hands firm on his throat and jaw, sending desire fizzing in his blood like a seltzer tablet. “Merriell, tell me.”

Merriell hauled himself closer, fingers tight enough to bruise on Eugene’s arms. He could tell from the pained grimace breaking across his face. Eugene’s own grasp on him was suffocating, pressure building in his head and lungs. “Ever fuck a man?”

Eugene jerked his hands away like he’d been burned. The reaction stung but Merriell pushed forward, wriggling into Eugene’s arms and tucking his face into his shoulder. He’d forgotten how good it felt to rub your cheek against bare skin, to brace your hands on another person’s ribs and feel their diaphragm contract and expand. He loved the sensation of muscles twitching. Freckles filled his vision as he bit lightly at Eugene’s collarbone, out of focus and shifting. He soothed the bite with the flat of his tongue.

“Merriell…” Eugene sighed, resigned and disappointed because he knew he was trying to distract him.

Eyes shut tightly, Merriell pressed their foreheads together. “After, Gene, I promise.”

“Sex isn’t going to make it hurt less.”

Merriell nodded; lips on Eugene’s nose, cheeks, temples, the corners of his mouth. He wanted it to hurt more.
Eugene’s hands caught his head again, stilling Merriell’s frantic worship of his facial features. “At least tell me you’re sure about this.”

“Ain’t a blushing virgin—”

“You are,” Eugene snapped, shaking him so fiercely that he opened his eyes. Eugene was dark, but he played like he was kind for Merriell, the golden ring of his iris reflecting his will to self-destruct. “Maybe you’ve been with a woman, but you haven’t done this. This is going to change you. If you thought you were fucked up before, there’s no going back from this. Think about that.”

“Do you—” Merriell swallowed thickly. Maybe he’d read the situation wrong. “Do you not wanna?”

With a huff Eugene rolled Merriell onto his back and climbed over him, pinning him with a stony gaze and his hips, half-hard cock poking into Merriell’s thigh. “I don’t want to take advantage of you. You’re not mentally stable.”

“You ain’t clearheaded either,” Merriell chided with a smirk. He shifted his thigh, smile widening when Eugene bucked his hips down reflexively. “Bein’ sleep deprived impairs your judgement.”

“Christ, fine. We’re both going Asiatic anyways.” Eugene hopped off the bed to dig through his sea bag. He extracted a tube of Vaseline and paused, rolling the tube between his palms. “Hey, maybe you should fuck me.”

Merriell scowled at him. “I don’t wanna do that.”

“Why not?”

“I just—I want you to.” A blush warmed his face as he struggled to articulate the craving to consume Eugene. This insane urge to cut himself open and have him crawl inside and hide, protected from the world. “Always wanted you in me, somehow.”

Eugene’s eyes swept over him, evaluating. “Okay,” he relented, returning to the bed. “Let me know if I’m hurting you and I mean that, Merriell. I don’t really know what I’m doing but I’m gonna start by putting my fingers up your ass.”

Merriell barked a laugh, pulling his underwear off and turning over onto his hands and knees. “Boy, you’re lucky I don’t eat for days.”

“I was thinking you hadn’t changed a bit. Just as skinny and wild as when I first met you.” Eugene ran a hand down his back and over the swell of his ass. Merriell jumped when he pressed a kiss between his shoulder blades. “Try and relax.”

“Keep talkin’ to me then.”

“What you been up to?”

The sound of the Vaseline cap popping open flipped Merriell’s stomach. He exhaled slowly to calm the jitters. “What you been up to?”

Eugene hummed at the question, one hand steady on Merriell’s hip, the other smoothing the thick, cool petroleum jelly from his taint to his asshole. He couldn’t help sucking in a startled breath. “Whole lot of nothing.” Eugene massaged the lubricant around the ring of muscle, touch nonchalant and borderline clinical. “You’ll think I’m spoiled when I tell you I just wander the woods all day. I take a sketchbook with me and draw the birds and insects. I note the passage of time for them. When
the leaves and flowers unfurl, when they fall, when chicks start hatching or fledging, when the
dragonflies molt. I like watching their lives, figuring out how they work, thinking about how it’s all
connected. Just one big life cycle.”

“And it’s peaceful in the woods. No people reminding you how your life is supposed to be,
expecting you to carry on like you’ve never killed another man, never held a friend as they died. I
spent a lot of time in the woods before the war too, but I didn’t pay attention like I do now. I don’t
know why it’s different. Back then I hunted, so maybe I…” He trailed off, hands slowing their
ministrations. “I’m going to put one in. Tell me if you don’t like it.”

“Don’t need to warn me,” Merriell grumbled, ears burning with embarrassment at Eugene’s
frankness.

“Well, I don’t want to surprise you. You’ll tense up.” Eugene slipped his finger in gradually. The
intrusion felt weird, especially when he started lightly twisting and tugging at the muscle. “I feel you
tensing up.”

Merriell rolled his neck, willing his body to relax. “Keep talkin’, Gene.”

“Have you ever been in a rhododendron hell?”

He shook his head.

“A rhododendron is an evergreen, woody shrub. A rhododendron hell is a thicket of them, so dense
it’s impossible to walk through. They don’t have thorns or anything, but the stems grow close
together and the wood is so brittle and inflexible, you’re sure to roll an ankle trying to get over them.
So, you gotta walk around and people call them rhododendron hells because they lose the path and
get lost in the woods for hours after running across one. But they must never see them in the spring,
because they are beautiful when they’re flowering.” Something gave way, for Eugene’s finger sank
sudden and deep inside him, a toe-curling electricity zipping up his spine. He gasped and arched his
back. Eugene pulled out immediately. “Did I hurt you?”

“No, no,” Merriell collapsed onto his elbows, trying to wrap his head around what just happened.
“Tell me about the flowers, Gene.”

“They’re white,” Eugene began, adding more Vaseline before pressing his finger back in. “They
smell a bit like lemons but not strongly, and there’s so many of them. From a distance, they look like
snow.” Eugene moved his finger in and out, the motion and the wet sound that accompanied it
sending a pulse of heat through Merriell’s body. He gasped and arched his
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snow.” Eugene moved his finger in and out, the motion and the wet sound that accompanied it
sending a pulse of heat through Merriell’s body. He’d never been so hard in his life. “I’m adding
another.”

Merriell nodding encouragingly, biting back a whimper. Two felt good, the way Eugene plunged
them in almost rough, the knuckles of his hand pulling and stretching Merriell’s rim while the pads of
his fingers swept along his insides, skating over something that made the world positively light up.

“Does this feel good?” Eugene asked, voice close in Merriell’s ear. His chest brushed against
Merriell’s back and he could feel his nipples were perked with arousal. “Could you come just from
this?”

Merriell tried not to pant, not to push back against Eugene’s hand, blood rushing to his face at the
shame he felt. Of course, he liked it, of course it didn’t hurt the way he wanted it to because nothing
in his life ever went the way he expected. “Don’t you wanna fuck me?”

Three fingers smarted, had Merriell keening when Eugene ground the third in without warning. “I
was wondering when you’d start making some noise,” Eugene murmured into the nape of his neck, hips rocking absentmindedly, erection smearing precum onto Merriell’s flank. “I’ve thought about this before. About you, what you’d do. I like to think that I know you pretty well, but you’re so unhinged you’re unpredictable. That’s part of what I like about you. You’re always fighting yourself. It’s fascinating.”

Merriell nearly cried when Eugene finally lined up and pushed in. It didn’t hurt initially, the solid, smooth pressure satisfying in a way that fingers weren’t, but there was scraping pain that grew as Eugene pressed deeper. He ignored it, blinking away tears furiously, breathed through it in a practiced way, focusing instead on Eugene’s stuttering groan. He knew how nice it felt to slide into a girl; all warm, slick, and snug. He hoped he felt good to Eugene.

“You’re hurting.” Eugene stopped, pulled back, and the action brought such pleasure-pain that Merriell saw stars.

He flung one hand behind him, catching Eugene’s wrist, halting the movement. “Stay, Gene, stay.”

“I don’t want to hurt you.”

“I want you to,” Merriell gasped, voice thick with repressed emotion. He hid his face in his forearm. He could say this if he didn’t look him in the eye. “Like it when you hurt me, Gene. You know I do.” He’d craved Eugene’s pain since the beginning.

Still, Eugene didn’t move. He rubbed his hands along Merriell’s back, over his spine and ribs like he could distract him from the cock throbbing in his ass. He sighed. “You’re still so fucking tight.”

“Make yourself fit,” Merriell growled in response. His own erection waned, and he was beginning to lose his patience. “Hurt me, Gene. You say you don’t want to but that’s only ‘cuz you know you’d like it.”

Eugene’s hands twitched, his fingernails scratching lightly against Merriell’s skin before his fingers settled on his hipbones. He’d hit a nerve. “Fine, but don’t bitch about it when you’re walking funny for the rest of the day.”

Eugene thrust all the way in, the sudden pain leaving Merriell struggling for breath. Without waiting for him to recover, he carved out a space for himself in Merriell’s body at a restrained pace. Not long after, something gave way again. All the tension drained out of Merriell’s muscles and he felt good.

The pain was still there, an ache he’d definitely feel tomorrow, but the constant, pulsing pressure, the friction and steady grind against something inside him had him rutting back, upsetting the rhythm in a bid for more electric warmth. He wanted Eugene to go faster, but he’d rather chew through his own arm than beg for it.

A whine escaped him when he opened his mouth to close his teeth around the meat of his forearm. His face flamed at the pathetic, desperate sound, but Eugene seemed invigorated by it. His grip on Merriell’s hips tightened, thrusts quickening in just the way that Merriell needed, lightening at the base of his spine. He’d never felt like this before, all at once empty and full, heat coursing through his veins, practically vibrating with an overload of stimulus; tingling like he’d licked a live battery, bright copper the color behind his eyelids and the taste at the back of his throat. The air felt humid around them, rich with static like the atmosphere before a storm. Eugene draped over his back, bringing a hand to his neck, breathing hard into the space between his shoulder blades. He was close, cadence of his hips faltering.

“Mer—” Teeth accompanied Eugene’s bitten off moan, unexpectedly sharp at the nape of Merriell’s neck, but not distracting enough to mask the sensation of Eugene coming inside him. Merriell’s
whole body flushed, blood rushing harder at the wet, sucking sound of Eugene pulling out.

Merriell was putty in Eugene’s hands, limbs lax as Eugene tipped him onto his side and nuzzled close. He hooked his arm under Merriell’s knee, spreading him, filling him with his fingers again, and oh, Merriell was sore—and slick, precum oddly thin and slippery on Eugene’s hand as he jerked Merriell’s cock. It didn’t take long for Merriell to orgasm, eyes rolling, back bowing, shaking apart under Eugene’s capable hands. His body felt heavy, leaden, helpless as Eugene wiped them down with the dirty sheets and gathered him up, cuddling him away from the wet spots on the bed.

“I don’t like it actually,” Eugene mumbled into Merriell’s lips. “Your pain. Reminds me of nicotine.” Their faces were pressed together, forehead to forehead, nose to nose, eyelashes bestowing a butterfly light kiss upon the skin with every blink. Merriell grunted softly in response, too tired to talk, dropping fast into sleep.

—I—

“I don’ know what’s real anymore.”

No air would ever feel as muggy as an Okinawan morning, but the steam rising from the bathtub made a valiant attempt to imitate that stifling humidity in the small room. Eugene had found blood, just a little from a small tear, and practically thrown Merriell into the bath as soon as he’d woken up. He’d forgotten how much of a worrier Eugene could be; the memories of him nagging their squad to pop and powder their blisters hazy in comparison to recollections of combat.

Eugene sat on the floor as Merriell soaked, leaning against the porcelain tub, fingers dipped into the water and chin pillowed in the crook of his arm. “Well, today is Friday, November 1st, 1946. Truman is president. You’ve been back in New Orleans for nearly eight months, living in an apartment above some weird voodoo shop. I’m sorry, I don’t know what you do for work.”

“Air conditionin’ installation and repair.” He should call his boss, tell him that he was still sick, although he was sure Bennie had already covered for him.

“That’s sounds nice, respectable.” Eugene smiled, kind and friendly—except for his eyes, flat and dimensionless like a shark’s. “You must not be that crazy if you can hold down a job.”

Merriell shrugged, wincing as the movement aggravated the ache in his lower back. Eugene hadn’t fucked him hard, but his body seemed determined to complain about everything. “I got it handled, usually. Samhain’s just bad. All sorts walkin’ around.”

“Samhain?”

“All Hallow’s Eve, Halloween, Toussaints, Fête des Morts, ring any bells?”

“Oh, Halloween.” Eugene shifted on the tile floor. “I don’t know much about that. It got a religious affiliation?”

“You’re not Catholic, are you?”

“I’m from Alabama, Merriell. I’m a Southern Baptist.”

“Still?”

Eugene scoffed. “No, you know what I mean.”

“All Hallow’s Eve’s a Catholic thing, I think. Has a couple names and nobody celebrates it the same,
but it’s basically a pagan holiday. During Samhain the veil between worlds wears thin and the dead may walk among the livin’. Supposed to wear a disguise so devils don’t snatch you up,” Merriell paused, watching water droplets condense and slide down the fogged bathroom mirror. “Shit, I sound jus’ like my mama.”

Taking a deep breath, Merriell sank under the surface of the water, hiding in the warmth and burbling white noise. It was pointless, really, to think that he wouldn’t become more like his mother as he aged. Human nature necessitated that history repeat itself, the same mistakes looped over and over again. A great cosmic joke that he just happened to be privy to. He popped back up before his lungs started to stress, staring at Eugene through the beads of water on his lashes. Eugene stared back, big brown eyes half-lidded, cheeks pink from the steam.

“How do I know you’re real, Gene?”

Eugene reached out, running his fingers through Merriell’s wet curls. “Is it too simple for me to tell you I am?”

Merriell leaned into his touch, a cat greedy for affection, a sunflower chasing the sunlight.

“How about this,” Eugene suggested brightly, taking his hand away so he could tug the willow wood ring off his finger. He held it out to Merriell. “When I’m here, you wear your father’s ring. When I’m gone, I’ll take it back.”

“Gone?” Merriell took the ring. The magic sang out, melancholy and herbal sweet like chamomile tea.

“Well I told my parents I was going camping for a while. Promised I’d be back before my birthday. Wans’t too sure how we’d get along. Besides, I can’t just disappear on them. My dad has all sorts of old spellbooks, so I’m sure he could find me even if I planned to run away.” Merriell rolled the ring between his thumb and forefinger, callouses snagging on the gaps in the wood. “You should put it on,” Eugene urged. “It could help you check if you’re having a vision or not. Did you wear it much, before the war?”

Shaking his head, Merriell slipped the ring onto the middle finger of his left hand. It was too big to fit on his ring finger, which was odd because he swore Eugene’s hands were skinnier than his. “Ma gave it to me when she died. Didn’t start wearing it ‘til I enlisted a few months later.”

Eugene reeled him in again, pressed a kiss to his temple. “Will you tell me about your father now?”

Merriell closed his eyes. It was almost easy to talk this way, tucked under Eugene’s chin, blissfully ignorant of his pitying gaze. “There’s not a whole lot to say. He was a Marine. I think he served somewhere in the Caribbean. Knocked Ma up before leavin’ and died before I was born. Part of the price for the foresight.”

“What do you mean?” Eugene asked, words slow and voice low.

“Strong magic has to be paid for.” The water was starting to cool, and he shivered. “Ma paid with love. Imagine it’s the same for me.”

Eugene didn’t respond to that and they sat in silence as the bathwater turned chilly, letting Merriell’s skin become well and truly pruned. The sun was setting when he got out of the bath. He let Eugene care for him, toweling his hair dry and dressing him in his forest green sweater. It didn’t smell like him. At least not the way Merriell remembered him. He tucked his nose into it anyways; catching a whiff of a wildfire under the scent of old libraries and gasoline. They smoked, dragging one of the
kitchen chairs out on the balcony for Eugene to sit on, and watched the sunset. The street became alive with people as the sunlight faded, youths heading out to find some trouble on a Friday night.

“The price—is that way you didn’t say goodbye?”

Merriell hummed around his cigarette, eyes on the sky. The moon and sun hung together, stuck in that strange, liminal space before twilight. “The price is a love lost. Had to lose you somehow. So, when you leave you gotta stay gone.”

“I don’t believe you,” Eugene said, leaning forward in his chair, eyes narrowed with determination. Brow furrowing, he chewed on the stem of his pipe. Merriell could practically see the gears turning in his head. “It doesn’t make sense to pay for magic you can’t control. There’s gotta be some other trick to it.”

“Don’t matter if there is, it’s best to play it safe,” Merriell cautioned. “And not just with the magic, with this too.” He gestured at the pair of them, sitting close but not quite touching. Lovers behind closed curtains. “I couldn’t take it if somethin’ happened to you.”

“You can’t protect me, Merriell.”

Merriell knew he couldn’t and that was part of what made him so anxious. More amorphous now than ever, the danger no longer bullets or bombs, but the shadowy space behind Eugene’s eyes. They all carried things—the crushing weight of survivor’s guilt and their inhumane wartime acts—but the burden on Eugene had to be greater than most, for he bore his own baggage and that of Burgin, of Leyden, of any other man in the company that he had touched. He’d soaked up their agony and anger like a sponge. He might be a dark caster, but Merriell was certain all the bad emotions were taking a toll on him, extracting their pound of flesh. If only he could recognize the damage.
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

I want to take a moment to thank everyone who responded to my help-wanted ad! It's been really fun chatting with you all on Tumblr. That being said, this chapter is the first one that has been beta read! Thanks, OOOtOOOt, for all your hard work and feedback!

Now for the chapter-specific warnings: Enjoy some OCs, untranslated French (the phrases are so small, I can’t be bothered), period-typical racism (but no slurs), and descriptions of blood and mild violence.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Reality might be hemorrhaging around him, but Eugene’s presence felt so natural at his side that Merriell struggled to care. The worry seemed to be fading, bleeding out like the tension in his body when Eugene fucked him so well he went pliant. He was going stupid with all the affection, and he knew it, but he couldn’t find it in him to be mad. He suspected Eugene’s magic placated him somehow, soothing his anxieties with a light touch, a slow poison eating away at his resolve. Not that it mattered, because Eugene would be leaving soon anyway. His birthday was on Monday, and he’d promised his parents he’d be back by then.

That Saturday afternoon, Merriell brought Eugene to the salt marshes east of the city. They took Eugene’s car, since Merriell didn’t have one. The ancient Ford Sport Coupe had a rumble seat and reeked of gasoline when the engine was running. Eugene drove with the windows down, which helped with the smell immensely, and Merriell hung his head out the passenger window like a dog, reveling in the cold wind whipping against his face. Birds filled the sky as they neared the marshes; more gulls, cranes, herons, plovers, and ducks than Merriell could ever name.

“There’s so many,” Eugene commented, voice hushed with awe as a fleet of black-headed gulls blotted out the sun. “They must winter here.”

He pulled the car off on the side of road just before the rushes started to crowd the gravel path, where the embankment crumbled into the ditches. The mud of the estuary was soft, sucking them down into the earth as they tramped through the wetland. Merriell’s magic thrummed, and he purred with it, soaking in the sun and lush salt air. Sometimes he wondered why he lived in the city, a mortal invention designed to detach humans from nature in the hopes of shaking the animal need from their souls. As if they ever could. Merriell learned long ago that the reptilian hindbrain dictated the actions of even the most cerebral people. Maybe even Eugene.

The list of things Merriell knew about Eugene was steadily growing—details about his family life, his nightmares, his mannerisms, his magic—but he didn’t understand him. The mechanism of his mind was beyond Merriell’s comprehension, clicking and whirring off-beat from everyone else. Watching him walk sure-footed through the tall reeds and knee-deep water, sketchbook tucked under one arm and binoculars looped around his neck, Merriell felt choked by a wave of wanting. He yearned to know what Eugene dreamed about, where he saw himself in ten years, whether he had any secrets. He swallowed those feelings, ducking his head to inspect the water for critters.

They waded slowly through the marsh and didn’t speak, the time oddly reminiscent of the hours they waited between combat in the Pacific. Eugene busied himself with his notes and sketches. He was
quite good at drawing, Merriell realized, peeking over the redhead’s shoulder every once and a while. Merriell messed with the wildlife, feeling like a boy again. He plunged his arm into the mud, searching blindly for hibernating toads or salamanders. He liked how the mire squelched through his fingers, the grit sticking to his skin and under his nails, his shirt stiffening from the salt in his sweat and the stagnant water. He caught a sluggish little frog and deposited it on Eugene’s shoulder, dripping muddy water down his neck. Eugene startled and glared at him but didn’t break the silence. Words had no place out here, human formalities abandoned in favor of the birds, sitting close in the brush, lulled to safety by their stillness.

Twilight fell when they left the marsh, stars already pricking holes in the sky. Merriell led the way back to the car with his keen vision, Eugene’s hand fisted tight in the back of his shirt as he stumbled after him.

“How’d you get so muddy?” Eugene groused as they stripped their waders off. He tried to contain the mess by folding them into a tarp before throwing them in his trunk.

“Child of the bayou,” Merriell grinned cheekily. Mud caked his hands and arms, splashed around his chest and face, itchy as it dried but not quite ready to flake off. “Gotta take some back with me.”

Eugene unearthed a grease-stained towel from his trunk and flung it at him. “God, you’re worse than a dog.”

He lolled his tongue out and panted at Eugene teasingly, delighting in the way he grumbled and blushed, probably thinking of other uses for Merriell’s mouth. Merriell sure thought about it, lust sparking in his blood at the way Eugene bossed him around, insisting he couldn’t get in the car unless he was reasonably clean.

Upon passing Eugene’s inspection, he lazed in the front seat until Eugene got in. Merriell pounced on him before he could get the keys in the ignition, crowding him against the driver’s side as he kissed him. Eugene indulged him, hands coming up to thread through Merriell’s hair, mouth falling open when Merriell nipped his bottom lip. It riled him up, how easily Eugene let him take the reins. They kissed sloppily; Merriell tasting dirt from his own lips, mixing in with the salt and musk of human skin. He rasped his tongue through the facial hair on Eugene’s chin. He still hadn’t shaved.

Eugene pushed him away indignantly when Merriell tried to unbutton his trousers. “We’re in public,” he snapped, throwing Merriell bodily into the passenger door.

“What, the birds gonna rat us out? They already seen us kissin’. What harm is suckin’ your cock gonna do?”

“What’s gotten into you?” Eugene started the car, the headlights weakly illuminating the road and reflecting off the eyes of some small animal in the reeds. “Just yesterday you were going off about being careful but now it’s okay to get arrested for public indecency?”

Merriell gaped at him. “Ain’t nobody here, Gene! We ain’t seen another human all day.”

“I’m aware, but we can’t be in the habit of doing shit like that outside. It’s gotta stay behind closed doors. You know that.” Eugene turned his gaze on Merriell, eyes large and pleading instead of cross. “Just be patient, you’ll get it when we get home.”

Home—Merriell’s anger fizzled out at the way Eugene said it, like he was planning on leaving Mobile for good and coming back to New Orleans. To Merriell, to his little apartment that couldn’t possibly contain their drastically different lives. Merriell acted petulant to hide how pleased he was by the word. “I won’t want it then.”
Eugene laughed as he coaxed the car back onto the road. “Sure, you won’t.”

Merriell pretended to sulk on the drive back, tucked into himself as he studied Eugene through the corner of his eye. His profile was stark in the twilight, broad forehead hidden underneath his hair, his long, straight nose the most prominent feature. His elegant fingers flexed upon the steering wheel, index fingers tapping some unidentifiable rhythm. Merriell used to watch him like this back in Okinawa, crouched in their foxhole as the light faded, memorizing the components that made up Eugene Sledge.

Nightfall on the horizon changed from a blur of hazy mauve and gray to a faint orange, the sky brightened by light pollution as they neared the city. Merriell’s street was particularly well lit on account of the shops underneath the apartment complexes. Still, he jumped when a shape slinked out from the gloom next to the steps leading up to his door.

“Merry, we’ve been lookin’ for you everywhere.” His cousin, Margie, stepped into the glow from the streetlamps. Bennie followed close behind her. Most Sheltons looked eerily like their mothers, and the twins were no exception, taking after Merriell’s Aunt Celeste. Their features were feline, lithe and compact, all sharp-angles and deliberate movements. Margie turned her attention to Eugene like a cat seizing up a mouse. “Who’s this?”

Merriell was reluctant to reply, for he didn’t trust the twins one bit. Every bone in Margie’s body was mean as could be. Bennie was nicer, most of his magic having been sucked up by Margie in the womb, but he never could say no to anyone, not even mortals, and so he did whatever Margie told him to do. Worse yet, they were only sixteen years old, hormones screaming at them to make bad decisions.

But Eugene didn’t know that, and he offered his hand politely. “Eugene Sledge.”

“Marguerite. I’m Merry’s cousin.” Margie purred, snatching up Eugene’s hand before Merriell could stop her. He nearly had a heart attack, thinking she’d detect the darkness in him, until he remembered that Eugene’s magic made him feel unnaturally blank. He watched Margie’s expression change from delightedly scrutinizing to confused when she couldn’t get a read on him. Bennie shook Eugene’s hand next, his manner conveying mild worry.

“Sledge served with me,” Merriell explained when his cousins turned their questioning eyes on him. “Just passing through on my way back from a camping trip,” Eugene elaborated. “Snafu here’s kind enough to put me up.”

Bennie seemed pacified by the explanation. “Thank you for your service.”

Margie, on the other hand, eyed Eugene shrewdly, hands rubbing together as she tried to get an impression out of their brief touch. “Snafu? That what you Marines call Merry?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Eugene gave a tiny nod, almost bashful. “Pardon my French, but it’s a military acronym. Situation normal, all fucked up, on account of him being a crazy Cajun bastard.”

Merriell stared at Eugene like he’d grown a second head. He’d never heard Eugene speak so crassly. Margie smirked and swayed closer. “Je te pardonne, alors Marines sound like a rough sort.”

“Oh, not really,” Eugene replied innocently, except Merriell saw the twitch of meanness at the corner of his mouth. “I just figure any relation of Snafu’s can’t be much of a lady.”

“Hoo boy,” Margie laughed, bearing her teeth in a mockery of a smile. “Guess it’s true what they say
about gingers. You are feisty.”

Dread pooled in Merriell’s stomach as he watched the exchange. She seemed more amused than
mad, but that could change in the blink of an eye. Having Eugene meet any member of his family
had never crossed his mind. To see him trading barbs with Margie was nightmarish and he
interjected before Eugene could come up with a smart remark. “What do you need, Margie?”

“Heard there’s some fun in the French Quarter this evening and I need an extra set of hands.” Her
bony fingers clamped onto his arm. “Come out wit’ us. Show Mistah Sledge the town.”

“We’ll think about it,” Merriell shrugged her off and started up the stairs. Eugene fell in step beside
him immediately. “Gotta clean up first. Been out in the marshes.”

The twins shared a look, eyes narrowed with determination, and followed them up. Merriell let them
in begrudgingly. As soon as Eugene shut himself in the bathroom to wash up, he rounded on them.
He glared at Bennie first. As the oldest living male cousin, Merriell had some sway over the boy.
They weren’t close before the war, but he talked to Bennie the most since coming back. Bennie was
softer than the rest of the family, sweet on a mortal girl from school and determined to make an
honest living. Of course, he still hustled with his sister when she asked, but he’d never been good at
it. He reminded Merriell of himself, just acting mean in order to fit in, and he often wondered how he
didn’t see the resemblance before.

“It’s not a hustle,” Bennie began, eyes on the floor.

“Ma’s sending us to settle a debt,” Margie finished, grinning. “Might be dangerous, so she told us to
bring you.”

Merriell shook his head. Figures the family would try to drag him back into the business the instant
Eugene showed up. They’d left him out of it for the past eight months, didn’t even talk about the
illegal shit they did when he was present. “If she wants my help she can ask me herself. I wasn’t
involved with that kind of work before and I ain’t gettin’ into it now.”

“Oh please, I’ll do all the heavy liftin’. I just need you to talk to the girl.” Margie batted her eyelashes
at him. “An’ maybe carry a gun.”

“You hear the words comin’ out your mouth? Dangerous jobs ain’t easy.” Merriell scowled. “Why
she sendin’ you two anyways? If this shit involves the mob, you gonna get yourself killed.”

“Well it’s ain’t like Jean or Hector are here to do it,” Margie spat, whirling sharply to slap Bennie’s
arm. Both Bennie and Merriell flinched at the sudden aggression. “You said he would help!”

Bennie sputtered, aiming a pitiful look in Merriell’s direction. “I said he might.”

Margie swore and berated them in French, snarling and pacing in the kitchen. Merriell rolled his
eyes. He didn’t care if she threw a fit. Her fury may resemble Aunt Celeste’s, but it didn’t scare him.
Margie was too girlish, too naïve to strike him as threatening, her temper tantrum too similar to the
ones she had as a child when Jean wouldn’t take her with them to the swamp. He turned his back on
them, craving a cigarette.

“Wait.” Bennie scurried to his side, touching his arm lightly.

“Not gonna change my mind, Bennie. I got company and I can’t drag him into it.”

Bennie’s hand fell away. Such a timid boy couldn’t win an argument even if his life depended on it,
all the fight beaten out of him by overbearing women.
However, Margie was whip-smart and used to manipulating people into giving her what she wanted. She leapt on the idea of Eugene. “Bullshit. Something’s off about that man. He feel funny to you?”

“Don’ know what you mean.”

“Bet he wouldn’t bat an eye in front of the mob,” Margie mused. “He smells like danger. Fire and lightning.”

Merriell’s heart leapt to his throat. “Get outta here now. Tell Celeste I ain’t ever returnin’ to the family business.”

“No,” Margie narrowed her eyes at him and pulled out a chair. She sat down, propping her elbows on the kitchen table and resting her chin on the back of her hands. “I wanna talk to this ol’ war buddy of yours. You’re actin’ weird about him. You reek of anxiety. An’ we’re all wonderin’ why you came back light. Makes us wonder why you bothered to come back at all.”

“Margie, you don’ mean that,” Bennie interrupted. He’d retreated to the front door, leaning up against it, foot jittering like he wanted to leave.

Margie’s rouged lips curled. “Don’ you wonder why he changed? I’m thinkin’ Mistah Sledge can shed a lil’ light on the situation.”

As though he’d been summoned, Eugene came out of the bathroom and walked into the kitchen. He’d shaved, slicked back his hair, and changed out of Merriell’s spare denim work shirt into a pair of gray slacks and a navy pullover. Muted colors looked good on him, but in this instant Merriell realized that Eugene stuck out like a sore thumb. New Orleans was a riot of color; Margie in her red dress, Bennie with his green and orange sweater vest, and even the apartment, which had been decorated by his mother, exhibiting a veritable rainbow of mismatched wallpapers and furniture.

“Well, well, you clean up good,” Margie cooed, gaze roving appreciatively over Eugene.

Eugene’s face remained neutral as he thanked her and directed his attention to Merriell. “Everything alright?”

“Jus’ peachy. These two were just leavin’.” Merriell hoped Eugene could pick up on his discomfort from a distance, how badly he wanted Margie and Bennie to get the fuck out of his apartment.

“Silly Merry,” Margie giggled, gold flashing sudden and bright in her irises. Merriell felt his vocal cords seize, throat hot and prickly like he’d swallowed a flame. “He’s jokin’, Mistah Sledge. Bennie, how ‘bout you help Merry clean up an’ I’ll fill in Mistah Sledge on the details of our night.”

Brow furrowed, Eugene stepped forward and held a hand up before Bennie could unstick himself from the door. “Hang on now, something doesn’t add up.”

Margie’s grin widened, canines exposed, her features feral. “Now don’ you be silly. I jus’ wanna talk.”

“I’ll talk,” Eugene said, mouth set in a grim line. Merriell wanted to yell at him to shut up, but he choked on Margie’s spell. Eugene shot him a concerned look. “Just stop whatever you’re doing to him.”

“Make me,” Margie challenged, sticking out her tongue impishly. “Show me what kind of casters make it through a war.”

So, she had noticed Eugene’s magic. Merriell glanced worriedly from Margie to Eugene, noting how
the tendons in Eugene’s neck twitched with anger. He remembered Eugene as strong under the light, but in darkness his magic may not be as powerful. He doubted Eugene could take on Margie anyways. He’d never used his magic to hurt people and he needed to touch someone to cast on them. Margie would never let him get close enough.

After a moment, Eugene nodded to himself, like he’d decided something and marched over to Merriell. Resolutely, he wrapped one hand around Merriell’s neck. The touch felt cool, soothing even, and Merriell let his eyes close. They stood like that for a long, breathless minute.

Margie cackled. “I feel you, honey, but that ain’t workin’.”

Growling in frustration, Eugene tightened his grip, fingers digging harshly into Merriell’s throat. Merriell opened his eyes, startled to find Eugene’s golden rage blazing back at him. Suddenly, his ears popped, and he felt their magic warring in his airway—Margie’s fire against Eugene’s lightning, and fuck, it hurt. His eyes rolled back in his head from the pain exploding like a grenade in his gullet. The spell shattered and Merriell collapsed to his knees, gasping for air and trembling. Eugene’s magic lingered even though he’d let him go, crackling through his lungs, agony so piercing it made him dizzy. Doubling over, he coughed blood onto the kitchen floor.

“Merriell!” Eugene’s hands found his shoulder, smoothed along his back, voice close and worried in his ear.

Despite the blood drooling from his lips, Merriell chided him, wheezing through every word. “Damnit, Sledge, quit pokin’ at her.”

Eugene ignored him, shouting at Margie. “What did you do?”

“Oh, you did that, honey,” Margie tsked. Merriell could easily imagine the smug look on her face, like a cat with cream. “That’s what happens when you break things that don’t belong to you. Though I am impressed that you managed to break it at all.” She snapped her fingers and fire filled Merriell’s throat again. He convulsed at the burn, unable to make a sound. “Now, unless we want Merry to be mute for good, I suggest we all do as I say. Bennie, make our cousin presentable.”

Wordlessly, Bennie hauled Merriell up by his armpits. He struggled to bear his weight, but he let Merriell lean on him anyways as he brought him to the bathroom. Merriell managed one last glance at Eugene, heart squeezing uncomfortably at his pale, terrified face; brown eyes locked on the small puddle of blood Merriell had left on the floor.

“I’m sorry,” Bennie whispered, sitting Merriell down on the edge of the bathtub. “I was gonna tell you yesterday but then you didn’t come in to work. Margie’s mixed up with some boys in the mob now an’ she gets violent when things don’t go her way. Consider yourself lucky ‘cause she knows some real mean spells.” Bennie found a clean washcloth in the cabinet above the toilet and wet it. Gently, he wiped the blood and mud off of Merriell’s face. “But I promise, we ain’t collectin’ from the mob. This man didn’t pay Ma fully for her services an’ you just gotta distract the wife, so Margie can sneak off with him. It’s not dangerous, Merry, I promise. She jus’ said that shit to rile you up.”

Merriell couldn’t reply. He settled for glaring at Bennie disapprovingly as he fussed over him, running a razor over his face and combing grease through his hair. Knowing that Eugene was alone with Margie alarmed him, but the flame licking up the sides of his throat kept him tethered to Bennie, letting the nervous boy fix him up for a night in society. Once he was clean-shaven and his hair had been tamed, Bennie ushered him quickly into the bedroom, bidding him to pick out something that made him look sweet.

There it was again—what would the family think of him once they heard about Eugene? He
reminded himself that Margie hadn’t touched him yet, so she probably didn’t know about his affection, and Bennie was too weak with magic to pick up on anything more sensitive than his stressed heartbeat. Still, he shook with nerves as he changed his clothes. Before stepping back out into the kitchen, he rubbed his thumb over the wooden ring on his left hand. He wished he was dreaming.

Eugene sat rigidly across from Margie at the kitchen table, back to the hallway. Margie bore a stone-faced expression. The blood was still on the floor, red and syrupy, sinking into the cracks in the linoleum.

“Now, you look nice,” Margie said flatly when she saw him. Eugene’s ears flushed red, but he didn’t acknowledge Merriell. “I trust Bennie told you the details. Between you an’ Mistah Sledge here, the girl is sure to find someone she likes.” With another dramatic snap of her fingers, the flames disappeared, allowing him to speak again.

Voice gravelly from abuse, Merriell tried to haggle one last time. “I’ll do it, no need to drag Sledge into this.”

Margie hummed and tipped her head, eyes sliding from Merriell over to Eugene.

“You’re not leaving me behind.” Eugene’s tone had a hard edge, leaving no room for argument. Margie stood up, chair scraping harshly against the floor. “Settled then. Allons y.”

—

The bar that Margie took them to was in a slowly gentrifying section of the neighborhood. A fresh coat of white paint barely masked the rotting wood siding, and shiny brass railings and light fixtures attempted to elevate the bohemian gloom of the building. Mellow, New York style jazz drifted through the air, a four-man band on the corner stage covering the latest King Cole Trio record.

“This isn’t so bad,” Eugene murmured in his ear as they followed Margie to the bar, skirting the dancefloor and the handful of tables scattered around the tiny main room. The hair on the back of Merriell’s neck prickled as he realized why the twins had brought them—this was a white bar. The twins’ complexions weren’t as deep as the men in the band, but their skin tone drew looks from the patrons anyways. Not disapproving, just surprised and a little unnerved, maybe awed, as if they were observing escaped zoo animals.

He pushed Eugene in front of him. “Buy Margie’s drink. Act like she’s your girl.”

“What?”

“Don’ ask, just do.”

Bennie caught his arm, pulling him close to whisper in his ear. “I’m gonna wait in the alley. Make sure Margie don’ get thrown out.” Then he left Merriell’s side, making a beeline for the backdoor. The eyes of the surrounding white folk instantly glossed over him, assuming from his purposeful stride that he worked there.

With a sigh, Merriell kept close to Eugene and Margie, hyper aware of every suspicious glance thrown their way. One man in particular, seated at a table close to the stage with a pretty brunette, stared at them, the color draining from his face. He looked well to do, out on a date judging from his sport coat and matching tie. The woman next to him wore pearl jewelry. She seemed a bit bored, antsy, like she wanted to dance. There was a cane leaned against the wall behind them.
“You know, Merry.” Margie pressed a bottle of beer into his hand. “Mama may say you’re sweet but
she ain’t ever said you’re dumb.” Her amber eyes glittered in the dim light as she clinked her glass of
clear bubbling something against his beer. She caught the man’s gaze and waved coyly at him.

Eugene, having finished paying for their drinks, quirked a brow at her and Merriell. “Thought she
was supposed to be my girl.”

“Don’ worry, boo,” she cooed. “Just wavin’ over an ol’ Army buddy of yours.”

“I wasn’t—”

She jabbed her elbow into his ribs, cutting off his protest. The man had gotten up from his chair,
excusing himself from his date with a hand on her shoulder, leaning heavily on the cane as he limped
towards them. “Normandy sure was scary, weren’t it? It’s a miracle you boys made it out.”

Eugene rubbed at the spot where she hit him, mouth hanging open like he was ready to fire off
another quip, but Merriell glowered at him, and he closed it with an audible click. Sulkily, Eugene
took a swig of beer.

The approaching man was older than them, likely in his late thirties, light brown hair sprinkled with
grey at the temples, wrinkles crinkling the thin skin around his watery blue eyes. His right leg moved
stiffly, the hip joint immobile, muscle weakness apparent from the tremor in his thigh. When he
stopped in front of them, he rested all of his weight on his left side. His brow was clammy with
sweat, but if he was scared, he hid it well.

“Captain Peichel, fancy runnin’ into you here.” Margie acted sweet, disarming, all the traces of her
meanness hidden.

“Miss Shelton, I’m frankly surprised to see you in this establishment.” His statement wasn’t
demeaning, just shocked that she’d wormed her way into a place he deemed safe.

Giggling, Margie looped her arm through Eugene’s, who played along with an endearing smile. ‘I’m
on a date wit’ Corporal Sledge, you remember him. And this here’s my cousin. You served wit’ him
too, if I ain’t mistaken.”

The captain’s face grew even more ashen, and he shook hands with both of them, palm wet and cold
as a fish. Merriell could smell his terror, feel his pulse racing with shame. “Nice to see you boys
again.”

Margie’s voice dropped low, inaudible above the music. Her eyes glowed gold as she cast a spell on
Captain Peichel so he could hear her. Merriell bumped up his own hearing to catch her words, but to
everyone else in the bar her lips moved and no sound came out. “Now, you and I got an awful lot to
talk about, but first let’s introduce your ol’ friends to your wife.”

“Can’t we leave her outta this?” The man pleaded.

Margie shook her head. “You want her to come lookin’ for you? Stumble upon somethin’ she
shouldn’t see? Best leave her in the care of these upstandin’ veterans here. They’ll show her a good
time. Bit of dancin’, nothin’ more. Let her have some fun.”

The man’s gaze flicked over them nervously—Eugene impassive but pleasant, and Merriell looking
about as uncomfortable as the man felt. He was never any good at controlling his expression. With a
trembling nod, the man turned and led them over to his table, to his wife who sat staring wistfully at
the dancing couples. When she noticed them coming over, she frowned, sizing them up skeptically.
It didn’t help that Captain Peichel stammered as he introduced them.
“Barbara, I’d like you to meet some men who, uh, served with me.” He swept an unsteady hand out to Eugene, who was standing the closest to him. “This is, uh, Corporal—”

“Eugene Sledge,” Eugene offered his hand, gold sparkling in his brown eyes as she took it. “Lovely to meet you, ma’am. It was a pleasure serving under your husband.”

The tight-lipped smile gracing Barbara’s face relaxed, becoming genuine under Eugene’s magic. “What a surprise, I didn’t know Terry had Army friends in New Orleans.” Unlike Peichel, who had a slight Louisiana drawl, Barbara spoke with a cultured Southern accent.

“Officer’s ain’t often friends with enlisted men,” Merriell interjected, his voice still raspy from being magically flayed. “Surprised myself to see him in the Vieux Carré. Thought we should say ‘hi’.” He held out his hand. “Marco Shelton, at your service.”

Barbara obviously liked him less, gingerly shaking his hand. Her hands were delicate, skin dry and soft, pulse steady. She turned her attention back to Eugene. “And who’s this pretty young thing on your arm, Mr. Sledge?”

Margie blushed but knew better than to speak without being spoken to.

“This is Marguerite, my date for tonight. She’s Marco’s cousin and wanted to come out dancing with us.” His Alabama twang thickened as he talked. “I’m just passing through on my way back home to Mobile. These two are kindly showing me the town.”

“How generous of them. There’s good music for dancing here.” Barbara sighed longingly, picking up her glass of white wine and sipping at it.

“If it’s alright with you, Captain, I’d like to ask your wife for a dance.” Merriell cut in again, perhaps too forward, judging from the way Barbara blossomed under Eugene’s Southern gentlemen act, but the sooner Margie finished her business here, the sooner they could leave.

“Barbara doesn’t need my permission to dance,” the captain replied, laughing nervously.

Barbara sputtered, trying to find a way to refuse him without seeming rude. Merriell half-paid attention, noticing Margie whisper something to Eugene before slipping off. Eugene nodded and stepped forward to rescue the situation.

“Oh, you wouldn’t want to dance with Mer—Marco, ma’am. He has two left feet.” Merriell scowled at Eugene because that was a bald-faced lie. “But if you’re amenable to it, I’d like to dance to this song. Marguerite’s run off to freshen up and this is one of my favorites. It’d be a pity to miss it.”

A pink flush spread over her pale cheeks, and she looked to her husband, who smiled encouragingly. “Go on, dear, I know you miss dancing.”

Gracefully containing her excitement, though Merriell could see how her eyes brightened at Eugene’s request, Barbara rose from her chair, kissed Captain Peichel’s cheek, and let Eugene lead her onto the dancefloor. Carefully, Eugene positioned her so her back was to them.

“You should go meet Margie now,” Merriell ordered, gaze fixed on Eugene and Barbara, as they swayed gently to the slow tune the band was playing. The sight made his skin crawl; how Eugene acted the part like he was born to deceive people this way, better at lying and schmoozing than Merriell had ever been. “Make it quick.”

“But—”
“Trust me, sir, you shouldn’t keep her waitin’. Your wife is safer with us than she’d ever be at your side. No offense.”

The captain left, cane clicking on the hardwood floor.

Merriell watched Eugene dance and tried not to feel jealous. It helped that Eugene kept a polite distance from Barbara, but one hand still cupped hers, the other resting low on her shoulder blade. Her arm fit snugly in the curve of his, her hand braced on his shoulder. He looked relaxed, charming and comfortable with dancing, like he’d grown up doing it.

All at once, Merriell realized that he didn’t know Eugene outside of war. He saw Eugene’s smart clothes—clean, crisp shirts and recently ironed trousers—but he didn’t know where Eugene bought them or if he was kind to the maid who laundered them. He inferred where Eugene picked up his mannerisms; his cordiality mirroring that of Southern Belle Barbara, indicative of his rich, white upbringing. But Merriell didn’t really know where Eugene came from, nor did he understand how he saw the world now that they weren’t fighting for their lives every day. The gentleman on the dancefloor was a completely foreign creature, not his Eugene. The man that he saw in the salt marsh, studious and enamoured with nature, wasn’t his Eugene either. His Eugene was a warrior, hateful and aggressive, covered in dirt and blood. And he didn’t exist anymore.

Hanging his head, Merriell pressed his fingers to his temples, pressure building behind his eyes. His throat and lungs hurt, and he felt miserable. He had to learn who Eugene was all over again. Or maybe, this was a sign that he should let him go.

The realization tore him up inside, because the scene before him encompassed the duality of Eugene’s possible lives. Deep down, Merriell believed that Eugene could still have a normal life. If he played charming this well, he’d have no problem meeting and marrying a girl. He could dance with his mother at the wedding, smiling gently down at her like he did with Barbara. Maybe Eugene wouldn’t be happy, but he would be safe. But Merriell also knew that there was a timeline where Eugene moved here. He had seen Eugene standing in his mother’s kitchen, kissed him there in front of a vase of mismatched flowers. It was easy enough to imagine that Eugene would go out on family business when Margie forced them into it, playing a role as naturally as breathing. Merriell didn’t know which future he wanted.

Helpless with indecision, Merriell sipped his cold beer despite the pain in his throat and waited.

Chapter End Notes

Fun bird fact, the black-headed gulls described are Bonaparte’s Gulls, Chroicocephalus philadelphia, which have a cosmopolitan North American distribution and winter along all the coasts. The actual Black-Headed Gull, Chroicocephalus ridibundus, is a Eurasian gull and is not found in North American
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

This picks up about where Chapter 5 left off, so maybe skim the last few paragraphs of that chapter just to orient yourself. I also URGE you to heed the warnings. These boys have issues.

All the warnings—brief drug use, more violence, magical sado-machism, anal sex, and self-harm (literally the last two paragraphs after ‘The last vision was about Eugene’ so skip those if you think you may be triggered).

After ten minutes, Captain Peichel came back to the table. He sat down heavily, the color having returned to his face, but his limbs trembled.

“All settled?” Merriell asked, finally dragging his eyes away from Eugene and Barbara, who were still dancing and chattering about something.

Peichel nodded. “I’ll never mess with that witch ever again. We just wanted—”

Merriell held up a hand to stop him. “I don’ wanna know. Just be thankful you’re still in one piece.”

Peichel’s face reddened, but he didn’t respond, attention drawn to Eugene and Barbara as they left the dancefloor. Barbara looked particularly animated, cheeks pink and eyes so bright that Merriell would have considered her pretty if he was at all inclined towards rich, white ladies who looked at him as though he were dirt. As annoyed as he was, Merriell still gave up his seat for her.

“Margie’s feelin’ sick,” Merriell told Eugene, sure that Margie and Bennie weren’t coming back into the bar now that their business was finished. “Think we oughta take her home.”

“Oh, poor dear,” Barbara exclaimed, fanning her face with her hands. “What’s wrong with her?”

Merriell shrugged. “She don’t like crowds much. Nice seein’ you again, Captain.” He gave Peichel a lazy salute.

“Likewise, boys.” Peichel returned the gesture with equal fervor, clearly having already forgotten their names.

“Thank you for the dances, ma’am.” Eugene kissed the back of Barbara’s hand sweetly; Merriell rolled his eyes.

“I had a lovely time, Eugene. I will put in a glowing word about you to my brother,” She gushed, smiling broadly. “And my niece—I know you said you prefer brunettes but she’s so clever, I’m sure you’d get on like a house on fire.”

“I appreciate it, ma’am. Enjoy the rest of your evening.”

As they walked away, Merriell felt irrationally angry. He hadn’t eavesdropped while they danced, not wanting to know whatever banal topics they discussed, but now he wished he had. Barbara talked like she was offering to recommend him for a job. He wondered what pretty lies Eugene had told Barbara, or if Eugene had bothered to lie at all.
“Prefer brunettes, do you?” He teased bitingly. The night air felt good on his face, cool and clean after the smoky atmosphere of the bar. He spied Margie and Bennie sharing a cigarette under a streetlamp across the street and strode briskly towards them.

Eugene had to jog a little to keep up with him. “I would have said I preferred men, but that wouldn’t have gone over well.”

Merriell stopped in the middle of the street and grabbed Eugene by the collar. He snarled at him: “What happened to keepin’ it behind closed doors?”

“Somethin’ wrong, boys?” Margie called breezily.

With a huff, Merriell pushed Eugene away and stormed up to her. “You got what you wanted. Final warnin’—keep me outta this shit.”

“Okay, Merry,” Margie sighed, blowing acrid smoke in his face. It reeked of marijuana. “You’re bad at this job anyways. Mistah Sledge on the other hand, you played the wife like a goddamn fiddle.” She held the joint out to Eugene. “Nicely done.”

Head tilted in that curious way of his, Eugene took it. Merriell grabbed his wrist before he could bring it to his lips. “You don’t wanna smoke that.”

Eugene pried his hand off. “I know what it is, Merriell. Quit policing me.” Under Merriell’s reproachful glare, he took a drag and held it, breathing out slowly as he handed the joint back to Margie. She smirked at them, assessing.

“Thought you called him ‘Snafu’.”

“I do,” Eugene scowled, patting his pockets, searching for something. “Just not when he’s being an asshole. Anyone got any cigarettes?”

Merriell bristled. “I’m an asshole? Forgive me, Saint Sledge, for tryin’ to stop you from gettin’ mixed up in illegal shit.”

“I got kreteks,” Bennie offered, holding up a packet.

“What are those?” Eugene squinted at the packaging.

“Don’t you dare fuckin’ ignore me, Gene.”

“They’re sort of like menthols except they taste like clove,” Bennie explained.


Bennie shook one out and passed it over.

“Alright, fuck you,” Merriell spat, turning his back on them and walking in the direction of his apartment. “Fuckin’ sleep in your car!”

“Shit! Merriell, wait!” Margie’s laughter accompanied Eugene’s pounding footsteps. “Calm down,” he pleaded when he caught up to him. Merriell didn’t slow his pace or look at him. “I’m sorry, I got caught up in it. You gotta understand the buzz, cut me some slack.”

Merriell remembered the high that came with sating that dark hunger deep inside, and he wasn’t surprised that Eugene felt it now, but chasing that high became a slippery slope. He wondered where
Eugene first tasted it tonight. Had it started when he hurt him, ripping the spell out of his throat so harshly that blood spilled forth? He had looked oddly vulnerable in that moment. Merriell should have recognized it. The bad deeds that brought on the feeling started out innocuous enough, but they escalated before long. Yesterday, he’d claimed that physical pain didn’t do it for him, but what if he was lying, what if he liked it so much he got more violent?

Merriell’s pulse raced, blood surging at the memory of Eugene’s eyes flashing golden, his elegant fingers on Merriell’s neck. He’d had Eugene’s hands around his throat so many times now, always gentle and warm, but he’d also had indistinct dreams of Eugene squeezing so hard that he couldn’t breath. He didn’t know which made his heart beat faster—Eugene’s kindness or his cruelty.

Whatever the case, they couldn’t have this conversation out in the streets, so Merriell ignored Eugene’s wheedling apologies until they got to his apartment. Eugene didn’t sound sincere anyways.

“What’d you like about it?” Merriell asked after he’d shut and locked the front door.

“What do you mean?”

“That stunt we just pulled so Margie could get her money or whatever.” Merriell grabbed his mother’s star-patterned teacup out of the drying rack in the sink and filled it with whiskey. “If you’re buzzin’ you must have got somethin’ out of it. What was it?” He took a sip and instantly regretted it, the liquor searing his abused esophagus worse than the beer. He coughed and gripped the counter to keep himself upright. “Fuck!” Eugene was at his side at once, hand on his back, magic starting to tingle through the touch. Merriell jerked away, croaking, “Don’ fuckin’ touch me.”

Eugene threw his hands up in the air, exasperated. “I’m trying to make you feel better.”

“You didn’t try and take my pain away before,” Merriell pointed out. “Somethin’ changed, what changed? Just give me a straight answer for once, Gene.” Old rage flared up in him, left over from Okinawa and Peking, when Eugene kept holding him close yet shutting him out. Taking a mile but never giving an inch.

Eugene dodged the question, hands on his hips, his tone gentle and pacifying. “Look, it was just sort of fun, I guess. That woman was so bored, so lonely. Full of regret, but sad about it. Ashamed of it. She loves that man so much, but it hurts to be with him. She hates that she can’t let him go.”

“You just soak it all in, don’t you? All the bad feelings.” Merriell thought the weight of negative emotions crushed Eugene, but now he saw that he thrived off of them. The energy in Eugene’s stance felt manic, menacing, like a predator. When Eugene moved to touch Merriell again, he flinched away.

“No magic, I promise,” Eugene coaxed, placing his hand over Merriell’s left, just like he used to during the war. His palm pressed the wooden ring into Merriell’s knuckles. “I can see how scared you are well enough without it. It’s in my nature, to take emotion into myself and feel some sort of energy from them. When I was light, I didn’t like seeing others in pain or seeing people inflict pain. It drained me. I realized in Peleliu that the pain was going to kill me if I didn’t shut it out. I’m not sure how soon after that I started to miss it, or when it started to nourish me.”

Merriell’s mind felt jumbled. There was a lump in his throat that he couldn’t seem to swallow. Eugene’s confession worried and intrigued him. The taste of blood in his mouth made his heart pound, adrenaline coursing through his veins, and he didn’t know if he wanted to kiss or punch him.

“You said you didn’t like it.”

“I said it’s like nicotine, Merriell. Addictive.”
“Is that what changed tonight?” He hated how his voice sounded; quivering, hoarse, and weak, but he had to know. “When you broke Margie’s spell, did you feel it?”

Eugene sighed and cautiously pulled Merriell into a hug. Stiff at first, but then Merriell relaxed into it, searching Eugene’s eyes for an errant golden spark and finding none. He knew he shouldn’t fall into this false sense of security, but he was always helpless in the face of Eugene’s affection. “You won’t like the answer,” Eugene warned.

Nodding, Merriell pressed onward. “Did it feel good?”

“A pain like that is visceral, the pain of war. It bleeds from a shrapnel or bullet wound, like an old friend. It’s hard to come by here, and that’s a good thing, because it sickens me.” Eugene cupped Merriell’s face in his hands in the way that he loved, thumbs brushing over his cheekbones, warm and reassuring. “I’m trying to be good, Merriell, but it’s like a drug. I don’t want it, but when I get it the world starts to make sense again. Without it, everything is too silent. So, I wouldn’t say that pain makes me feel good—the blood especially, I can’t stomach that—but when it’s not there I miss it.”

Merriell encircled Eugene’s thin wrists with his hands, fingers light on his steady pulse. Eugene felt calm, unnaturally so, and Merriell missed the days when he was green with fear.

“Does that bother you?” Eugene asked, brown eyes boring into Merriell’s. “Does it make you love me less?”

The question felt like a knife between his ribs. Merriell would never fear Eugene as much as he loved him. Rather than answer, Merriell kissed him. He’d said too much already, and he didn’t want to hear anymore. He bit at Eugene’s mouth like he could rip the words from his lips.

“Ow,” Eugene grumbled after a particularly hard nip. When he drew back, his bottom lip was split and bleeding. Merriell’s stomach swooped excitedly, and he lapped at the blood. He grabbed Eugene’s jaw, opening his mouth wider so he could kiss him deeper, wanting to convey that this was okay. If the violence of war hadn’t left them yet, then they could take it out on each other; if Eugene needed it, Merriell was certain he could handle anything that Eugene dished out. Desperate, Merriell dug his teeth into the cut on Eugene’s lip, feeling oddly aroused by the thought of Eugene giving it to him, releasing all the anger and frustration. Eugene seemed to sense his eagerness, sagging against the kitchen counter as he relented and let Merriell be as violent as he liked. But only for a while. After a bruising clash of teeth, Eugene pushed him back, hand on Merriell’s aching throat.

“Fuck me,” Merriell whined, neediness making his whole body burn.

Eugene shook his head, but his pupils dilated at Merriell’s demand. “You’re still sore from this morning.”

“I’m not sore, I’m empty.” The words elicited a full body shudder from Eugene. Too often it seemed like he held the reins in their relationship, but Merriell had the power in this instant. He rolled his body against Eugene’s, slipping a hand between them to knead at Eugene’s cock through his slacks and whimpering breathily. “Fill me up.”

“Not when I’m like this. I’ll hurt you.” Body betraying his protestations, Eugene’s hips ground against Merriell’s. His hands tangled in his hair, tugging at the dark curls so hard Merriell’s scalp tingled.

Merriell dug his fingers into Eugene’s jaw punishingly. One jagged fingernail tore open the soft skin under his jawbone, and lust sparked low in his belly when Eugene winced. “Think I can’t hurt back?”
Growling, irises reduced to a thin gold ring around his tar black pupils, Eugene shoved Merriell onto the kitchen table, pushing him flat so fast his head bounced off the wood. Ears ringing from the blow, Merriell brought his legs up around Eugene’s waist, pulling him close, locking him in. His heart hammered in his chest as Eugene loomed over him. Eugene grabbed Merriell’s wrists and pinned them to the table, gripping so tight that the bones grated together. “Last warning.”

Laughter bubbled up out of Merriell’s mouth, raspy and winded. He thrashed against Eugene’s hold, testing his strength, desire mounting when he found that couldn’t escape. He’d forgotten what is was like to be terrified, to be sure that death crept towards him in the form of a Jap bullet or a lover’s hands. And yet, from the moment he’d let Eugene in, this was what he’d wanted, even if he couldn’t name it. Ever since the war ended, he could feel himself drifting aimlessly in the world, floating in a haze of irrational fear, and he was tired of trying to keep himself together. He shook with longing, wanted Eugene to rip him apart, to give him a real reason to be scared, to make him feel as helpless and lost on the outside as he did on the inside. The realization anchored him, terror a familiar stone in his stomach, pressing his spine into the table. His whole body tingled, muscles stretched taut with anticipation. Merriell needed Eugene to hurt him just to break the tension.

“Come on, tear into me.”

Letting go of his right wrist, Eugene cradled the back of Merriell’s head, unexpectedly gentle compared to what came next. White flashed across his vision and he arched up off the table, unable to hold back a scream at the pain lancing through him. A bolt of magic that contained the agony of hundreds of men; all the burning flesh, bullets shattering bone, mortar shrapnel digging deep, coral slicing open palms, muscles screeching with exhaustion. It crackled in his ears like the discharge off a battery, and he panted when Eugene released him, tears rolling freely down his temples.

“You asked for it,” Eugene said flatly, poised above him, working on unbuttoning their trousers. He looked down, expression mildly confused. “How are you still hard? That should’ve hurt like a bitch.”

It had hurt, more than anything, scrambled his brain so much he could barely think, let alone formulate a coherent response. Merriell’s chest heaved, muscles twitching uncontrollably like he’d been electrocuted.

“Hey.” As much as Eugene played mean, deep down he would always be kind, and he leaned in close, petting Merriell’s face. “You’ll tell me if it’s too much, right?”

Merriell struggled to get his jaw to work properly. “Fuck me up, boo,” he slurred.

Eyes narrowing, Eugene shocked him again. Merriell writhed with the sensation, aching with familiarity because Eugene was sharing his burden, letting it flow into him the same way it had in Peleliu. Back then, his magic was a river, and Merriell had willingly drowned. Now it was lightning, and Merriell was an ocean, completely ungrounded and absorbing it readily, atoms shaking apart from the excess energy, bringing him to a boil with rage and suffering. Blood pooled in the back of his mouth, brought up by reedy screams that shredded his already raw throat. The world spun as Eugene pulled him into a sitting position, so he could cough it out.

“I don’t want to do this anymore.” Eugene’s face paled at the sight of the blood. He tucked himself into Merriell’s quivering form, propping him up and hiding simultaneously. Merriell wrapped his arms around him as best he could, limbs jerking.

“See,” he gurgled, pausing to swallow haltingly. “You ain’t as mean as you think you are.”

Merriell buried his face into Eugene’s silky hair and held him until the shaking stopped. Now that he
knew what the darkness hid, he worried more than ever.

In the morning, he coaxed Eugene into fucking him one last time.

“I don’t want to hurt you.” Eugene was still spooked. He couldn’t handle blood, didn’t like how Merriell’s voice had become thin and hoarse from last night’s violence.

Merriell drew him in softly, stroking his russet hair and showering his face with tender kisses. “You can’t hurt me if I love you.”

He’d never said it out loud before, and it did the trick, got Eugene’s elegant fingers right where he wanted them. Eugene took his sweet time stretching him, overly cautious, focused on Merriell’s pleasure.

“Gene, I’m gonna come,” Merriell croaked into his freckled shoulder, fighting not to grind down onto his hand.

Eugene smirked against Merriell’s forehead. “Then come.”

“No, I want you in me. Want to carry you around all day.”

Eugene relented, blushing. He slid in missionary style, Merriell’s knees hooked over his arms so he could achieve the correct angle. He couldn’t thrust as deep this way, and Merriell disliked how his back ached at the contorted position, but Eugene wanted to see his face. Their foreheads rested together as Eugene pushed into him again and again, breathing the same sultry air; the scent of sweat, iodine, and ozone thick on Merriell’s tongue. Eugene kissed him, ash and salt, and stroked Merriell’s cock in time with his thrusts until he spilled over with a gasp. Eugene started to pull out but Merriell forced him back in, digging a heel into his back.

“It’s too tight,” Eugene protested. “It’s going to hurt.”

“I’ll relax,” Merriell panted, planting sloppy, open-mouthed kisses along Eugene’s beautiful neck. “Stay.”

After a few moments, Merriell regained control of his muscles enough to encourage Eugene to fuck him through the afterglow. The overstimulation was uncomfortable, a glancing blow here and there dragging a whine from him, but he begged Eugene to continue, the warmth of him coming inside soothing the pain like a balm. They shared a cigarette afterwards.

“I love you,” Eugene whispered into the smoky silence.

Merriell chuckled. “You don’ even know what that means.”

“I want to.” Eugene turned to look at him imploringly. The light caught his eyes just right, revealing striations of bronze and yellow-green in the iris, morphing them into hazel. Did Merriell ever truly know the color of Eugene’s eyes? “I remember loving my parents, my brother, my friends, my dog.”

“That’s not the same kind of love.”

“Can’t I try?”

Merriell took a drag, releasing the smoke slowly to steady himself. He passed the cigarette to Eugene and closed his eyes. “When you leave today, don’t ever come back.”
Eugene didn’t speak for several moments. When he finally did, his voice was hollow with disbelief. “What? Why?”

Merriell shifted away from Eugene, putting some distance between them so he wouldn’t know what he was feeling. Everything he did was out of love, and Eugene could never understand that. Eugene thought love was a selfish thing, a desire to keep someone close, to build a life with them. But Merriell loved Eugene so much; he’d do anything to keep him safe from his magic, even if that meant letting him go. “We’re not good for each other. We poison each other. I love you, but you’re killin’ me, an’ I know you think I make you feel better, but all I do is push you to do worse. I made you dark, Gene, same as you made me light. If you ever wanna be light again, if you wanna stop hurtin’ me, you gotta leave.”

In the stunned silence that followed, Merriell twisted the ring off his finger and held it out. Eugene took it.

“You really want me to leave.”

Merriell nodded, steeling himself for the inevitable challenge.

“Look me in the eye and tell me to leave.”

With a shuddering breath, Merriell opened his eyes and faced Eugene. His expression was incredibly open and wounded; brow furrowed, jaw clenched tight, eyes watery with unshed tears. Merriell reminded himself that Eugene was just putting on a show. Anything to get his way, anything to stay.

“Gene.” His tongue flicked out to wet his lips nervously, but he wasn’t going to break. “Leave.”

And he did. Closing his eyes again, Merriell heard Eugene roll out of bed, get dressed, pack up his things, and leave. The door closed with a finality that brought a fierce ache to his chest.

That night Merriell slept restlessly, plagued with visions. They peppered through his nightmares of the Pacific, kaleidoscope bright and whirling like fever dreams. Many of them were brief, barely a flash—a brown and white dog running after a red bike, a lemon tree, movement in a dark alley, birds with beady black eyes pecking along a sandy beach, birds with patches of red feathers on their heads perching on Eugene’s hands and arms—but three emerged clearly, logically, and stuck in his mind throughout the rest of the week.

The first, like so many others, was about his mother.

She was in the kitchen making dinner based on the lengthening shadows in the apartment. Young Merriell sat on the living room floor with a set of her divining bones, arranging them back into the skeleton of a rat, stacking the vertebrae of its spine and ribs just so. There was a frog in this set too, and he was engrossed in the grooves of its wide flat skull. His mother opened the door. She did that a lot, always knew who wanted in before they knocked. Adult Merriell shivered in his bed because he remembered what came next.

Aunt Celeste burst in, dark hair wild around her face and eyes already molten gold, screaming at his mother in French. His mother jabbered back. He couldn’t understand what she said, but the tone indicated she was trying to placate her. Celeste was having none of it, and she cast the same spell on his mother that Margie had put on him. He saw the instant his mother broke it, green streaming out her eyes and her fingertips as she clawed at her neck, triumph turning to fear when the shattered spell ripped through her throat. Blood burbled from her mouth. Young Merriell got up and ran over, scared but wanting to help. Adult Merriell winced, anticipating the hurt.
His aunt flicked her fingers at him, paralyzing him from the neck down, sending him crashing headfirst into a chair. He blacked out, head split open and gushing blood. Merriell’s memory ended there and started up again with stitches at the home of his mother’s friend. The vision filled in what he’d missed; his mother crying and spitting pink foam as she tried to reach him, held back by Celeste’s fingers knotted in her hair. Celeste warned her not to steal clients ever again or she’d drown him in the swamp. When she left, his mother cradled him, hands slippery with blood, begging for someone, anyone to help her.

The second vision was about a room.

A room as big as his whole apartment and filled with books. There was a wide window at one end with a big, wooden desk in front of it. Chairs surrounded the desk, a big brown leather one tucked behind it and two maroon leather ones in front of it. Brass trinkets and important looking folders cluttered the top of the desk along with an inkwell and a ceramic cup holding shiny pens and feathers. Everything looked expensive; the furniture, the brocade curtains, the stained-glass lamp shades, the ornately patterned rug in the center of the room. Bookshelves lined the walls, all the tomes bound with leather, the stacks broken up with eclectic bookends. Hunks of quartz and agate held up works of fiction, large wooden chess pieces were scattered through medical texts, biographies, and encyclopedias, stone statues of animals stabilized philosophical manifestos, and an iron statue of Atlas supported both the world and several editions of the Bible.

Merriell’s hand was hovering over the spine of a holy book when a loud thump in the hallway drew his attention. The door to the room was open, and a redhead boy ran past with a brown and white dog at his heels. His heart pounded.

The last vision was about Eugene.

Alone in an unfamiliar bedroom, too small and bare to be his childhood room, seated on the bed in his underclothes. He fiddled with a loose razorblade, still wrapped in cardboard for safety, turning it over and over in his hand. He wore the wooden ring on his left hand. His window was ajar, and laughter drifted in like there was a park or busy street outside.

Merriell ached to know where Eugene was, for the despair in the room was palpable, a mood of isolation and apathy, laced with the crushing urge to feel anything at all. It took Merriell’s breath away, how badly he wanted to be there, to save Eugene from the pain. If Eugene needed it, then Merriell could give it to him second-hand, let Eugene draw the blade across Merriell’s skin and feed until he felt better. He wanted to take Eugene’s hands in his, place them upon his own chest and beg him to tear into him, to find all that he was lacking and make himself whole again from Merriell’s parts.

But Merriell wasn’t there, could only look on as Eugene stripped the cardboard from the razorblade with steady hands and carved a neat row of red lines into the meat of his thigh, where no one else would see.
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

Here’s a brief reprieve from the sex and violence. Sorta. There’s a vague description of “public” masturbation. And I quoted the Bible. Citations in the end notes if you’re curious.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The road to Mobile wound through wetlands, forests, and tiny towns. The shifting scenery provided just enough stimulation to keep Eugene awake during the long drive. He appreciated the gradient; the slow transition from catkins and ducks, to poplar trees at the edges of the long grass, to dense old growth where the last of the migrating passerine birds hid in the shadows. Towns often cropped up close to streams, little more than cheerful wooden signs, vacant petrol stations, and the occasional crumbling main street. No two alike, but not so distinct that he would remember their names.

He drove with the windows down to avoid suffocating from the fumes that leaked from the car engine into the cabin. His car hadn’t had this problem before, but at some point during his four year service, small holes had rusted through the sheet metal body, and try as he might, he couldn’t patch all of them. He found that he didn’t really mind, since the wind whistling through the open windows drowned out most of the thoughts he had of Merriell. Except there were so many that some snuck through, like the hint of gasoline and carbon monoxide swirling around the cabin; a briny, bitter, and nautical green fog.

Contrary to what Merriell said, Eugene knew of love, and it came in all the colors of the rainbow. His parents’ love was white, all encompassing, as warm as sunlight with pride or cold as snow with disappointment. Sidney or Burgin’s love was orange, exciting like the smell of citrus when you peeled the rind back. A dog’s love was blue, unconditional, cheerful as the summer sky. Captain Peichel’s wife, Barbara, was purple with love, royal and noble in her suffering, the top notes of a plumy red wine; deep, rich, and sweet from the life they led before the war, followed by spice and an ethanol burn brought by what came after. Eugene absorbed them all, filed them away; he contemplated what color his love would be and how it would feel, smell, and taste.

Merriell was green, always had been green. Even when he was dark and distant, keeping Eugene at arm’s length because he was just another boot shuffled into their company. He growled army, alligator green to start with, dependable and dangerous, but remarkably tame no matter how much Eugene and the other men prodded at him, making him snarl and snap for their amusement. The neutral magic turned him forest green, like plant life, the surface of a pond murky with algal growth, a bloom of phytoplankton drifting on the ocean. He felt so alive that Eugene started to hate him a little bit—how dare he feel hope when the world was falling apart around them. His affection for Eugene unfurled slowly like a fiddlehead; brushed against his ankles, trying to keep him tethered. When Merriell finally gave into the light, his love came loose, a jagged bottle green shard rolling in the waves, swept along with mountains of stinging salt. As it settled, it changed, morphed with his moods; tart apples when he wanted, bitter cherry bark when he didn’t, green clover in pleasure, capsaicin and nicotine in pain. The light magic underlaid it all—the smell of the surf held close to his skin and in his curly black hair.

Eugene had never wanted anything as much as he wanted Merriell’s lush green love.
At first, he’d felt sickened by it, shrugging off the tendrils unconsciously reaching out to him in the sands of Pavuvu. The evening the dark magic claimed him, he reread the Epistle to the Romans from his pocket New Testament. His church never discussed the affliction of homosexuality, but he’d studied the Bible enough to know. It never occurred to him that he might suffer from it, might one day burn with lust towards another man. Shame was the last thing he felt before the darkness consumed him; shame at the giddiness that had filled his stomach when he detected the sentiment blooming in Merriell’s heart. That moment tipped him over the edge. He was so tired of everyone else’s emotions running through him, filling him up with so many colors, he couldn’t remember having feelings to call his own. And Merriell’s love was newborn, seconds old, weak and faint and unknown even to the man carrying it. Eugene had never held such a fragile secret before. What else could he do but hide from it?

In hindsight, he hadn’t hidden very well. As he trudged towards the end of the war, hands caked in mud and blood, brain blitzed with fear, rage, and pain, Eugene drifted towards Merriell’s light like a moth to a flame. His magic felt so refreshing, a cool draught soothing the heat in Eugene’s chest. Like drinking saltwater, every sip left him thirstier than before, greedy for more. Yet for every drop that Eugene drank, Merriell never ran dry. His mouth watered just thinking about it.

Somewhere in Mississippi, Eugene stopped for gas and lunch. Most places were closed, since it was Sunday, but he managed to find a small deli that was open for brunch. All the youths of the town congregation appeared to be inside, mainly rambunctious high school kids, but they paid him no mind. He picked at a greasy fried chicken sandwich and watched them out of the corner of his eye.

A pack of boys, athletic and suntanned, sat at one end of the deli counter, surreptitiously peering over at a gaggle of girls crammed into one of the narrow booths near the door. Still dressed in their church best, they gossiped, postured, and flirted. The boys gossiped loudly about someone’s football statistics. Pretending not to hear, the girls passed around a tube of bright coral lipstick, assessing the shade but really discussing the boys in some sort of coded speak. That shade of coral was obnoxious, juvenile, and as a group they decided they should be focused on finding something more mature and elegant. One girl glanced his way, and Eugene redirected his stare out the window.

Memories from when he was light were murky, but he knew he’d been in a group of boys like that once. He still couldn’t pinpoint when he stopped wanting attention from women. It could have been Pavuvu, after the nurses with the lemonade, but if he dug deep, he supposed that he never wanted them to notice him in the first place. On a day just like this, Sidney Phillips must have turned to him and said Mary Houston was pretty, and Eugene must have just agreed. Maybe this whole time he’d been lying to himself, and when he complimented her perfectly coiffed blonde hair, it was simply a conditioned response. From birth, he’d been groomed to lead this singular lifestyle; get an education, become a doctor, marry a girl, have a baby boy and however many extra kids you could handle. All across America, boys and girls were being raised to want exactly the same thing. Eugene contemplated whether it was him who was broken or society.

Wiping the grease from his fingers, Eugene climbed back into his car. Grey clouds crowded the sky, threatening rain. He hoped it would hold off because his windshield wipers needed replacing. Between the exhaust fumes and the horrendous squeaking, he was sure to have some sort of fit. However, the dimming light suited his souring mood. Enlisting in the Marines, becoming dark, had derailed him from whatever cookie-cutter life his parents had planned for him. He simply couldn’t set himself back on the tracks, and it bothered him that Merriell thought he could proceed as normal. Of all people, Merriell should know how impossible it would be for Eugene to move forward. He’d consciously poured all of his grief and anger into him last night, so he had to know. Eugene was infuriated that Merriell had asked him to leave and not return.

Merriell thought his life was shit, thought his family were feral and malicious. He thought Eugene
wouldn’t fit in there, but he was wrong. From the moment Eugene shook Margie’s hand, he’d felt a kinship, a distinct lack of interest for who you were or what you did. The Sheltons’ didn’t live inside the system, didn’t uphold the values that he’d grown up with, and the realization was cleansing. There was a new beginning for him in New Orleans, a freedom to be whoever he wanted. He wouldn’t be expected to have an immaculate moral reputation, to go to church and kill scandals in their crib. His life could be entirely sinful, and there’d be no repercussions, no way for his parents to know. He craved the anonymity, the opportunity to release his true self from the cage it’d been kept in all his life. He wanted to be free of all shame.

Rain gushed down as soon as he entered Alabama, so torrential he had to pull off onto the side of the road. He turned off the car and reluctantly rolled up the windows. Digging through the back seat, he found his sketchbook and a crumpled pack of cigarettes. With a sigh, he laid down on the front bench, bringing his feet up against the passenger door. The bench seat wasn’t long enough for him to stretch out properly, but he worked the slight cramps out of his muscles one leg at a time, listening to the rain beat out a furious tempo on the roof. He lit a cigarette and flipped through the sketchbook, waiting for the downpour to lighten up.

There’d been a lot of wildlife in the salt marsh yesterday. Eugene couldn’t judge the diversity without a positive identification of the creatures that he’d sketched, but he imagined there had been over twenty species of waterfowl alone. Or maybe not—baby birds didn’t emerge from their eggs fully formed and ready to fly. He imagined they must have a transitional, juvenile stage. Carefully, he traced a finger over one of the gulls he’d drawn. It had different markings from the surrounding flock, but the overall shape was similar, and it was possible that the bird was an adolescent of sorts. Dry, muddy splotches smeared the frog sketch on the next page, some an exact imprint of the frog’s tracks.

The giggle that Merriell had let loose when he dropped that frog on him was downright impish, and Eugene had marveled at how he young looked. Wild and boyish, splashed head to toe with mud, bits of dried grass caught in his hair and sticking to his brown arms. Like the bayou personified, just gangly limbs and a wide, tobacco-stained grin, large eyes the richest shade of green Eugene had ever seen. He’d scolded him to tamp down how much he wanted to taste that sublime energy. When he kissed him, it was like biting into a juicy melon, all water with a hint of sugar, soaking sticky into his fingers and dripping down his chin. Just thinking about it made him flush with excitement.

Eugene snaked a hand down his pants to relieve the slight pressure, feeling oddly lecherous doing something like this on the side of the road. But he ultimately decided that he was protected by the relentless rain outside. The deluge blurred his windows so much, the car appeared wrapped in a thick, grey fog. Lost in the world, alone, just him and his warm right hand and his lurid thoughts of Merriell. Eyes slipping closed, Eugene indulged in the memory of Merriell’s lean, bronze back, sweat pooling between the knobs of his spine, undulating as he sought more friction. His magic leaked when he was bursting with love like that, sea glass green spilling out his eyes and beading on his skin, salty taste indistinguishable from perspiration. The flavor of strong tobacco came through if Eugene ever hurt him, smoky and spicy like black pepper, mounting as Merriell begged. The cigarette smoke clouding the cabin brought the memory of Merriell’s pain to the roof of his mouth, and he pressed his tongue to it, hips pushing frantically through the tight ring of his precum-slick fingers. He couldn’t understand why Merriell enjoyed the pain, found it a bit nauseating. But it turned him on to hear Merriell whimper like that, acting so tortured by the pleasure. Eugene came thinking about the sounds Merriell made as he fingered him this morning—those breathy, half-contained moans.

The rain let up as he relaxed after the climax, just a few drops pinging against the windows now. With a dissatisfied huff, Eugene sat back up, cleaned himself off, and prepared his car for the road again, windows cracked and wipers screeching across the windshield. He lit another cigarette since
he’d let his first burn out.

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As soon as Eugene pulled into the drive, his parents descended on him like flies.

“Eugene, where have you been? We’ve been worried sick about you!”

“Eugene how dare you take off like that! Everyone at church noticed you were gone.”

They had every right to be angry. He hadn’t said goodbye before driving off on Thursday afternoon, instead leaving a note on the kitchen counter with very vague information. They didn’t deserve this treatment from him, not when they were used to a more docile son.

He offered an explanation that wasn’t far from the truth: “Just wanted to see some birds migrating through the Mississippi estuary. Thought it’d be a nice chance to clear my head.” Pacified for the moment, they allowed him to retreat to his room to unpack his things and wash up.

Dinner was a spectacularly tense affair. His mother kept glaring at his father and jerking her head at him, like Eugene wasn’t even in the room. His father ignored her for the most part, sighing and downing bourbon to prepare himself for something. Partway through the entrée of steak-fried pork chops, gratin potatoes, and green beans, his mother put her fork down with a clatter.

“Eugene, do you know what time the evening service starts?”

Eugene bit his lip, reining in the urge to give a smart reply. “No, Mother, I don’t.”

“It starts at seven thirty. I expect you to attend.”

“Yes ma’am.” He nodded slowly, eyes on his plate.

“You know how everyone talks in this town—”

His father cut her off, tone exasperated: “Mary Frank, please.”

“Edward, this is for his own good,” she snapped. Eugene looked up at her. Usually so poised and polite, Mary Frank had never raised her voice in front of him. She would scold, but always in a quiet, dangerously disappointed way. Her gaze was stern, brown eyes more sad than angry.

“Gene, I think you’ve lost your way. We all know why—the war made you do despicable, unthinkable things and anyone would be shattered by them—but there’s no reason for you to keep shutting us out. Serving us this stone-cold silence of yours.”

Eugene’s mouth dropped open, more out of surprise than the desire to defend himself, and his mother held up a finger warningly.

“I’m not done,” she insisted, her righteous anger palpable, buzzing like a hornet’s nest. “You act like you can solve this by yourself, both of you!” She wagged her finger at him and his father. “But you need people, Eugene. Clearly, you cannot manage this trauma on your own. I understand if you don’t want a girl, that’s fine, she probably wouldn’t understand you anyway. But for the sake of your soul, go to church. There’s a veteran support group in the basement on Wednesday nights. I beg you to go.”

Stunned silence followed, both Eugene and his father staring at Mary Frank incredulously. Red faced, she sliced into her pork chop as though it insulted her. Eugene felt mildly embarrassed. He’d
assumed that his mother’s primary concern was getting him hitched to preserve the family reputation, and some borrowed emotion allowed him to feel sorry for misjudging her. Suddenly it felt wrong to keep her in the dark about his struggles.

“You’re right,” he took a deep breath, hands clenched in his lap. “I’m sorry, I’ve been distant lately. I don’t…” He cast a furtive glance at his father, whose face became pale. “I don’t feel like I used to, and it wears on me, to be around people.”

“What do you mean?” She reached across the table for him, like she used to when he was a child and he’d felt something at school that scared him. The action made him feel even guiltier. He recognized the source this time, Merriell’s grass green fear of disappointing his dead mother.

He placed his hand over hers, left over left, his fingertips brushing over her soft, wrinkled skin and the warm metal of her wedding ring. “I don’t have light magic anymore.”

“I don’t understand.” She frowned, confused. His father sighed again and beckoned to the help for more bourbon.

Eugene cleared his throat and blushed as he tried to explain how he had changed. “To use light magic you have to have good intentions. Dark magic is fueled by anger and selfishness.”

She gasped softly and gripped his hand. Her sadness crept through, powdery blue. “Oh, Gene.”

“I had to protect myself, Mama.”

“You did what you had to do.” She raced around the table to hold him. He stiffened in her grasp, overwhelmed by the fierceness of her touch. Everyone felt so one dimensional compared to Merriell, and the full force of maternal love constricted him. His magic had to retreat just so he could hug her back. After a few minutes, she let go, hands carding through his hair, treating him like a little boy. “Your father and I just want what’s best for you. And after this whole mess with Junior, we don’t want to lose you, too.”

He held one of her hands again, head lowered submissively as he drew back. “I know.”

Her thumb swept over his knuckles and paused, bumping into the wooden ring. “What’s this?”

Heart pounding with panic, Eugene cast a quick illusory spell over the token. He’d forgotten he was wearing it on his ring finger. “What’s what?” He looked up at her, watching confusion drift over her features.

“Well, I thought I…you know, never mind.” She smiled thinly and let go of him. “Let’s finish dinner. I’m sorry I made such a scene.”

One would expect the tension in the room to be relieved, but Eugene could feel his parent’s suspicion growing. They knew he was hiding something greater than the darkness, and he sweated under their appraising eyes. He should’ve put the ring on his other hand or not even worn it all. They could know about his magic and the nightmares, but Merriell was a secret he would take to his grave.

As promised, Eugene went to church for the evening service. Generally attended by the most devote worshipers, many of the pews were sparsely populated. He spied a few familiar faces, ladies from his mother’s book club and the pastor’s family. Having arrived early, he greeted his mother’s friends to keep up appearances, describing the Mississippi delta migration that had caused him to miss the service that morning. Then he sat in the third row from the back, where the soft candlelight from the alter began fading into shadow. He kept his head bowed throughout the sermon, barely listening, idly rubbing his palms over the whitewashed wooden pew.
“As by one man, sin entered the world, and death by sin; and so, death passed upon all men, for all have sinned...For as by one man’s disobedience, many were made sinners, so by the obedience of one shall many be made righteous.”*

Church had been chaotic for him as a boy, everyone’s emotions too loud, making it hard to breathe, forming a miasma that ultimately gave him a headache. So much self-satisfaction and self-hatred, fervor and apathy, piety and guilt. The duality tore him up inside, had him clinging to his brother’s hand just for the cool reprieve of his guileless mortal soul. Nothing about the church felt light to him now that he had observed the true nature of light magic. The heavy, leather bound Bible weighed down his hands, the yellow candles wept wax, and the pastor’s oldest daughter plonked out a dragging melody on the organ. The music echoed in the small room, tone of the instrument dense and somber.

As Eugene fought to inhale the dust-thick air, the artificial perfume of repentance stinging his nose, he longed to be outside. He saw the shape of flying birds imprinted on the back of his eyelids, their levity enviable as they floated up and away. The phantom sensation of Merriell’s wet, cold hands tickled the nape of his neck, brighter and more invigorating than any ceremony of contrition.

“There is therefore no condemnation to them which are in Jesus Christ, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit. For the law of the Spirit of life in Jesus Christ hath made me free from the law of sin and death.”**

Sitting in this musty church no longer brought him solace. Before the war, he believed in their mortal lies. He bowed his head along with the rest of the flock and prayed for absolution of sins that he had no memory of committing and the ones he had yet to perform. Foolishly, he’d thought that God would protect him in battle, if he had enough faith. Then he’d seen Peleliu and knew that God was not there.

“That the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the spirit.”***

But it wasn’t his loss of mortal religion that prompted him to start giving in to the darkness. It just couldn’t be that simple; he had stopped praying for too many days on that hellish island. And so, he thought that maybe the impetus was Merriell and the little glimpse he caught into the man’s soul on the night that he let Eugene in. He still remembered it, the sensation of everything pouring out, becoming lighter than air. Merriell felt heady, like a field of flowers blooming; timeless, wild, and free. A soul like that was the kind that Eugene had never even dreamed of, and he was at once envious and inspired.

“For to be carnally minded is death; but to be spiritually minded is life and peace.”***

His narrow, sheltered view of the world broadened because of Merriell. To simplify light and dark into intentions was simply wrong. To be light did not mean one should be virtuous, because Merriell was a vicious, rough thing, all bark and bite, hands stained with blood. Despite his wicked ways, the light suited him pure and simple. And to be dark was not to be sinful, for no true joy came to Eugene after he had sinned, and to passers-by he appeared as good and God-fearing as any other rich white boy in America.

No, light and darkness were older than morality, born out of the universe before any conscious human mind. Something else attracted them to a caster; some quality of the soul, some configuration of the atoms in the body that weighed you down or lifted you up. The way they carved into your bones like a boon, hollowing out the marrow and replacing it with air or ash. It was not any better or any worse to be light or to be dark. They just were; free and formless in a world obsessed with control.
“They that are in the flesh cannot please God. If any man has not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his.”**

Eugene pressed his lips against the wooden ring, relishing in the burn, hands clasped in front of him. The only spirit he felt here was Merriell’s, the impression of his magic lingering in his body like a fleeting sun shower. His hands smelled odd; petrichor, damp campfire ash, and thundercloud static. He smirked against his knuckles, remembering where his hands had been just this morning. In the flesh, indeed.

The pastor shifted from quoting the Romans to interpretation: “Paul warns against sin, but offers salvation in our benevolent Lord Jesus Christ. Here we are warned specifically…”

Eugene ducked his head in the dwindling candlelight, tuning out the pastor completely in order to pray. Not to this mortal god, but the ones he glimpsed in the salt marsh, in bird feathers, and in Merriell’s piercing verdant eyes. Worldly ones—amorphous and ancient, less like entities and more like cosmic dust, flowing in and out, transmuting into everything and nothing. He didn’t ask to be light again, he simply asked for freedom and a chance to change Merriell’s mind. His days in Mobile felt numbered, each second ticking by under the pastor’s droning voice bringing him that much closer to death.

Chapter End Notes

Apparently, the KJV Bible is public domain, so I don’t technically need to cite it, but since I only roughly spruced up the verses to resemble modern English, here is the footnote citation for those passages. *Romans, 5:12-19 and **8:1-9. The Bible. King James Version. 1987.
Weeks crawled by and Eugene felt himself steadily slipping beneath the surface, drowning in the apathy and alienation that had led him to seek Merriell out in the first place. He understood now why he had; Merriell’s magic softened him, helped him mold himself into some semblance of a civilized man. But the seawater evaporated from his skin over time, and he sank faster into the darkness than he had before. The depression that had taken months to build up now pressed against his seams in a matter of weeks.

The veterans’ church group seemed to hasten the process above all else. In the dank basement under the church, a ragtag group of broken men met and skirted around the topic of their nightmares and the impossibility of day-to-day tasks. Many of them were amputees or had some other affliction, epilepsy or palsy, that prevented them from fully taking up the mantle of breadwinner.

Eugene felt out of place among them; he couldn’t blame his inadequacies on a tangible injury. He escaped the war physically unscathed, sores and cuts long healed over, his most grievous wounds invisible to the eye. If his fellow veterans could understand the gangrenous ulcer eating away at his soul, he would never know, for it was not in the nature of the men in Mobile to discuss mental illness.

His parents tried, needling at him. They knew he was hiding something, and he let them believe it was something other than longing for another man’s love.

His father wanted him to get psychoanalyzed. Eugene wasn’t insulted by the idea. He’d read Freud and frankly thought that his kind of magic necessarily led to conflicts of identity and social withdrawal. But he also knew that psychoanalysis focused heavily on sexual fixations, and he didn’t need a friend of his father poking into that side of his psyche.

His mother, on the other, spent an unprecedented amount of time with him. Raised primarily by a nanny, he couldn’t remember his mother ever being around this much. She watched him like a hawk, even following him into the woods to observe wildlife and sketch the dormant buds on trees. She irritated him less than his father, which surprised him.

She had an eye for detail, a shared trait which he had always and perhaps erroneously attributed to his father. She embroidered a handkerchief with plumes of white rhododendron flowers, immaculate and anatomically correct, filling up the corners of the emerald cotton square.

“I was working on it while you were at the veterans’ group,” she gushed, as she presented it to him the week before Thanksgiving. “I hope you don’t mind that I used your sketchbook as a reference.”

“I don’t mind at all.” He kissed her cheek, the silky texture of the embroidery cool and slippery under his fingertips. “It’s beautiful, thank you.”

On a whim, he asked: “Will you teach me?”

She blinked in surprise but beamed at him. “Of course.”

It felt like she knew, sometimes, and perhaps she did but willfully ignored it like a good Christian woman should. First, she taught him how to sew, to fix a button or a ripped seam with neat, even stitches, her guiding fingers brushing over the hidden wooden ring. He learned fast, having inherited steady surgeon’s and seamstress’ hands.

The new hobby worried his father.
“Sewing is woman’s work,” he grumbled when he stumbled upon them in the parlor one evening.

His mother’s lips grew thin, eyes narrowing. “And dock work was man’s work but plenty of gals did their share during the war. Besides, how’s sewing fabric any different from sewing flesh?”

His father rolled his eyes but didn’t argue, retreating to his study.

“I don’t want to be a surgeon,” Eugene admitted, voice soft and barely audible over the Frank Sinatra song warbling from the radio.

“You don’t have to be. Plenty of women would be over the moon if their man could help with the housework.” Her nimble fingers created a bobble of posies, crimson thread bubbling purposefully in the scrap of pink ribbon on her lap. “Being born a man makes you a man, learning how to embroider can hardly change that.”

She sounded remarkably progressive, but Eugene knew better than to be tricked by a few sweet words. She still cared about appearances. It showed at church and Sunday brunches, how she wilted under the judging stares of their community.

And, as the holiday grew nearer, his mother became anxious and bitter about Edward Jr. coming home with his new wife and baby. Eugene tuned out her chatter, not wanting to be drawn into whatever frenzy she was whipping herself into. Luckily, preparing the house for guests distracted her, leaving him with ample time to himself.

Eugene used his newfound freedom to apply to colleges in New Orleans. Barbara Peichel’s brother was a cellular biologist at the Tulane University School of Medicine, and, like she promised, she had written a personal recommendation for him. Consequently, Dr. Charles Knack contacted him, inviting him for a visit. Unbeknownst to his parents, Eugene planned to tour the university in early December, more out of courtesy than real curiosity. Anywhere close to Merriell was good enough for him. The prestige of Tulane was just a bonus, something for his mother to gossip about if he got in.

He wrote letters to Merriell too—about how much he loved him, how he couldn’t bear every passing second apart—many of the drafts sounding so desperate that he tore them up and burned them. He sent two; the first detailing his plans about college and the second asking after his family and wishing him well in the simplest, most detached language Eugene could manage, a little frog doodle accompanying his signature.

Merriell promptly replied to the first, a terse ‘DON’T’ scrawled on crumpled, dirty paper in smeared graphite. He didn’t hear back after the second. Twiddling the wooden ring on his finger, he wondered if Merriell’s world had devolved back into fragmented reality. If he read those letters and, sensing the restless energy behind the ink, spiraled off into some alternate timeline.

Often times, Eugene layed in his bed, fighting sleep and daydreaming the things that Merriell might see in his visions. He imagined Merriell’s mother as an older version of Margie, with a deep complexion and Merriell’s big green eyes. He pictured a world where he could bring Merriell home to his parents without the fear of being stoned to death and hung from a tree.

He knew Merriell thought he was spoiled and that he’d want all the fancy things that he grew up with. But when he planned a future for them, everything he wanted was achingly simple. A little apartment, at least one dog, in a section of a city somewhere that didn’t know them and didn’t care. He considered moving to the country, but the odds of getting caught and beat up in the sticks was much greater than in the city. It was foolish to dream, but he was helpless to do anything else, while he waited impatiently for his next trip to New Orleans.
Edward Jr. arrived with his wife Katherine and baby Dorothy late on the day before Thanksgiving. Junior embraced Eugene with a wide smile and thumping pats on the back, shaking him to the core.

It’d been ages since they last saw each other; Junior had gone off to officer’s school two years before him, and Eugene shipped out to Camp Pendleton before Junior came home on holiday that year. Five years and a war had aged him considerably, brown hair receding from his forehead slightly and wrinkles crinkling the thin skin around his eyes. He’d put on weight, soft around the middle and his once-sharp jaw. When Eugene backed off to get a good look at him, he realized that Junior resembled their father immensely, the only difference being his gentle hazel eyes.

The resemblance made Katherine more of a surprise. She appeared to be the very antithesis of their mother; almost as tall as Junior and about as solid, hair bleached platinum blonde like a film star. Her features were angular, nose aquiline, and dark eyes piercing in her pale, heart-shaped face. She wore fuchsia pink lipstick. It matched her loud mouth perfectly.

“Goodness, you’re thin as a whip!” Katherine declared, pinching the very slight fat of Eugene’s side as she pulled him into a one-armed hug. The baby gurgled at her hip. “Did you wither away in the Marines?”

Eugene could barely think, bulldozed by the volume of her voice and her aura, rippling with nerves and an overwhelming need to impress them. He retracted into his shell immediately.

“Come into the parlor, I’d hate to crowd the hallway,” his mother admonished through a tight-lipped smile. “And let me see my granddaughter.”

Leaving the women to fuss over the baby, his father herded them both into his study for a celebratory tumbler of scotch. “I can’t even begin to describe how happy I am to have you both here this Thanksgiving. Our family is extraordinarily blessed. It is simply a miracle that both of you returned from the war unharmed.”

“Well, relatively,” Junior said with a smirk. He jostled Eugene with his elbow conspiratorially. “I might still have pieces of shrapnel in my right thigh.”

His smile was infectious, and Eugene felt his own lips curving upwards in response. Junior had that effect on people.

“Now, now,” his father tsked. “No somber talk until the ladies have gone to bed. We’d best get back out there and make sure your mother hasn’t eaten Katherine alive.”

Junior laughed. “Oh, Katie can handle herself. You’ve got to be made out of stern stuff to survive a Nazi bombing.”

The ease with which Junior and Katherine mentioned the war threw Eugene for a loop. Katherine would be bouncing Dorothy on her knee, bragging about how clever she was for her age, and in the same breath mention that it had been her duty as a Jew to join in the fight against fascist Germany.

With her coat hanging on the hallway rack, Eugene could see the burn scars on her arms, mottling her skin in shades of silver and pink. They didn’t seem to cause her any pain, for she didn’t twitch when Dorothy’s clumsy little hands grabbed roughly at her forearms. The scars drew his mother’s gaze like a magnet. He imagined she felt very sorry now for gossiping badly about Katherine. She may not be the kind of women that Mary Frank imagined her boys should marry—too brash, too Jewish, too metropolitan—but she was a veteran, just as hardened and hurt as they were.
“Oh, Genie, you haven’t held little Dorothy yet!” Katherine exclaimed, just as they were considering putting the sleepy child to bed. Her Boston accent thickened the more sherry she drank, and Eugene and Junior snickered at the nickname ‘Genie’.

“Well, Genie,” Junior teased. “Think you can grant such a wish?”

“I suppose I could.”

Katherine deposited Dorothy in his arms. He couldn’t remember the last time he held a baby, although he knew he had sometime before the war. Dorothy was soft and incredibly warm, tolerant of people passing her around like a little doll. Her hair was downy and thin, strawberry blonde, cottony against Eugene’s chin when she nuzzled into his neck tiredly. His magic darted out, quick and curious, just craving that touch of purity, delicate and cloudlike. The wanting startled him, pulse quickening at how adorable she was, how perfect and untainted, marveling at the idea that all humans started out this tiny.

As Eugene breathed in the powdery, milky scent of her, he remembered the baby he’d stumbled across in that bombed out hut in Okinawa. Heart stuttering as the memory welling up in him, he wondered if they had survived; if they had put down roots in all that churned up blood-soaked soil. And, for some reason, when he imagined them grown, they had Merriell’s eyes.

Stomach twisting, Eugene brushed the thought aside. “Seems like it’s well past her bedtime, though.”

“Oh, it certainly is, but you two are so cute together!” Katherine scooped Dorothy back up, hushing the fussy cry that she let out at being jostled. “You should come visit us in Boston, Genie. Go on, convince him, Eddie.” Katherine tapped Junior’s leg lightly with her toe before rushing off to tuck Dorothy in for the night.

Junior shot Eugene a skeptical look but offered anyways. “What do you say? Want to try a taste of the big city?”

His parents erupted into protests right away, commenting on Eugene’s delicate disposition, insomnia, and aversion to sudden loud noises. Eugene’s mouth twisted with displeasure. He supposed now was as good a time to tell them about his plans for going back to school.

“Actually, I was thinking moving to a larger city would be good for me. I did spend several months in Peking, after all.”

His parents stared at him in disbelief.

“What are you saying, Gene?” His mother stammered. “You want to move to Boston?”

Eugene shook his head, chuckling nervously. “Uh, no. I was thinking of going to a university in New Orleans. There’s a professor there who would let me work in his lab. His sister is the wife of a buddy of mine, and she put in a good word for me.”

“Well,” Junior clapped him on the back. “That’s wonderful!”

His father eyed him disapprovingly over the rim of his glasses. “I’ve heard New Orleans is incredibly dangerous. All sorts of vagrants and rife with crime. The mob trafficks along the river.”

Mary Frank gasped, looking faint with terror. “What’s the mob? Is it bad?”

“I survived the Japanese and the communist Chinese, I think I can handle a little crime,” Eugene assured, bitterness creeping into his tone.
His parents flip-flopped on how to handle him and he found it aggravating. One minute, they thought he needed to toughen up and stop dwelling on the war, the next they coddled him like a light breeze could shatter him into a million pieces.

“And I wouldn’t be on my own out there—” He shut his mouth with a click, having already said too much.

His mother pounced on his mishap like a cat with a mouse. “You have friends out there? Men that you served with?”

He nodded woodenly, cursing himself for even bringing it up.

“Well, are they trustworthy? Can we meet them?”

Junior came to his rescue. “Mother, what a ridiculous question! Any man in your company is your brother until the day you die. If a foxhole buddy showed up at my doorstep, I would give my right arm to help him. I’m sure the Marines are the same, right, Gene?”

“Without question, semper fi,” Eugene agreed.

He dug his fingernails into the palms of his hands, biting his tongue to hold in all that he wanted to say about Merriell. He must have drunk too much, for it never tried to spill forth this badly. He excused himself shortly to smoke on the back porch, promising his parents that they could continue this discussion in the morning.

The chilly night air helped to clear his head, aided by the meditative packing of his pipe.

That had gone poorly. He shouldn’t have said anything. He should have waited until his brother’s family had left before bringing up New Orleans, considering how much their visit riled up his mother. He ground his pipe between his teeth so ferociously that the stem split, smoke seeping out.

Junior knocked on the screen door, startling him. “Mind if I join you?”

“Free country.”

He ambled onto the porch, not wearing a jacket, breathing in deeply. “I forget how nice the weather is here. When we left Boston this morning, it was about twenty-eight degrees. High fifties seems balmy by comparison,” he laughed. “What was the weather like on your end of the war?”

Eugene swallowed thickly, split pipe creaking under his teeth. No one had ever asked such a direct question about his service before. But this was Junior, never one to pose a question unless he genuinely wanted the answer. “Hot as hell. Near hundred degrees most days and sometimes so humid you could drink the air.”

“That’s awful,” Junior shook his head. “We were freezing our limbs off, but at least the cold makes moving feel like a blessing. I don’t think I’d want to march anywhere in a hundred degree heat.”

“You got used to it.”

“That you did,” Junior sighed and sat next to him on the porch swing, the chains squeaking in protest. “Mother’s worked herself into a right state. It’s my fault really. If I’d just come home and married Regina Warren like she wanted, you wouldn’t be in this mess.”

Eugene rubbed a hand over his eyes. “It’s not your fault, I shouldn’t have said anything. I know better than to poke at her when she’s like this.”
“No, really, they are less than thrilled about Katie. I mean, it’s a scandal. She’s older than me and Jewish. We had to elope, so Dorothy would be born in an acceptable manner. Don’t tell me Mother’s not pinning her hopes on you after all that. I remember how that pressure feels. What I don’t know is how awful it is to come back from a war and have to deal with it. I got lucky, Katie’s seen just as much hell as I have. We get to lean up against each other when it gets bad. I can’t imagine what it’s like pushing through it on your own.”

“It’s not that bad,” Eugene’s statement sounded hollow even to his own ears. “It’s just this town. It’s killing me. I gotta get out.”

“Then get out,” Junior put his hand on his shoulder, radiating comfort and acceptance. A lump formed in Eugene’s throat, the whiff of his brother’s aftershave a familiar blend of sage and menthol. “If the folks won’t back you going to New Orleans, you could apply for some schools in Boston. Katie has some friends at a teaching hospital if you want to do something medical.”

Eugene shook his head. “No, it’s gotta be New Orleans.”

Junior looked confused. “What’s so great about New Orleans?”

“My friend there he—” Eugene paused, sure that he should keep quiet but there were so few secrets between him and his brother. And Junior had been so open with him already, offering in his own way to be Eugene’s confidant. The hand on his shoulder squeezed gently, reassuring mint green.

“Ed, I’m in love with a man.”

Junior’s shock was a sharp inhale, but his hand didn’t move, didn’t feel any less warm or kind. “Okay.”

“Okay,” Eugene repeated, a tremor starting up in his limbs. Why’d he say that? He rushed to take back the words. “I mean, I’m not. Just forget that I said that.”

His brother’s hand clamped down a little harder, sliding over to the junction of his shoulder and neck. He jostled him lightly. “Gene, it’s okay. Do you…want to talk about it?”

Eugene shook his head fiercely, stammering. “No, I-I didn’t mean it like that.”

“Calm down, can I just ask you something?”

He squeezed his eyes shut and hid his face in his hands. “Fine.”

“Does he love you?”

The question was like a key to a locked box. Junior was the only person he’d ever tried to describe his magic to; how emotions were a full body experience linked to a smell, a sound, a flavor, a touch. Eugene kept his eyes closed in some futile effort to make the moment less real but failed to keep the longing out of his voice.

“So much, I’ve never felt anything like it. Like floating in the ocean on a calm, sunny day or chewing clover in a field—just, feels more alive than life itself sometimes. Other people are one-dimensional, two at best, but he’s so complicated I don’t know if I could ever truly explain how he feels.”

“Sounds incredible,” Junior remarked with a chuckle.

“He changed for me,” Eugene admitted, unable to stop himself now that someone would listen. “He
used to be a dark caster, but he became light when he realized he loved me. I can’t just move on with my life, knowing that he’s out there, still loving me. Could you?”

Chancing a glance at his brother, Eugene saw that Junior gazed at him with something akin to nostalgia, fond and empathetic. “You know, the folks think I married Katie because she got pregnant. But I knew her before that. She worked in the hospital where I got sent when I was wounded. Such a spitfire, I thought, I’d step on a mine just to see her again. I realize that’s not the same, but I think when you’ve met someone who leaves such an impression on you, it’d be silly to try and live without them.”

“You’re not disgusted?” Eugene asked timidly.

Junior scrunched his forehead, imitating their father’s scowl when he was thinking hard. “Are you still a virgin?”

Eugene’s face reddened rapidly as he sputtered, taken aback by the question.

“I mean, how’s that even work?” Junior puzzled, thoughtful expression turning genuine.

Eugene punched Junior playfully in the arm to hide his embarrassment. “You don’t want to know.”

“Suppose I don’t,” Junior laughed, slinging his arm over Eugene, trying to get him in a headlock. They were still scuffling, falling off the porch swing with a heavy thump, when Katherine walked out onto the porch.

“My, my,” she tutted, watching them wrestle with her hands on her hips, poorly imitating their Alabama twang. “You boys and your violent games, a sensible woman like me could never!”

Eugene squirmed out of Junior’s grasp despite the drastic difference in their weights, pinning him expertly to the porch, tucking his arms up towards his shoulder blades and placing a knee in the small of his back. Junior yelped dramatically. “You win! Christ, who taught you to fight like that?”

Helping him up, Eugene ducked his head sheepishly, apologizing to Katherine. “Sorry, ma’am.”

“Oh, don’t mind me,” she scoffed, waving a hand dismissively. “I grew up with all brothers. If I wasn’t on my best behavior, I would take you out myself.” Her eyes glittered with mischief. Eugene decided that he liked her immensely. “Now I know your pa’s a doc, but I really need a smoke. Do you mind?”

“I was just out here with my pipe. I won’t tattle.”

“Cross your heart?” She squinted at him, taking a pack of menthols and a lighter out of her purse.

“Let me bum a smoke, and my lips are permanently sealed.” Eugene crossed his heart, feeling refreshingly childish.

Katherine shook out a pair of cigarettes, lit them both, and gave one to him. “You drive a hard bargain, Genie.”

The smoke of the menthol cigarette was sharp and cooling compared to the straight tobacco of his pipe or an unfiltered brand. He could barely taste the black pepper notes of nicotine. They rearranged themselves on the porch to smoke and chat, Katherine and Junior sitting close on the swing while Eugene leaned against the railing across from them. Eugene watched, an amused smile on his face, as Junior snuck a couple puffs from Katherine’s cigarette.
“So, what’s it like living in Boston?”

“Oh, you don’t want to talk about that,” Katherine frowned, flicking ash off the side of the swing.

Eugene quirked an eyebrow. “I don’t?”

Katherine crossed her legs at the knees, like a man, scowling at Junior when he nudged her with his elbow warningly. “Let’s talk about what you’ve been up to since Eddie saw you last.”

She fixed her dark brown eyes on him. They were stark in contrast to her pale, angular features, and he realized everything about her was bold and intelligent. She was nothing like Edward Jr., with his candid, prudent countenance, and maybe that’s why they worked. The combination of them, sweet and sour, prompted him to spill his guts.

The war poured out of him like a waterfall; the heat and horror, the endless rain and rotten mud, and the destruction of his humanity. He carefully left out the part about his magic; Katherine didn’t need to know about that and he assumed that Junior knew better than to tell her without his permission. But he talked about Merriell in the form of Snafu, his mad foxhole buddy, loyal and driven absolutely insane with combat fatigue. Beaten bloody and thrown in the brig for insubordination, the culmination of all those pain-riddled, stir-crazy, homesick years.

It was a longer tale than Eugene expected it to be, and when they parted for bed shortly afterwards, Junior came by his room, looking tired and troubled.

“Don’t be mad at me for saying this, but I understand why the folks are so cautious about you now, and I just want to know what your plan is for dealing with all this.”

“What do you mean?” Eugene’s eyes felt sticky and dry with exhaustion, and he rubbed at them blearily.

“Like, what do you plan to study in college—From the way you talked, I feel like medicine wouldn’t be a good choice for you.”

“Oh,” Eugene huffed a laugh. “God no, I don’t want to be a doctor. Can’t handle the sight of blood anymore.”

“Then what?”

Eugene propped his head against the doorframe, gazing slightly past Junior’s head into the dim hallway, at the painting of deer in a meadow on the wall. “I’m thinking something green.”
Interlude: green dreams

Chapter Notes

Merriell's descent into madness.

Warning for brief descriptions of suicidal thoughts/actions, and alcoholism.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Time meant nothing. All the world was grief and love, twisting in on itself like a snake devouring its own tail. A perfect circle, and within it laid a mesh of fine wire. Lifelines ran parallel, converged, and twined together in the darkness; every thread a distinct spark in the cosmos. A Jack-in-the-Box of a world; a fresh filament popping up every second, taking a new turn, forming a unique shape.

And time was a Russian nesting doll, everything buried within itself. You had to look at it all to understand, stare into the web and let mortal dimensions slip away until you become the snake. Like Merriell and his mother, existing simultaneously in the tumultuous moments of life and death.

“You’re back.” She sat on the bank of a river on a moonless night, legs dipping into the dark water. She had tied his father’s dog tag around her neck with a short piece of black cord. She looked exhausted; eyes puffy and red, hair greasy and hanging limply around her face.

Distant growling in the bayou upstream made Merriell’s hair stand on end. He dropped to his knees next to her, eyes on her pregnant belly. He shivered, felt sick, but gulped down the bile. “What are you doin’?”

Tears glimmered on her cheeks. She snifflced and rubbed at her eyes. “I’m just tired of hurtin’.”

Merriell understood her better than anyone. They’d lost everything, driven mad by a curse upon their family. Sitting beside her, gazing into the swamp, he wondered if it would be so bad to end things before they even began. But then he thought of how Eugene’s selfishness poisoned his soul, and Merriell knew that dying would never be the answer.

“Mama, please don’t.”

“I know,” she whimpered, hiding her face in her hands, hunching over the tiny life inside her. His life—a tenuous thing, yet it was the heart of a spider’s web or the spoke a wheel. If they snuffed themselves out now, who knew how the universe would change. “I shouldn’t, and I won’t. I dream about you all the time. Even though I miss him so much, I never see him anymore. Not even in the past. I don’t even daydream about the moments when I held him. All I ever see is you.”

She straightened up, hands falling to her belly, her face tilting up to the black sky. She was him, and not him—the same square jaw and gently sloping nose, hair coarse and tightly curled. Her complexion was deeper, her eyes a shade brighter, more yellow than grey-green. Right now, her eyes glowed emerald, the light magic like a beacon in the darkness.

During previous visions, Merriell had never tried to touch her, too afraid that something bad might happen, but he couldn’t bear her tears. Slowly, he placed his hand over hers. They both inhaled sharply, but the night remained quiet. He had missed her touch; her skin warm and soft.
“All I have is you.”

Merriell’s mother spoke the truth. Unlike time, truth held so much meaning. Truth cradled you to its chest or pushed you into a free fall. Scared you, because sometimes it caught you just before you hit the ground. Other times, you slipped through its fingers, and it was up to you how you shattered. If you healed, or let it break you. Truth, as harsh as it could be, made something of you.

Merriell held his mother’s hand as she gave birth to him. His heart felt ready to give out in that split second where he struggled into the world. A breech birth—he didn’t cry, strangled by the umbilical cord on the way out. His aunts fretted, shouting at each other as they tried to get him to breathe, but Merriell and his mother were calm. He wasn’t going to die. He was already here.

“Do you have visions about anyone other than me?”

She rocked him to sleep in her arms. He was the tiniest baby Merriell had ever seen, and his skin was still a little blue. No one had told Merriell about his perilous first hours of life. It wore him down, to think that he had come into the cruel world suffering.

“I do.”

“Who?”

“Don’t you know?” Merriell smirked at her, and she grinned back. Grief didn’t weigh her down like it had before. Her love for him consumed her, a hearth fire keeping the sorrow at bay for a little while. “You say you see me. You must see him, too.”

Her thin fingers stroked over baby Merriell’s brow. His whole head fit in her palm. “The redheaded man? I’ve seen him once.”

Merriell regarded her curiously. “Just once?”

“I’ve seen so many different things. I try to keep track of them, even though I know they can’t all come true. I think once I saw you kissin’ a man, but it seemed like years into the future. Somewhere that I didn’t recognize. He had dark eyes and red hair, and his soul was a storm that couldn’t be soothed. He was gentle with you, although I got the feelin’ that he wasn’t always.”

Merriell huffed a laugh. “That’s an understatement.”

“Who is he, Merriell? What happened to him?”

Where to even begin? Merriell closed his eyes, trying to find the strength to answer. When he opened them again, she was gone. He was alone in his bedroom, moonlight casting blue shadows all around him. He checked his watch. 6:34PM. A whole day gone, maybe more, and he couldn’t remember the last thing he did.

With a shaky sigh, Merriell got to his feet and walked out of the room, intent on getting a drink. If the universe wanted to fuck with him, then he would fuck right back—drown himself in so much whiskey that reality wouldn’t even matter anymore.

In the hallway, he noticed soft lamplight in the living room. Maybe he left the light on when he got home. But then he reached the end of the hallway, and his heart thrashed in his chest like a wounded animal. Eugene sat reading on the couch.

“Why the fuck are you still here?” Merriell spat.
Eugene startled, expression first ashamed and then perplexed. He set his book down and stood up.

“Jesus, you scared me! What’s wrong with you?” He approached Merriell, brow furrowed with worry. “Your head still hurting?”

Merriell scowled, fingers touching gingerly at his temples. He hadn’t noticed until Eugene mentioned it, but he did have a furious headache.

“Here, now that you’re awake, I can…” Eugene went to touch him, then paused, hand hovering in the air between them. “Why are your eyes green?”

“What?” Merriell’s brain felt three sizes too big for his skull, gray matter pulsing and pushing against the bone. “My eyes are always green.”

Eugene shook his head, crept closer like he was afraid. Odd, because Eugene wasn’t afraid of anything anymore. “No, I mean, they’re glowing. Like you’re using magic, but something’s not right. You’re not light, so why’re they green?”

Merriell’s breath hitched, the realization that this wasn’t his timeline like a punch to the gut. Trembling, he reached out to caress Eugene’s cheek. And he was open; arcane energy a calm river flowing, the scent like summer grass and sweet mint.

Eugene grabbed his hand, confusion deepening, and Merriell could feel it. Eugene was uncertain, but he wanted to help. “What’s going on Snafu? You don’t feel right.”

“Call me Merriell,” he corrected, stepping closer. He wanted Eugene to hold him, to soothe the throbbing in his head. “Snafu’s not here right now.”

Eugene put an arm around him, tutting anxiously. “Come here, sit down.”

Merriell collapsed onto the couch gratefully, and when Eugene sat next to him, Merriell sagged against his side. Eugene felt blissfully cool, his hands gentle on Merriell’s face as he kept trying to look at his eyes, assessing the situation.

“You’re burning up. You’re talking nonsense. I don’t understand.” Eugene was overwhelmed, tears prickling at the corners of his eyes as he took in Merriell’s emotions. “Why are you hurting so much?”

Merriell sensed the moment that Eugene shut him out, severing their connection and turning to marble beside him. It hurt, but not as much as he expected. Eugene’s magic still flowed over him, nudging his attention away from the pain in his head. “Eugene, how long have you lived here?”

“I think we’ve got more pressing issues at hand. This isn’t a normal headache.” Eugene sounded so worried, voice cracking with fear. “It’s fighting me, like it’s not a feeling but a spell.”

“I know,” Merriell brushed Eugene’s hands off and tucked his face into the crook of his neck, just to smell him. Eugene stiffened under him but didn’t try to push him away. Thyme, damp earth, and fresh-mown grass; this wasn’t his Eugene at all. The skin of his neck felt odd, bumpy and tough. Merriell drew back, taking in the pinkish scar tissue sprawling along Eugene’s neck. “Where’d you get those?”

Eugene gaped at him. “You don’t remember?”

“I’m not him, Gene. He’ll be back, but I’m…I’m a traveler of sorts,” Merriell explained, watching Eugene’s expression grow more and more concerned. “I just want to know how you got here.”
Eugene swallowed nervously, staring at the floor for a moment as he processed the information. Then he nodded, having reached some sort of decision.

“Okay, I’ll play your weird game for a bit.” He shifted in his seat and looked back into Merriell’s eyes. “We were clearing out a bunker in Peleliu, not far from the beach. We got caught in a grenade blast. Then the Jap came running out, shooting wildly. Got me in the shoulder here.” He placed a hand on the ball of his left shoulder. “Shattered the joint, so now it’s made of metal. You took two to the leg. Broke your femur.” Gingerly, he patted Merriell’s right thigh. “And that was the end of the war for us.”

Merriell squeezed his eyes shut. Peleliu made all the difference—a few hours of battle versus months. The men whose lives he’d crashed into carried physical scars instead of mental ones. He envied them.

“Are you okay?” Eugene touched the back of his hand to Merriell’s forehead tentatively, the magical barrier that he had placed between them grating on Merriell’s skin. “You’re scaring me.”

Merriell shook his head, the injustice of this life choking him. He grabbed the collar of Eugene’s sweater, ignoring his gasp and terrified doe eyes, and kissed him because he could.

 Barely a blink, and Merriell was alone again, sitting on the couch, hand grasping at nothing. On the bright side, his head didn’t hurt anymore.

Jaw clenched with frustration, he got up and walked into the kitchen, determined to get a goddamn drink. Every step to his liquor cabinet felt like crossing a minefield. He was just waiting for another dimension to explode underfoot. But he got to the whiskey without issue. He drank straight from the bottle, sighing with relief after the first sip.

The alcohol kept him from dreaming. Sometimes.

Merriell’s visions seemed to show him all versions of Eugene except the one he wanted to see. And every time he found out something new, he discussed it with his mother, trying to make sense of the chaotic strings weaving through their universe.

“Eugene becomes dark after Peleliu. Always,” he muttered more to himself than her most days. She was busy working and raising him, and he didn’t always visit at convenient times. As the Great Depression worsened, she started doing odd jobs in addition to the family business, and some days Merriell laid in bed with her as she slept. He talked to her, careful not to say anything about himself. “If he never goes to war, he stays light. If he doesn’t make it to Bloody-Nose Ridge, he stays light. But after that point, he’s dark.”

Merriell was also baffled by the dichotomy between him and Eugene. He had yet to see a timeline where he and Eugene existed as the same type of caster. If Eugene was light, then Merriell was dark. If Merriell was light, Eugene was dark. Like some balancing act of the cosmos, they were never on the same side. “If I become dark again, will he become light?”

“Do you think you could be dark again?” His mother asked him. They laid in bed, orange light breaking over the horizon, streaming weakly into the bedroom. Young Merriell was a toddler now, tucked against his mother’s hip, still asleep. “Do you think you could stop lovin’ him?”

“No.” Merriell’s love was a circle, running now from his very beginning all the way to the end. It was ingrained in him, existed in every moment of his life, even if he hadn’t felt it until the war.

“Then he won’t be light again. I mean, it’s so simple, cher. You’re two sides of the same coin.”
Merriell wished that wasn’t true, but he could see how hell-bent they were on destroying themselves. Whenever he dreamt of his Eugene—the dark one with vacant eyes and a stormy soul—the end was always violent. Eugene couldn’t let the Pacific go. It had burrowed into his bones, the sand weighing him down in a bathtub after he’d downed a bottle of sleeping pills. It had rooted in his brain, gunpowder and blood smeared over the bark of an oak tree when he tried to dig the trauma out.

Merriell erased the horrifying visions with whiskey. Every empty bottle brought him closer to his mother and further away from Eugene, further away from reality.

Bennie came to his apartment Monday through Friday, to drag him into the outside world so that he wouldn’t lose his job. He picked the lock and shook Merriell awake, reminding him to brush his teeth at least so he smelled a little less like booze.

“Merry, you gotta stop drinkin’ so much,” the boy scolded half-heartedly—more terrified than authoritative. “The boss is gonna notice.”

But it was already too late. Merriell’s dependence on alcohol had reached a point where his whole body started to tremble, his head pounding unbearably, if he went more than twelve hours without it. He wasn’t bleary under its influence anymore, either; hardly felt the buzz after a few shots in his morning coffee. A bona-fide, functional alcoholic. “I got it handled, Bennie.”

Lies bloomed from Merriell’s lips like flowers. Where once he couldn’t stand them, he now clung to them, holding a bunch in his hands like a shield against any and all thoughts of Eugene. The bad—all the death and pain spurting from his pale skin—and the good.

“I love you,” Eugene panted in his ear, pressed the words into his cheek, along his jaw. Merriell sat astride him, body completely out of his control, hot and open. Eager to consume Eugene whole. “And I’ll keep telling you until you believe me.”

Eugene chanted the words, hips pumping in time with love, and Merriell's head hurt so badly, he started to cry. Eugene held him gently, kissed the tears from his cheeks, eyes golden. He placed his palm on Merriell’s temple, hips stilling, brows furrowing. “Merriell, your—”

Merriell slipped in and out of his other lives a lot. The degree of control varied, but his head always ached like it’d been clamped in a vice. It irritated him a little, how quickly Eugene noticed when he was there, piloting a body both his and not his.

“Something’s wrong.” Eugene peered into his eyes and probed at him with his magic, the electricity excruciating in Merriell’s current state. “Who are you?”

It ended with a kiss, almost like the dissonance of their souls forced Merriell back into his own reality. He abused the power, always chose to kiss Eugene if he ever fell into a world where they were happy together. He hated parting with him over and over again, but the cheerful visions made him feel worse. He would rather leave than bask in affection that wasn’t genuine.

One morning Merriell woke up feeling incredibly sore. He laid flat on his stomach, limbs sprawling. His shoulders hurt, the joints tight like he’d stretched them to their limits, and when he tried to get up his back spasmed so hard that he collapsed.

“Hey, maybe don’t move so much,” Eugene hushed his pained whimper, running a hand soothingly over his back. “You really hurt yourself last night.”

“Doin’ what?” Brain fuzzy from pain and muddled from the liquor lingering in his system, Merriell spoke before he had a chance to really think.
Eugene’s hand stilled on his back. After a beat of silence, he asked: “Don’t you remember?”

For some reason, Merriell didn’t have a headache this time. With much effort he turned to face Eugene. Something was different about this Eugene too, his touch more familiar. And there was an odd sharp-sweet taste in the back of Merriell’s mouth; green apples, clover, and tobacco. The impulse to lie took over his tongue. “My thoughts are all jumbled.”

“Well, I guess you were quite out of it after.” Eugene pursed his lips, gold sparking in his thoughtful gaze. “All the more reason not to do it again.”

“Do you gotta be so fuckin’ vague?” Merriell groaned and pressed his face into the pillow. He felt like he’d strained every possible muscle, the sensation almost all that he could focus on. He tensed and relaxed, just to feel the burn.

“Do you want it in writing? I’m not tying you to the bed again,” Eugene growled. Merriell’s stomach flipped excitedly. “All you do is pull at the ropes so hard that you hurt yourself. I only agreed to this kind of play because you said it’d help me with my sense of control, but after last night, I’m starting to think you tricked me. I mean, I know you like the pain, but we promised each other we’d do better. Not worse. This is worse, Merriell. This is self-destructive behavior, and I’m putting my foot down.”

This Eugene talked as though they’d been together for years, like they knew the extent of each other’s wounds and tried to heal them. The sentiment choked Merriell, sent his heart pounding wildly. He needed to get out. Eyes shut tightly, Merriell faced Eugene again. “Kiss me, please.”

“Are you even listening? I’m mad at you. You pushed my limits last night. Maybe you feel good, but I feel sick. I’ve gone along with it this far, but I can’t hurt you as much as you want me to. I just don’t want it as much as you do.” Eugene voice broke, sounding tight and watery. “I’m done with violence. I want to be gentle.”

To Merriell, all the world was grief and love. He was nursed on grief. Grief was his father and his first friend; a steady comfort, always there. To him, love hurt, sharp claws ripping down your side and chest. Love stole from you, left you with nothing. But for Eugene, all the world was love and grief.

Merriell had dreamed of Eugene’s past a few times, never as vividly as his own, but he caught snatches here and there. Reared by doting parents, he and his brother had a carefree childhood. They played in the woods without fear and wanted for nothing, sheltered from the ugly side of humanity by a community that saw them as an investment rather than a burden. War showed Eugene grief, stripped him of his innocence in a brutal way. Eugene saw grief as a bad thing. He resented it, resigned to carry it bitterly. He would never embrace grief the way that Merriell did.

Pushing through the muscle weakness, Merriell propped himself on his elbows. He stared down at his hands, fisted them in the sheets just to get through the aching in his arms. Rope burns and greenish-blue bruises ringed his wrists, the skin a little puffy. The sight thrilled him, made him wonder if Eugene had fucked him the night before. “How long we been fightin’ like this, Gene?”

“God—The past four years, at least.”

Four years didn’t mean much to Merriell. Four years could mean this was the near future, or four years from a moment years from now.

“And how old are you?” Merriell asked.
“Old enough to realize that what we’ve been doing isn’t healthy,” Eugene sighed and scooted closer to him until their sides pressed together. He ran a finger lightly over the bruises on Merriell’s wrists. “I know it’s hard to change old habits, but we have to talk about our problems instead of guessing at how to fix them. Do you even know why you like being hurt?”

It wasn’t a like, it was a need. Merriell simply didn’t know how to love without pain.

Love was taught, not innately known. His mother’s love flooded the land like a monsoon, her tears mingling with the milk that she fed him, anguish dogging her every step. She showed him love was a longing, a hole in your heart like a bottomless well. Love weighed her down, had her crying every night without fail. And in some universe, he was sure that love had killed them both in the river on a moonless night.

Of course, Merriell didn’t blame his mother for his need for physical pain. The war gave him that—love in wartime meant sacrifice, blood spilling forth so some other man could go home. On the hellish islands of the Pacific, he would have taken any bullet or blade destined for Eugene. At some point, the wires in his brain must have crossed, the desire to make love to Eugene confused with all the injuries from which Merriell wanted to save him. But how to say that out loud? How could he tell Eugene that he loved him the most when Eugene hurt him?

He couldn’t. He shook his head, eyes stinging with tears when Eugene leaned close to kiss his cheek. Merriell tilted his own face a fraction, and their lips met.

And Merriell was alone in his bed. He sagged against the lumpy mattress, relieved to be in his own body. If he concentrated, he could see the spider’s web of the cosmos imprinted on the back of his eyelids, every destiny a gossamer thread streaming from a single point. He was a fly, wings tangled in the sticky strings with no hope of escape.

In another time and another place, nose buried in Merriell’s hair, Eugene whispered his greatest wish. “If it wasn’t for your magic, would you keep me? And don’t argue, please. Just indulge me.”

Merriell wanted to keep Eugene forever; wanted his warm weight always beside him in bed, the back of his hand brushing his as they walked side by side through this brutal life. His magic, his wit—everything. Every tear, every shout, every smile, every hopeful, awful, ephemeral moment. He wanted to breathe his last while Eugene sat next to him, telling him sweet lies about the afterlife, until his withered heart and cancer-rotted lungs collapsed.

Merriell rubbed a hand over Eugene’s stubbly cheek. He could sense Eugene’s magic under the skin, quivering, tremulous like a skittish bird about to take flight. “You want me to tell you a story?”

He was echoing his mother’s words, as she lay dying from a slow poison that he hadn’t been able to suck out. Her eyelids fluttered feebly, emerald irises like stars in the dark room.

“This is a story about your Eugene.” Merriell knew what she was going to say, but he listened anyways. “I saw him in Celeste’s shop, with lil’ Margie…except she weren’t so lil’ anymore. And then I saw him in the springtime, the petals of the tulip trees rainin’ down on the street. And you were walkin’ in the bayou, showin’ him all the birds. You were so happy, Merriell. All I want is for you to be happy. An’ happiness is green.”

He held her hand as she slipped away, the shine of light magic dimming from her eyes.

And the end became the beginning.
Consider this my Time Travel AU for Sledgefu week :P
By December 6th, Eugene was back in New Orleans again. It had taken much cajoling on his part to convince his parents to let him go alone. His mother had this funny idea in her head that he’d be safer if she went with him, which both he and his father vehemently protested. They agreed to buy his train tickets—arriving Friday and leaving Tuesday after his tour of Tulane—because God forbid his car break down in some backwater town.

Unfortunately, Eugene misjudged his arrival time on Friday, showing up at Merriell’s apartment around 3PM, well before he was sure to be home. The shop below was open, dried alligator heads lined on the window sill below a cracked and faded sign. Eugene thought he’d take his chances talking to another one of Merriell’s strange relatives over waiting on his doorstep.

A bell above the door jangled as he entered, and the ominous atmosphere hit him like a freight train. Dark magic permeated every corner of the shop. The shelves were lined with it; little cloth dolls soaked in nightmares, mysterious bottles of liquid that reeked of rot, crystals and stones charged with misfortune, and incense laced with hysteria. Ancient books sat stacked by the back wall, bound in crumbling leather, whispering at him in tongues, enticing him; a will-o-wisp leaping from tussock to tussock in a hazy swamp, the wily shape of a man in the distance, eyes huge and reflective above a gator sharp grin, beckoning like a blue flame—

“Perdu, petit gars?”

A croaking voice broke him out of whatever trance the books had placed on him. Eugene shook his head to clear it, blinking the white haze out of his vision hastily.

“Uh, hello. I’m looking for Merriell Shelton.”

An old woman appeared by the shop counter, greying black hair frizzy around her catlike face, amber eyes glowing in the gloom.

“His apartment is upstairs, but it seems he’s not there. Do you know when he’ll be home?”

The woman hummed, slinking slowly towards him. “Je pense que tu mens à moi. Tu sais déjà quand il arrivera chez-il.”

“I’m sorry, ma’am, I don’t speak anything but English and a bit of Chinese.” Eugene backed towards the door, feeling nervous.

“Where are my manners?” she grinned at him, yellowed teeth unusually sharp, accent so thick he could hardly understand her. “I’m Celeste Shelton—what you want wit’ Merry?”
“I served with him in the Marines, ma’am. I’m in town for a while and wanted to come by and see how he was doing.”

“How nice, tu mens encore.” Her amber eyes roved over him, and some trick of the light made her pupils contract and expand in an oval shape. “What your name?”

Hesitantly, Eugene extended his hand for her to shake. “Eugene Sledge, ma’am.”

She took her time coming up to him, so slow he nearly faltered and withdrew, but she grabbed his hand with both of hers gently. Her hands were softer than he expected, nails trimmed neatly and varnished with red paint, fingers cluttered with rings made out of all sorts of material. Bits of colored twine, animal teeth set in gold, carved wood, and silver trinkets crowded her knuckles. Everything about her rumbled with latent magic, the scent of hibiscus flowers and rotting meat lending a sweet, iron tang to the air.

Celeste turned his hand over and opened it, spreading and straightening the fingers, muttering to herself. “Tes mains sont fortes, élégantes mais mortelles. Les mains du pêcheur, si tu veux. You a religious man?”

He shook his head. She ran a fingertip over a line on his palm and his magic crackled in its wake, arcing in the air like a tiny bolt of lightning. He sucked in a breath, sharply. “Didn’t take you for one. Les mains du tueur, alors. Dark caster like you gotta be the business end of a rifle. I ask once more and never again. What you want wit’ Merry?” Her eyes gleamed dangerously, the pupils all but dissolved into her golden irises, which had grown so large they edged out the whites of her eyes.

“I said, I’m an old friend visit—ow!”

Her fingernails lengthened suddenly, piercing into his hand like claws. Black rosettes appeared on her skin, the pattern of a jungle cat.

Eugene found himself on his knees, quaking with pain and terror, caught like a mouse in a trap. Her claws dug in harshly, blood beading up around them, and he waited anxiously for her to snap through a tendon. “Dis-moi la vérité ou je mangerai tes jolies mains.”

Her growl reverberated through the tiny shop, bone-rattling, awakening some primal fear. He sweated under her predatory stare, helpless tears collecting at the corners of his eyes. His magic sparked feebly against hers.

“Maman?” Someone called out, muffled footsteps drawing closer. “Arrête!”

It was Margie. She ran quickly to them, grabbing Celeste’s arms and screeching in French. Celeste snarled in response but something Margie said prompted her to release him, claws withdrawing from his hand with a slick, schick sound.

Blood gushed out of the ten dime-sized holes in his trembling hand. Eugene couldn’t breathe, chest trapped in a vice, choking on the overwhelming stench of carrion in the air. He watched as his traitorous heart pushed his lifeblood out and onto the dusty floor of the shop, runaway pulse visible in the twitching way the crimson liquid bubbled forth. He collapsed onto his side, suddenly faint. He felt very sure that he was about to die.

“Merry’s gonna be furious!” Margie shrieked, grabbing Eugene by the shirt collar and slapping him. The panic left him with a gasp, forced out by the fiery handprint on his cheek. “Quit bein’ dramatic, you’re not dyin!’”
“Tu penses que j’ai fou mais je sais quand quel’ un ment et il ment! Un homme avec magie noire comme ça, c’amènes de la mort. Merry est trop doux de protéger il-même d’unes ténèbres si malveillantes, si violentes.”

Margie hauled Eugene into a seated position, inspecting his hand as she continued to yell at Celeste. “Why don’ you fuckin’ trust me? I’m tellin’ you, he ain’t here to hurt Merry. He really did serve with him in the Marines!”

“I just asked what time he’d be home,” Eugene explained weakly as Margie dug through his pockets. Finding his handkerchief, she wrapped it around his hand and pulled, putting pressure on the wounds to stop the bleeding.

“C’est ses intentions subconscientes. Il a le désir de dévorer—”

“Give it a fuckin’ rest, Maman! Fuckin’ hell!” Margie slung Eugene’s uninjured arm over her shoulder, bolstering him up and off the floor. She had the good sense to snatch up his sea bag as well. “Don’ mothers drive you up the fuckin’ wall?”

They left the shop with Celeste still chattering angrily. Margie helped him up the stairs to Merriell’s apartment. Eugene protested half-heartedly, his hand throbbing. “Shouldn’t we go to a hospital?”

“I’m sure she didn’ get you that hard. Just a lil’ warnin’.” At the top of the stairs, she propped him up against the door. Pulling a couple of pins out of her hair, she knelt down to pick the lock. “Used to get me an’ Bennie all the time wit’ her claws. We’ll clean ‘em out, and you’ll be good as new.”

“Can I know what the fuck happened back there?”

“What’s there to know? She’s a crazy ol’ bitch.” The lock clicked open and Margie shooed him into Merriell’s apartment. It looked a great deal more cluttered than when he’d last been there. Dishes piled in the sink and on the counters, mixed in with empty whiskey bottles and cigarette cartons. Margie dragged him into the bathroom, tossing Eugene’s sea bag onto the sagging living room couch.

She unwrapped his hand over the sink and Eugene had to look away, ducking his head behind her shoulder as bile crept up the back of his throat.

She sneered at his reaction. “Thought you were a soldier.”

“Can’t handle blood anymore.” He could still feel it pulsing out of the wounds, trickling over his skin. He gagged.

“Don’ you fuckin’ throw up me.” Margie turned on the tap, letting warm water rinse away the blood. “Just keep your hand there, I gotta find some peroxide.”

Eugene obeyed, bent over the sink, forehead pressed against the cool porcelain, trying his best not to vomit. Margie was quick about her search, like she’d been in this apartment hundreds of times, coming back from the bathroom cabinet with a bottle of hydrogen peroxide, a roll of gauze, and some safety pins.

“This gonna hurt,” she warned, turning the tap off. Eugene nodded to let her know that he’d heard. Pain didn’t bother him, although he probably looked pale and shaky with it, and he remained silent and still when she poured the peroxide over the puncture wounds.

“Well, looks like you were a soldier after all.” She sounded impressed by his stoicism.
“Will you tell me what she was saying?” He kept his gaze on the floor as she wrapped his hand in gauze.

“What you want to know that for? Just the half-cocked ramblin’s of an ol’ hag.”

Eugene shook his head, ground his teeth when Margie pulled particularly tight. “Don’t bullshit me, Margie. Your kin have magic that affects perception—”

“Honey, you don’ know us at all,” she cut him off, tugging on the gauze punishingly. “You think you trippin’? Because Maman really mauled your hand.”

“Thought you said it wasn’t bad,” Eugene risked a glance at her and his hand, breathing a sigh of relief to find that the wounds were covered. “Anyways, you read people—felt you trying to get a handle on me when we first met.”

“And you shut people out,” she pouted, pinning the gauze in place. “What’s your point?”

“Celeste read me.”

Margie tossed her head back in laughter. “No, she fuckin’ didn’t. She makes shit up all the time.”

Eugene grabbed her wrist earnestly. “I’m serious, Margie, she got to me somehow.”

Margie sobered up, grin sliding slowly from her face. “Then don’ you already know what she’d find?” She moved away from him, turning the sink on again to wash her hands. “She just said you were a liar. That you were dark, bad, violent. Nothin’ new. Said somethin’ like, you wanted hurt Merry. Or kill him. Or fuck him, then eat him. I don’ know, I ain’t ever been good at translatin’. She tells lies for a livin’, you think she even know what’s real anymore?”

“I thought it was just the light casters in your family that went crazy.”

“Oh, honey.” Margie smirked at him, drying her hands on her dress. “We all go crazy in the end.”

—

Merriell came home around 5:30PM, as Margie and Eugene were scrubbing droplets of blood from his hallway floor. He took one look at them—huge green eyes roving over the bloodstains on Margie’s dress and Eugene’s shirt and pants, the mass of gauze covering Eugene’s right hand—and wrenched open the nearest kitchen cabinet. Inside were rows of whiskey bottles, which he apparently purchased by the crate. He grabbed the closest half full bottle and drank straight from it.

Margie scrambled up off of her hands and knees, hands up placatingly. “We’re real, Merry, it’s not a vision.”

Wincing against the burn of the alcohol, Merriell closed his eyes and pointed vaguely in Eugene’s direction. “You think I’ll drink less if you tell me that you and Sledge broke into my apartment and got blood all over the place? What were you doin’? Playin’ the knife game on my kitchen table?”

“Merriell.”

Eugene had missed his voice, that rough, slow New Orleans drag like being groomed with a cat’s tongue. Merriell chugged more whiskey, panting, eyes still squeezed shut after that last pull. Eugene noted the twitch in the fingers of his left hand, reaching for the wooden ring and not finding it. He got up and walked over to him, forgetting about his injured hand and Margie, crowded him close against the kitchen counter just to breath him in.
Merriell pushed him away. “What the fuck, Sledge?”

Margie cleared her throat. “You don’ have to pretend in front of me. I already promised Bennie I wouldn’t tell. Not that it matters. Maman got her claws into your man here. That’s why his hand’s bandaged.”

The tortured expression on Merriell’s face was exquisite. His brow furrowed low over his eyes, turning them a shade darker, lips parted softly in disbelief. He reached for Eugene’s injured hand, his own broad, calloused worker’s hands remarkably gentle as he cradled it. Eugene consumed the sadness, guilt, and confusion that accompanied the touch, relishing in the vulnerability settling over his skin like fine sea spray.

“I’m gonna leave now,” Margie announced, eyes on the floor. Eugene nodded at her, slightly amused; he hadn’t pegged her as a bashful type.

“Thanks for your help, Margie,” he said as she hastened out the door, slamming it behind her.

At once, he pressed his lips against Merriell’s, kissing him with the fervor of a starving man. The world melted away, the day’s stressful events erased by Merriell’s warm mouth and plush lips. Eugene shivered at the sting of cheap whiskey that lingered on his tongue but kept kissing him anyways, chasing the true salt and ash taste of him. Eventually Merriell turned his face away, hands up between them, one on Eugene’s chest, the other brought up to his chin to serve as a barrier to the little kisses Eugene kept trying to plant on him.

“I told you not to come back, Gene,” he scolded sternly, irises stormy sea green beneath his scowl.

Adoringly, Eugene nuzzled Merriell’s hand, nose and lips brushing over the hardened skin of his fingertips and on the side of his thumb. He wondered what kind of work he did that demanded the skin be so tough. He nipped at Merriell’s thumb, cheekily. “I’m done following orders.”

Then he sucked Merriell’s thumb into his mouth, lust making his blood rush loudly in his ears, triumphant when Merriell’s pupils dilated with want. He pulled off, moving onto Merriell’s index and middle fingers, swirled his tongue around them, taking in the taste—faintly metallic and a little dusty, salty and tangy with sweat. Merriell pressed against the muscle, pushing his fingers towards the back of his throat. Eugene longed to tear into him, feel the skin split and sink his teeth into the tart flesh underneath, the taste of green apples overwhelming his palate.

Eugene sank to his knees, letting Merriell’s fingers slip from his mouth, hand tugging Merriell’s shirt out of his pants, exposing his belly. Merriell reached behind himself to grab the counter and watched him with heavy-lidded eyes. The light magic sluicing off his bronze skin felt divine and Eugene lapped droplets of it from his stomach as he undid his belt buckle and pants. His thirst controlled him, had him swallowing Merriell’s cock like he’d die without it, but Eugene didn’t feel shame here. At least, not his own.

Merriell gasped as Eugene blew him; writhed at the shattering of fine china teacups, tea splashing over the green and ivory linoleum, the smell of the steam rising herbaceous and bitter. Eugene drooled at the memory—so specific, so visceral, he was dizzy with greed. His world reduced to sensations, as he tried to drain Merriell of everything he had.

“Gene,” Merriell moaned above him, hips twitching, knuckles white on the kitchen counter. Eugene could tell he was close already. He took him deeper and closed his eyes until all he knew was Merriell; a velvety heat in his mouth and throat, brine of the tide filling his nose, bittersweet love dripping sticky salted caramel over his fingers.
Merriell’s orgasm swept through Eugene like a wave. The undertow threatened to pull him under, and he went with it, eager to see the sunlight streaking through the warm water. He would have breathed in all that saltwater just to stay in that languid state of mind.

Ignoring the mess in his pants, Eugene got off his knees, pulling the willow wood ring off his finger. He pried Merriell’s left hand off the counter and slipped the ring onto his middle finger. He thought it odd that it fit, because he was sure that his fingers were thinner than Merriell’s.

“I know you think you’ll be the death of me, and that’s true, but being with you isn’t what’s going to kill me. It’s staying away.” He grasped Merriell’s chin, forced him to look him in the eye. “I love you, even if you think it’s a lie.”

“Gene, you don’t mean any of it,” Merriell protested, voice growing hard, mean, at odds with the lax state of his body.

“Did Margie tell you what I said to her that night?”

Eugene and Margie had sat at Merriell’s kitchen table for nearly an hour, while Bennie got him ready. In exchange for Merriell’s safety, she wanted to know why he came back light. Eugene could have lied to her, because she’d given him time to calm down after the sight of Merriell’s blood. With all his nerves sufficiently steadied, she wasn’t able to read the fluctuations in his pulse or breathing or sweat.

He did lie, partly, because he knew Merriell’s shame was rooted in his family, in his mother’s sordid past. He’d told her that he could plant suggestions in the minds of others, which was true, and that he’d made Merriell love him, tricking the other caster into protecting him. But that part was a lie, because Merriell started to love him before he’d ever thought to use his power for his own selfish needs.

Margie didn’t ask for details, not when or how long; Merriell’s magic, which blossomed under the light, seemed to be explanation enough. She had felt that Eugene could drain magic, as freely as he once gave it, and leeching off of Merriell seemed as logical to her as it was to Eugene.

Merriell shook his head, pushing Eugene away angrily and zipping up his pants. “Doesn’t matter what lie you told her, I don’t wanna hear you lying to me. Why can’t you just stay away?”

“Don’t you feel better when I’m here?” Eugene countered. “How many visions did you have while I was here, huh? How bad did it get when I was gone?”

He asked, even though he already knew the answer. During his last visit, Merriell had thrived under his form of blood-letting, the foresight fading away enough for him to sleep, to eat, to walk through the world without doubting his reality. Eugene could see that the visions were chasing him to an early grave; he was too thin, eyes bulging and red-rimmed in his gaunt face, skin sallow from the alcohol and cigarettes. His pain and anxiety manifested in his flesh, changing him from the brash soldier that Eugene once knew into this twitchy specter of a man.

“You need me, too, Merriell, admit it.”

“I don’t—I don’t,” Merriell stammered, inhaling sharply. He shivered and rubbed at his eyes roughly with one hand. “You can’t stay Gene, it’s not safe.”

His tone changed suddenly, from irritated and desperate to sad and wistful.

“Mama, I said it once, I’ll say it a million times.” His head jerked unsteadily, eyes gone glassy and bright, preternatural emerald green. “I’m not like you, I won’t make the same mistakes you did.”
“Merriell?” Eugene called out to him hesitantly. He’d seen him have visions before, in Okinawa and China, his magical aura flaring in his sleep. But he’d never seen him have one, while he was awake. He watched, fascinated as Merriell had a full-on conversation with himself.

“I can learn to.” Merriell shivered, practically vibrating out of his skin. His breathing came fast and uneven. “Doesn’t matter if his lucky color’s green…Red’s bad, red’s a warning sign, la couleur du danger, du risque.”

His voice changed the more he talked, pitching higher, oddly feminine when he slipped into what Eugene assumed was French. “C’est quoi la vie sans risque? On ne sait pas la valeur d’une belle chose comme l’amour si on ne sait pas le risque.”

As quickly as he’d slipped into French, he slipped out, talking like himself again. “Those are fools words. You’ve told me before, it’s not worth it…not worth the pain… Mon pauvre Merriell, je ne l’ai dit jamais. Ceux sont tes mots, pas les miens.”

Merriell’s breathing slowed and the tremors with it, until he was just staring vacantly at a chair by the kitchen table.

“Merriell?”

At the sound of his name, the clouds in Merriell’s eyes cleared, irises dimming to their usual gray-green. His gaze snapped to Eugene’s face, and he continued to argue as if the vision had never happened. “I don’t need you and you sure as hell are better off without me. You’re kiddin’ yourself if you think two broken men like us can possibly keep each other afloat in this world. We’re not healin’ each other, we’re makin’ each other sick an’ you just can’t see it yet.”

Eugene tilted his head, regarding Merriell with awe. He wasn’t even mad that Merriell was trying to push him away, just wished he knew what triggered the foresight. “We’re just going to ignore the fact that you crossed over to a different plane just then?”

Merriell’s eyes narrowed. “Stop tryin’ to change the subject.”

“You were just talking to your mother.”

“No, I wasn’t.”

Eugene laughed derisively. “I was standing right here, I heard you. You had some sort of fit and started talking to yourself.”

Merriell gaped, nervous sweat beading up on his brow. He shook his head. “I wasn’t—I don’t talk to myself, someone—Bennie woulda told me, he’s seen me have ‘em before.”

“Admit it, you’re losing control.” Eugene stepped close to Merriell, taking his face in his hands again. Merriell didn’t resist a second time. “I can help you. Let me help you.” He pressed his lips to Merriell’s forehead. “Maybe your love can make me light.”

“It can’t, Gene. Love’s not enough for you. I’ve seen it.”

If Eugene was light, the words would have winded him like a punch to the gut, sank into him like a knife to the chest. But he wasn’t, and he had known for a long time now that the dark magic would never leave him. He licked his lips, tongue brushing over Merriell’s skin, the tang of his sweat reminiscent of the ocean. “I know.”

“Then why are you so eager to lie to me? I see right through you every time, same as you do with
“Because I do love you.” Eugene felt Merriell tense, ready to tell him that he didn’t. He pressed a finger to Merriell’s mouth to shush him.

“Just hear me out, okay? You think I don’t know anything about love, but I’ve felt all kinds, and I’ve had a lot of time to think about why they’re all different. You act like love is some singular thing—some selfless, tragic need to please or some shit like that—and maybe sometimes it is, but not all love is good and kind and pure. Some love is selfish, born out of wanting. Some love is angry, born out of stubbornness. And some loves are shallow, little ephemeral things; while others run deep, as old as the universe itself.”

Eugene drew back, stroking his thumbs over Merriell’s cheekbones, to look at him properly and bask in the sweet green glow. “Your love is all those things, Merriell, so you can’t possibly fathom in what way that I love you. It’s a mean love, a greedy love, but it’s the best I can do.”

Chapter End Notes

Merriell’s conversation with his dead mother: “Doesn’t matter if his lucky color’s green…Red’s bad, red’s a warning sign, the color of danger, of risk.” His voice changed the more he talked, pitching higher, oddly feminine when he slipped into what Eugene assumed was French. “What’s life without risk? We don’t know the value of a beautiful thing like love if we don’t know the risk.” As quickly as he’d slipped into French, he slipped out, talking like himself again. “Those are fools words. You’ve told me before, it’s not worth it…not worth the pain… My poor Merriell, I never said that. Those are your words, not mine.”
Chapter Notes

Warnings for this chapter (AND PLEASE PAY ATTENTION TO THEM):
Discussion of suicidal thoughts/actions, description of violence, erotic asphyxiation gone wrong, and (not necessarily a warning) an attempt to set some boundaries.

In the wake of Eugene’s confession, things were not better or worse between them. They slept together in Merriell’s bed that night, each keeping to their own side of the mattress. In the morning, Merriell changed Eugene’s bandage, and Eugene coaxed him into going out for breakfast.

“Come on, Merry. I can’t remember the last time I saw you eat solid food. I’ll pay.”

“Don’t call me Merry.”

They ate at a Spanish Creole café three blocks from Merriell’s apartment. One of the waitresses recognized Merriell, ruffling his hair and calling him one of those ‘Shelton rascals’, as she took their order. Merriell ducked his head, expression sour as he sulked and smoked over his coffee.

Eugene told him about his plans to apply to Tulane, certain that he wasn’t actually listening, absentmindedly adding: “You should come with me on the campus tour.”

“There’s no way in hell I’m doin’ that,” Merriell groused, flicking ash from his cigarette disdainfully.

Eugene blinked, a little startled by Merriell’s outburst. He’d gotten so used to the passive aggressive politeness of his mother and her church friends; their demure denials of ‘that sounds like a wonderful idea, I’ll have to check my schedule’ which actually meant ‘I’d rather do anything else’. By comparison, Merriell was just plain aggressive.

Eugene blew over his own hot coffee before taking a sip. “I didn’t think you’d want to, I was just being polite.”

Merriell scowled at him. “How’s it polite askin’ me to do somethin’ you know I won’t like? Then I just look like an asshole, tellin’ you no.”

“It’s a habit,” Eugene clarified. “I’ll try to break myself of it.”

“Why would you do that?”

“Clearly it bothers you.”

“Since when do you give a shit about what bothers me? Thought you were done followin’ orders, that you’re gonna do what you like no matter what I say.”

Eugene rolled his eyes, hiding a smirk behind his coffee mug. “Christ, I forgot what a pain in the ass you are. Always wanting to argue.”

“Nah, boo, it’s you who was always startin’ fights.” Merriell caught his grin, a borderline feral smile spreading slowly over his face. “If it weren’t for Burgin, you would’a gotten court martialed in
Okinawa.”

Eugene nodded; Merriell had a point there. Burgin had saved both of their asses more times than he could count, from the Japanese and from the Marine Corps itself. “Do you wonder what Burgin’s up to? Think he and Florence got married?”

Merriell shrugged, looking past Eugene’s shoulder, prompting him to glance over as well. The waitress was coming back with their food. The old woman patted Merriell’s cheek, as she set his plate down.

“You Mariana’s boy?” She asked, smiling broadly. Several of her teeth were missing, and the few remaining were capped with gold and silver. Merriell blushed, nodding dumbly. Eugene found the behavior curious, having never seen him look anything other than aloof or angry in public.

“I thought so with those green eyes!” The woman crowed triumphantly. “She never comes around anymore. You tell her Anita Quijano says ‘hi’.”

When she left, Merriell scarfed down his plate of chorizo and eggs like he wanted to get out of there as fast as possible. Eugene ate his omelet at a leisurely pace, astonished but also amused by Merriell’s anxiety. He’d assumed that people around the neighborhood would know Merriell or his mother, much like how everyone back home knew of him and his family. However, he hadn’t considered whether Merriell wanted a fresh start.

“Does it bother you?” He asked when they left the café. “That she recognized you?”

Merriell scratched at the back of his neck, eyes on the ground. “No. Just ain’t heard her name in a long time.”

His voice sounded gruff; he cleared his throat. “Anyway, wanna walk down to the river?”

They wandered the city until sunset, seeking out little parks that Merriell remembered from his childhood. They didn’t talk much, and the aimless meandering reminded Eugene of the marching that they’d done back in the Pacific. It felt right, familiar. Merriell walked beside him, just like he did back then. Some things were different, though. Aside from the obvious absence of heavy packs and helmets, rifles and ill-fitting boots, there was a polite distance between them. During the war, the occasional bumping of shoulders or leaning up on a buddy for support wouldn’t have warranted a second glance—maybe even wouldn’t have drawn one now—but Eugene wanted to wait until Merriell approached him, feeling somehow that he no longer had permission to touch him as he liked.

Eugene had overstepped a boundary yesterday. Not only had he come back despite Merriell’s orders not to, he had demanded to stay, because he knew Merriell could only be mad for so long before he forgave him. That’s the kind of man Merriell was, after all. Insane and confused, possessing a temper with the shortest fuse Eugene ever seen, but ultimately forgetful and unable to hold a grudge. Eugene glimpsed that forgiveness, clear and sweet, when Merriell lit his cigarette before his own, as they sat down to smoke and drink whiskey on the balcony after dinner.

This felt familiar, too; not in a déjà vu sort of way, but like a muscle memory. As the night settled in around them, streetlamps coming on and washing out the twinkle of the stars overhead, Eugene got the urge to stamp out his smoke. But they weren’t in their foxhole, and there was no CO about to come through, hissing at them to douse their smoking lamps. They were alive, home, and they could do whatever they wanted, whenever they wanted.

“Oh, can I tell you a story?” Eugene studied Merriell’s profile in the orange glow of the streetlamps. His
jaw jutted out slightly, making him look about as stubborn as he acted.

Merriell shrugged, eyes heavy-lidded as he puffed on his cigarette. “Do what you want, like always.”

Eugene rolled his eyes at Merriell’s resigned comment but carried on. Merriell didn’t believe that Eugene could love, and he wanted to try and make him understand.

“Once upon a time, there was a boy who could feel everything other people were feeling. He didn’t even have to touch them—he’d just be standing there, and he would know if they were happy or angry or sad. He could always tell where the emotions were coming from, too, because everyone has a color, and adults have more complex emotions than kids. Anytime someone was mad or disappointed with him, he knew. If he hurt someone, he knew; and so, he got it in his head that he would only ever try to make people happy. Because the bad emotions didn’t feel very good, and he hadn’t learned how to shut them out yet. So, you know, kid logic, just replace them, just make everybody happy. And it worked, a little bit. If he held a person’s hand, he could calm them down, ease their pain, distract them from whatever upset them. But that kind of power is just a bandage, not a cure.”

“That boy thought that that was his purpose in the world. That the reason God put him on this green earth was to help others stop hurting. And when the war came, he thought ‘this is my big chance, this is my calling’. He enlisted without a second thought—didn’t consider for a second that the inhumanity of war would bring greater pain than any scraped knee or guilty conscious that he’d encountered throughout his cushy life. Didn’t think that he might not have what it takes to survive.”

Eugene flicked ash into the tray on the little table beside them, observing Merriell’s reaction to the following words: “Of course, that boy died out there.”

Merriell closed his eyes wearily. Eugene couldn’t help but grin, watching the grief creasing Merriell’s brow.

“And I rose from his ashes, realizing that there is no God and no purpose to my magic. No purpose to anything, really, unless you invent some.” He laughed, taking a drag just to tamp down the giddiness. “But that’s the funny thing about the human condition—and I mean, all humans, mortals and casters alike—is that we need a purpose…Or else, what is there to live for? What is the point of breathing, eating, shitting, if you’ve got no good reason to do it?”

Merriell rubbed a hand over his eyes but didn’t answer.

Eugene continued, because he didn’t expect one. “Well, let me tell you, when I realized how pointless my life was without direction—when I went home and saw everybody looking at me, expecting that boy and instead getting this—I couldn’t stand it. They wanted that boy back so bad, and when they didn’t get him, they expected me to fit right in, to replace him as if I wasn’t a totally different person. I don’t give a shit about anyone’s happiness but mine, and sometimes yours. But that kind of feeling doesn’t fly back in Mobile. No, you gotta want to please everybody; family, friends, every rubber-necking neighbor. Disappointment feels like a funeral home, in case you were wondering, like they’re mourning you, even though you’re standing right there.”

Eugene paused his ranting and ran a hand through his hair. He felt lighter already. And warmer, more alive, like sharing his burden was bringing him back from the dead somehow.

“That the end of your story?”

“No,” Eugene stared into Merriell’s eyes, amused to find them reflecting almost gold in the light of the streetlamps. “Did you ever wonder why I came and found you?”
Merriell dropped his gaze and licked his lips, gesturing lazily at his willow wood ring with his cigarette. “You said the ring called you.”

“Did you ever wonder how I found the ring?”

“You didn’t have it all this time?” Merriell scowled, confused. “I put it in the breast pocket of your greens.”

“I didn’t check ‘em. The maid hung ‘em up for me.” Eugene leaned towards Merriell, voice lowered conspiratorially. “I found that ring while I was searching for my revolver.”

He watched as Merriell shuddered, a flare of emerald green passing over his eyes as he gaped at Eugene in shock.

“You…” Merriell swallowed thickly, his left-hand twitching as he rubbed over the ring nervously. “You wouldn’t, would you, Gene?”

Aside from listless depression, the war gifted Eugene with a keen perception of the men that served beside him. The intimacy that formed within a company had sewn itself into his very soul. He didn’t think he would ever forget the expressions of fear or rage or hope that drifted across a fellow Marine’s face. He knew Merriell better than anyone; even his own reflection paled in familiarity to the sadness washing over Merriell’s features. Without asking, Eugene knew that Merriell had seen the kind of relief that Eugene was craving—that eternal sleep, long and deep.

“You’re the only thing stopping me.”

Merriell snorted and turned his face away. “You stay here, my magic’s gonna kill you.”

“I go away, I’m gonna kill me.”

“So, what do I do, Gene?” Merriell sounded broken, on the verge of tears. He ground his teeth, the stained enamel squeaking under the pressure. Eugene wanted to hold him, feel the despair throbbing under the skin, smell the burnt sugar and iron. “I didn’t haul you out the other side of that war for you to die here. What will it take to make you want to live?”

Eugene clicked his tongue. Sometimes Merriell caught on quick, but most times Eugene thought he had the thickest skull in the world. “I think, if I’m gonna die either way, that I would prefer to spend my last days with you.”

Merriell snorted at his remark, a watery sound, and wouldn’t look Eugene in the eye or speak to him for the rest of the night. But when they went to bed, Merriell lay down a little closer to him than before, and Eugene hid his triumphant smile in the threadbare sheets.

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A flare burst overhead, the bright red glow pulling Eugene out of his slumber. His neck ached; the canteen that he’d wedged between his shoulder and head had slipped out and fallen to the bottom of their foxhole at some point during his four-hour nap. He rolled his head to work the kinks out of his neck, wincing at the grinding and popping of his vertebrae. He opened his eyes, looking for Merriell. The light caster crouched at the edge of their foxhole, not even glancing up at the flare hovering in the dark sky.

Eugene breathed shakily. He didn’t know why, but Merriell’s stillness bothered him. It shouldn’t, because Merriell could see with or without the light of the flare, but he was a fidgety man, and it was unusual for him to sit so still and quiet.
Eugene had the urge to crawl up and check on him. He tried to fight it, looking down at his watch first to note the time. 0042H. Forty-two minutes past their change in watch. Had Merriell fallen asleep?

Terrified, Eugene crept to Merriell’s side and put a hand on his shoulder, ready to whisper in his ear to wake him. Merriell felt cold to the touch. Silent. Empty.

Eugene held back a gasp, hand shifting to Merriell’s neck, so he could check his pulse. His fingers slipped on blood, sticky and congealing; a deep gash exposed tendons and vital veins. Eugene drew his hand away, trembling, a wild panic rearing up in him. He didn’t know if he could survive in this world, if Merriell wasn’t in it.

Turning his attention to the broken, pockmarked coral of the line, he could see shapes moving around all of their foxholes. Japs—slinking through the darkness like they always did, dipping in and out of the pitted earth, murdering all the men on watch. He felt sick, had to choke down the bile welling up in his throat.

The noise caught the attention of one of their attackers, his head cocked in Eugene’s direction, like a cat catching the rustle of a bird in the bush. Eugene slid down to the bottom of the foxhole, casting about hurriedly for his rifle. It wasn’t there. He patted down his waist, his pockets, and the ground. No revolver, no Ka-bar, not even a fucking rock. He turned to Merriell’s body, dragging him down to see if he had any weapons in him. Nothing. He began to hyperventilate, hunched at the bottom of the hole, like a canary waiting for the cat to pounce.

The Jap leered over the edge of the foxhole, eyes black, teeth gleaming red from the flare. Eugene waited for him to pull his pistol and put a bullet through his brain, breath coming short and fast. But the Jap didn’t appear to have any weapons either, instead leaping down and grabbing Eugene by the collar of his utilities. He shoved him against the side of the hole, forearm pressed against his throat, intent on squeezing the life out of him. Eugene thrashed, the instinct to fight back roaring through him. He punched the Jap in the head, loosening his grip with a brutal tap to the temple, and pushed him away. The Jap stumbled over Merriell’s corpse and fell, sprawling in the dirt.

Filled with the purest, blackest rage, Eugene jumped on him. He pinned the Jap’s arms to the ground with his knees, circled his neck with his hands, and leaned his weight into the grip. The Jap gurgled, but didn’t struggle against him, eyes growing huge and red-rimmed and…green?

Eugene panted and blinked furiously, strangling him harder even as he watched the nightmare drip away, the Jap beneath him growing curly black hair and a plump, sweet mouth; exuding sympathetic emotion like Merriell did when Eugene hurt him, a sweet clover tartness followed by a nicotine rush. Those green eyes rolled back in Merriell’s head, fluttering like the pulse under his palm. His eyes closed, and Eugene let go.

“Merriell?” Eugene couldn’t hear if he was still breathing, his own blood rushing loudly in his ears. He grabbed him by the shoulders and shook him, slapped him. “Hey? Hey, look at me!”

Lethargically, Merriell opened his eyes. He cleared his throat feebly, arms twitching under Eugene’s legs. “Get off.”

Stomach roiling, Eugene rolled off to the side. “I’m so fucking sorry.”

Merriell sat up, massaging his throat tenderly with one hand and croaking, “It’s fine, my fault. Felt you freakin’ an’ tried to wake you.”

“It’s not fine, I could have killed you,” Eugene spat. “You weren’t even trying to fight me!”
He glanced around the room, trying to ground himself in reality with the sight of peeling rose-print wallpaper and the rickety metal bed-frame. Pain radiated from the puncture wounds of his bandaged hand, and he pressed down on it, using it as an anchor.

Out of the corner of his eye, Eugene glimpsed Merriell’s erection tenting the sheets as he shifted on the bed. “Are you seriously getting off on this?”

Merriell’s desire for violence confused and disturbed Eugene. To Eugene, such a thing was a quick reminder of mortality. It made him feel alive, shed some light into the black hole within. But Merriell wasn’t dead inside, and Eugene couldn’t understand why he wanted it. Confusion churned his stomach.

Merriell responded by flipping the sheets back and reaching down to touch himself. He stared at Eugene, the popped blood vessels stark in the whites of his big, pale eyes.

“Funny, how it’s fine if you die, but when it’s me there’s a problem.” His voice sounded gravely and thin, like he’d gargled glass. Eugene wondered if his visits would always end with Merriell losing his voice in the worst way. “See the hypocrisy in that, Sledgehammer?”

“Don’t call me that,” Eugene growled. “That’s not me, not anymore.”

“Then who’s the boy that died out there?” Merriell’s breath hitched, and he picked up the pace on his cock, thumb rubbing over the foreskin roughly. Eugene’s mouth watered. He itched to taste him but kept his hands to himself. He worried that if he reached out, Merriell would ask for more.

“Are we really gonna do this right now? While you’re jacking off, because I almost choked you to death?”

Merriell grinned, prodding at the red marks on his throat—the brand that Eugene had left on him.

Eugene felt sickened by his own arousal, lust flaming deep in his belly, as he watched Merriell dig his fingers harshly into the slowly bruising flesh. “I’m warning you to quit teasing me.”

Merriell let go of his cock, brought his hand to his mouth, and licked the drops of precum off the webbing between his fingers. “Or what? You’re not gonna lay a hand on me unless I let you. You know, you showed me what you were dreamin’ about. Don’t think you meant to, but it pours through your touch.”

“Oh.” Eugene didn’t expect that. It took effort to project emotions now, and he’d never used his magic when he wasn’t conscious of it. He’d never shared images either, wondered if he’d unwittingly amplified his powers by siphoning Merriell’s magic.

“Oh?” Merriell smirk widened, hand returning to his leaking cock. “Do you always dream about me dyin’?”

Eugene wanted to wipe that smug smile off his face, pin him to the mattress, and force him to be gentle. Instead, he sat frozen on the edge of the bed, cataloguing the minute changes in Merriell’s face as he masturbated. He’d run into Merriell jerking off before, back on Pavuvu and Okinawa, but it meant nothing then. Pile hundreds of young men on an island with barely a square foot between them, and you were bound to walk into a tent where someone was getting their rocks off. Now, it felt like Merriell was putting on a show, his gaze smoldering at Eugene in the gloom, the only light in the room the meager glow of a streetlamp yards away.

When Eugene didn’t answer, Merriell tipped his head back and sighed, the noise like a death rattle through his abused vocal cords. “I dream about it. An’ I don’t mean the visions, although I can’t
really tell the difference, but I dream that you’ll kill me. Rip me open, bow to stern, tear everythin’
out, and eat me alive.”

Eugene laughed nervously at the admission. “You’re a sick fuck.”

“Maybe, but would you do it?” Merriell’s eyes seemed to bore into his very soul, peering into the
glittering black tar guilt and fury. He hungered for it, never flinching away like a normal person
should.

Eugene shook his head, bewildered. He remembered the taste of  Merriell’s desire, how recklessly
and eagerly Merriell demanded savagery, like he hadn’t gotten enough of it during the war. “I don’t
understand.”

Merriell’s pink tongue darted out to wet his lips, his tobacco-stained teeth flashing as he drew the
bottom lip between them, let them scrape sensuously over the chapped flesh.

“Come here, Gene.” He beckoned to him with his free hand, the other stroking leisurely on his cock.

“I refuse to hurt you,” Eugene stated solemnly, even as he moved closer.

“If you love me, why do you lie?”

The question stung, because Eugene wanted to be honest with Merriell, and he thought his words
rang true. Waking up to find his hands around Merriell’s neck had felt like slipping from one
nightmare to another. He yearned to keep the other man safe from harm. The desire to protect him
might be the only sentiment that survived his fall from grace—the danger changing imperceptibly
from bullets and bombs to Eugene’s own hands. But love was his undoing, and as much as Eugene
didn’t want to hurt Merriell, he would do whatever he had to to convince him that he loved him.

Eugene leaned into Merriell’s space, careful not to touch him. “I’m not lying, I don’t want to hurt
you.”

“Wantin’ and refusin’ ain’t the same thing.” Merriell cupped the back of his neck, pulling him nearer;
warm, sour breath fanning over his cheeks. “Choke me.”

Eugene’s heart stuttered, pulse pounding in his ears again. “I don’t want to.”

“But you’re goin’ to,” Merriell murmured into his lips before kissing him. Like finding water in the
desert, Eugene drank him down greedily, tangling his fingers in his hair and licking eagerly into his
mouth.

Merriell allowed his attentions briefly before pushing him back a little, panting into the space
between them: “Come on, choke me.”

In that moment, Eugene wondered if they were both damaged beyond repair—the will to say ‘no’
fading. Hesitantly, he straddled Merriell again and settled his hands around his slim, strong neck. His
injured hand burned like a warning. The tips of his fingers brushed, met as he strengthened his grip;
grinding bone against bone, straining tendons and sinew, narrowing the world down to a frantic
heartbeat. He could already imagine how stark the bruises would be in the morning; an angry,
mottled ring of purple-red-blue fingerprints.

Merriell didn’t make a sound, face growing red as Eugene cut off the circulation to his head. The
hand on his cock sped up, movements growing sloppy, slick, and so loud that Eugene’s ears burned.

He knew the things they did were vile by societal standards, but this bothered him more than fellatio
and sodomy. This cruel, erotic asphyxiation was tinged with a violence that Eugene longed to leave behind in the Pacific. He didn’t find it arousing at all; he felt sick, sweaty and dizzy, bile rising in the back of his throat.

Eugene let go, hands shaking, resting lightly on Merriell’s neck. The reddening skin underneath his fingers radiated heat.

“I can’t, I can’t.” Eugene’s heart thundered as he watched Merriell get his breath back. He kissed the corners of Merriell’s slack mouth as he wheezed, the ache in his throat throbbing aggressively, rich and dark, the color of oxblood. “Don’t make me, please.”

Merriell whined, hips bucking on the bed, hand flexing helplessly on his cock, the other coming to tangle in Eugene’s hair. “Gene, please.”

Resolutely, Eugene shook his head. He bowed to his forehead to Merriell’s temple, cursing the part of him that demanded this violent adoration. “Don’t make me.”

Eugene felt the precise moment that Merriell gave up on him; his squirming hips stilled, his body rigid under him. The hand in Eugene’s hair slipped down over his neck, his shoulder, stopping in the center of his chest. Merriell pushed him away. His eyes were still dark with arousal, expression unreadable in the gloom.

“Why?”

“I don’t know, I just—” He held back all the things he wanted to say— is this why you want me to leave, is this what made me dark, is this going to keep happening if I stay—and curled around Merriell’s smaller form. “Merriell, I—”

“Don’t you need it?” Merriell’s voice was a strained whisper. His hand, spread wide on Eugene’s chest, trembled. “Even if you don’t like it, don’t you feel better?”

Eugene hid his face in Merriell’s curls, breathing in the faint smell of salty sweat and cigarettes. He wanted to cry. Not panicked tears, but real, honest sobs. The fear burned through him, a sentiment as familiar as it was foreign, because for the first time in a long time, it was his own. Not borrowed and bleeding over from some other man; Eugene was helpless, horrified, and so unbelievably alive.

It sickened him to know that Merriell’s pain made him feel like the man he used to be; his dark soul lightening a shade, gulping greedily at the pale light of Merriell’s love. He didn’t have the strength to accept that yet.

“I don’t know, but please don’t make me do it right now.”

“Okay,” Merriell rasped, shifting away from Eugene, turning so that his back was to him. “Go to sleep.”

The dismissal left Eugene achingly hollow, but when he pressed himself against Merriell’s back, Merriell didn’t push him away again. A small victory.

Eugene laid there with his forehead resting between Merriell’s shoulder blades, listening to him breathe. He hated when Merriell made him doubt himself like this, goading him into losing control and filling him with regret. He never wanted to hurt Merriell; knew with every fiber of his being that he’d do anything to make him happy. And yet, the pain revived him like nothing else could, remorse a welcome distraction from his usual apathy.
Chapter 12

For the first time in years, Eugene dreamt about good things. Things that signaled levity and life to him; a fawn laying in tall grass, children playing around a walnut tree, Deacon running alongside him as he rode his bike.

The last dream was a childhood memory, yet not, because he carried his sixty-pound USMC pack on his back. The straps dug into his shoulders, pressing on old sores and bruises, but Eugene barely noticed the pain. It was a burden too familiar to be upsetting.

The sweltering summer sun beat down on him, drenching his skin with sweat, and the faint breeze ruffled his hair, not quite strong enough to cool. Deacon yipped happily, weaving in and out of the shade cast down by the boulevard trees. Eugene didn’t know where they were going, tires and paws kicking up dust on the gravel street, but when he gazed ahead he saw light. And that was odd, because it felt like forever since Eugene had dreamed about anything but darkness.

He blinked awake slowly, squinting against the sunlight streaming through a crack in the curtains straight into his eyes. Merriell was already up—had been for a while judging from the coolness of the sheets beside him. He could hear him clattering about in the kitchen, humming an old jazz melody. Something by Billie Holiday, maybe.

Eugene rolled out of bed and shuffled into his pants. He scratched his head, sighing tiredly when he caught sight of himself in the little mirror on Merriell’s dresser. There was nothing unusual about his appearance—the bags under his eyes a permanent fixture since Peleliu, the facial hair growing in because he couldn’t be bothered anymore—but he thought he looked older than he should. Worn down and already at the end of his rope, about to dangle from a noose.

After clumsily changing the bandage on his hand, Eugene walked into the kitchen to find Merriell at the table reading the newspaper. A pot bubbled on the stove, the source of the briny, savory smell wafting through the room. His eyes were drawn to the bright purple bruises ringing Merriell’s scrawny neck like a collar.

Merriell noticed him staring, rubbing a hand over the marks idly, as he jerked his head towards the stove. “Coffee’s done.”

With a grateful nod, Eugene poured himself a cup, glancing surreptitiously at the whiskey bottle set close to the percolator on the counter. Merriell probably added a dash to his own mug on the daily. Swallowing down a derisive remark, he sat down next to the light caster and braced himself for the argument that would surely ensue.

“We need to talk.”

“’Bout what?” Merriell didn’t lift his eyes from the morning paper. The man had an underbite like a dour bulldog, surly and stubborn, and sallow eyes that bulged like a frog’s. His hands looked too big for his skinny wrists, huge and square. Under the winter sun, his skin paled to a sickly yellow. Eugene’s heart ached for him; for the wily, bronzed bastard that had saved his life millions of times and the virile, grinning bayou child that showed him the sweetest, truest religion.

“About what happened last night.”

“Don’t worry ‘bout it, Sledge.”

The name felt like a punch to the gut. “I throttled the hell out of you. And even when I said ‘no’, you
pushed me for more. How would you feel if you were in my shoes?”

Merriell sipped his coffee. “I don’t see the problem. You need an outlet, and you know I like it.”

Eugene didn’t have an answer for that, not when the aftertaste of Merriell’s pleasure still lingered in the back of his throat.

“If you’re mad that we didn’t fuck, I’ll suck you off after breakfast.”

“I don’t care about that at all,” Eugene replied, stunned by Merriell’s nonchalant suggestion. “This isn’t about sex—”

“Oh, it isn’t?” Merriell stood up, chair screeching over the linoleum floor. He walked over the stove to check on whatever was cooking. “An’ how many times did I let you fuck me before you said you loved me?”

Anger and disbelief sparked in Eugene’s chest. How dare Merriell try to boil down their relationship to mere physical attraction. “Let me fuck you? You were begging for it every time.”

“Think that makes you special?” Merriell turned his back on him, pulling a colander out of the sink. “Half the girls in this town know how pretty I beg.”

Eugene’s hands curled into fists in his lap. “You let me in—you always let me in. And you’ve been doing that since before things got physical, so quit trying to pretend like us fucking has anything to do with love.”

Love and lust were not remotely the same thing. The first time Merriell put his mouth on him, he hadn’t known what to make of it. It certainly felt good, heavenly compared to all the hell that they’d been through, but the physical stimulation paled in comparison to the vibrant, herbal rush of Merriell’s accompanying affection. Eugene would take a smile, a kiss, a simple brush of hands over a blow job any day. He wished he could coax Merriell close enough to show him.

“Fuck you, Sledge.”

“Christ, Merriell, I wish you’d stop fighting me.”

Merriell snorted and dumped the contents of the colander into a pan on the stove. “Never.”

“Why’s it so hard to believe that I love you?”

“Because that’s not how the universe works, Gene!” Merriell snapped, rounding on him, hands on his bony hips. “We’re not special, we don’t get a pass because we were stupid enough to help some dumbass mortals. You’re dark; you don’t get to feel, let alone love.”

Eugene flinched back from the brutal words, but Merriell carried on. “And I’m just some cursed fool of a light caster. We don’t get to write our own story, it’s all laid out for us already. This is the price that I pay.”

Merriell trembled as he yelled, blurring at the edges, shaking apart at the seams. “I can love you—and, hell, maybe you can believe that you love me—but I don’t get to have you. We’re done, Gene. We’re over.”

Eugene reined in his rage with a deliberate inhale and exhale. He got up slowly, kept his expression neutral when Merriell skittered back at the motion, already afraid.
“Don’t fuckin’ touch me.” They both knew all his walls would come crumbling down, as soon as Eugene got a hand on him.

But Eugene didn’t need to touch him to know he was hurting; reaching out for him as desperately as he pushed him away. Frankly, Eugene was rather tired of the way Merriell struggled with himself. He picked up his cup of coffee and leaned against the table, facing Merriell.

“Have you actually seen me dying here in New Orleans?”

Merriell chewed his bottom lip, eyes darting around the room, looking anywhere but Eugene. “Well, no, but—”

“You still have visions of a future with me?”

“Yeah, but—”

Eugene cut him off again, clearing his throat authoritatively. “Then we haven’t even started. I meant what I said last night. About spending my last days with you. If you wanna think I don’t feel anything for you, then fine. But I don’t think your magic is as dangerous as you think it is, and one day I’m gonna get to the bottom of this, and I’m gonna prove to you that we can have this.”

Merriell shook his head, pressing his fingers to his temples wearily. “Gene, you don’t see—”

“No, I don’t see what you see.” Eugene blamed Merriell’s foresight entirely for their inability to see eye-to-eye. “You said it yourself once—you don’t know when it’s real or when it’s something you want, and everything you see can’t come true. In fact, a lot of it hasn’t come true. But I don’t think you should let any of that matter. You were always saying, back in China, how afraid you were to turn into your mother, letting your powers dictate your life. Isn’t that what you’re doing right now?”

Finally, Merriell met his gaze, his green eyes containing a sadness as breathtakingly deep as the sea. But then something popped on the stove, catching his attention and dragging his eyes away. He darted nearer to the stove. “Shit, shrimp are burnin’.”

Eugene rolled his eyes and sat down again, sure that the argument was over. Merriell always had a brief temper; raging like a road flare one moment and docile as a kitten the next. The abrupt change irritated Eugene as much as it amused him. He remembered Burgin’s exasperation with such tantrums back in China, when Merriell got into scuffles over silly things like poker or garrison contraband.

“Just one more second,” Burgin would say, “and he’d have forgotten all about it, and the MPs wouldn’t have gotten involved at all.”

Eugene didn’t forgive and forget as easily. Merriell’s repetitive excuses annoyed him, and there were only so many ways he could reiterate his own devotion. None of it was having any impact, because the stubborn bastard simply wasn’t listening. He mulled over the issue, picking up the abandoned newspaper just to have something to stare at.

Words held little meaning for Merriell, but images wielded great power. After Eugene had accidentally shown him his nightmare, Merriell had wanted him so close they both were suffocating. Unfortunately, Eugene didn’t have a clue how he’d done it.

“So, what do we do now?” Eugene asked when Merriell set a bowl of shrimp and grits in front of him.

Merriell shrugged and sat down, poking at the slightly blackened shellfish in his own bowl. He
hadn’t given Eugene any of the burned shrimp. “Don’t have any plans for today.”

“Will you take me to the bayou?”

Merriell stared at him for a long moment, assessing. Eugene wondered what he was looking for—if he had brought Eugene to the bayou in a vision and something important had happened between them.

Then Merriell dropped his gaze, shaking his head and spooning grits into his mouth voraciously. “Whatever you want.”

—

They took a bus to the outskirts of civilization, where the bayou edged up into the city limits. Bald cypress trees stretched up from the water, reflections on the smooth grey bark forming faces that disappeared as soon as you noticed them. He could hear birds, chittering and singing high in the boughs, but the dense canopy concealed them. And then there was the water, still and murky brown, the hiding place of predators well-known but seldom seen. Merriell led the way, jumping from one knot of tree roots to another like a child playing hopscotch.

Eugene had never seen such a dark, oddly desolate forest before. He felt out of place in the dank green and grey landscape, the shifting gloom alive and writhing like some prehistoric jungle. The way that Merriell fit in the shadows made him suddenly self-conscious of his pale skin and bright red hair.

Despite the uneasy atmosphere, Eugene could understand the propensity for Shelton casters to choose dark magic over light. The very ground seemed steeped in it; bubbling hot and acidic, the molten core of the earth spitting up from the mud. An antithesis to the salt marsh, where the wind rustled bright and free, the air of the bayou clung to the skin, sticky and stifling. Eugene felt the lightning crackling in his chest, rising up to meet some ancient call. He drew in a lungful of the heavy air, more ozone than oxygen, feeling wild and free.

Balanced on a tangle of cypress roots, Merriell stopped and faced him. Sweat slicked his forehead, beading on his brow and dripping into his eyes. Eugene thought it odd, because it wasn’t particularly hot out.

“What do you wanna see?” Merriell asked. “An alligator?”

“What do you mean?”

Merriell swept his arm out, gesturing dramatically at the swamp. He looked impish and feral, a creature of the bayou masquerading as a man. “Got yourself a private nature tour. Can find any flora or fauna you want.”

Eugene smirked. “What do you think I want?”

Huffing, Merriell placed a palm on the nearest tree, eyes sparking verdant in the darkness. His magic radiated outward, glimmering green unlike anything Eugene had ever seen. The chirping of birds grew louder, their wings fluttering as they descended, hopping into view. Passerine songbirds mingled with docile kites and kingfishers, the iridescent feathers of hummingbirds glinting in the low light. Their beady eyes gleamed, round and preternaturally emerald. Eugene knew that Merriell could control animals, but he didn’t know to what extent, and the sight took his breath away.

“That enough birds for ya?”
“Holy shit, this is incredible.”

The magic lapped over him, warm and gentle like an ocean wave. Eugene wanted to kiss Merriell, hold him close and feel him trembling with exertion. He redirected his attention to the olive, red-capped birds that flapped close to his feet. He crouched down and extended his hand tentatively, delighted when one of them leapt up onto his wrist. Its little head twitched this way and that, regarding him with equal confusion and fascination. It didn’t flinch when he brought it close to his face to inspect it. The spell kept it remarkably tame, and he ran a delicate finger through its silky plumage, in awe of its gossamer soul.

“I wish your magic brought you joy.”

Eugene glanced up at Merriell’s words to find him watching wistfully. Green love spilled from his eyes, and Eugene ducked his gaze—bit back the urge to demand that Merriell see the irony in his statement, to point out that he could borrow Merriell’s joy. He stayed silent, marveling at the birds flitting to and fro, letting the brave ones perch on his arms and shoulders.

His relationship with his magic was complicated. As the only casters in Mobile, he and his father kept everything secret. Even Eugene’s best friend Sid didn’t know. Growing up, his power isolated and confused him. After all, what does a boy do when his heart is full to bursting with emotion that doesn’t belong to him?

He envied his father; healing magic seemed so much simpler to manage than the quicksilver river of feelings wearing him down. It took him so long to separate his own from all the others, to immerse himself in blissful quiet and finally feel without contamination.

The birds shook off Merriell’s spell slowly, the emerald cast fading from their eyes as they startled and began to fly away.

Eugene chuckled softly, awash in the subtle sorrow of their parting. “You say that like yours does. Like you’re not drinking every day to numb the heartache.”

“Oh, right,” Merriell loomed over him, peridot eyes reflecting cat-like, the only spot of color amongst the twilight shades of grey. He offered Eugene a hand, which he took without wiping the mud from his own. The cold, damp soil squelched between their palms as Merriell helped him up. “Stick close, then.”
Eugene held on to Merriell’s hand, as they walked on. He didn’t question where they were headed, trusting Merriell implicitly. This too was something that he missed like a phantom limb back in Mobile; Merriell guiding him through the shadows fraught with danger, bringing him safely to the other side.

Merriell stopped near the base of an enormous cypress tree, the trunk rippling out of the stagnant water like some mythical beanstalk, covered in twining, leafless vines.

“Watch your step, there’s candles and shit layin’ ‘round here.” He let go of Eugene’s hand, leaping nimbly onto the roots. He bent down and scooped something out of the valley of grey bark—a candle, it turned out—and lit it with a snap of his fingers. “This here’s an old family shrine.”

Shock and excitement coursed through Eugene, as he watched Merriell meander about, lighting candles and illuminating the mess of animal bones and shards of ceramic vases scattered around the tree. Shrines were a sacred relic of the old religion, used to thank the Mother for her gift of magic. Eugene didn’t believe in any of the superstitious nonsense, but shrines signified a special, familial tradition. His own family had a long history of fleeing witch hunts, and they kept their shrine minimal and dismantled, tucked into a box in a secret drawer in his father’s study. He felt rather touched that Merriell had brought him here.

“Isn’t it dangerous? Having a shrine out in the open like this? What if a mortal stumbles across it?”

“Can’t see how they’d find it. And if they did, how’d they get out?” Merriell grinned ghoulishly, the flickering candlelight throwing shadows like the rosettes of a jungle cat over his tawny skin. “Think you could find your way back from here?”

Shaking his head, Eugene leapt tentatively to the tree roots, teetering on the smooth bark. He imagined that he’d end up in an alligator’s belly without Merriell. He slipped, boot heel cracking through the leg bone of some small critter.

“Jesus, you weren’t kidding about the voodoo cliché.”

“Rumor has it we used to do animal sacrifice. Ain’t had a ceremony here as long as I been alive, so I don’ know if there’s any truth to it.” Merriell slumped against the trunk of the tree, rubbing his cheek against the bark like a cat, eyes half-lidded and filled with green fire. “All sorts here, though. Kinda hard to breathe.”

Eugene approached him cautiously, picking his way through the remnants of old offerings. He felt fine, finding the quality of the air here no different from the rest of the bayou. But then again, he was dark, and the lingering spirits likely saw him as a kindred soul—curious and hungry for Merriell.

“Get your head between your knees if you’re gonna pass out.”

Merriell pushed off the tree, face tilted up toward the canopy. “Nah, just gotta get some air, and I’ll be fine. Gimme a boost?”

Together, they scaled the giant cypress tree, minding Eugene’s injured hand; clambering on each other’s knees and shoulders to haul themselves up into its boughs. This too felt like the Pacific, with its dizzying height, grayscale landscape, and mind-numbing physical exertion. They climbed as high as the branches would let them, until the sharp autumn wind caressed their faces.

Tucked side by side against the main trunk, balanced carefully on the last large branch, cradled by twigs only a little thicker than their arms, Eugene let his magic creep over to Merriell. If the man felt it, he gave no indication, red mouth open and gulping in the fresh air, eyes clear and sea glass green
as he stared off into the horizon.

Eugene closed his own eyes and tipped his head against Merriell’s, delighting when he didn’t move away. And he thought of him; wanting to show him what he looked like through Eugene’s eyes—not crazy or damaged or dumb or hopeless or even sweet—just strong and green. Like the sea for which he was named, like an endless field of wild grass, like the very tree that held them up so high and free.

He whispered wistfully into the soft curls above Merriell’s temple. “If it wasn’t for your magic, would you keep me? And don’t argue, please. Just indulge me.”

Merriell’s hand came up, alighting on his cheek, calloused fingertips rasping through the stubble along his jaw. “You want me to tell you a story?”

Nodding, Eugene nuzzled his face into Merriell’s hand, kissing his palm, pulsing with greed. He craved every apple-sweet word from Merriell’s lips.

“Ever since the light claimed me, I’ve had visions of you, and it burns me up, how bad I want them to be true. I dream that one day we’ll grow old together, and as I’m dyin’ in a hospital bed, you’re holdin’ my hand.”

“Don’t tell me a sad story.” Eugene admonished. “Tell me something happy.”

“Alright, well…One day we got a puppy. Not here, but somewhere and sometime else. A place where we’ve got a house, too. It’s got a yard, big enough for me to have little garden in the back. Anyways, it wasn’t some purebred pup like your dog, Deacon. We got it from the local pound. This lil’ doe-eyed mutt, all fluffy and black with a white stripe down its chest. You kept sayin’ it was wearing a tuxedo, an’ you had the stupidest grin on your face. An’ I don’t remember much more than that ‘cause I woke up real soon after an’ got through half a bottle of whiskey.” Merriell sniffled, shaking at Eugene’s side.

Eugene felt Merriell’s tears, stinging at his own eyes, the grief a bitter ache in his throat. “I can take away the pain, Merriell. You just gotta let me.”

“You don’t get it, Gene.”

“What don’t I get?”

Merriell cleared his throat, but his voice remained rough when he spoke. “Love is pain.”

“It doesn’t have to be. Maybe it is right now, but if we give it some time…” Eugene knew that love mellowed with age, sometimes growing weak but often becoming stronger. The giddiness giving way to something timeless. And Eugene wanted to think that they had something like that already—Merriell’s green love felt ancient, as primal and mysterious as the bayou. The war that had torn them asunder bonded them in an explicable way.

Hope bloomed, fragile and soft lilac, even as Merriell shook his head. He hoped, but he didn’t believe.

“Let’s get back, before the sun sets.”

They didn’t talk, as they made their way out of the swamp and back to the privacy of Merriell’s apartment. Their mouths sealed shut by this tenuous hope; they were close to understanding each other, even if their fate was undecided. When they were safe behind closed doors once more, Eugene wriggled into Merriell’s arms again.
He knew what to do, how to make Merriell see.

Merriell blinked, lost in his thoughts. The bayou had exhausted him, his movements slow and weak. Eugene took advantage of the bleariness, holding Merriell tight and kissing him until he pushed him away.

“Will you stop?” Merriell was surly, but the words were weary.

“Please, let me show you that we don’t have to hurt each other for this to work.” Eugene cupped a hand around Merriell’s neck. He’d tied a bandana around it to hide the bruises while they were in public, and Eugene tugged the square of fabric loose. “Can’t we pretend for just a moment that we’re in love?”

Merriell’s mouth dropped open like he meant to argue, but Eugene never played fair, running a thumb over the bruises, turning Merriell’s protest into a needy whine.

“Let me make love to you.”

Merriell’s breath hitched under Eugene’s palm, pulse jumping. He nodded uncertainly, eyes glassy green, lips quick to become drenched in affection. Eugene drank it all in and poured it right back. He tried, harder than he’d ever tried before, to project exactly how he felt and saw and tasted love onto Merriell.

“Don’t be quiet,” he begged, when they were warm and close once more, bodies wound so tightly around each other that he was starting to forget where he ended and Merriell began. “Tell me how you feel.”

Chest heaving, skin shining with sweat and light magic, Merriell keened and tossed his head back against the pillows. Eugene mouthed at the bruises, glaring and purple on his throat.

“Gene, I—I’m burnin’ up.” And Eugene knew that, could feel how the lightning sizzled over the surface of the sea, making it boil.

“An’ my mouth tastes funny.” Like fresh cut grass, tobacco, and a hot slice of apple pie.

“I love you,” he whimpered, tears streaking down his temples. Eugene brushed them away. “So much I could die.”

With a gasp, Eugene knew that without death there would be no purpose to their love. For better or worse, it had bloomed in moments of loss and would forever be tinged by the fear of it. Love and pain were two sides of the same coin. He dug his teeth punishingly into the bruises on Merriell’s skin, knowing that he craved the sting.

Orgasm hit them at the same time—how could it not, when Eugene had them so intertwined—and Eugene shuddered as Merriell moaned, white noise washing over them like an ocean wave. He dropped his forehead to Merriell’s shoulder, trembling, hoping that this was enough, that Merriell would finally see.

“Do you believe me? Please believe me.” This love was all or nothing. Its presence made the world bearable, and in its absence, Eugene was crushed.

“I’m scared to.” Merriell pressed a hand over his mouth; his jaw clenched tight like he was holding back a scream. Not a yes, but not a no, either.

Eugene grabbed Merriell’s wrist, pulling his hand away from his mouth, and kissed him to sleep.
Eugene was too drained to argue anymore, and he caressed Merriell’s cheek as he went limp. Then he pulled out, both from Merriell’s body and his mind. He laid there for a long while, watching Merriell sleep, running a hand through his dark curls. Merriell didn’t even twitch, knocked unconscious by Eugene’s magic, free from the visions for at least one night.

But Eugene was restless, rolling out of bed to smoke on the balcony, until the lavender sky faded to inky black.
Chapter 13

On Monday, Merriell had work, so Eugene was on his own. At this point, Eugene felt comfortable enough with the bus and streetcar routes to venture out to the university neighborhood and back. Confident that he’d be able to find his way to the Tulane School of Medicine tomorrow morning, Eugene returned to Merriell’s apartment late in the afternoon, planning to read up on cell biology from an old textbook that he’d brought with him.

He ran into Margie, smoking on the steps that led up to the apartment.

“How’s it goin’, Mistah Sledge?” She waved at him lazily, sporting a matching bandage on her hand.

“Been better,” he admitted. “I take it your mother wasn’t too pleased with you?”

Margie snickered. “That’s one way to put it. The way she carries on, you’d think I let a fox into the henhouse. Thought I’d stop by an’ check.”

“Merriell’s still at work. Should be home soon though.”

“That’s fine, it’s you I wanted to talk to.” She stood up, tossed the butt of her cigarette, and trotted up the stairs, beckoning him to follow her. “Come on.”

“You seem to break into Merriell’s apartment a lot,” Eugene commented, as he watched her jiggle the lock with her hairpins. Merriell had given him a spare key, but he kept quiet about it, since Margie was about as fast with her pins as he would have been with the key.

“Lock pickin’s like any skill. Don’ use it an’ you lose it. Bet Merry can’t even do it anymore.”

She walked into the apartment like she owned it, whistling at how much cleaner it’d gotten now that Eugene was around. He couldn’t help but tidy, knowing that Merriell wasn’t in any frame of mind to do it. He’d scrubbed the kitchen this morning, and it still smelled faintly of bleach.

Eugene observed Margie cautiously, as she grabbed two glasses and an open bottle of whiskey from Merriell’s kitchen. He didn’t feel as scared of her as he was of Celeste, but he had little experience with female casters, and their interactions so far had been a mixed bag. On the one hand, she’d cast a spell that destroyed her cousin’s throat without batting an eye. On the other, she’d saved him from her mother. He suspected that most Sheltons hovered somewhere in the chaotic neutral realm—not truly dark, just incredibly animal, uninterested in moral rights and wrongs.

They sat at the table, and she poured a neat measure of whiskey into each glass.

“So, what do you want to talk to me about?” Eugene asked, catching the glass she slid his way.

Margie gulped down some whiskey, a shudder running through her body at the taste.

Warning for some period-typical homophobic slurs.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
“That’s fuckin’ awful. How can he stand this stuff?” She wrinkled her nose and stuck out her
tongue.

“He’s an alcoholic, Margie,” Eugene remarked drily, drinking from his own glass.

The whiskey burned, the flavor sharp with ethanol and little else. Perhaps a hint of charred caramel,
artificial and quickly erased by the sting of the alcohol. Margie sniffed, pushing her glass away as
though it’d offended her. She reminded him of a finicky cat, knocking shit over because she was
bored.

“Just like his mama.” She fixed him with her amber gaze, gauging his reaction. He kept his face
neutral. “Ain’t you curious how she died?”

“Merriell will tell me if he wants to,” Eugene replied coolly.

He felt like he was taking some sort of test, except he hadn’t been able to study, and he didn’t know
the rules, and he wasn’t sure what would happen if he failed.

“Merry ain’t ever gonna tell you, or ain’t you noticed how much of a sore spot she is?”

Eugene tapped his fingernails against the side of his glass. “Bold of you to assume I care.”

Her eyes narrowed, growing imperceptibly yellower, as she leaned across the table. “See, that’s the
weird thing, ‘cuz Maman thinks you do care. An’ I tried to assure her that you didn’t, but she ain’t
havin’ none of it. She keeps sayin’ you want to eat him, but the word she usin’ ain’t like the normal
‘eat’. It’s like…how a starvin’ animal eats, or how a man fucks if he’s real desperate for you. It’s a
word suggestin’ obsession. Not normal at all.”

She settled back in her chair, mouth twisted in displeasure. “An’ I can’t decide if that’s at odds with
what you told me about why Merry loves you.”

“I don’t see how it would be. I’m using his magic to fuel mine. Isn’t that the same as eating it?”

“Yeah, but the more he loves you, the stronger he grows.”

Eugene’s heart stuttered. He didn’t know that. “So?”

Margie smirked. “So, it’s in your best interest to make him love you more. But you can only make
that suggestion, you can’t grow it with more suggestions.”

He opened his mouth to argue but she held up a finger warningly. “Uh uh, I read. You can’t, it’s
against the rules. You may suggest love, but it’s up to you to grow it without magic.”

“An’ that got me thinkin’, how do you grow love? Why, you make them think you love them. But
see, that’s a suggestion in and of itself, ain’t it? You gotta make a mask to wear round them, so they
see you actin’ like you love them. An’ if there’s anythin’ I’ve learned from wearin’ masks, it’s that
either the mask becomes you or you get sick an’ tired of wearin’ it. An’ so I wonder, if you even
used magic to make him love you in the first place, because it seems awful inconvenient.”

Eugene scoffed, rolling his eyes. “I think you’re making this out to be more complicated than it really
is.”

“Nah, actually I think I’m makin’ it simpler. It’s just, what I can’t wrap my head around, is why
Merry would fall in love with a dark caster in the first place.”
“That’s because he didn’t.” Eugene knocked back the rest of his whiskey. “Really Margie, what possible reason would I have to lie to you?”

She pursed her lips, pouting. “What reason do you have to tell the truth?”

She cocked her head, and Eugene imagined that if she had a tail it would be thrashing with anger. “An’ then there’s the way you reacted around all that blood. Ain’t ever seen a dark caster so upset by a lil’ blood.”

“I’m a veteran—we all have hang ups. Your cousin’s a drunk and I have shell shock.” Eugene didn’t like where the conversation was heading.

As he poured himself more whiskey, he asked, “Why do you care so much anyways? Judging by that stunt you pulled with his throat last month, you don’t give a shit about his well-being.”

“But you care a lot,” Margie stated, running a finger around the rim of her abandoned glass. “An’ Maman cares a lot too, which means I gotta care or I get slapped.”

She lifted her bandaged hand and sighed. “She cares ‘cuz all our boys died in that awful war but Merry. An’ she feels guilty an’ mad ‘cuz all those boys’ mamas are still alive but Merry’s ain’t. We got all these mamas with no kids an’ one lonely lil’ boy. Ain’t no one lookin’ after him. Ain’t nobody who wants to, since they’re all caught up in their own grief. But Maman, she owed Aunt Mariana all her life an’ didn’t ever pay up.”

“Owed her for what?”

Margie shifted in her chair, considering. A stray beam of sunlight fell across her face, and Eugene swore her pupils constricted, feline. “Why, the foresight, of course.”

A chill ran down Eugene’s spine and, somehow, he knew.

“Your mother has the foresight?”

“No, only a person with no intentions can freely use that kind of magic. Someone like Merry or his mama Mariana, directionless, driftin’ in the wind. Mariana always had it, but there are spells that can help to channel it. Give it a purpose. Let you aim to see what you want. My mama wanted to know somethin’, an’ she preyed on Mariana’s weakness, her man, and got her to do what she wanted. If they’d done the spell twice, Maman woulda had to pay, but they done it once, so only Mariana paid, and she saw what they were both askin’ after. The sad thing was that Maman wasn’t honest with Mariana about how much the spell cost, an’ when she found out what the real price was it was too late. Merry didn’ have a papa anymore, an’ it was Maman’s fault. Now he don’ have a mama either, an’ that’s on her, too.”

Eugene closed his eyes, focused on breathing. Part of him felt relieved, because Merriell’s fear of his magic was unfounded, based on bad information likely gathered from his hazy, fevered visions. But the realization that Merriell’s own family had indirectly killed his parents settled in his stomach like a stone. Eugene didn’t have a single point of reference for what the appropriate emotional response should be.

“I take it Merriell doesn’t know about any of that?”

“Of course not, an’ you ain’t gonna tell him.”

Eugene rubbed his hands over his face. “I wouldn’t dream of it. I assume his mother drank herself to death?”
Margie hummed in affirmation. “Liver cancer.”

They sat in silence for a long while.

Eventually, Eugene lifted his head from his hands. He slammed his whiskey and poured another. He didn’t know how to deal with this tangential tragedy. He understood the kind of death that happened right in front of you—a buddy catching a bullet in the head or bleeding out from a shrapnel wound, clutching uselessly at their guts spilling out—because you lived through it, felt the effects immediately and were intimately familiar with the cause.

The death of another person’s parents was something totally alien. He felt fortunate to have grown up with both of his and to still have them. His heart squeezed upon the realization that maybe Merriell kept pushing him away, because he didn’t want him to lose his parents. The whiskey soured in his mouth, as he thought of all the things he had as a child that Merriell probably didn’t.

He glanced at his watch. Almost 5:30PM. “Merriell will be home soon. You’d better go.”

“No, he won’t.”

“What do you mean?”

Margie clicked her tongue. “Bennie’s takin’ him out fishin’ for a bit. An’ I ain’t done with you yet.”

—

After stripping and replacing the frayed wires of the old window AC unit, Merriell hefted it up on his shoulder, so Bennie could get on the ladder and screw it back into the frame.

“Hurry the fuck up,” he grumbled. “It’s real fuckin’ heavy.”

He was in a foul mood; tired and achy from lifting old, clunky units all day, dreading going back to his apartment and dealing with Eugene.

They were stuck in some hazy limbo of together but not together, and it was exhausting and entirely Merriell’s fault. He couldn’t wrap his head around the idea that Eugene had found some way to love him. Dark casters didn’t love. By some law of the universe, they existed as an antithesis to the light, and everything the light had, they couldn’t have. So Merriell had love, but Eugene didn’t, even though he insisted that he did.

And maybe sometimes he felt Eugene’s love—his eyes on Merriell soft and thoughtful, careful to give him space, making sure he ate, hurting him in all the right ways, opening him up and pouring himself in, sharing in the way Merriell always wanted—but it couldn’t be. Because that’s not the way the world worked, and Merriell knew better than to think that an insignificant speck of dust like him warranted exceptions.

“Say, Maman wants me to fetch catfish for dinner tomorrow. Wanna help me catch some?” Bennie asked, as they were cleaning up.

“I would, but I’m sure Margie told you that Sledge is in town. Gotta babysit him.”

Bennie sighed, pouting as he packed up their wire cutters and small soldering iron. “Come on, Merry, you ain’t gone fishin’ with me in so long. I’m sure he can take care of himself for a couple hours. Don’ you miss the swamp?”

“Well, sure,” Merriell chewed at a patch of dry skin on his bottom lip. Eugene’s presence grated on
him as much as it grounded him—like a faucet running hot and cold, a sweet and sour sauce, a kiss with a fist. A few hours of catfishing sounded much nicer than sitting tensely in his apartment with Eugene, arguing over whether they could have a loving future.

“Guess it couldn’ hurt. Can we catch ‘em old style?”

“’Course.”

Bennie had inherited Jean’s old truck and, after punching out, they drove to their grandma’s property in Plaquemines Parish. She died a decade ago, but the house and the acres of swamp surrounding it remained in the family. Aunt Ertha, the eldest, lived in the house with her two oldest daughters and their young children. The swamp belonged to anybody with the Shelton name, and Ertha never cared who was coming or going.

“Should catch a fish for her,” Merriell mentioned, crouched in the shallows of the river, dragging his fingers through the sediment along the banks.

As they’d driven past the house, he’d counted at least ten dirty little mouths to feed playing in the yard. “How’d Dorah end up with so many kids?”

Bennie chuckled, searching for fish on the opposite riverbank. “Margie thinks her last beau was one of those Catholic boys. The Irish ones that come in to work the docks, with the wives always carryin’ twins.”

“Didn’ take them Catholics for casters.”

The Sheltons had few rules about who you fucked, the ultimate one being that you didn’t spawn with mortals.

“I’m sure some of ‘em are, or Dorah wouldn’ have bothered with ‘em.”

Merriell’s fingers nudged up against the soft nose of a catfish, and he let out a triumphant shout when it latched onto his hand, swallowing it up into its wide mouth. He used his other hand to grab the fish by the gills and heft it out of the water.

A decent catch, a little over a foot in length and weighing about four pounds. It thrashed in his grip and he calmed it with a spell, not up to dealing with its futile squirming. He splashed his way back to the cooler that they’d set up on shore and tossed it in, its sandpapery teeth leaving a slight scrape on his wrist.

“Hey, Merry.” Bennie dumped his own fish in next to Merriell’s. His magic wasn’t strong enough for the calming spell, the fish’s errant flip-flopping nearly upsetting the cooler. Merriell reached in and ran a finger over its back to still it, careful of the spines on its dorsal fin.

“Is Sledge…well, is he alright?”

Merriell grunted noncommittally, wading back to a spot where he thought more catfish might be hiding. “Don’ worry about him. How’s your girl?”

“Louise is fine. Good. I just thought I’d ask because Margie an’ Maman seem to think he’s dangerous.”

“Any dark caster’s dangerous.” Merriell closed his eyes, one ear submerged in the water, listening for movement. It was getting late, so he had to watch out for alligators, too. His spell, shimmering in the water around them like a web, would do a decent job of deterring predators but there was always
a chance.

“Yeah but... Maman don’ normally worry about you.”

Merriell snorted. “Bennie, I can tell they’re puttin’ you up to this. They’re nosey, like they always are, an’ I ain’t gonna let ‘em get up in my business. You can run home an’ tell ‘em that.”

“You ain’t scared of him or nothin’? He ain’t ever hurt you?”

Merriell plunged his hands deep into the gritty dirt of the river bottom. He wore a bandana around his neck to hide the bruises from Saturday night’s strangling. Of course, there were times he should have been scared, but he’d begged for any pain that Eugene had caused him.

“Shut up, Bennie. You’re scarin’ the fish.”

Weak-willed Bennie kept quiet, as they continued to fish for the next hour or so. They caught five catfish, before Merriell deemed the river too risky to stay in any longer. He could feel the alligators pressing inquisitively up against his magic net, see their wide-set eyes gleaming opalescent in the distance.

As a gift, Bennie and Merriell stopped by Ertha’s porch and handed off the two largest fish to the flock of kids. Bennie didn’t dare speak again, until they got back into the brightly lit city streets.

“I’m gonna break up with Louise,” he stated, like he was commenting on the weather.

“Oh?”

Bennie had been hung up on Louise, this pretty blonde thing from school, since before the war. He remembered Margie mercilessly teasing him about it. He couldn’t remember when they started dating, but he imagined it felt like a long time to Bennie.

First love was a teenage emotion, felt keenly and treasured deeply, driven largely by hormones, so even dark casters knew of it. Merriell could recall the rosy sentiment inspired by his first girlfriend, a Haitian métis with perfect white teeth whose name he’d long forgotten. His stomach twisted with the sudden realization that Eugene was his first real adult love.

“It’s too hard datin’ a mortal white girl. Their world moves too slow for our kind,” Bennie explained. “Her pa don’t much like black people, an’ I ain’t light-skinned enough to pass for any kind of white. Don’ see how we can make it goin’ forward, fightin’ an uphill battle like that.”

Merriell patted him on the shoulder sympathetically. “Suppose that’s true. Maybe you should ask Dorah if she knows of any pretty Irish girls.”

Bennie shook his head. “I don’ want a caster. I just wanna live a normal life.”

“Your mama ain’t gonna like that.”

“Yeah well, we boy Sheltons don’ matter much in the grand scheme of things. She’ll get over it, once Margie starts poppin’ out babies.” Bennie parked on Merriell’s street and exhaled heavily.

“Now, Merry, I gotta warn you—”

“I know, you couldn’ say no to Margie.” Merriell rubbed at his eyes, shoulders slumping with exhaustion. “She’s in my apartment messin’ with Sledge, ain’t she?”

“I’m real sorry, Merry.” Bennie hung his head dejectedly.
Merriell clapped him on the shoulder again, disappointed but not surprised. “Don’ worry about it. You get that fish to your mama before she tans your hide.”

Merriell fully expected to find a bloodbath when he walked into his apartment. Instead, Margie and Eugene stood in front his stove, and the whole room smelled like rich tomato sauce, aromatic and tangy.

Eugene noticed him first, as he leaned back against the kitchen counter, watching Margie stir something in a pot. He smiled fondly, like he’d been waiting all this time for Merriell to come home, and nodded at him in greeting.

“What you two been conspirin’ about?” Merriell asked gruffly, bending down to untie his boots. The treads were caked with mud, and he felt bad walking around with his shoes on since Eugene had clearly swept and washed the floors. The last time they looked this clean had been when his mother was still alive and healthy.

Margie glanced over her shoulder at him, batting her eyelashes innocently. “Conspirin’? Well I don’ know about that fancy word, but I’m showin’ your man here how to cook a proper gumbo.”

Merriell felt his face flush and hid behind his knee. “Ain’t my man.”

“Really? Are pigs flyin’ in the street? Come on over here and taste it.”

Merriell approached the pair slowly. He didn’t like how well they were getting along, and Eugene’s doe-eyed gaze made him uncomfortable. Margie offered him a spoon as he drew near, moving out of his way so he could scoop a bit from the pot.

“What kind did you make?”

“Just shrimp an’ okra. Didn’ make it too spicy neither, since Gene’s delicate.”

Eugene scoffed. “I’m not delicate, I’m just not too fond of setting my mouth on fire.”

The gumbo tasted fine to Merriell, the sauce sufficiently briny from the shrimp and creamy from the okra. He missed the heat, longed to add a touch more cayenne pepper, but he had some hot sauce around here somewhere that he could add to his own helping.

He licked the spoon clean lazily. “Tastes alright.”

“Yeah? Just doesn’t taste right, if it’s not spicy.”

“It’s good, Margie,” Merriell placated, dropping the spoon in the sink as he walked away. He wanted to wash up before dinner.

“Oh, hey!” Margie shouted after him. “Change into somethin’ nice, I’m takin’ you boys out!”

Merriell paused in the hallway. “Margie, I’m not in the mood for your games.”

After a beat of silence, Eugene stepped up behind him, voice low and soft. “There’s no games, Merriell. She’s showing me a nice place to hang out. I’d like it if you came with us, but you don’t have to, if you’re tired.”

Eugene sounded so considerate that Merriell was instantly suspicious, but his curiosity won out. Why was Eugene trying so hard to please him?

“Fine, but I don’ wanna stay out late.”
After dinner, Margie led them about six blocks away from Merriell’s place. The buildings were familiar to him, once home to businesses that had folded during the Great Depression. The old storefronts were painted over, but their history couldn’t be erased.

She took them down an alley stairway, into the dank basement of a squat red brick building.

“Wasn’t this an illegal distillery?” He asked, scrunching his nose at the faint smell of grain alcohol that lingered on the walls.

“Yeah, but it’s a bar now.” She halted in front of a rusty iron door and knocked cheerily.

A man dressed in all black opened it, stepping outside deliberately. “Can I help you folks?”

Margie grinned handsomely at him, turning on all the charm. “Yessah, you know where the pink room is?”

The man assessed them languidly. He stared at Eugene for a long time, then turned his attention back to Margie, itching his nose. “I suppose I can help you find it.”

He opened the door and ushered them in. Then he pointed down the long dark hallway. “Pink’s on the right, an’ there’s bathrooms on the left.”

Music drifted down the hallway, big band jazz that reminded Merriell of the days when he hustled pool and poker. The lights in the pink room were dim, a few bare bulbs dangling from the curved ceiling struggling to illuminate the cavernous space.

As far as Merriell could see, there was nothing particularly ‘pink’ about it—the walls naked rock or crumbling brick, pipes and copper wires streaking overhead. There was a long, coppersop bar along one edge, bottles of liquor arranged neatly behind it among huge wooden kegs. The stage ran nearly the entire length of the room, squat and round at the far end with some sort of runway protruding from the center. Merriell thought that was odd, but the place looked like any other revived speakeasy. Except…

Eugene’s hand brushed against his, fingers tangling in his tentatively. Merriell jerked his hand away. Eugene grabbed him by the arm instead, sidling closer. “Look around, Merriell. We don’t have to hide here.”

One of the last things Merriell had noticed upon entering were the number of same-sex couples in the bar. He could tell from the way they stood, pressed close together in a public display of affection usually seen from heterosexual couples. Mostly women, gossiping around tables or jiving enthusiastically on the dancefloor. But there were some men, too, seated around upturned barrels with their arms wrapped around each other.

“The crowd on weeknights is lousy with lesbians,” Margie explained. “But I heard that Saturday nights are boys only.”

She winked and darted off towards the bar.

“Gene, I’m…”

Merriell could feel himself shutting down. It wasn’t innate homophobia, because he hadn’t been raised to care about that, but some slow dawning comprehension that Eugene was trying to court him.
Prior to this night, their relationship didn’t have a label, born from the desire to protect each other from the horrors of war. All Merriell had ever wanted was to see Eugene safely to the end. Any thoughts of keeping him, of trying to make a life together in the aftermath, had been deeply repressed. It hurt to feel them rising to the surface.

Eugene tugged lightly on his arm. “Come on, let’s get a drink.”

Merriell tucked himself into Eugene’s side, walking so close he was nearly pushing Eugene diagonal. But Eugene remained firm and warm, unfazed by being out in such a public place. His calm made Merriell irrationally angry, because Eugene was the one who’d grown up sitting in a church pew every Sunday, internalizing all the societal rights and wrongs. The rage bubbled up in him as Eugene paid for their beers.

“How come you’re so calm?” He spat, moodily accepting his drink.

Eugene didn’t answer right away, weaving through the crowd to find a free barrel to use as a table. He pulled out a pack of cigarettes and his lighter as he sat down, lighting up to steel himself for the argument that would surely follow.

He took a drag, then passed the cigarette to Merriell. “Sit down, please. I am nervous, I’m just not showing it.”

“They’re here?” Merriell perched on the edge of his stool, leaning over the barrel to whisper anxiously. “They’re here?”

Eugene licked his lips, the only nervous tick that Merriell could discern, and gestured for Merriell to give him the cigarette. Once it was back in his hand, he nodded to himself. “I told my brother about us.”

Merriell’s heart stuttered, blood running cold. “You did what?”

Eugene lifted his chin defiantly. “I know what you’re thinking, but he was fine with it. He wished us well. Said we could visit him in Boston, if we wanted. Together. As a couple, staying in the same guest room and everything.”

“Did you lose your goddamn mind?” Merriell hissed. “Are you gonna tell your parents next?”

“I am.” Eugene’s eyes glittered harshly in the gloomy room, daring Merriell to change his mind. “I won’t tell them about us, but I will tell them that I’m...”

He puffed on the cigarette, blowing the smoke out quickly through his nostrils. “I’m queer.”

Merriell dropped his head into his hands. “Fuck, Gene. Why?”

“Because I don’t want to hide anymore. I’m not ashamed of who I am, and I’m not ashamed to love you. I don’t want to shove it all down, and I don’t want to spend another second of my life without you. Do you?”

“My family don’t give a shit about me or who I fuck! You’ll get disowned!”

Eugene ran his tongue over his teeth, shaking his head. “Let me worry about that. I asked you a question.”

“About what?”
“Living your life without me? Do you honestly think you could do it?”

Pulse pounding in his ears, Merriell gawked at Eugene helplessly. He still struggled to wrap his mind around the idea that Eugene had told someone.

“Look, I know you think that suffering is some payment for your magic, but Margie and I did some research, and we found out that’s not true. Your mother made a mistake, yeah, but it doesn’t affect you. The price has already been paid—she paid with her happiness, so you could have a chance.” Eugene paused, breathing heavy and blinking furiously.

“Are you pretendin’ to cry?”

Merriell lashed out, because Eugene had upended his entire world. He wasn’t sure yet, if he believed him, but he wanted to—wanted to accept that his magic wasn’t going to snatch Eugene from him the instant he gave in and let him stay. That he could have all the warm, green dreams of him and Eugene growing old together.

Eugene slammed his fist down, startling Merriell and several nearby patrons.

“No, it’s—I remember your emotions sometimes, and it’s…” Eugene shook his head doggedly. “You know what, doesn’t matter. What matters is that we can be together, if you want. And I hope you want, because I’ll give up everything for you.”

Merriell stared at him, cigarette and beer long forgotten. He observed the darkness, shining golden in his brown irises, and his neat, auburn hair, recalling a time very long ago now when it shone copper in the tropical sun. He counted the freckles flecked across his nose and cheeks, the soft skin pink with frustration; remembering the taste of sweat on his tongue, how that skin muffled his sighs when Eugene pressed deep inside him. He looked down at Eugene’s elegant hands, splayed on the table, clean and free from calluses, so pale the scars from the jagged rocks of Peleliu had faded.

“Why?”

“Why?” Eugene repeated, huffing with affection and resignation. “Come on, Merriell. I don’t have anymore tricks up my sleeve. I don’t know how else to convince you, if you don’t believe me now.”

There was an amused look in his big brown eyes like Merriell should already know, infer the sincerity of his words from his actions. Eugene’s magic reached out, like it’d done a lot in the past few days, heavy static close to Merriell’s skin raising the hair on his arms and the back of his neck. Weird, but gentle and full of promise.

And try as he might, Merriell couldn’t ignore it anymore.

The color green dripped through his mind, an odd, herbal taste in the back of his mouth. A sensation like the wind rippling through his hair, the sound of tall grass rustling or maybe the crashing of the surf on a distant beach. He didn’t understand it, the sights and sounds and smells that Eugene showed him blurring sweet and sun-drenched, but they made him feel happy. Free. Like opening a window to let fresh air into a cold, dark room.

Merriell placed his left hand over Eugene’s, the willow wood ring suddenly feeling too tight on his middle finger. He did know why—had been too busy wallowing in an illusion of unrequited love to really listen to Eugene’s words until this moment—and the knowledge welled up in him at a dizzying pace. He was used to sinking, drowning, so much so that he could scarcely breathe as the feeling filled him up like a hot air balloon. Pressure building at the seams, warm and lofty, until he floated.

“Okay.” The big band music mellowed, transitioning to an easy jazz melody. He recognized the
tune, but the name escaped him. “Wanna dance?”

Eugene chuckled and nodded, apprehension fizzing under his skin like the carbonation in their beers, reaching the surface and popping with relief. He didn’t quite feel like he used to, the undercurrent tingling like electricity instead of menthol, but Merriell reveled in it anyway.

There was a moment of confusion on the dancefloor, where both of them were trying to lead. Eugene let Merriell at first, left hand cupping the back of his neck tenderly, but then Merriell stepped on his shoes one too many times, not used to dancing with someone with such big feet, and Eugene made them switch. Following embarrassed Merriell a bit, especially when he noticed Margie hanging over some petite blonde at the bar, grinning at them. But he relaxed into it before too long, shadowing Eugene’s movements in a practiced way, muscle memory from minding him in the Pacific flaring up so strong that he didn’t even have to think.

Chapter End Notes

The penultimate chapter...or really, the last chapter. Did it end how you thought it would?
Epilogue: Best kept secret

Chapter Notes

Thanks again to OOOtOOOt for all their input on clarity and word choice! To wrap this story up, enjoy my first ever split PoV chapter.

The Sheltons didn’t celebrate Christmas; mortal gods were never their gods, if they believed in any at all.

When the city of New Orleans sprang up around them so many centuries ago, the family adopted some European customs, but they were a farce designed to dispel rumors of witches in the swamp. They decorated their doors with cedar wreaths, complete with green and red bows. They also gathered—all aunts, uncles, cousins, and relations twice to five times removed—at Aunt Ertha’s house in Plaquemines Parish like a mortal family. Except they assembled on the winter solstice, and not Christmas Eve or Day, to eat food and shout at each other over old feuds. The end of their night culminated in a trip to the bayou rather than in an exchange of gifts, with a voodoo ceremony where they thanked the universe for their magic.

Merriell had not gone to a ceremony since his mother was alive. The thought of going to Aunt Ertha’s without her made him nauseous. His family made a big deal out of blood relation during the ceremony, and he had no one now. He could go to dinner, but only the strongest casters and their children went out into the swamp. He ultimately decided that he wouldn’t go at all, but then Ertha showed up on his doorstep three days before.

Ertha in the city proper was a rare sight indeed—old, thin, and shriveled like a raisin. So steeped in magic and tethered to the bayou that the jaguar’s rosettes on her skin were permanent, but barely visible against her deep complexion.

He invited her in mutely, astonished to see that her daughters, Dorah and Fae, were nowhere in sight. Her gnarled hands clung to his arms as he settled her at his kitchen table, somehow coming up with a cup of tea to serve her.

“Well-mannered, ain’t you?” She mused when he set the tea before her. “Chère Mariana raised you right.”

She beckoned for him to come closer. “Let me look at you, I’m near blind now.”

No magic could reverse the effects of aging, and Merriell knelt on the floor next to her, letting her stroke her fingertips over his face, her big, yellow eyes unfocused and obscured with cataracts. He didn’t remember very much of Aunt Ertha; she was the oldest of his mother’s siblings, and his mother had been the youngest of seven. He thought that maybe she was kinder than Celeste, but that was a low bar to climb over.

“Give me your left hand,” she prompted. He obeyed.

She traced over the base of his ring and middle fingers, able to sense the impression of the ring even though he’d given it back to Eugene. “I wondered when she would give you his ring. She often told me that she saw you wearin’ it when you were older. When you finally accepted her love. I wonder
if she knew she would die before she saw that day."

She released him with a little nod, but Merriell stayed kneeling, head bowed. “It’s time you take your mother’s place at the fête.”

Merriell’s heart leapt into his throat. Male Sheltons were onlookers during the ceremony, never active participants.

“You heard me right.” Ertha touched his chin gently, tipping his face up. “You’re not as strong as me or my sisters, or even pauvre Mariana, and you never will be. But there must be seven.”

Merriell licked his lips nervously, staring into her clouded eyes. “Why not one of the female cousins?”

“You’re stronger than them for now. None of them hate as much as you love. They will, maybe, with time. Now get off your knees, child, and fetch me Mariana’s divining bones if you still have them.”

He did—had them stashed away in a box under his bed with her Tarot cards and silly dream journals. She had written down her visions, but they were in French, so he couldn’t read them. He brought out the bones, sheepishly brushing dust from the faded red velvet drawstring bag. When he put the bag on the table in front of Ertha, she asked him to throw them for her.

“I don’t know how,” he admitted, sitting down next to her at the table.

“You’re magic ain’t something learned. It’s just done,” Ertha admonished, shaking the bag at him.

Uncertainly, Merriell took it from her and tipped the bones onto the table. The clattering hypnotized him instantly, his vision fading to black and fizzling back into grainy static that signified a premonition. For a second, he wasn’t seated at his kitchen table but at a dining table adorned with an ivory tablecloth and porcelain candlesticks in some strange house that smelled like pine. But then he blinked, and the bones ceased to rattle on the table, arranged in a pattern that didn’t mean anything to him.

Ertha set a hand on his shoulder. “Here’s a secret for you—the bones have no meaning, only that which you give them. So, tell me, Mariana’s boy, was that a lucky throw?”

Merriell glanced over his mother’s diving bones, a motley collection of small animal bones, chunks of quartz, wooden beads, and bird feathers. The feather of a yellow finch sat atop a frog skull. Nothing else caught his eye.

—

Christmas was a dramatic season in the Sledge household. His mother preferred to host her family, which was small, just her parents and her recently widowed and childless sister. Despite being Jewish, Junior and Katherine were coming down from Boston, claiming that Hanukkah was not as important a holiday as Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

Normally, Eugene would find his mother’s fretting about the deluge of guests amusing, but this year the whole situation annoyed him.

In addition to the usual Christmas festivities, Eugene and his father performed a perfunctory gratitude ceremony in the woods behind the house on the eve of the winter solstice. Little fanfare surrounded the ceremony, as it was kept extremely private and neither his mother nor Junior knew about it.
When he was younger, Eugene was excited about this special secret between him and his father. But then he started to wonder if there was even a point to it, other than tradition and superstition and the knowledge that such ceremonies had gotten their ancestors killed in the past. However, after four years away from home, he felt like he needed it, the anticipated relief tempered by the anxiety of being discovered.

His mother’s family never traveled on the winter solstice, but Junior and Katherine were arriving in Mobile that evening, and Eugene was getting increasingly worried that he wouldn’t be able to get away since they liked to socialize with him in the evenings. His father assured him that that wouldn’t be a problem, although he seemed nervous, too. But Eugene suspected that his father fretted for an entirely different reason.

Their magical family tree was exclusively light casters—nearly all healers with the occasional empath—and the prayer had been passed down from generation to generation. Eugene knew it by heart and doubted that it was specific to light magic, but he could understand why his father was troubled. They’d made so many exceptions to their ceremony already, what if adding a dark caster was the last straw?

Junior, Katherine, and baby Dorothy showed up just after dinner. Katherine marveled at the immaculate decoration of their home, exclaiming enthusiastically that everything looked just like a set of a movie.

In some ways it did, for Mary Frank and the maid, Lucy, had an unrelenting competition going on with Mrs. Frye and her maid, Tabitha, regarding holiday decorations. This year, the Sledge house was decorated as a delicate and somber winter wonderland; pine wreaths frosted with fake snow and paper snowflakes, ivory tablecloths and ribbons sparkled with silver glitter, porcelain nativity scenes arranged carefully on the fireplace mantel and the dining room sideboard.

Eugene liked it, thought it was fitting for their house to feel cold and desolate.

After putting Dorothy to bed around eight thirty, Junior and Katherine insisted that Eugene join them for a smoke on the back porch. He obliged, accepting another menthol from Katherine, but kept careful track of the time as they drank, chatted, and smoked. The ceremony had to be performed at midnight.

“Pa was telling me you smoke a pipe,” Junior commented, prodding Katherine for a puff of her cigarette.

“I do—Well, I did. I broke it,” Eugene replied, surreptitiously fiddling with the cuff of his shirt so he could check his watch. It was already ten o’ clock. He missed his pipe, since his father nagged him about it less than unfiltered cigarettes.

Katherine tsked. “Why didn’t you write us about that? We could have gotten you a new pipe for Christmas instead of a bunch of books.”

“Honestly, I forgot. Besides, I like books. And you’re not supposed to tell people what you get them for Christmas, Katie.” Eugene smirked as she rolled her eyes, grumbling about all these weird rules she’d never be able to remember. He excused himself politely, claiming that he’d had an early morning and was feeling quite tired.

Eugene slipped into his father’s study to find him seated at his desk, reading by candlelight. His father looked up, silver-rimmed glasses glinting in the soft, yellow glow. “Have they gone to bed already?”
“No,” Eugene sighed, perhaps a tad dramatically. “They’re on the back porch. We should drive around to the other side of the property instead of walking through the woods from here.”

“I don’t know, Gene. I don’t like changing so many variables.” His father shut the book, some tattered old tome, and ran his hands over the soft leather cover.

“It’s going to take us over an hour to walk out there either way. Going the back way, we could actually light the candles, so we can see.”

Edward Sr. shook his head resolutely. “It might be slow going, but we should go the way we always have. Grab the box, and let’s go now.”

Mouth drawn thin with displeasure, Eugene twisted the globe of his father’s Atlas bookend, unlocking the secret drawer under the shelf. His father kept a handful of arcane items inside; old spell books, his great-great grandmother’s cursed locket, and a small wicker box that housed items for the solstice ceremonies. He tucked the box into his jacket, underneath his arm. His father doused the candle, and they tiptoed out of the house.

—

The Sheltons carried beeswax candles out into the swamp, confident that no mortal eyes would spy them on their ancestral land. They had no need for the candles to light their path, keen eyes cutting through the darkness as naturally as a cat’s, instead holding them to attract spirits.

As a dark caster, Merriell never sensed the spirits—doubted they were there actually—as he walked arm in arm with his mother. He remembered vividly how she trembled, holding his arm in a vice-like grip. Now he saw them, blue will-o’-wisps sizzling above the stagnant water and darting towards them playfully. His breath came fast and sharp, and he tried not to flinch when they swooped close, whispering.

The shifting light made him dizzy, magic sweeping hot and cold over his skin each time a wisp drew near. They wanted him to know something, but he couldn’t understand them.

He stumbled, pitching face first towards the packed earth of the path, but Bennie caught him. The boy looked concerned, amber eyes huge and reflective in the darkness, and he clung tight to him as they caught up to the rest of the family. Merriell was grateful; the humid air of the swamp felt too thick to breathe, and the spirits seemed to be sapping the strength from his limbs. He all but collapsed in front of the ancestral shrine, hands and knees digging into the damp dirt, his candle nearly toppling into the water.

Bennie held him upright, hands digging into his shoulders, and Merriell thought he saw his mother’s reflection in lieu of his own, young Merriell keeping her up instead of Bennie. How had he forgotten how badly this ceremony drained her?

—

Eugene and his father meandered through the dark woods for as long as they could before giving in and lighting the candles.

“Christ, I forgot how much this part sucks,” Eugene muttered, grateful for the meager amber glow of the candles. He missed Merriell’s catlike eyes.

His father put a finger to his lips waringly. They weren’t supposed to talk, just supposed to walk silently along the creek in the dark, until they reached the grove that fringed the headwaters. The candles helped some but threw barely enough light to keep them from tripping over tree roots.
More than once, Eugene stumbled and slipped into the creek, biting his tongue to hold in curses. He breathed a sigh of relief when the creek finally widened, old growth forests yielding to a thicket of alder and willow.

As graceful as a pair of blind bears, they squirmed their way into the heart of the thicket, where a gnarled willow wept over the edges of the pond, tips of its bare branches dipping into the still water. They climbed up the stout trunk, into the cradle of its boughs.

Eugene took the box out of his jacket to begin setting up the shrine. He balanced two stubby, pewter candlesticks on the twisted bark, into which they slotted the candles that had guided them through the woods. Then he took out a pair of dolls, made out of sedge stems and twine with an acorn bound in the center, to use as offerings. He gave one to his father and checked his watch. Nearly a quarter to midnight now.

—

Merriell swallowed down the bile creeping up the back of his throat and focused on the shrine. Long, long ago, someone had made it out of a huge alligator’s bones. Aunts Ariella and Celeste set the offerings—spoonfuls of black-eyed peas and rice, a slice of yule log cake, a handful of polished stones, and Mariana’s Tarot cards—into the wide mouth of the gator’s skull.

Its jaw was propped open with its own ribs. Previous seasons’ offerings lay scattered around the skull, shuffled and gnawed on by wild animals.

His aunts passed around the gator’s vertebrae, which they used to hold their candles, and with shaky hands Merriell wedged his into the hole where the spinal cord came through.

The will-o’-wisps were closing in on him, and he sweated, palms feeling icy cold and clammy. Aunt Celeste took his candle from him, nudging his cheek roughly with the back of her hand by way of comfort. He wrapped his arms around himself, shivering, waiting for his aunts to finish setting up the shrine.

Bennie and his other cousins stepped back, leaving just him and his aunts at the edge of the water. And Merriell knew that, he’d heard them retreat, but he couldn’t shake the feeling that someone was standing close behind him.

“À notre Mère.” Aunt Ertha’s reedy voice echoed through the swamp, signifying the beginning of the ceremony. Merriell understood and spoke no French other than these ceremonial words.

“Sur ce solstice, nous remercions la Mère, pour sa direction, pour son cadeau.”

—

“To our Mother,” Eugene’s father intoned, holding the doll in his hands, thumbs pressed to its acorn heart. Eugene joined in on the ceremonial words.

“On this Solstice, we thank the Mother, for her guidance, for her gift.”

—

“Pour qu’elle était si adoré par l’univers qu’elle recevait tel pouvoir.”

“That she was so adored by God that she was granted such a power.”

“Et qu’elle décidait que nous somme digne de tel pouvoir.”
“And that she should see fit to pass that power on to us.”

—

“Nous sommes reconnaissants de vivre dans son ombre et sa lumière.”

Merriell felt fingers carding through his hair, fisting none too gently in the dark curls and wresting his gaze from the shrine to somewhere beyond.

—

“We are thankful to live in her light.”

“We are thankful to live in her shadow.”

Eugene’s father glared at him, surprised that he’d changed a word. Eugene stared back resolutely and continued the prayer.

“To our Mother, we offer these tokens out of gratitude.”

—

“À notre Mère, nous offrons ceux cadeaux par gratitude.”

There was a specter, far off in the bayou, wearing a yellow dress and his mother’s smile.

“À ma mère,” Merriell gasped, eyes rolling back in his head.

—

Eugene and his father poked the acorns out of the dolls’ chests and roasted them over the candles until the hull split. Then they tossed them into the pond.

The oath of silence was over now, and Eugene’s father reprimanded him sharply. “I wish you would have told me you were going to say ‘shadow’ instead.”

“What does it matter?” Eugene tucked the sedge dolls back into the basket.

“This is magic, Gene, not just some silly superstition.”

“If that’s the case, then it would have been worse if I said ‘light’,” Eugene responded harshly. “Because I don’t live in the light anymore, Pa. The sooner you get over that, the sooner we can move on with our lives.”

His father sputtered. “I never said—”

“You don’t have to, I can feel it.” Eugene preferred to ignore his parents’ emotions, but every once and a while he reached out, gauging the sincerity of their expectations.

His mother seemed to be changing over time, resigned to letting him go and do whatever he wanted with his life. His father, however, held on to a permanent sense of failure. That he had failed with Eugene somehow, and if it wasn’t in treating the combat fatigue or in convincing him to go back to school, then it was his magic.

“I’m never going to be light again. Please accept that.”
“How do you—you don’t know that for sure.”

“I do. There was a caster in my company who could see the future. He told me.” Eugene packed away the candlesticks, holding the still-lit candles carefully in one hand as he tucked the box into his jacket again. “And he couldn’t lie to me to save his life, so I have no reason to doubt what he saw.”

Eugene offered a candle to his father, gaze dropping to the ground to avoid the shocked expression on his face.

His father took the candle slowly, steady hands trembling uncharacteristically. “A seer? What did you pay him?”

Eugene climbed down from the tree, mulling over his father’s question. He hadn’t ever asked Merriell to look for something specific. While he had researched enough to know now that Merriell’s seemingly random visions were tethered to those he loved the most, he wondered if his father knew about the apparent frivolity of the sight and the loopholes concerning the use of such magic.

“I didn’t.”

His father climbed down after him, gaping at him, somehow even more astonished than before. “That’s dangerous, Gene! You can’t ask a seer about your future without paying! You could lose your first-born child!”

Eugene laughed and covered his eyes with his free hand. “I’m not having children, Pa.”

“Jesus Christ, Gene! How much did you ask for?”

“No, that—” Eugene couldn’t help but giggle hysterically. “That part’s not on him, that’s on me.”

His father grabbed him by the shoulder. “Gene, what in God’s name are you going on about? You’re scaring me.”

Eugene smiled, placing his hand on his father’s shoulder in return. “I’m never going to get married, because I don’t feel for women the way that I should. And so I’m never going to have children, because I’m never going to be with a woman in the biblical sense. And you don’t have to worry about me paying a price for a glimpse at my future, because the man I asked can’t control his powers at all. He just happened to see a few things about me on a day when I almost died.”

“Gene, I just don’t understand.” His father’s voice was hardly a whisper, faint against the backdrop of insects buzzing in the darkness.

“I almost died a lot.” Eugene patted his father’s cheek, soaking in the sadness and disbelief that slicked his skin like week-old roses, wilting in a vase on a misty morning. “So, I’ve decided I’m going to live my life the way I want. I don’t see the point in making myself miserable, when I’ve already suffered so much. I hope you can understand that.”

He walked away without waiting for a response.

—

Merriell woke up in a stranger’s bed. Eyes still closed, he rubbed the side of his face idly against the pillowcase, frowning at how soft it felt under his stubbly cheek. The sheets too, not scratchy or thin or worn through with holes. Blearily, he opened his eyes and stretched, gasping as his body ached. His lower back and hips especially protested, making his heart race, because the pain in his ass was distinctly familiar, even though he’d never felt this sore.
Staring at the dresser against the wall across from him, Merriell considered whether it was possible that he’d gone out after the ceremony and gotten drunk and let someone fuck him. Some rich son of a bitch, by the looks of that shiny mahogany dresser.

He rubbed at his finger, checking for the absence or presence of the willow wood ring. If it was gone, he was awake; if it was there, it was a vision. He froze; there was a ring. He brought his hand up, rolling onto his back to look at it.

On his finger sat a new wooden ring, reddish brown in color, smooth and undamaged. It whispered to him, not in words but a sensation, like lips on his forehead and warm hands on his jaw. Eugene’s magic, electric but gentle, holding him, keeping him safe. A beacon spell, to ground him if he ever woke up in a place he didn’t know yet.

Merriell got up, wincing with discomfort, and began rummaging through the dresser for clothes. It was organized just like his dresser at home—underwear at the top, trousers below that, undershirts next, and shirts and sweaters last. The clothes in each drawer were of two different sizes, both larger than what Merriell normally wore.

Glancing down at his body, at how it’d filled out somehow, muscles and bones hidden by a thin layer of fat, he chose the smaller of the two and they fit. His hands shook as he dressed, trying not to feel too hopeful. Just because this kind of future existed didn’t mean it belonged to him.

He caught sight of himself in the mirror hanging on the back of the bedroom door. Truthfully, he thought he didn’t look too much older. A few wrinkles here and there, crow’s feet around his eyes and some fine lines around his mouth. Laugh lines, he realized, at odds with the permanent, worried creases on his forehead. He’d grown his hair out some, the curls fluffy and messy atop his head, but there’d been no change to the color or his hairline. Overall, he thought he looked mature and healthy, all traces of the scrawny, twitchy, gaunt Snafu hidden deep within him.

Stepping back from his reflection, he cast a glance around the room, unsurprised to find the furnishings sparse. There was a little bedside table on the other side of the bed—Eugene’s side, he realized—atop of which sat a lamp and a stack of books. An endearing pair of thick-rimmed tortoiseshell glasses rested on top of the books, and Merriell’s heart fluttered at the sight. He wondered if Eugene ever read to him, sweet Alabama twang reciting haughty poetry or a grand fictional scheme. He wanted him to, not for the stories, but for the chance to doze off to his voice or to kiss him with those ridiculous glasses on, feeling the frames press against his own cheekbones.

Dazed, Merriell wandered out of the bedroom and into the hallway. There was a little bathroom and another bedroom that was fully furnished but looked barely used. Unlike his apartment, this one had a kitchen that was a room in and of itself, tiny but spotless, with barely any counter or cabinet space at all. An archway led through to the dining room, where they had set a round table and four chairs.

Merriell ran his hand over the tablecloth, tracing the intricate blue cranes embroidered on the silvery fabric.

Another archway took him into the living room, which could be seen through a little serving window in the wall of the dining room. Merriell could barely breathe in the small, cozy room. One corner was clearly a reading nook, two bookshelves forming a noble backdrop behind a green suede armchair. Two round pillows were placed on the floor in the opposite corner, surrounded by colorful balls and an assortment of chew toys. They had a couch and a radio, and the whole room felt so clearly domestic and lived in and loved.

Sunlight streamed in from a big French door that led out to a wooden porch. Limping a bit, Merriell walked out onto the porch, the grain of the wood comforting on his bare feet. Not a porch, but a
balcony, since there were no stairs leading down onto the grass below, looking out over a lush, green forest. And not private, either, since there were similar balconies extending from the building on either side.

The wind blew towards him and Merriell smelled salt, sea spray carried on a south easterly breeze from an ocean somewhere beyond the horizon. He closed his eyes, tipping his face up to bathe in the heat of the late morning sun.

A clattering from the living room shattered the peace, and Merriell turned to find a scruffy mutt of a dog sprinting from the front door towards him. He’d left the door to the balcony open and it leapt through, tail whirling excitedly as he crouched down to greet it.

He’d never owned a dog before, but this one seemed to love him, pushing its narrow snout into his chest. He ran a hand through its short, mottled black and gray fur, flipping the dog tag on the leather collar around its neck so he could read it. One side had a street address and Eugene’s name, the other had the dog’s name, ‘Jupiter’.

“How can you tell?”

“Well, your eyes are glowing. That’s a dead giveaway, and frankly, you look rather scared of me. Come inside, I’ll get you a cup of coffee.”

Merriell slinked back into the apartment after Eugene, careful to shut the balcony door behind him. Jupiter strayed from his side, bounding over to the pillows on the floor where another dog lay chewing on an antler. The other dog looked a bit like Eugene’s childhood dog, Deacon, white with reddish-brown spots but clearly still a mutt. It wagged its tail when it saw Merriell but didn’t approach him, just stared at him with mismatched blue and brown eyes.

Merriell couldn’t decide if this was his Eugene or not, if he’d slipped into some other timeline instead of further along his own.

This Eugene tilted his head curiously, like he’d realized something. “Oh, you’re not my Merriell.”

“Surprised to see you up so early. Thought I tired you out last night.” Merriell’s head shot up at Eugene’s voice.

Eugene had changed a lot. Still beautiful, still gentlemanly, and really not that much larger than Merriell, but vastly different from how he looked at twenty-two. His hair had lost its red sheen, darkened to a rich brown and receded slightly at the temples. The freckles were faded, too, skin porcelain pale. His eyes weren’t the same either, hazel instead of brown.

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Merriell flexed his fingers in the dog’s fur nervously. “How can you tell?”

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This Eugene chattered, as he poured Merriell some coffee from the half-full percolator on the stove and pointed at a tin on top of the refrigerator.

“You want something to eat? I’ll admit, Merriell usually does the cooking since I’m hopeless at it, but my mother sent some shortbread cookies and we’ve still got some leftover. If sweets aren’t your thing, I think we’ve got some shrimp cocktail from New Year’s. They’re not Gulf shrimp but they’re pretty good.”

He handed Merriell the mug of coffee, a sheepish look on his face. “I’m sorry, if you’re sore. We were in a mood last night, and Merriell wanted it rough—anyways, where and when are you from?”

Merriell face burned with an answering blush, trying not to imagine just how rough this sugar sweet Eugene could be, and stammered. “Uh, N-New Orleans. 1946.”
“Oh wow, you’re so young,” Eugene laughed, shaking his head as he walked back to the living room. Merriell followed helplessly. “Do you know who I am?”

“Sorta. You don’t look like my Gene.”

“Well, that’s because I might not be.” Eugene flopped down on one side of the couch, gesturing for Merriell to sit, as well. He sat down rather gingerly, cognizant of the aches in his body, mind still reeling. This Eugene sounded used to this, probably had a series of questions that he ran through just to assess whatever version of Merriell crossed his path. “Have you kept in touch with him?”

Merriell nodded, sipped his coffee to steady himself. “Yeah, he’s plannin’ on movin’ to New Orleans. Gonna go to Tulane, study biology or somethin’.”

“Are you gonna let him?”

“Yeah. He wants to try, and I love him.” He curled his hands around his cup, wanting desperately to know if they’d ever have this. “I like him to get rough with me too sometimes.”

Eugene grinned and rubbed at the back of his neck bashfully. “I’m glad that you’re working things out.”

Pulse pounding loudly in his ears, Merriell asked, “Does any of that sound familiar to you?”

“Now, Merriell’s asked me not to tell you anything about how we got here.” Eugene’s smile morphed from shy to fond and faintly paternal. “He says you’ll obsess over it, forget to live your own life and make your own choices.”

“Can I know anythin’? Like, where are we and what year it is?”

Eugene stared at the ceiling, lips pursed as he mulled over the question. “What kind of a caster is he?”

“Dark, but he wasn’t always. Are you?”

Jupiter came back over to Merriell, resting its sleek furred head on his knee and whining until he petted it. The anxiety bubbling in his chest was soothed by its presence, and some muscle memory had him scooping the dog off the floor and cradling it on his lap. Eugene frowned, like he didn’t approve of having the dog on the couch.

“I am dark,” he spoke slowly, choosing his words carefully. “It’s 1957, and we live in Florida. That’s all I’ll say.”

He rubbed a hand over his mouth, and Merriell caught a glimpse of the cracked wooden ring on his ring finger. He pressed his face into Jupiter’s pelt to hide his smile.

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“He pressed his face into Jupiter’s pelt to hide his smile.

“Can I know just one more thing?” Merriell’s voice was muffled by the dog’s thick fur. Eugene eyed him suspiciously but nodded. “I’ve had this happen a lot. Me, slippin’ out of my body and into another version of my life. Do I ever learn what triggers it?”

Eugene chewed his lip and sighed. “Merriell doesn’t know why it happens, but I do.”

“Why haven’t you told him? Will you tell me?”

He shrugged, twisted the willow wood ring around and around on his finger. “You’re young, so you probably won’t believe me when I say this, but some things are best kept as secrets. And you
shouldn’t misunderstand, because Merriell knows that I know, and that I will not tell him. But the foresight cannot, should not be controlled, or there’ll be a price to pay. I hope you understand that it’s in my best interest not to tell you what triggers your visions. I rather like being alive, and I’m sure your Eugene does, too.”

“You think it’d kill him, if I found out?” Merriell trembled, clung to the dog so hard that it squirmed out of his grip and trotted away. He missed the warmth, wrapped his arms around himself in an effort to combat the cold fear dripping down his spine. That niggling feeling, like he could keep Eugene safe if only he stayed away, reared its ugly head again.

This Eugene tutted and shifted closer on the couch, slipping an arm around him and rubbing his shoulder comfortingly. Merriell cuddled into him gratefully. “Now don’t go thinking that he’d be any safer without you. A cosmic force knows no bounds, no distance. Quit fretting and enjoy it.”

“I just don’t get it. Why aren’t you afraid?”

Eugene sighed again, grasping Merriell’s jaw and tilting his face towards him. “Love is about what you would do for a person, not how they make you feel. I’m going to kiss you now, and you’re going to wake up in your own bed and go out and buy me a new pipe. Okay?”

He pressed his lips to Merriell’s before he could even think of a reply. He tasted the same, Merriell realized as he yielded to him—salt, wood smoke, and lightning.

—

On Christmas morning, the Sledges sat around the Christmas tree in the parlor, watching Dorothy clumsily open an assortment of presents.

“I understand why Christmas is so popular now,” Katherine commented, tying bows from the gift wrap into Dorothy’s hair. “Kids get so many presents.”

The adults had gotten into the gift giving spirit, as well, primarily exchanging money or books. Eugene had wrapped up one of his Japanese pistols to give to Junior, since he didn’t seem to mind war relics. His grandmother, mother, aunt, and Katherine received embroidered silk handkerchiefs. Thanks to some friends who had renewed their service and were still stationed in Japan, Eugene was able to give Japanese whiskey to his grandfather and father.

“Oh Gene, there’s one last gift for you,” his mother announced, getting up from the couch and darting into the front hallway. She came back with a small, brown package. “It showed up on the porch this morning and Tee brought it in. It’s from…oh, the handwriting is so bad, I can hardly read it.”

Eugene accepted it, quizzically. His heart leapt to his throat when he recognized Merriell’s near-illegible scrawl.

“Who’s it from, Gene?”

Eugene couldn’t speak, the memory of Merriell—his broad hands and tobacco stained grin, his green eyes mischievous under his petulant scowl—strangling him like a vine. He opened the package, intentionally tearing through Merriell’s name and address. Inside was a scrap of paper and a slim, rectangular black box.

The note on the paper was slightly more legible than the address and read: ‘New Year’s 1957. Remind me to buy you a new pipe’. Eugene’s hands began to shake.
Concerned, Junior leaned over his shoulder and plucked the note out of his hands. He cleared his throat, like he meant to read it out loud, but all that he said was: “Oh my.”

“Can I see?” Katherine perked up.

Uninterested in whatever excuse Junior was coming up with, Eugene opened the box and lifted out the pipe. It was a nice one, with a briarwood Dublin shaped bowl and gently curved black stem. The finish on the bowl was smooth and sleek under his fingertips.

“How’s it from?” His father repeated his mother’s question, holding the scrap of paper in his hand and frowning. Junior looked between the two of them, expression guilty and concerned, but Eugene met his father’s stern gaze with a smile.

" My foxhole buddy.”

—

On Christmas morning, Merriell found an envelope on his doorstep. It crinkled underfoot as he walked out the door, already late on his way to Celeste’s for brunch. Swearing, he kicked it into his apartment, thinking it was probably another letter from the VA office. He didn’t think about it the rest of the day, running as he was from one aunt’s house to another. They all wanted to spend time with him now, and he figured the morose holiday season was making them miss their boys. He didn’t mind though, since it kept him from missing his mother too much.

Merriell suspected they knew something he didn’t. It was very likely that something had happened after he blacked out at the solstice ceremony that made them change how they acted around him. They wouldn’t tell him what, and initially he’d been annoyed that they were keeping secrets from him. But then he remembered Eugene’s words, that some things are best kept secret, and he felt settled. Aunt Gloria’s chicken tamales were worth a few secrets anyways.

Later that evening, Merriell stepped on the envelope again. With an annoyed huff, he flipped it over to check the address and promptly dropped it. He hadn’t expected Eugene to send him anything for Christmas.

He picked it up again, futilely dusting off the boot print, and took out his pocket knife to slice it open. He pulled out a letter and a neatly folded navy handkerchief. Cotton, from the feel of it. As he unfolded it, he noticed frogs had been stitched in bright green thread upon the four corners. Such a trivial thing, he thought, rubbing his thumbs over one frog, feeling the beacon spell woven into the thread sizzle with dark magic. The sensation of Eugene’s elegant thumbs sweeping reassuringly over his cheekbones ran through him, akin to ‘I miss you, I’ll be home soon’.

—

Merriell fell asleep with the handkerchief clutched to his chest, leaving the letter to read until morning. Approximately 130 miles away, Eugene stayed up smoking, teeth gentle on the stem of his new pipe. Their love was green in the stillness of the night.

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