I Fall Behind

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I Fall Behind

by HMGfanfic

Summary

All’s quiet on the magical questing front and normalcy can get under your skin. Quentin Coldwater is about to find out how much something as commonplace as a wedding can mess with you—and your lovely, if ill-defined relationship. (Two and a half years post-monster, Quentin and Eliot are learning the beauty and the drawbacks of ‘slowly.’)

**Complete**

Notes

Oops. Thought I was done with this universe, but Q kept calling to me. This piece is turning out much longer and much less fluffy, though it’s hardly over-the-top angst (insofar as I’m a sap at heart and all will be well and better for our boys by the end). But it definitely acknowledges both Q and especially El’s...complexities, let’s say and they hash it out. Doesn't go dark-dark, though.

This story was inspired partially by giving Q his own return to Fillory, but also by the idea that Quentin and Eliot really have a lot (A LOT) to work through. But on the show, they
probably won’t have the time or space, what with the fate of the magical world always in their way. So, I gave the bandwidth to them, whether they like it or not.

Finally, this is technically a companion piece to my other work “Suitcase of Memories,” but I think it stands alone fine if you want to read it on its own.
Part I

The trouble began when two invitations arrived, both addressed the same way:

Quentin Coldwater & Guest

Eliot Waugh & Guest

Technically, a third invitation addressed to Julia and Penny also came, and a fourth to Kady (who immediately ripped it up and said, “I’ve met that dude, like, twice. He can buy his own damn toaster.”) But those pieces of stationary, lovely as they were, didn’t really matter for the purposes of Quentin’s current obsessive rabbit hole. Well, except that apparently, Julia and her now long-term affair with the alternate timeline Penny warranted a recognized status.

At first, Q assumed Todd was being a heteronormative dick. But then he saw he was marrying someone named Ethan Lewis, so that seemed a little less likely. Eliot’s theory was simple: They spent exactly zero amounts of time with Fucking Todd these days and he was famously a know-nothing, so stop reading into it, Coldwater.

“As much as he’s tried to replicate himself in my image, he’s not exactly a master of social grace,” he took a long slow drag of a cigarette as they sat on the fire escape. It was a narrow iron frame, so instead of sitting side-by-side, Eliot rested comfortably below him, leaning back between Q’s legs, his smoking hand perched on his right thigh. He was nearly two years sober, but his nicotine intake had tripled in other intoxicants’ stead.

“It’s a faux pas, plain and simple. He probably wrote ‘And Guest’ for every invitee, even the married ones. Like a Neanderthal.”

Quentin laughed a little at that, partially because it was a funny comment and also because Eliot prescribed Hominid qualities or intent more often than he probably realized. Other recent violations included: People who wore Allbirds sneakers, any pâté that wasn’t fois gras, the sport “hockey,” and writing with ballpoint pens. He’d hate to know how often he repeated the same joke, but it was just so Eliot that Quentin never had the heart to comment on it. And so, even though it undercut the point he was trying to make, he gave into his overwhelming urge to lean forward and kiss Eliot on the top of his head.

In response, El craned his neck upwards to look at Quentin and gave him that smile, the one that was soft, and warm, and gentle, and completely convinced him of goodness in the universe, every damn time. When Eliot first looked at him that way, around when they’d become actual friends and confidantes, Q’s whole body had jerked with the rush of a standstill heart rate. Against all odds and circumstances, he was completely lightning-struck with the thought, Holy shit, am I in love with Eliot?

It was fleeting then. But now, years later, the effect had yet to dim.

“What was that for?” His eyes searched Q’s face, focusing on every feature with a crinkled glow. At Quentin’s shrug, his smile broke open with something briefly joy-like, and he pulled Q’s shirt down to press his own kiss on his lips. Then, settling back, but closer, Eliot rested his head against Q’s sternum and returned to his almost forgotten cigarette.

But one of Quentin’s fatal flaws was that he could never leave a tender moment alone. Despite the timing no longer calling for it, Q offered his well-reasoned thought process that Julia and Penny
never spent time with Todd anymore either, but they were still invited as a unit. Though Eliot’s face was angled away, Q saw his defined jaw muscles tense and ripple, and he adjusted his neck with a tic of annoyance. He brushed him off with a slightly too obvious, “the real mystery is who the fuck would marry Todd” joke, frustration barely simmering beneath. Clearly, the matter was closed.

At first, Quentin chalked the buzzing gnat in his brain up to boredom. For once, there was no great mystery to solve. No lives at stake. The abrupt tabula rasa of their life—as a collective and individuals—was unnerving more than relieving, as much as they all gave lip-service to their gratitude for the breather. Six months into the realization that they had no quest, no mess to clean up, no existential threat looming over all of them, Q feared that it would be the beginning of the group’s dissolution, with nothing to bind them together.

He was pleased that he was only a little right about that. Sure, they saw Margo and Josh less often, since they were still one of the ruling couples of Fillory. And since Fillory was a full-blown world in its own right, they were busy pretty much all of the time. Not with anything magically exciting or really, with anything they needed help with—mostly stuff like tax law, and alliance mergers, and the promotion of civil rights. One small good that came out of the latter was that Margo had personally administered Eliot and Fen’s happy divorce, a Fillorian first, and ruled down other protections for women with an iron fist.

(On the less good side, the divorce also effectively ended Eliot’s last official tie to Fillorian court and society outside of his deep and ever-abiding friendship with Margo. That was a tougher transition, even if he acknowledged it as being for the best.)

But at the end of the day, High King Margo and Queen Josh the Delicious (Margo’s bestowed title; they were as of yet unmarried) were governing officials and governance was often a slow slog. They had simpler access to Earth now though, both via Penny’s traveling and the free-flow of magic by perfecting a difficult-to-make, easy-to-imbibe potion. And there was no world or worlds that would keep Margo and Eliot apart for long.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, Alice was working at Brakebills, having somehow fully regained Dean Fogg’s trust and esteem. And when she wasn’t the hardest-ass teacher any graduate student at their (semi-)alma mater had ever worked with, she spent most of her free time on meditative retreats, centering on her place in the world and the universe, trying to reconcile all that she was. She and Q were more or less on good terms, speaking every now and then to catch up and even reminisce. Unfortunately, no one else ever forgave her, save a somewhat softening Kady. And the one time he tried to get Eliot and Alice together for a Bury the Hatchet brunch in Soho was, uh, well, a disaster of epic proportions, bringing out the absolute worst in each of them.

“I guess you got what you wanted,” Alice leaned her frame over her Eggs Benedict, throwing her words out with fire and spittle. “This was your plan all along. To humiliate me.”

“Don’t flatter yourself,” Eliot responded to Alice’s primal anger with cool, poison civility. “Besides, if I’d actually wanted to fuck Quentin from the start, he never would have even known your name.”

Meanwhile, Q just…sat there, quiet, spineless, hiding behind his hair like a worthless lump on an even more worthless log.

Eliot apologized to him later for his behavior, but balked at the idea of apologizing to Alice as well. She was baiting him, he claimed. She never would have responded to a female lover of Q’s like she did toward the dastardly gay who turned the stalwart heterosexual hero into a dirty deviant of the worst kind. If there was ever a part of Eliot that loved Alice or, hell, even respected her, years of tension, distrust, and devastation on both sides had spoiled the empathy broth. The boy who had once dubbed her Queen Alice the Wise was long gone, as long gone as that girl on the beach was
herself.

Still, true to his word, Eliot never interfered with Quentin’s friendship (or whatever the hell it was) with Alice, even if it was clearly a sore subject. Eliot fully understood the place Alice held in his heart, her role in shaping him, and he even respected it. He could also understand, theoretically, that feelings can remain complicated, messy, and full, even while loyalties lie in new, better places. But that didn’t mean Eliot had to like it.

Ergo, it was Quentin’s duty to respect Eliot’s fair boundary—he was accepting of his journey, even if it included his ex, but personally wanted to stay far the fuck away from Alice. And so, brunch, obviously, never happened again. Q kept the two parts of his life completely separate, as was probably natural anyway.

Otherwise, Quentin found himself happily entrenched with the people who had become his closest friends and, really, his family. He and Kady had a weird sort of bond, one that neither really saw coming. She was brash and dark in all the ways he wasn’t, and she definitely punched him in the face the one time he referred to her as *street smart* (“Condescending dick,” was the last thing he remembered her saying.) But Kady was also loyal, fierce in her protectiveness of what was right, and actually very funny, in a dry, macabre sort of way. When they moved out of Marina’s old apartment and away from their awful landlord, it would have made more sense for Kady to go her own way, since she was still working with hedges, fighting for equal recognition, and generally kicking ass and taking names. She needed no one. But instead, she stayed on with the apartment hunt and eventually claimed her own room next to Q and Eliot’s for no other reason than she wanted to. It was nice.

...It also didn’t hurt that she had been a huge source of support for Eliot’s addiction struggle, during the Dark Days.

And, of course, there was their resident demigoddess. His closest friend for most of his early life was still an incredibly important part of his life now. She was familiar and comforting, but had also grown into her own beyond anything he ever could have anticipated. He was so proud of her and so proud to know her. He’d lived so many lives at this point, both known and unknown, that it was hard to keep track, but the one constant was always, always Julia. Quentin wasn’t actually sure what was going on with her a lot of the time, since she spent intermittent days, weeks, months traveling through worlds with Penny to perform feats of magic far outside mere comprehension. But in many ways, she was the same person that he’d always known, and sharing an early morning cup of coffee with her, just the two of them, was a favorite ritual.

(Like he said, Penny was also there. But no version of Penny liked Quentin and no version of Quentin liked Penny. He was happy for Julia’s happiness, but that was about it. The end.)

The new apartment was much smaller and less grand than Marina’s. But it actually felt like home, with all their personal touches coming together in a cozy hodge-podge. Of course, Eliot had the, uh, occasional strong opinion about the aesthetics of their living space, but even he was much less of a tyrant about it than anyone guessed on move-in day. He had bigger things to worry about—namely, his sobriety and the management of his PTSD—and he’d also softened into a somewhat more flexible person, one who almost always played well with others, and who would sometimes live and let live, even in matters of interior decorating.

This was at the front of Q’s mind, the morning of the wedding. He and Julia sat drinking their daily coffee before the sun made its appearance. She had started keeping the communal coffee grounds in a kitschy, turn-of-the-century chicken cookie jar. There was a time Eliot would have literally smashed the atrocity on the tile floor with a blasé, “Oops.” But the other day, when he first saw it in passing, he furrowed his brow a little, but then simply shook his head and walked away with nothing
more than an slight disapproving sound from the back of his throat. If that wasn’t personal growth, Quentin wasn’t sure he’d ever seen it before.

“Yes, he’s definitely grown,” Julia was pursing her lips and clutching her mug tightly between her delicate fingers, choosing her words carefully. “And you’ve been a really good influence on him.”

“He’s done the work himself, Jules.”

“Hey, I know that. I’m obviously Team Eliot, here,” she said, putting the mug down. “He’s dear to me. But first and foremost, I’m Team Quentin and I don’t like that you’re worried.”

“It’s not Team Eliot or Team Quentin,” he said, pressing his finger into the kitchen table for emphasis. “It’s Team Eliot and Quentin.”

“Right,” she looked away, sucking in her cheeks, slowly nodding her head up and down.

“What?” He knew her well, and she was holding something back. Well, really, she was telegraphing that she was holding something back, specifically so Quentin would ask her what she was holding back. One, two, step. It was a tango he knew well and still found irritating.

“It’s just…you couldn’t sleep because of that invitation thing, right? And you’re not sure why it’s bothering you?”

“Excellent recap.”

She flipped him off with a sisterly pulled face and hit his arm, “Well, can I ask a possibly insensitive question then?”

“Could I stop you?”

“Are you guys a couple?” She cast her eyes downward, tracing circles on the golden maple with her tattooed fingers. She always looked like she was tutting, even in relative stillness. “Like, a for-real couple?”

“I mean, obviously,” Quentin said, leaning back in the chair and crossing his arms. It wasn’t an insensitive question; it was an absurd one. He and Eliot lived together. They shared a room, a bed, a book collection. They were inseparable and openly affectionate with one another. But he wasn’t sure why defensiveness was boiling in his chest, rather than laughter. Then, it roared as Julia widened her eyes and brightly nodded, clearing her throat without eye contact.

“What was that look?” He didn’t really want to know the answer, but his chest was squirming and hotly uncomfortable at Julia’s feigned cheerfulness.

“Nothing!” She chirped, her voice too high, and Quentin stared her down, his face all stern lines. Julia swallowed. “It’s that you’ve both been saying that you’re taking it slow, day-by-day, giving it time, you know, all that. And it’s been admirable, really, especially after everything.”

“Thanks. I mean, I think it’s been really mature and healthy,” he nodded and gripped the table, holding onto this rationale for dear life. Julia scrunched up her face and smiled falsely, his least favorite word on her lips. He finished for her: “...But?”

“But it’s been over two years. And yes, I know he’s in recovery and that the first year or so was... difficult. For both of you,” she was speaking quietly, looking up at Quentin from behind her long
lashes. “But at what point does it become not so much realistic clearheadedness, but straight up commitment phobia?”

“I’m extremely committed to Eliot, Julia,” Quentin’s voice was a warning, but she responded by simply tilting her head and laying her hand on top of his.

“I’m not talking about you, Q,” she said, quietly, kindly, devastatingly.

And there it was. Quentin mumbled something or other to get away from the table, and trusted that Julia understood. The question of labels and definitions never really concerned him, and definitely concerned Eliot even less. They worked well together, they were building something slowly—as discussed, as promised—and most importantly, they were fucking happy. At least, they were mostly happy. Most of the time. Those other times, the times that Quentin typically pushed down because they weren’t useful, or—or helpful to analyze, a large blanket of uncertainty twisted around him with no clear recourse.

Eliot was charming, kind, loving, open, brilliant, and way out of Q’s league, in this or any other world. Still, Eliot loved him, wholeheartedly. Quentin knew this. The love wasn’t up for debate.

But at the same time, Eliot was morose, and spiteful, and dealing with demons that still crawled through every particle of who he was. He was distant. Sometimes, his gaze lingered too long on the horizon, or he’d pull away without warning, physically or emotionally or in every way that stabbed Quentin’s gut and heart in tandem. He would escape to Fillory, to be with Margo, or he’d make a portal to escape to Paris, just to wander the city, alone, always alone. And that’s literally how it felt—like Eliot had to escape. And Quentin felt every kind of inadequate.

The third time Eliot disappeared and then returned, jauntily, like he had been gone two hours instead of two days, Quentin was tired of bottling everything up. He slammed doors and worked on mastering new levels of his discipline with fervent, angry focus. Still, Eliot had the audacity to walk over later in the afternoon and drape himself over Q on the couch, as though nothing had happened and like Quentin hadn’t been sending him a very clear, Hey, what you did sucked message the whole first few hours of the day. Without much thought and maybe a touch too vigorously, he shrugged him off and walked to the kitchen, with the plausibly deniable aim to put away dishes.

“What’s with you?” Eliot asked, pulling himself up, like he couldn’t possibly guess.

“Nothing. Um, nothing,” Quentin said, tightly, refusing to look at him and busying his hands with a brillo pad scrubber. “It’s fine. Whatever.”

In his periphery, he saw Eliot pull his lips together along with his eyebrows. Then he laughed, a soft sound, like a whistle. He walked up next to the sink and dipped his mouth dangerously next to Q’s ear.

“You know, you’re never more attractive to me than when you’re sullen and passive aggressive,” he said, daggers whispering on his lips.

“You are definitely not allowed to me mad at me right now,” Quentin shot back, which only made Eliot laugh harder, the sound moving to a harsh bark. Fucking infuriating, Quentin thought, stepping back and taking in the whole of Eliot, standing nonchalantly in the kitchen, looking at Quentin like he was the one who’d erred, like he was who had kept the person he loved up for two goddamn nights, worrying about where the fuck he was.

“Allowed?” Eliot was smiling, but his eyes were enraged.
“You know what I mean.”

“No, I don’t. So if you have something to say, then fucking say it, Coldwater.”

“You can’t just disappear, El,” he said, slamming a metal pan into an open drawer. “I-I-I didn’t know where you were, I didn’t know if you were safe, I didn’t know if—”

“You absolutely knew I was visiting Margo.”

“For the afternoon. Then, fucking 48 hours passed. And I couldn’t reach you. Penny was off with Julia and I had no access because you took the last of the potion along with you.”

“My plans changed. I was fine. I’m here now, that’s what matters,” Eliot held the bridge of his nose between his fingers and shook his head. “I have to be able to do my own thing, Q.”

“I think I’ve hardly prevented you from your much-needed freedom, so don’t throw that bullshit at me, like I’m somehow suffocating you,” Quentin said, but it was too late. Eliot was already retreating, pulling his gaze away and sighing, tapping his foot toward the exit. “Sometimes I think there’s—I think there are some things we need to address, that, um, with everything, all the fucking trauma and, and, and the fast pace of our usual life, that we haven’t really been able to look at in any kind of real way.”

“What, so we should hash it out in couple’s counseling?” Eliot didn’t roll his eyes, per se, but the intent was there nonetheless.

“You say that like it’s a joke, but therapy, with, you know, the right therapist, it can really help in situations like this.”

“Of course it was a joke, Quentin. Jesus.”

They didn’t really talk for the rest of the day, avoiding each other and stomping around in their own accord, keeping to their own very separate, very distinct rhythms. Quentin busied himself with errand work, spell work, and work-work, for a big project due over the next few weeks with the shadowy Magicians circle that was paying him for mendings on scratched dollar coins. Weird as the job was, it paid well and it successfully kept his traitorous brain from focusing on Eliot. He almost didn’t fall apart at all, almost kept his shit tightly together, and actually didn’t even cry fucking once.

At night though, Q got into bed and faced away from the door, wrapping himself tightly in the flannel comforter. His brain immediately turned on him, and he had to work double-time on his meditations to drown out the angry voice in his head, relentlessly confirming the worst parts of himself in grotesque detail.

But then, like an instant balm, a warm and familiar arm wrapped tightly around his abdomen, and crawled and cuddled into their shared bed. Immediately, Quentin’s brain quieted and he vaguely hated that Eliot had more control over the voices than he did. His brain went fuzzed though, when Eliot pressed himself fully against him, kissing the back of his neck, his jawline, all along his cheekbone, and to his ear and hair.

“If I’m going to be gone more than a day, I will try to let you know,” he said, lips against Q’s temple. “But if I fuck up, it’s because of my shit, not yours, okay?”

“Okay,” Quentin said, hoarse and heartsick. Eliot buried his face in the crook of his neck and pulled him even tighter against him. Q responded in kind, entwining their fingers, and Eliot sighed with a mix of contentment and relief. They both fell asleep. They also never spoke of that fight again, and Quentin tried his best to pretend that the niggling fear in the pit of his stomach hadn’t steadily grown
into a malignant tumor of self-loathing and insecurity. Months passed, and Eliot fucked up more than once, and then the invitations came, and then the morning of the wedding and Julia at the breakfast table.

And there it was.

Quentin brushed his hair back and secured it away from his face with a ponytail holder, his formal hairstyle-cum-battle armor at the ready. Opening the deep black case on the windowsill, he rummaged through Eliot’s myriad rings, watches, broaches, and pocket squares, in vain search for his one pair of humble cufflinks. The black tie wedding ceremony began at 7pm sharp, and he and Eliot were tasked with meeting Fen beforehand to ensure her safe passage, both from Fillory and then throughout the city. Honestly, Quentin had forgotten that she was actually once pretty close to Todd, maybe closer than anyone else in the group was. But it was equally possible that he was just completely self-absorbed and never realized that the bonds forged outside his most immediate ones were equally important in their own right.

In any case, his cufflinks were definitely nowhere to be found within Eliot’s haphazardly stored treasures and he looked ridiculous with his tux sleeves wide open around his wrists. He could have thrown together a little spell to put them together, but that particular type of tying-cast actually required more focus and re-upping than he really cared to enact for a party. A super meaningful party, for Todd, for sure. But a party. The old-fashioned way sometimes made more sense (said Quentin Coldwater, circa six years ago, never.)

“Shit,” he muttered under his breath, closing the case and ducking down to check the floor for the errant studs. He hadn’t actually worn them since Alice’s now irrelevant funeral, but he’d seen them when they moved in, so he knew they had to be somewhere. He briefly considered that Eliot might have thrown them away, but that wasn’t really something he’d do. He much preferred to tease Quentin for his a-stylistic choices, rather than actually trying to change them.

*Speak of the devil and he appears*, he thought with a grin as Eliot walked through the door, fussing with his bowtie. Naturally, El’s tux was on a whole other level—impeccably tailored and deep green with an iridescent stardust pattern, finished off with deep purple shoes in alligator leather. Hardly your standard issue pallbearer uniform. His short dark curls fell down to his cheekbones, lazily styled in sharp contrast to the fastidiousness of the rest of his ensemble. Quentin looked down at his own dull black tux and stark white shirt, his shiny black rental shoes. He wasn’t sure if he felt more dazzled in Eliot’s presence or underwhelmed by his own. Eliot, though, stopped and looked at Quentin, that soft gaze creeping over his face.

“Well, don’t we clean up nicely,” he said, charcoaled eyes shining. Quentin blushed and shrugged.

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“No, sorry.” He didn’t sound all that sorry. “I have plenty you can borrow.”

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“Yeah, uh, no thanks. I’m pretty sure even one pair of yours costs more than, like, all my clothes combined.”

“Probably,” Eliot laughed and walked over to the case. He pushed aside a peacock broach and an
Yves Saint Laurent pocket square (it really said a lot about his time spent with Eliot that Quentin recognized the designer of a plain yellow piece of silk on sight), before picking out two small pieces of silver and handing them to him.

“If you insist on accessorizing like a pauper rather than the prince you are, these will keep you incognito.”

Quentin rested his hands on top of Eliot’s open palms and the tastefully simple cufflinks, and thanked him with a brief kiss. Eliot smiled into Q’s mouth and flipped their hands over, pushing the studs into his palms with a squeeze.

“You can have them,” he said, turning back to the mirror on the other side of the room, readjusting his tie so that the flares were perfectly dimpled. “Yours were nickel and that’s bad for you.”

“I think only if you have an allergy,” he couldn’t help but correct.

“We all have an… existential allergy to nickel, Quentin,” Eliot said, never literal, per usual. “Can you make sure my collar is over my bowtie in the back?”

Quentin brushed his hands over Eliot’s neck and pressed down on the crisp silver lines of the formal shirt. A tiny hint of Eliot’s patterned tie peeked out stubbornly from its rightful place and he tucked his hands underneath the collar to push it back. Eliot nuzzled the side of his head lightly into Quentin’s forehead as he worked, overwhelming him with the scent of aftershave and smoke.

“So Todd’s getting married. I can’t believe that. Are we, like, even grown up enough to go to weddings yet?” Quentin said into Eliot’s neck. “Weddings of people’s own volition, I mean. Earth-style.”

“Yes, it’s very hashtag-adulting,” Eliot craned his head behind him to try to look at his back and approved Quentin’s workmanship with a gentle pat on his hand. Then he tapped Quentin on the shoulder to switch places, and he double checked the same issue for Q. “What I can’t believe is that we’ve lived long enough to see a friend get married. Of their own volition. Earth-style.”

Quentin’s mouth went dry and swallowing was difficult. Eliot sometimes threw stuff like that out so casually now, like he was trying to make the trauma of the past few years actually…casual. Q respected it as a coping mechanism, but couldn’t admit that he’d gotten to that point himself yet.

“Though I must say—and it speaks to our bond that I can confess this to you, deep in the privacy of our sanctuary,” Eliot took a deep breath, resolute in what he was about to share. “I’m happy for him.”

Quentin leaned back, pulling Eliot’s arm around his waist. In turn, Eliot rested his chin on his shoulder and they caught eyes in the mirror.

“You’re really brave, El.”

He felt Eliot’s laugh rumble and resonant on his back and they both smiled, bright and wide, locked in one of those quick, perfect moments before Eliot sighed and turned Q out of his arms.

“Todd may be the fucking worst, but he’s also, you know, sweet or whatever. A good guy. And I hope this Ethan is too. Todd,” Eliot swallowed thickly, hating himself. “...deserves it.”

“Wow, that’s definitely the nicest thing you’ve ever said about him. I’m sure he’d appreciate it if you wrote that in, like, a card or something.”
“But if he thought he gained my approval, even in a small way, what more would he have to live for?”

“Yeah, basic decency, fuck that,” Quentin said, teasing, and Eliot kissed his forehead in time with a push on the shoulder, before grabbing his formal overcoat from the apparently completely necessary hooks he’d installed by the door (“You’d have me keep my outerwear in the closet?” He’d asked that day, incredulous at Quentin’s simple suggestion.)

Eliot’s warmth away from him, Q felt the cold rush of that uncertainty, that unease creep up his spine, dizzying and demonic. He tucked his hands in his pocket and rocked back and forth on the balls of his feet, trying to sound as relaxed as he could.

“Speaking of cards, do you want to add your name to mine or...?”

Eliot froze for a moment, staring straight ahead. He slowly closed his eyes, his mouth strangling for words in a way Quentin didn’t exactly recognize. Then, he blinked and turned his focus down to his coat, slowly buttoning each silver circle with an unnatural meticulousness.

“No, I’m good,” he said, airy, detached, still not looking at Quentin. “I have my own, along with a lovely little gift that I’ll be sending to their address for arrival after the honeymoon. I’m not a—“

“Neanderthal,” Quentin finished for him, hoping he hid the anger on his tongue and the sinking of his heart well. “No, right. Of course you aren’t.”

Eliot patted his closed coat and cleared his throat, and grabbed Quentin’s hand, pressing a too-hard kiss on his knuckles. They had to rush, he said, because they had both a Fillorian portal and a B train to catch. Quentin didn’t resist, letting Eliot pull him along and trying to calm the ominous thud of his anxious heart.

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tbc.
Quentin attended three weddings in Fillory.

The first was Eliot’s wedding to Fen. In the midst of the goings-on with the Beast and silhouetted with Eliot’s devastation and crisis of conscience, that particular ceremony was more like a lively funeral dirge than a joyous celebration. At the time, Quentin’s focus was split: One, on how the fuck they were going to overcome the obstacles they’d failed thirty-nine times prior. Two, on how painfully he could drill holes into the backs of Alice and Penny-40’s heads with his eyes. So he didn’t really have the wherewithal to take note of the surroundings and his recollection was mostly like a blurred polaroid.

There was fire and a collective of ribbon dancers, and Fen wore a green dress. One thing he remembered clearly was that her appearance was different in the glow of the evening; earthier, more elven, less the sweet innocence and softness she embodied after moving to Whitespire. Perhaps it was the foreshadowing of her true inner regal ferocity, or maybe Quentin just had a weird and shitty memory. Either way, the truth of Julia’s summoning, the forging of the knife, Alice’s power, and all the subsequent murders and betrayals took faster and greater stock in his mind. Eliot's first wedding was merely a strange, small thread in the intricate tapestry of their lives.

Then, there was his own first wedding, to Arielle. Quentin harbored incredible guilt about his wife, both then and now, even as her memory felt more like a lucid dream than a fully realized part of his life experience. He felt especially guilty when he compared his relationship with her to his relationship—then and now—with Eliot. She was the kindest person, the best mother, and she deserved someone entirely more devoted, in life and death, and even universes apart.

It was in the evening, of course, after sunset. Eliot had enchanted the trees with small lights; his peace offering to show support of the union. Arielle wore pale blue and she was so sweetly beautiful, Q’s breath still caught to think of her. Their few friends and neighbors from around the hamlet all gathered, and they feasted and danced until morning. Eliot, though, normally the party prince, avoided the reception and worked on the Mosaic alone.

And that made Quentin’s stomach churn all the more, because what he remembered most vividly had nothing to do with his actual wedding, splendid, whimsical, and meaningful as it was. After Quentin and Arielle made love for the first time, and after she went to sleep, early in the morning, he didn’t actually stay in the bridal suite, holding his beautiful, kind, wonderful wife in the bliss of martial aftermath. Instead, he went out to the front yard to join Eliot in their quest and spent stolen, peaceful time with his closest confidant… and soul mate.

Quentin never touched him while he was married, but the betrayal was there nonetheless.

(He learned to live with the guilt more than forgive it in himself. And sometimes that guilt lived deep in the crevices of his soul, where it compounded in a vicious cycle, like a snake eating its own tail.)

The last, of course, was his and Eliot’s. It wasn’t ordained, since only royalty could take a same-sex spouse, per tradition. They exchanged rings, privately, in the forest, at the end of their favorite walking path. They’d already been together-together for five years, but the ritual mattered to teenaged Teddy and so the three of them woke one morning and took a stroll. Eliot surprised them both by presenting the golden bands that he’d forged himself, without magic. So in the stillness of the morning, spontaneously, Quentin and Eliot promised themselves to each other, forever. It was intimate and perfect, and the memory wholly gutted him whenever it caught him off-guard.
But none of this was the point of his reminiscence. He’d become a master of compartmentalizing and tonight was no different. He blinked and forced himself to be analytical. The point was actually that none of the weddings he’d attended, even in Fillory, featured much, if any, magic.

So he was more than a little awed when they walked through a dumpster-shaped ward in Central Park West and into the grandest entryway he had ever seen, full blooded neo-Italian Renaissance style. Clearly, either Todd or Ethan’s family had money and magical connections, because the sky or ceiling or… sky-ceiling was enchanted with swirling milky ways and supernovae, occasionally spelling out the grooms’ names. Finery in golds and sapphire draped the floors and the trees, the walls and the ocean. (Yes, there was an ocean, and a beach with tiki torches.) Chandeliers danced in the crystal air and dazzling birds, glittering and ephemeral, swooped in choreographed duets, leaving trails of light wherever they flew.

Food from all over the world was laid out in sumptuous presentation and champagne waterfalls descended from the air. At the front of the room, a silvery altar shone, rising above the crowd, and a full orchestra played to make Mozart himself weep. And all around the perimeter, exceptionally good looking Magicians wearing black uniforms tutted in unison, keeping the enchantments strong and steady.

Quentin had seen a lot of magic in his day, but what Todd and Ethan put together was something completely beyond what he had ever experienced or even thought was possible in the world where most of magic’s source came from suffering or pain. Hell, it was even beyond the ostentation of Alice’s parents’ home, weird and uncomfortable as that shitshow was. Imagining Stephanie’s sickly green jealous reaction made the spectacle all the more appealing.

Next to him, Eliot was silent and unreadable, his guarded eyes slowly taking everything in with an apparently disinterested disposition. Behind Quentin’s stupefaction, he briefly wondered if El was thinking about his failed nuptials and wedding plans with Idri. As much as he’d had mixed feelings about Eliot taking a husband at the time, he saw firsthand how much he’d cared about perfecting the event. Margo and Josh called him Groomzilla and, yeah, he was, but only because he was passionate and excited and effervescent. The best of El, the worst of El, all at once. And it really sucked that it fell apart, even if that thought went entirely against Q’s current self-interest.

Hundreds of white lights spiderwebbed to present the ceremony chairs, and Quentin was dazzled away from his train of thought.

“The hula dancers are definitely…something,” Julia said, looking over at the beach side of the amorphous venue with a neatly ticked eyebrow. “If I ever get married, I want it to be far away, in a beautiful city rich with history. San Miguel de Allende, Cusco, Sevilla, wherever. With no one but my closest friends in attendance, small enough to share a single bottle of champagne.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Penny said, wrapping his arms around her and kissing her ear.

“Are you two going to be cute all night?” Eliot handed his coat to one of the working Magicians without sparing a glance. “Because you should give us fair warning.”

“We’re always cute,” Julia said, with a small pout, followed by a giggle and kiss on Penny’s cheek.

“Gross,” Eliot said, face blank and voice monotone. Then he nudged Quentin, who had been standing starstruck during the exchange, still feeling the natural high of the sheer velocity of magic in every molecule. “You with us, Q?”

“Um, yeah,” he said, a little dazed. “This is just…”
“Wow,” Fen said, breathlessly, also staring up at the sky-ceiling. “I always knew the Large Apple was magical, but this is…”

“Incredible,” Quentin smiled at her and they both laughed, nodding, and Fen held her arms out and spun around.

“Well, there’s no accounting for taste,” Eliot said, but he was half-smiling, maybe a little charmed by their enthusiasm. “On that note, I’m off to find the nearest Perrier, unless we’re dealing with a bunch of godless San Pellegrino heathens.”

He started to step away, but then backtracked, ever the consummate host, “May I grab anything for anyone else?”

Julia held up her hand in silent, polite refusal, but Penny nodded, barely paying attention. He was the distracted one now. But instead of a sweet awe overtaking him, his eyes were darting around, like he couldn’t believe where the fuck he was in all the worst ways. To say that Todd’s wedding choices were not aligned with Penny’s style or interest would be like saying that Quentin would feel at home at a private equity convention run by the bro-iest of finance bros.

“I’ll take a beer,” Penny said, his brow furrowed, dark eyes focused on the llama in a sombrero that had just entered their frame of sight. Eliot blanched for half a microsecond, before recovering to his usual state of vague amusement and indifference.

“Non-alcoholic,” he said simply. “I’m not a masochist.”

“Oh. Sorry, right,” he looked genuinely contrite and bit his lip as Julia squeezed his forearm a little too hard. “Then, uh, nah. I’m good.”

“I’ll take one of those night-dark fizzing drinks! The one that tastes sweeter than honey and makes my brain feel alive,” Fen said, her wide eyes gleaming with possibility. Eliot smiled warmly and rubbed her back as he passed her, promising her a Coca-Cola as soon as possible.

Joining him, Quentin staggered a little when they reached the bar. He gaped at the acrobats mixing cocktails, glasses and liquid flying through the air with otherworldly grace. One of the mixologists was an herbalist, and she placed a seed in Eliot’s water. A fresh sprig grew to the top, imbuing every bubble with a pure, concentrated taste and aroma of mint. Eliot reluctantly admitted that it was delicious, and Quentin felt more happiness in magic than he had in months.

Despite the trappings of the venue, the ceremony was actually simple and sweet. After the grooms’ entrance via large and loud Mardi Gras-style parade (“Pick a theme,” Eliot said, impatient), they stepped off their elephants and took each others’ hands in front of the hundreds of people they’d met and known and loved throughout their soon-to-be-shared lives. The wedding party’s voices were magically amplified and there were certainly more fantastical elements throughout the minister’s first speech, including fireworks and a choreographed magical flash-mob. But what struck Quentin most was how none of it seemed to matter to the two of them. As they stared into each other’s eyes, there was no one else in the room. It made his heart glow and lurch, just a little bit.

By the mid-point of the service, Todd was crying, Ethan was crying, and—surprising Quentin the most—Josh Hoberman was crying, as he stood up next to Todd, acting as Best Man. He hadn’t seen Josh in a few weeks, since the last time he and Margo had graced the apartment with their indomitable presence. Well, with Margo’s indomitable presence. Josh was always purely along for the ride, and happy to be so.

“Is Margo here?” He whispered to Eliot, even though the answer was obvious since she hadn’t come
running at El as soon as they entered the building, like a drought victim to a tall glass of water.

“Fuck no,” Eliot quietly laughed. “I may be a soft touch, but she wouldn’t be caught dead at Todd’s wedding.”

“But I didn’t even know Josh knew Todd?” He leaned in closer, his cheek against Eliot’s, as to not cause a distraction from their conversation. “Should I have known that they know each other?”

“That would require you to give a shit about something no one could reasonably give a shit about. Don’t worry.”

Dissatisfied with that answer, Quentin leaned forward, his hand on the elaborate white chair in front of him. He tapped Fen on the shoulder.

“Hey, Fen,” he started, but stopped when she spun around and revealed her mascara-soaked face, wet with fresh tears.

“Shhh!” She said, pulling a finger to her lips, admonishing. “This is...the most beautiful thing...I have ever seen.”

“I was just—“

“Don’t ruin this for me!” She sharply smacked him right on the forehead.

Startled, Quentin muttered a signature, “Um, okay,” and Fen huffed, turning back to the ceremony, an ethereal glow forming around her. Within seconds, she was shaking with new sobs as one of Ethan’s younger teenaged brothers began a reading of 1 Corinthians in monotone (“Love is patient and kind,” she cried into Julia, who patted her hand.) Quentin sat into his own chair again, and his shoulder brushed back against Eliot’s, who was snort-laughing into his closed fist.

“To be fair,” Quentin said, voice low, “Fen has only ever experienced completely non-romantic arranged weddings that were sometimes bloody and violent.”

“Oh, I’m not laughing at her,” he said, rubbing his thumb lightly over the spot on Q’s head where Fen hit him with a surprising amount of force. Quentin elbowed him off and rolled his eyes, eliciting Eliot to stick out his tongue, wicked and mischievous.

“Stop it,” he tried to sound stern, but laughter crept in and Eliot’s face turned into the cat’s that ate the canary. Sliding his arm along the back of Q’s chair, he lazily ran his fingers around the nape of his neck and Quentin rested his own hand on Eliot’s thigh. They both kept silent for the rest of the service, through Todd and Ethan’s personally written vows, and the breaking of the glass, only occasionally exchanging humored glances at the other.

It really was beautiful.

Immediately after Todd and Ethan kissed—to thunderous applause—the air in the room shifted. The sky-ceiling turned midnight blue, with dotted gold stars and the ceremony chairs were quickly switched out with large round tables for all the guests. The altar spun itself up and then down, the silver pooling out to create a dance floor. Josh ran to the middle of the shining circle and clinked his glass for everyone’s attention.
“For those of you who don’t know me,” he said with a gleeful smile and a performer’s tenor, “my name is Josh Hoberman and I am honored, ecstatic, fucking delighted to be Best Man to one of my absolute favorite people in the world. A man who has been like a brother to me, a man who always puts others first, a man who—” he choked up a little, and Eliot and Quentin exchanged a disbelieving look “—who saved my life…”

“What the shit is he talking about?” Eliot asked out of the side of his mouth and Quentin laughed, quickly turning it into a cough.

“I, uh, I guess we missed something?” He bit the inside of his cheek to stop from laughing harder and Eliot elbowed him in the side repeatedly.

“Be respectful, Coldwater,” he said, but his eyes were wild and Quentin had to turn completely away from him so he wouldn’t lose it. He refocused his attention on Josh, who, true to form, was still speaking.

“But I’m even more thrilled to be your Master of Ceremonies tonight. I’ll be leading you through the strange, exciting journey of your evening, replete with…belly dancers!”

Belly dancers appeared in front of him, like out of thin air; they had obviously been hidden behind an illusion, but the effect was admirable.

 “…a fire show!”

Flames flew out of the sides of the walls, exploding and jumping in a danger-free display.

 “…Elton John!”

And there was fucking Elton John.

 “…and, of course, true romance.”

Todd and Ethan, standing next to Josh through his whole speech, kissed each other vigorously, Ethan dipping Todd with a dramatic flourish. Quentin tried not to be bothered at Eliot’s eye roll.

“Now, please, everyone find your seats and enjoy our delicious feast, designed and prepared by…well, by yours truly. Bonsoir, and I will see each and every one of you very soon.”

“How did he have time to do all this?” Eliot shook his head, as they walked over to the large wall with the seating assignments written in glittering calligraphy. “He’s a goddamn Fillorian Queen.”

“Must be quieter than usual,” Quentin said with a shrug, before pointing above. “We’re table 18.”

After they made their way through the electrified crowd, Quentin returned Julia’s wave when they reached their destination. She was already seated, glass of wine in hand, and Penny was next to her, chugging his beer for dear life. Julia patted the chair on her opposite side and Q scooted over, seeing his name written in bright blue flowers atop a golden plate. He motioned for Eliot to join, but then stopped cold when he saw the place seating next to him.

It read High Ambassador Fen of Fillory, the Knife-Maker’s Daughter. Eliot’s was on the other side of hers.

Quentin swallowed, the gnat in his brain turning to a wasp that attacked him, over and over again, with a forceful, relentless sting. He ground his teeth, the muscles in his jaw tenser than when those damned invitations arrived and his breath remained caught between his rib cage. He opened his
mouth, dry air entering, and then closed it, rubbing his neck in a nervous tic that he’d yet to get under control.

From behind him, he felt a tall form against his back. He looked up. Eliot’s eyes were heavy-lidded and he elegantly positioned his hands above the plates, his ring and middle fingers tightly entwined. He crossed them over each other in a swift single movement and both sets of flower petals rose into the air, and re-landed. The place setting next to Quentin now read Eliot Waugh, in deep purple.

“There, no fucking issue,” Eliot pulled out his chair with a little too much strength and smiled tightly. Julia’s eyes narrowed and Quentin sat between them, not really trusting the demigoddess to remain calm if he didn’t.

“Easy enough,” he said, clearing his throat. “Can someone please pass the bread?”

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Dinner was complete and everyone was a little tipsy, save Eliot and Quentin, and they were all ready and waiting for dessert. The couple came by to greet them and thank them, and each member of the Brakebills/Fillory table extended their heartfelt congratulations (“You don’t look awful,” Eliot said and Todd’s eyes filled with happy tears all over again), and then the cake cutting commenced. Most of the room had gathered to watch Todd and Ethan press pieces of cake into the other’s mouth, while Elton pounded out “Crocodile Rock” on his brightly colored piano.

But the small group remained seated at the half-empty table, lighthearted and casual conversation flowing sweetly and easily. Fen was speaking now, catching everyone up on the latest adventures in Fillory. Things had been hard since Margo had cleared the air of its opium—entirely for Eliot’s benefit—but slowly and surely, beauty and wonder was returning to her much beloved homeland, in ways she never thought she would see in her lifetime.

Similarly, she had been thriving in her role as Head of the High Fillorian Council, even if it set her at odds with the notoriously petty Pickwick family. Tick, though, had proven himself a kind and thorough mentor, patient with her and impressed by her passion for both Fillorian rights as well as the nitty-gritty details of wonk policy making.

And personally, Fen was certainly enjoying the wealth of options singledom and a newly sexually liberated populace afforded her.

“Then Margo, well, she… uh, she helped me come to a really important realization. I’m— “ she held her hand out in a dramatic flourish “—BI-SEXUAL.”

“That’s great, Fen,” Eliot said with a small smile.

“Is fucking everyone bisexual?”

“No one asked you, Penny,” Quentin snapped.

“And the answer? Yes,” Julia said, stroking her partner’s cheek with a nose-scrunched nuzzle.

“Cheers to that,” Eliot held his water glass aloft.

“To bi-sexuality!” Fen said, shouting, giddy, nearly spilling her champagne as she clinked it against Eliot’s. He pulled away instinctually for a second but then took a deep breath, and re-tapped her
glass with a *cin-cin*. Quentin raised his own lemonade next, followed by Julia, who also opted to raise her water rather than her wine.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Penny grumbled, but Julia just laughed and patted his elbow upwards, encouraging him to join the toast. To his credit, he obliged, and the nose of his beer tapped against the rest of the glasses and they all hollered with joy. Then they immediately cheered again when gorgeous red velvet cake appeared without preamble on their plates.

“Holy shit, cream cheese icing should be illegal,” Julia said with a moan as she shoveled the perfectly bouncy and luscious dessert in her mouth indelicately. “Josh is the most talented and the most worthy Magician out of all of you, I’m sorry.”

“I’m jealous of Margo,” Quentin agreed, mouth full of literally the best cake he’d ever tasted in his life. But then he sputtered at Eliot’s lightly and teasingly incredulous look. “I mean, because she gets to eat food like this all the time, not because—”

“Sure, sure, Q,” he said, rubbing his knee. “Your deep, carnal crush on Josh has been noted.”

“I do not—”

But the man of the hour had stepped to the front of the room and clinked his glass at the conclusion of the cake cutting. Once again, he was at the ready, soaking up the crowd’s energy with a raucous yelp in the air, thrilled to be the center of attention.

“Wow, all the thanks to Mr. John, our favorite Master Magician musician on the planet!” Everyone cheered, as Josh held his hands over his head and clapped with practiced showmanship. “Now, though, we’re going to slow things down for the sweethearts in the room.”

Josh smiled widely and the lights dimmed to a romantic glow.

“To kick off the dancing portion of the night, we invite all the couples—new, old, beautiful, and bold—to come out here and hold their love close to them,” Josh walked forward and pulled Todd’s mother and father out on the floor, and the crowd aww’d in time. “As the music continues, I’ll be saying a number of years and if you’ve been together less than that number, well, then off the floor you go. The last couple standing will be our winners—not that they need our approval! And we hope they’ll pass on the wisdom of a great romance for Todd and Ethan to share and look forward to.”

“Oh, what a lovely idea,” Fen held her hands to her chest, as Elton John played the first few chords and Penny stood, holding his hand out to Julia. Julia smiled and stood up, wrapping herself in Penny’s arms with a misty gaze painted on her face.

_I saw you dancing out the ocean_  
_Runnin’ fast along the sand_

“Well, I’ve certainly never heard a better cue for a smoke break,” Eliot stood up abruptly, patting his pocket and pulling out his favorite carved silver lighter. Pressing a long black cigarette between his lips, he bowed at Julia and Penny. “Enjoy your pas de deux, children.”

He strode away, never glancing back. And Quentin was the tiniest ant in the world’s most suffocating, airless room.

_A spirit born of Earth and water_  
_Fire flying from your hands_
“Do you want me to smite him?” Julia leaned forward on the table towards Quentin, her eyes glowing goddess black, her voice lower than her human speaking voice. “Because I’ll fucking smite him.”

“It’s fine, Jules,” he lied. “Go dance.”

His own hint of concern barely registering on his brow, Penny nodded at Quentin and led Julia out to the dance floor. At first, she resisted, pulling back to look at Quentin. He reassured her again with a quick nod and wave. She swallowed and turned back to face her date, resting her head on Penny’s broad chest.

Once they left, distracted in their own bubble of love, Quentin was frozen in his seat. He stared at the red crumbs left on his golden plate and almost started laughing. It was really silly, everything he’d been so obsessively worried about. Who the fuck cared about a wedding? Who the fuck cared what Fucking Todd thought? Who the fuck cared if Eliot was unwilling to hold Quentin in his arms, swaying to music, silently yet surely declaring his affection and devotion to a group of perfect strangers, people who definitely didn’t give a shit about their epic love story? And mind you, their love story was epic, with or without anyone’s acknowledgement or fucking validation. Why wasn’t that enough? It should have been enough.

But right then, in that moment, with fucking Elton John wafting over him in a dizzying trance, it wasn’t enough. Not really. It mattered to him. It all mattered to him. Every second of it, every ounce, every small slight, perceived or real, from Eliot’s distant heights. It really fucking mattered and he could barely see in front of him, except for those ridiculous red crumbs, mocking him and telling him what a worthless sack of shit he really must be.

Fuck you too, crumbs, he thought, his brow hot as a fire-crown and his chest entirely constricted. He closed his eyes and remembered the mantras, the ones that kept his worst ideations at bay. He was currently seated in a chair, at a wedding, at a round table. He was Quentin Coldwater and he was safe. He was a worthwhile human being and he deserved happiness. He deserved to breathe the same air as everyone else. He was part of the world and that was good.

That was good. That was good. That was good.

The blank black of his eyelids brought forth a visceral memory of Eliot, kissing his neck in loving, agonizing trails along his artery, and tightly hugging him from behind. “No, it’s better than good, Q,” he murmured into him, his teeth caressingly scraping against his hot skin, “It’s so much better than good. I love you. I love you. I love you…”

When stars collide like you and I
No shadows block the sun

And fuck you even more, Elton John. Quentin released his breath. He was back, engaged and present. The panic passed. His hand only barely trembling, he reached for Eliot’s abandoned water glass and took a long, steady gulp. He released his breath again. He looked over at Fen, who smiled warmly at him as Josh kicked out any couple that had been together for less than two decades.

“I guess it’s not really his thing,” Fen said quietly, her pity obvious. Quentin smiled too brightly, the muscle memory foreign and painful against his skin.

“Definitely not his thing,” he said. “He doesn’t do cheesy.”

“Totally.” Fen agreed too forcefully. “When Eliot was preparing to marry King Idri, Josh suggested the Dance of Chickens as an Earthly addition to the waltzing ball. And, well, Josh ended up in the
“dungeon for a few hours to think about what he’d done.”

“His own fault, really,” Quentin chuckled, not his usual sound, but who the fuck cared. “Though I’d personally pay to see Eliot do the Hokey-Pokey.”

“I don’t know that reference,” Fen smiled again. “But it does sound quite funny.”

Quentin agreed and then let Fen know he was going to grab another glass of water. Which was maybe his original intention, but instead, he stood at the edge of the dance floor. He watched Julia lean back against Penny, and his arms dip forward to encircle her and his mouth go to her ear. He whispered something that made her laugh and she threw her head back against him, and even Penny’s face transformed into pure pleasure and happiness. Left on the floor were three final couples—Ethan’s maternal grandparents, Todd’s paternal grandparents, and Ethan’s paternal grandparents. Then, Josh called for anyone together for less than forty-five years to exit the dance floor and one couple remained, dancing slowly, more rocking in each other’s arms than gliding with any grace or rhythm.

_You’re all I ever needed_  
_Baby, you’re the one_

Seriously, Elton John, go fuck yourself. Quentin’s hand shook and he suddenly had an overwhelming urge to run to the bar and order himself an Old Fashioned. But as much as he knew Eliot would tell him that he was a big boy and that he never asked Quentin to give up intoxicants for him, he also knew that if the next time Eliot kissed him—which, no matter how upset Quentin was, would still be within the next few hours—he knew that if he had the taste of whiskey on his mouth, it would hurt. Too much. It would be nothing but selfish and Quentin was really, really trying to stop being selfish.

Josh was standing in the middle of the dance floor now, his arms around the elderly couple, his face red and joyful.

“And the last couple standing is George and Marla! They have been together an impressive and romantic forty-six years. Let’s give a big round of applause to these love birds. George and Marla, everyone!”

At that, the weirdest thing happened: The room went silent. It wasn’t silent, not really. He could see the crowd clapping, whooping, and hollering for the embarrassed yet pleased septuagenarians, who held each other’s hands tightly, devotedly. But as he stood there, the room didn’t make a sound. It shifted and spun, and he was standing on a bed of ferns, overlooking the plum trees, while Eliot threw a tile at the grass in a burst of loud frustration. His heart glowed, bursting out of his chest, and he could see himself walking toward Eliot, and bending down to him, his hands on his back, and then his lips on his and Eliot’s legs sliding over and under his, and goddammit, all kinds of magic was real.

With all the respect in the world to George and Marla, they didn’t have shit on him and Eliot.

Because, even with all their ups and downs, and marriages to others and clandestine nights apart, and even now, with the pain of their new and fervent adjustment, even with all of that… Quentin knew that they’d had fifty years.

Fifty years.

“Who gets proof of concept like that?”
Peaches and plums, motherfucker.

Quentin knew what he had to do. He straightened his back, walked diagonally away from the dance floor, and went to find the smoking section.

It was time.

tbc.
Part III

Chapter Notes

For any fluff lovers who have stuck around, this is the worst of the emotional angst, I promise.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Decades Ago

Eliot’s wineskin was rarely filled with wine.

Fillorian wine, he told Quentin, was low-key disgusting and the populace was actually much prouder of their beer, due to the climate and culture respectively. But nothing could make him stomach that swill, no matter how often people on Earth tried to convince him of the validity of “craft brewing.” So, his drink of choice as High King had become his own brand of mead, which was strong, sweet, and fermented.

“Like my soul,” he said with a tipsy snort, and he casually offered the bag to Q. Quentin had already had a good amount of, well, beer, but he took a game sip. And the sharp taste was…well, it was…

“Mmm, it’s—it’s good,” he said, grimacing. “It’s really…interesting, like sour honey and—”

“You fucking hate it,” Eliot fell over, full belly laughing. Quentin felt his own shoulders shake and he laughed—really laughed—for the first time in the six months since they’d started their grueling work on the Mosaic.

“El, what the fuck? It’s awful,” he said, tears running down his face and Eliot practically cackled. They were both sitting on their makeshift wicker couch and Eliot’s forehead fell briefly against his own thigh, before he pulled back up and pressed back against the wood with a humored sigh. He laid his arm behind Q and let out a few more quiet chuckles.

“Fine, drink your piss of the masses,” he said, his hand drawing wide circles on Quentin’s shoulder. They’d gotten used to casual touching, both lonely in different ways. “But I’m going to keep working on it, until I get something that’s suitable to your unrefined palate.”

“Can’t fucking wait,” Q said with a wide grin and they both shudder-laughed all over again.

In short, they were drunk. Which is why the next thing Quentin said was…

“I think I only ever loved Julia because she’s so good at magic.” He hiccuped a little between his thoughts. “I think I felt it and projected it on her, you know?”

“I do not,” Quentin settled in closer and Eliot moved to tracing lines on his arm. He resisted the urge to close his eyes. It felt really good.

“Please, look at your next obsession,” Eliot stretched his long fingers up and down, from the nape of his neck to his elbows, leaving a tingling trail behind. Quentin was drunk enough to admit that his heart rate quickened and goosebumps raised. If Eliot noticed, he didn’t let on.

Instead, his tongue clucked against his top teeth, “Alice Quinn is a whole other level of adeptness. And then she literally became the embodiment of pure magic.”

“I mean…” Quentin dipped his head like he was going to say something serious, but then he looked back up with the most mischievous grin he could manage, “…that’s, like, my primary porn search.”

Eliot’s eyes widened along with his smile, looking like he couldn’t believe Quentin was real. But instead of laughing like Q thought he would, he just leaned his head against his and sighed.

“You are full of surprises sometimes, kid.”

A few moments passed and the air shifted in their companionable silence, laughter still echoing through the trees. It was nearly autumn, but heat waved from the ground like a mirage and Quentin was suddenly too aware of every part of his body that was touching Eliot’s. Charged. Electric. And for his part, El turned slightly to face him and Quentin could feel his breath on his neck. It may as well have been sparks from the fire nearby.

“You know,” he said, his eyes heavy and a languid smile resting on his too-pink lips. “I’m not half-bad at casting myself. Antics aside, I was actually the best in my class.”

“Um,” Quentin said, every breath he’d ever taken trapped by his ribcage.

“Um,” Eliot hummed back, sing-song and teasing, surprisingly tender. He brought his hand up to Quentin’s face and tucked a stray hair behind his ear, his fingers carelessly lingering on his cheeks. Q wasn’t sure if the black spots in front of his eyes were from the alcohol or the intoxication of…

“Eliot,” he said, breathier than intended and Eliot’s eyes, really fucking green, tilted down to look at his lips. Both of their chests rose and fell in a rhythm unknown.

“Why, uh…why do you say that?” Quentin asked, swallowing. Eliot tilted his head, peering through him with a naked affection that made his toes curl. His lips parted slightly and Eliot brought up both hands to encircle his face, and Q’s heart roared with something he always felt, but rarely acknowledged.

But instead of closing the gap between them, Eliot blinked. Mask firmly placed back on, he tightened his jaw and pulled away, taking his hands along with him.

“I thought we were playing the non-sequitur game,” he said, no hint of gentleness in his tone. He was light and sharp and bored again. The air lost its weight and Quentin could breathe, though he felt much colder.

“I am drunk,” Eliot said, barking out another laugh.
Todd and Ethan obviously didn’t want people to smoke at their wedding.

Unlike most New York City galas to which Quentin had been invited (you know, all two of them), the smoking lounge was not the centerpiece of the party. In fact, at this particular event, it was actually exceedingly difficult to find. Every corner was plastered in gorgeous, but firm No Smoking signs. There was no clear exit, no obvious marked door. Nothing.

This was fine as a personal preference, but it was definitely annoying when on a mission to find the one person who definitely didn’t just say, “Fuck it,” and turn around.

When he asked a few other guests in passing if they knew where the smokers were gathered, they offered shocked glances and refusals. One woman even offered him a nicotine patch, which was kind, but not exactly helpful for finding Eliot.

Q’s energy was frayed with sparking edges, and he had no time for any distractions or judgment. He was on his way to finally have a real goddamn conversation with his…well, whatever Eliot was to him. “Boyfriend” felt juvenile. His live-in partner-slash-late husband from another timeline.

After walking past the dance floor, away from the multiple bars, and even through the large coat room, Quentin finally found a small Post-It note with an arrow pointing the way. He turned the corner, down a beige hallway. Flickering florescent lights gave a far bleaker pall to the surroundings than the glowing, dewy shine of the main party hall.

And worse, when he reached the end of the depressing hallway, he saw…nothing. Again. Just another beige wall, with a couple of scratches on it. He turned around, making sure he hadn’t missed a turn or an exit. Still, nothing. Scratching his head, he looked up. Nothing. Then down...

Finally, there was a small gray door, no bigger than a crawl space. The words SMOKER’S LOUNGE were scrawled in haphazard sharpie. There was also a longer, more involved sign underneath, and Quentin crouched and squinted to read it.

SMOKING KILLS 500,000 UNITED STATES CITIZENS EVERY YEAR DON’T BECOME A STATISTIC!
IT ALSO MAKES YOU SMELL BAD AND YOUR TEETH YELLOW IN MEMORY OF THE FATHER OF THE GROOM WILSON B. LEWIS, 1960-2018

While he certainly felt for Ethan’s loss—his own father’s death still rang clear and painful every single day—he was annoyed at the condescending message. It would obviously be better if Eliot didn’t smoke as often as he did, but Quentin would also much rather he had a cigarette in his mouth than multiple pills. And as for his own habit? Well, after everything, he deserved a couple of vices here and there. Cancer took his father, it might take him, that’s how these things go.

Quentin jimmed the door, which seemed to be coincidentally jammed, and used his shoulder to push it open. He ducked under the low ceiling and squat-walked down another long hallway, the walls painted black and disorienting. Finally, after what felt like over five minutes of thigh-burning effort, he reached a blood red door with a small glowing exit sign at eye level. It also had yet another sign plastered in the center, written in large block letters.
The smiley-face in particular elicited a “Fucking really?” from under his breath and he pushed forward, opening the door into the cold city air. He immediately felt the shine of magic erase itself from his skin; he was outside the wards. Stretching his legs to fully stand, he wrapped his arms around himself, the cold biting through his tux jacket. He was now in a small, dirty alleyway, with three dumpsters and stagnant water. Steam rose from the ground and the ambient noise of cars horns, sirens, and the shuffling populace cloaked the scene.

He looked around for Eliot, but only saw a stray cat dart away from him. But from overhead, he heard a shuffling noise and a slight cough, and Quentin raised his eyes to the top of the dumpster. Eliot sat perched above, his legs stretched out with one knee bent, and his head tilted upwards, cigarette poised and posed. He looked very much like he did the first time Quentin met him.

“Hey,” Quentin said, waving at Eliot, who was staring straight ahead, perhaps lost in thought. He blinked once and then turned to the intrusion. His features slowly brightened and Eliot angled himself toward Q, without really moving from his kingly position that made him look far too unreachable and way too beautiful.

“There you are,” he smiled, his eyes warm. Quentin swallowed and held his arms out, a dull presentation of himself, and then immediately crossed his arms again, feeling the weight of his sunken eyebrows lowering on his face. Eliot chuckled and swung his legs around, so that he was sitting upright on the edge of the trash receptacle.

“Apparently, smoking is no longer en vogue in the city that never sleeps,” Eliot gazed down at his cigarette, a fondness playing on his lips. “Todd wanted to make the tobacco-leper quarantine zone unappealing, to ‘discourage consumption.'”

He brought the cigarette to his lips and breathed in, “But clearly no one told him that if the pictures of rotting lungs on cartons and the ever-increasing social stigma don’t do the trick, a couple of cute little signs and sitting by a trash heap certainly won’t.”

Eliot held out his pack down to Quentin and shook it. “Care to join the slow march to emphysema?”

“No, I’m fine,” Q said, brushing his shoes against the wet ground and pushing an errant hair back. In response, he briefly pursed his lips, but then shrugged.

“Suit yourself.” He took an exaggerated drag and closed his eyes, as if in ecstasy. “The course of true love never did run smooth, my little friends.”

“Uh, can we fucking talk?” Quentin said, his voice a little too loud. Eliot turned his face upwards, and then he was still, statuesque, his proud and strong profile glowing in the reflection of the city lights in the alleyway.

“About?” He flicked orange-red ash into a puddle.

“Well, you kind of abandoned me in there.”

“Don’t be dramatic. Your invitation is unspoken and constant.”

“Or you could have stayed with me.”

Eliot let out his slow, foreboding whistle-laugh, his eyes following the trail of smoke rising above him.
“I am not apologizing for refusing participation in a tacky wedding game meant to validate old people,” he said slowly, with a biting grin. “You know me better than that.”

It was true. There was never any indication that Eliot was willing to bend toward the activities enjoyed in earnest by the innocents of the world. This was partially from his long-cultivated persona, partially from his fear of vulnerability, and partially from an innate preference. And normally, Quentin would absolutely chalk his refusal up to that, but tonight...tonight he knew better.

He knew that it was an easy excuse to avoid whatever the fuck it was that had been brewing, growing, tensing between the two of them. Eliot was an accomplished ostrich, but Quentin wasn’t going to let him get away with it anymore.

“Even Penny sucked it up,” he said, bringing up the last person in the world who should have wanted to dance to an overwrought Elton John song amongst the Chanel No. 5 crowd. But he did, because that’s how much he loved Julia. That’s how proud he was to be with her.

“So you want me to be more like Penny,” Eliot leaned forward, his eyes narrowed and unconvinced. “Who you hate.”

“I don’t hate him, I just—”

“Hate him.”

“I don’t want you to be more like Penny or—anything like Penny.” Quentin said, crossing his arms even tighter, knowing that Eliot was trying to move the conversation away from the heart of the matter with a pointless distraction. “But I do want you to stop unilaterally deciding what is and what isn’t worth our time.”

Eliot jumped from the top of the dumpster to a standing position and threw his cigarette butt on the ground. He crushed the remnants beneath the ball of his shoe with a grimace.

“Fuck, Quentin, I’ve been really patient with how all this shit has gotten in your head,” he craned his neck backward. “But it’s getting a bit much now, don’t we think?”

“So you knew,” he said, sharp bile and anger rising in his throat. “You knew I was freaking out.”

“You’re not exactly subtle.”

“And you said nothing.”

Eliot pulled out a new cigarette and lit it, then exhaled the smoke through his nostrils.

“What the hell was I supposed to say? I addressed your concerns whenever you bothered to tell me about them and sometimes even when you didn’t,” he said, opening his mouth with a soundless laugh. “If there was anything deeper going on, that was your responsibility to bring up. I’m not going to coax you all the damn time.”

“Okay, well, I—I’m bringing it up.”

“Goodie,” his voice was long and sarcastic, and he leaned back against the alley’s wall, like he didn’t even care if his tuxedo was sullied with city grime. “Go ahead, then. Tell me how much of a dick I am because of my indifference to a party.”

“You know that’s not what this about,” Quentin resisted the urge to stomp his feet in frustration, like a child. Eliot shrugged.
“Then enlighten me.”

“You are the most infuriating person I’ve ever met sometimes,” he started pacing and then stopped, holding out his hand. “Give me a fucking cigarette.”

Eliot obliged, silently lighting the clove-tobacco mixture and handing it to Q. Shakily, Quentin grabbed it and brought it to his lips, inhaling too much, too fast. Clove cigarettes were his favorite—probably why Eliot had them, he noted with a twinge in his chest—but they were harsh. He coughed violently and he cleared his throat, swallowing, trying to lighten the acid burning down his trachea. He saw Eliot’s armor briefly falter, and his hand reached out.

“I’m fine,” Quentin snapped and Eliot’s posture returned to its defensive sangfroid. “Of course it’s not about the wedding. It’s that our relationship, our partnership, has apparently mattered to no one but us, and sometimes I even wonder about that. You were the one who said that it’s all in the details, the little things—“

“Don’t throw my words in my face to further your agenda.”

He couldn’t be serious.

“My agenda? What the fuck?” Quentin raised his eyebrows.

“I’m monogamous, Quentin,” Eliot’s voice cracked. He threw his hands up in the air, like he was moving to pull his hair out. His cigarette fell to the ground. “I’m not really sure what more you want from me.”

“Monogamy is, like, the bare minimum. “

“It’s not,” Eliot bent down, grabbing the fallen soldier and silently cursing its dampness. He pulled out a third and lit again. “Not for me.”

“So what, you—you want to fuck other people?”

Quentin always knew that it was a possibility, that Eliot could eventually play that card for his sexual well-being. But holy shit, he did not expect the mere idea to incinerate him down to his stomach, a wave of unsteadiness rendering him helpless. Unprogressive as it may be, the thought of Eliot with anyone else… his mouth went dry from more than the smoke.

“No, that’s not what I’m—“ Eliot bit his fist and jerked his hand out in frustration, before finally pointing straight at him. “That straw man did nothing to you.”

“Then what are you saying?”

“I’m saying that I thought we were evolved past all that societal bullshit,” Eliot stared down at his cigarette, resting between his lips, with a sigh. “But apparently you want to be boyfriend and boyfriend, going to the fucking LGBT sock hop.”


“Obnoxious though he may be, perhaps that archetype has some solid points, occasionally.”

“This is me, Eliot,” Quentin said, and Eliot flinched. “This is the two of us. Do you really want to treat us like a social experiment or a…a fucking conquest?”
“Of course not,” Eliot said, but he was growling, dark. He closed his eyes and swallowed smoke hard, bringing his cigarette up to his brow and shaking his head. “Though this is exactly what I’ve always loathed about relationshits. The unspoken expectations, the constant pressure. I thought we were—”

But Quentin wasn’t listening. Instead, he was compulsively nodding, like a bobble-head, his empty gaze fixed on a point in nonexistent space as he took his own drag on his own cigarette.


“Come on, I was being pithy.”

“Yeah, you always are.”

“What do you fucking want from me, Q?” Eliot stared right at him, his eyes stormy. “I’m serious.”

“Don’t act like this is some great mystery,” Quentin kept his voice calm in contrast to his screaming insides. “We were together for fifty years—”

“Oh, Jesus,” Eliot shook his head harder and began pacing. “Yes, in a perfect little fever-dream. Real helpful for us now.”

“Look, I know you don’t want to talk about our time in Fillory pretty much, um, ever and I feel like I’ve respected that, but—”

“Because if we constantly compare, there’s no way we’ll measure up. I experienced it twice and yeah, obviously, it got me off my ass in the way I needed, but it’s served its purpose. We need to let it rest if we ever want this thing—” he gestured between them, ashes flying off his cigarette “—to stand on its own.”

“I guess I just think there’s some room between constant comparison and occasional acknowledgement.”

“To what end?” He sounded so very tired. “Seriously, to what end, Quentin? To make ourselves feel shitty?”

“No, to give us hope and-and guidance. We did it before—”

“Things. Are. Different. Here,” Eliot grit his teeth and refused to look at him, still moving like a caged animal. “My stance on that has not changed.”

“If I recall, your stance was actually that there are complexities everywhere,” he said, trying to catch Eliot’s eyes. “That what we built was from the details, details that are still here.”

“I said that well before the hell of addiction started ravaging my body and brain every goddamn second of every goddamn day,” Eliot wouldn’t stand still, his speed increasing with every syllable. “Things are fucking different, Q, and you’re more naive than I thought if you don’t recognize that.”

“Eliot, I love you,” Quentin said. Eliot stopped, almost lurching forward. He closed his eyes, his whole form shuddering. Quentin tentatively stepped closer to him. “I love you, El. And I believe in you. I believe in us. Here or anywhere, against any circumstances, even the shittiest ones.”

He took another step closer and took Eliot’s unresponsive hand in his, “But I need you meet me halfway. I can’t carry us on my own. I want to, but I can’t. I still have my faith, but I need to know that we’re both in this, all the way, together.”
Eliot swallowed again and his eyes slowly opened and slit their way to look at Quentin, the rest of his body unmoving. His hand still felt like dead weight and something vicious formed.

“Yes, well,” he said calmly, “while you’ve certainly done an outstanding job play-acting as a queer man—“

Quentin dropped Eliot’s hand cold. If he had slapped him across the face, it would have been less jarring and painful.

“Play-acting?” He faltered backwards several steps. His voice was high and trembling, weaker than a threading string. “Wow.”

“Quentin,” Eliot’s face was drained of all color, and he moved slowly toward him. Gone was the aloof, angry veneer, and regret was painted on every line of his face. Eliot’s eyes were desperate, pleading. He opened his mouth and closed it, like he was trying to swallow back his words as he stepped as close enough to him that they shared the same air.

“Quentin, I didn’t mean that, okay?” Eliot reached for his hand, the faint touch still enough to electrify him.

Q brushed him away like it burnt and backed up further, his eyes moving restlessly, anxiously throughout the alleyway. He almost bumped into the wall and he started pacing in a small circle. Eliot stood there, unmoving, his ragged breaths the only audible sound other than the blood rushing in Quentin’s ears.

The city went silent.

At any other time, any other day, he could easily guess where Eliot’s cruel response came from. Quentin knew when Eliot felt backed into a corner, he was the rare breed that reacted with both flight and fight. Secretly, he blamed Margo’s influence for this idiosyncrasy—it went away with time in Fillory, forever ago—but he also knew that Eliot was culpable for his own words and choices. Regardless of the impetus, when El went for the jugular, blood still splattered.

But this time was different.

Quentin’s own shield fell, and a blinding, gutting knife of honesty slashed its way through. He thought of Eliot’s hatred of Alice, he thought of Eliot’s relentless jokes about how Q would eventually take a wife, he thought of Eliot’s palpable discomfort around children, he thought of Eliot’s eye-rolls around weddings and couples and romance, and he thought of how Eliot still pulled away from him, after everything, after fucking everything, and…

The clarity was there, colder than a frozen morning.

“No, um, I actually think you kind of did,” Quentin met his eyes and begged him to say he was wrong.

Eliot was silent, and the muscles in his neck jerked and his skin turned creeping red. He opened his mouth again and closed it back tightly, with a pained strangled sound, despairing. Eliot’s eyes watered and they fixed on Quentin’s hands, a thousand yard stare.

“Q, I love you,” he said, his voice like gravel, the words thudding out, fervently, insistently. He didn’t say those words often. He saved them for when he really meant them.

But it wasn’t a denial.
“Okay, wow,” Quentin’s hands went to his hair and he pushed back against his scalp, circus music playing in his brain. That was a new one. But he was so disoriented, so lost in how to process this information, that it was like he was short-circuiting.

After everything, Eliot still saw Quentin as having one foot out the door. And he didn’t even seem to really care all that much. It wasn’t like Eliot was fighting for him. Instead, he accepted it as status quo and got pissed at Quentin for trying to change it. After everything.

After living together for fifty years, after building their family together from the ashes of despair. After falling in love, more than once, with the same spark and passion and comfort and fucking joy as the time before.

After becoming Kings of a magical land, after killing a god, after saving magic, after sacrifice and possession and more pain than Quentin thought his body and soul could take. After finally getting him back, and after it was the greatest thing in his short, complicated, miserable, wonderful life.

After Quentin shared every deepest part of himself, after telling him things that even The Trials never could have wrenched out of him. After holding Eliot’s shivering naked body, feeling his vomit seep into his pants, but not giving a shit about anything except him getting fucking better. After the idea of solace became the idea of Eliot, and after sleeping apart felt like an absurd notion.

After spending day after day finding each other, hurting each other, needing each other, loving each other. After all the ways he proved himself, all the ways he tried to make himself worthy of the unreachable High King, his own King of Hearts…it wasn’t enough.

It wasn’t enough.

“Quentin.” Eliot was shaking but Q couldn’t really bring himself to give a shit.

“Okay. Um, I have to go now because the social contract dictates that you not have a total fucking blow out fight at someone else’s wedding, and if I stay I’ll...” He wasn’t sure he knew exactly what he’d do, but he knew it wouldn’t be good. “So I, uh, I have to go. I’ll see you at home.”

“Quentin!” Eliot stepped forward, reaching to grab his retreating arm.

A surge of power coursed through his hands. Instinctually and aggressively and without any premeditation, an unfamiliar sound roared and wretched from his mouth and his hands imprecisely tutted a spell he barely knew, staggering Eliot back slightly and forging his legs to where he was standing.

Frozen in place, Eliot blinked and let out a high-pitched laugh, trying in vain to pull forward.

“Are you shitting me, Coldwater?”

Quentin glowered and his jaw tightened, his blood vessels bursting with adrenaline. Eliot immediately started working on his own tuts, trying to get out of the bind. Q knew that he should release him. Knew that was the right thing to do. The unselfish thing. To talk to Eliot, to work through it, then and there.

But instead, he remained silent, turned around, and went back through the crawl space.
Quentin ran toward the ocean, illusory as it was.

He intended to go home, to sleep off this terrible night and soothe the clawing ache in his gut, so he could face Eliot clear-minded in the morning. But every time he tried to bring himself to the exit, he stopped. He felt like if he was completely alone, he might spiral. Being near people, but not with them, was for the best. So he passed the dancing, lively, thrilled crowd, the varied heads bouncing in time to “Bennie and the Jets,” and started walking the long stretch of sand, smoothing out to a dark blue and white vastness.

The wedding guests a swirling dot in the distance and the music muffled as though it were coming through a tin can, he fell to his knees under the dim glow of a torch and the false moon above. He ran his fingers through the fine grains of sand and pressed his hands hard into the line where dry warmth met cold wet. A wave rushed up against him and his clothes were soaked, but he didn’t care.

Inexplicably, he thought about being back at the Physical Kids’ cottage.

Once Eliot was strong enough to walk around, after everything with the monster, he admitted that he felt uneasy, and even a little physically sick, staying in Marina’s apartment. Which made sense, as it had been the primary torture grounds for all his victims—random innocents, his friends, and first and foremost, Q’s psyche. Even if Eliot didn’t remember it, he felt it, and so did they all.

So, they moved back to the cottage, taking over rooms despite Fogg’s protests. But he owed them, for one thing, and the man was also smart enough to know that fucking with Julia’s decree was unwise at best. In a show of compromise and strained goodwill, they promised it was temporary. And true to their word, they only stayed, on and off, for six months.

One evening, the High King of Fillory came to visit and immediately holed up in Eliot’s room. They laid around, caught up on full seasons of reality television, and talked about everything and nothing, like old times. Quentin was only privy to this knowledge because he and Eliot had already started more or less sharing quarters on a regular basis. He occasionally had to walk through their little Bambi & El bubble to grab socks, a book, cigarettes, charge his phone, whatever.

After Eliot fell asleep for the evening, Margo crept downstairs and shimmied her way to sit next to Quentin on the couch, who had been reading.

“T’m sleeping in his bed tonight,” she announced, reaching behind her to grab two high-balls and a bottle of gin. “Hope the couch is still comfy.”

“I have my own room,” he said, placing his book down on the coffee table and turning to face her, taking one of the glasses from her outstretched hand. “And I figured. He’d kick me out harder than you.”

“I doubt that,” she said with a sly smile. “But he can be a dumbass for cute boys.”

She laughed at Quentin’s blush, and poured the liquor for herself and held out the bottle in silent question. Quentin nodded (Eliot hadn’t quit drinking yet, not all the way) and the clean sound of liquid hitting crystal soothed him. He held the full glass up to her, in a quiet toast.

“We did good, Q,” Margo said with a clink. “He’s safe. And it’s because neither of us gave up.”

“Hard as hell, but nothing was more worth it,” he said in agreement.

She placed her drink precariously in her lap and looked away, her hand trembling. He suddenly felt like he’d intruded on a private moment, even as they sat together.
“I always knew it was true, but almost losing him?” Margo’s eyes were shining with unshed tears. “He’s... Eliot is my heart, Quentin.”

Not sure what to say, but understanding as much as he could, he squeezed her shoulder and rested his head against hers. She clutched his hand in return, and they both sat there for a few moments, tears forming in earnest and catharsis settling into their souls. Margo turned her face to look at Quentin’s and leaned forward, pressing a tender kiss to his cheek.

“And so,” she nuzzled into him, sniffing. “If you break his?”

Her nails started digging into Quentin’s hand.

“Um, ow?” He tried to pull away but Margo sank in deeper, showing her teeth and the whites of her eyes. He knew what was coming. The traditional shakedown of the new beau from the protective best friend. “Yeah, yeah, I know. You’ll hunt me down and kill me, got it.”

“Oh, I won’t kill you. I will destroy you,” she said, invoking her name. “Death is a fucking mercy, Quentin Coldwater. You will beg for the conclusion of your miserable existence, but instead of the sweet release of darkness, all that will await you is more pain, screaming down through your core, pure destruction setting fire to the universe and the souls of your goddamn ancestors—“

“Jesus,” Quentin said, genuinely a little frightened. “Okay. Point made.”

“But I didn’t even get to what’d I do with your remains once your weak, pathetic form could no longer hold out,” Margo held her eyes wide, her lips puckered, and her voice falsely high, the juxtaposition making her seem all the more dangerous.

“Yeah, well, I can infer,” he said, running his hands through his hair. “Besides, this is kind of moot anyway because if anyone is going to break anyone’s heart, it’ll be Eliot and my heart. So don’t worry.”

“Oh, sweetie,” Margo’s features softened. “If you really believe that, you’re stupider than I thought you were.”

Then she cupped his face, “Which is already pretty fuckin’ stupid.”

“Good talk,” Quentin said, sighing, his bones jellied. He had an urge then to sink into the floor, and so he let himself fall slowly from the couch to the carpet below him, muscles unimportant.

“Oh, get up. This weird thing you still do? It’s still weird!”

Then, the memory broke and the swooshing hum of the large mass of water crashed along his fingers, and Quentin watched his hands appear and recede in and out of the ground, hypnotizing. He raised his gaze out to the horizon and focused on the long wide line that reflected the moon. He stood, clumps of wet sand in both hands.

With the loudest scream his smoke and anxiety damaged lungs could manage, Quentin threw the fistfuls into the sky and kicked the water, stomping and pounding his feet as hard as he could. For too long, he’d been the strong one, the one with his shit together, so if anyone deserved to throw a goddamn temper tantrum, it was him.

“Fuck you, Margo!” He shouted into the ether, hoping the abyss would swallow his voice and send it through the wards and the atmosphere and past the Neitherlands, all the way to Fillory. “I was fucking right! My heart. My heart. Not so smart now, huh? Fuck you!”
He stood up and kicked the earth with every fury he had in his body, sweating and furious. The sand flew up around him in a chaotic flurry and he kept kicking, and kicking, and kicking, and kicking, until his legs gave out under him. Exhausted and panting, he held two middle fingers up to the sky, telegraphing telepathically so that she would see.

“Fuck, fuck, fucking fuck you, Margo,” he finished, the anger living in and outside of his form. He was done. He was done. He was done. Collapsing on himself, he breathed in the sand and salt, his heart beating in time with his jagged breaths.

“Uh, Quentin?” A familiar, nasal voice sounded from directly behind him. “That’s my monarch and primary lover you’re talking about.”

“Josh?” He breathed out, the glass of his self-made bubble shattering. He’d totally forgotten that he was actually at a pretty populated party and not a private beach. Sitting up, he turned around and saw the Fillorian Queen and Head Chef—tux jacket off and bowtie undone—offer a congenial wave.

“One and only. Good to see you, man,” he smiled, as though he hadn’t just watched Quentin completely lose his shit. “Where’s Eliot?”

“How the fuck should I know?” It came out shoutier and more heated than he intended, but what can you do.

“Oookay,” Josh pulled his face. “Yikes. Bad Times at Ridgemont High, huh?”

“Yeah, I guess,” Quentin closed his eyes and shook his head. “Not good times, that’s for sure.”

“Aw, you’ve got your li’l wounded puppy face on,” he sat down next to him in the sand before Quentin had chance to take issue with that description. “Talk to Father Josh. What’s going on?”

“You know, I’d really rather wallow in silence, if that’s okay.”

“Well, you weren’t very silent a minute ago and I’m involved now,” he held up his hand as Quentin went to protest. “Ah, ah. No take-backs.”

“Eliot and I are fighting,” he said, averting his eyes and sniffing.

“Uh-huh, yup. I kinda got that, from context,” Josh nodded his head up and down exaggeratedly. “About what?”

“That’s private,” he said with no room for argument, rubbing the back of his neck. “Look, I’m sure you have a lot of Best Man stuff to do still, so I’ll be fine.”

“You’re sitting in the tide of a fake beach, your tux is soaking wet, you were just kicking fake sand, and literally fucking screaming to the, again, fake high heavens. So I’m going to need a little more convincing on the ‘Q’s okay’ side of things,” he clapped his hand on Quentin’s shoulder. “Otherwise, I’d be a really shitty friend to leave you alone.”

Quentin closed his eyes and shook his head, “Eliot can sometimes just be a little…”

“Mercurial?”

“That’s one way to put it,” he actually smiled at that, in its oversimplification. “No. I was going to say distant, actually.”

Josh sighed a little and squeezed Quentin’s shoulder harder, nodding. He felt him lean back on the
beach and looked up at the sky-ceiling.

“Look, man, I don’t want to dig into your business,” he said. “But can I offer an unsolicited observation?”

“Sure,” Quentin stared blankly out at the water. “Why not?”

“Regardless of whatever is going on with you two, I gotta say… Eliot?” Josh grinned. “That dude is buckass-wild in love with you. Like, tear down the world, fuck it all up for the sake of your smile kind of love. I don’t think his distance is what you think it is.”

Quentin’s heart rate quickened despite himself and he ignored the way his stomach dropped, giddy in its muscle memory. His chest felt warm and the tips of his fingers tingled, as much as he willed his body to cooperate and remember what brought them to the beach in the first place.

After letting his revelation sink in for a moment, Josh leaned over conspiratorially, “I mean, I happen to have a very reliable inside source.”

The idea of Margo and Josh gossiping about Quentin and Eliot’s relationship, all dressed in their finest Fillorian formalwear, surrounded by armed guards and talking animals, almost made him laugh aloud. But he wasn’t there yet. And besides, Josh was looking at him expectantly, waiting for a response, so he had to remember how to form words again.

“Yeah, right, I know. And, uh, thanks, that’s nice of you to say,” he offered Josh a wan smile, knowing he meant well. “But tonight was really…not good.”

“Okay,” Josh patted his knee and started to stand. “Worth a shot.”

Looking at his good friend in profile, Quentin felt a rush of an idea bubble from his stomach and take root in his brain.

His fingers still tingling, he knew that what he was thinking might be reckless or way too impulsive. But at this point, he was done being the steady one. He was done always doing what was sensible or practical, always the equalizing force to Julia, or Alice, or magic, or now Eliot. There was something he needed to explore. For himself, not for any-goddamn-one else. And Josh was the only person who could provide what he needed.

“Wait,” Quentin grabbed his arm, stopping him from standing all the way. “Are you—are you heading back to your table? Or do you have, like, a special place you’re going?”

“What are you asking?” Josh’s eyes were guarded and a little suspicious.

“It’s just that sometimes, at parties, you have…supplies. Like, cakes and stuff,” Quentin’s heart pounded in his chest, knowing what he was asking. But he had to try. He had to do this. He needed to. “Maybe I could join you, if that’s where you’re headed.”

“You want…one of my special cakes?” Josh’s expression, normally so animated and vivacious, was stone solid and cold. “I thought you were all aboard the sober train with Eliot.”

“Well, yeah, I am. Usually,” Quentin was heedless, his whole body on fire. “But, um, not tonight. With this whole fight and everything, I—”

“Don’t do anything you’ll regret, man.”

“I won’t,” he said firmly. “I just…remember that brownie you gave Eliot? You know, after?”

“No, you giving Eliot any drugs after his possession was—” He put his fist to his mouth and hummed out a high pitched sound. It wasn’t the time to rehash old mistakes, no matter how fucking narcissistic they were. He needed to keep Josh on his side. “Never mind. The point is, I want that.”

Josh blinked and tilted his head. Then he looked around, his mouth open. Then he looked back at Quentin. He blinked again and tilted his head deeper.

“You want to see into other worlds,” he finally said, a statement and a question at the time.

“Yes.”

“Voluntarily.”

“Yes.”

“Even after—”

“Do you have it or not, Josh?” Quentin pulled himself to stand and held his hands out. “Because I’ll bet there are other Herbalists at this party I could talk to.”

“I have it,” Josh nodded slowly, finally standing as well. “But, I mean, I’m not sure what you’re looking for here.”

“I think what I need will find me,” Quentin said, punctuating his words with finality.

“I think you’re emotional and have crazy eyes,” Josh pointed at his glasses. “This is a bad idea, Q.”

“Yeah, well, I’m not actually asking for your opinion,” he stared Josh down, not caring at all what his eyes looked like to him. “I am an adult and I can choose what substances I want to put in my own body. I will pay you if that changes the equation.”

With a final sigh and shrug, Josh shook his head, “Okay, fuck it. Your call. Come with me.”

He stood up and walked ahead of Quentin for a few moments, before he abruptly turning around.

“And friends don’t make friends pay for drugs, you know that,” he said, pointing a finger right at Q’s chest. Then he dropped it and sighed. “I really hope you know what you’re doing, man. And that you’re ready for this.”

Quentin didn’t respond, but his gut screamed his answer.

He was so fucking ready.

______________________________

tbc.

Chapter End Notes
The last two chapters before the epilogue are the longest, so there will be slightly more time between posting them. They're all drafted though and about 75% complete each. :)

Chapter Notes

One chapter, split in two because it ended up longer than expected. :)  

Also, these are the only chapters that directly reference and rely on the earlier work in my series. For context, in my first piece, Eliot accidentally took Josh's See Into Other Worlds cake and ended up talking to his Mosaic counterpart, who A) is happily continuously reliving the Mosaic, with self-awareness and B) brought this timeline's Eliot into the loop, to relive it. If you know that, you should be good.

One year earlier, Quentin poured his second cup of coffee, the one he shared every day with Eliot. His hand shook a little as he steadied the pot over his large white mug, “Columbia University” written on the side in a spectrum of blues. Eliot’s cup was next to his; deep gray, heavy, in carved stone. It reminded him of Fillory, he’d said, when he found it at Pottery Barn of all places. The coffee was El Salvadoran, a dark roast, which El preferred.

One time, Julia claimed that dark roasts had less caffeine than lighter roasts, which sent Quentin down a frantic Wikipedia hole, to confirm whether that was true or a myth or what. He spent the better part of an hour reading about the chemical composition of coffee, and telling a patient Eliot all about how the mass and water content of roasted coffee beans impacted the specific caffeine levels at around a 0.2% rate, until or unless one accounted for specific Arabica varietals, which changed the composition entirely.

“Fascinating, right?” He said with a smile, looking up from the computer across the counter.

“Mmm,” Eliot said, his eyebrows raised and amusement caught in his cheeks. “Definitely.”

(Quentin threw a balled up napkin at his head, and Eliot released his laughter.)

Of course, none of this was actually relevant to the task at hand, which was solely to get the coffee ready. But in the meantime, focusing on mundane details helped calm his mind, in preparation for his planned, practiced, and fretted over morning conversation.

Eliot’s greatest fear—other than his father, existential unworthiness, and pleather—was being pitied. So Quentin knew that he needed to strategize cautiously and approach the situation like it was an entirely organic thought process, rather than one spurred by their rapidly deepening relationship. Easier said than done. Unable to stand still, he walked to the fridge and pulled open the door, the cool air immediately soothing his pink face. It was winter, but he was warm. Nervous, really.

Quentin had asked Julia for her input and she was typically forthright, telling him to stay the course and not to give Eliot any room for argument. Which was all well and good in theory, but “no room for argument” and Eliot didn’t tend to mix well. In the room at the same time, Kady disagreed and offered her own solution.

“Don’t fucking talk about it at all,” she’d said with an eye roll. “It’s your actions that matter, not your crybaby feelings.”
While that was a little mean and a lot true, El was far too astute and Quentin far too squirrelly to pull it off. An initial conversation would be better than Eliot slowly—or not so slowly—catching on and feeling duped. And as for the Fillorians, Quentin couldn’t exactly ask them for any help because their loyalties were clear, especially Margo. They were direct lines to Eliot and a second-hand reveal would be much, much worse than anything else.

Of course, the one person who could have actually helped him negotiate this tricky social quandary—that is, the one person who always helped him navigate every tricky social quandary, which was all social quandaries—was the one person he couldn’t ask, period. That was the rub, he realized with a sigh.

Heart rate rising, he scratched his ear, more for something to do with his hands than because he had an itch, and grabbed the half and half. Another deep breath. He turned back to the small faux-granite breakfast bar, intently focused on each of his movements, grounding himself in the routine. But when he looked up, Eliot was already sitting on one of the stools.

“Jesus, you’re like a cat,” Quentin said, holding his chest. “Shit.”

“Agile and well-groomed, indeed,” Eliot yawned, rubbing his eyes. He was already clad in a button-down and dress pants, contrasted to Q’s white undershirt and flannel pajama bottoms. “Morning to you too.”

“How’d you sleep?” Q poured the rest of the coffee—black for Eliot, cream and sugar for himself—pretending his heart wasn’t threatening to thud out of his chest and land in a grotesque presentation on the floor. Briefly, this made him think of the monster and he instantly regretted the imagery. He pushed it away, to the dark recess of his brain where all those thoughts lived.

“Fine,” Eliot said, impassive. Quentin knew that was a lie, having felt him toss and turn all night, but didn’t press. Instead, he slid the coffee over, to which he received a nod of thanks. Eliot pushed his hair back and took a long sip, the dark circles under his eyes more visible than ever. Quentin traced his gaze down to the counter, where Eliot’s hand—rings on three fingers—tapped arrhythmically.

Things had been a little rough lately.

He knew that what he was offering was the best thing, for both of them, and would ultimately serve to progress their relationship with a deeper trust, as well as a stronger sense of support and purpose. But he also knew Eliot, and he knew he’d be resistant. He wouldn’t willingly impede on his worst enemy’s freedom, let alone Quentin’s. But at the end of the day, it wasn’t actually up to him. So he took a deep breath and cleared his throat, ready to dive in with his mentally rehearsed conversation starter.

“Hey,” he started, proud of his calm voice. “I wanted to run something by you.”

But Eliot immediately shot his eyes up, half-smirking, looking right through him.

“Oh-oh,” he said. “Someone’s got his Overthinker’s Cap on.”

Shit.

He’d expected Eliot to eventually realize that it wasn’t, in fact, a casual conversation. They knew each other well, better than anyone really, from time spent together in both worlds. But he didn’t expect that he wouldn’t even be able to get out the first half of his opener before Eliot noticed his plastic casual tone, his practiced lack of stammer. He swallowed and tried to adjust his tactic, but his mind was a mocking white blank.
“Um,” he said, predictably. He silently cursed his complete inability to be articulate when it mattered most.

“Q,” Eliot reached across the breakfast bar, entwining their fingers. “What’s going on?”

Quentin squeezed his hand tightly, and forced himself to think through the problem logically. He’d wanted to ask Eliot how to handle it. He knew Eliot better than anyone. Ergo, he just needed to think about what Eliot would advise, if he could. Quentin closed his eyes and let the algorithmic conversation flow over him.

*Spit it out, he would say. It’s really not as complicated as that very cute but very fucked up brain of yours is making it out to be.*

“I’m going to stop drinking,” he said, opening his eyes to look him straight on. Eliot’s face immediately darkened, but he didn’t pull away.

“Why would you do that?” He was more aggravated than pissed, but certainly not happy.

Quentin took a steady breath, swallowing down defensiveness. He wanted to tell him that he should be grateful, that it spoke to how much Quentin loved him that he was trying to support him and that getting annoyed wasn’t going to change anything. But he didn’t. Because he was also certain that the second part of Eliot’s hypothetical advice would be to respect and respond to Eliot’s actual reaction, rather than preempting with his own premeditated thought process.

*Because that’s how conversations work, Quentin.*

“I understand that this might be surprising to you. But you just passed a year sober,” he said, and continued even when Eliot’s jaw ticked at the word. “I barely have alcohol anymore anyway and it just feels like the right thing to do.”

“I’m not going to fall off the wagon if you have a glass of wine, Q,” Eliot let go of his hand and pulled his coffee back to his mouth with an aggressive jerk. “One of us should be able to have a little fun.”

“I understand that,” he said again, and Eliot pulled a face at his clinical tone. “But El, I have an opportunity to help instead of hinder, and I think that’s important to recognize.”

Eliot’s eyes flicked up again, fierce and capturing direct eye contact. A tingle rushed through Quentin’s stomach.

“You never hinder,” he said. “But I’m not asking you to do this.”

“I know that. It’s something I want to do.”

“Why?”

Quentin sighed. Most of his reasons would go over like a lead balloon. Reasons like, because he never wanted to make Eliot feel bad. Because he would never forgive himself if Eliot ended up back in old habits and he could have prevented it, in any small way. Because he wanted to make sure they were in sync and on the same page. Because every day he was more and more blindingly in love with him. Because Eliot’s life was his life, full stop.

“Because…” He searched for the right words, and then inelegantly said the first coherent thought that came to mind. “Because you sacrifice for the people you love.”
Eliot pulled back, thunderstruck. The chair made a squeaking sound under his force.

“What did you just say?” He asked, almost swallowing his words in their quiet tremor. Quentin felt his cheeks burn and he ran his hand through his hair, then rubbed his neck. Two nervous tics for the price of one.

“Sorry. I know that’s probably stupid. I don’t want you to think—it’s not like a sacrifice-sacrifice or anything—”

“Q,” Eliot said, and immediately opened his mouth again, a small, undefined sound escaping. “No. It’s not stupid. It’s just—that’s what you said…”

He trailed off, and his lips widened into an unexpected smile. He sniffed and leaned forward on the counter again, his eyes growing warmer, and gentler, and he was looking at him like he was something miraculous. Heat raised up Q’s back and it was all he could take not to leap across the the counter space between them and fall into him, right there in the kitchen, their roommates be damned.

“What I said when?” He decided to ask instead, swallowing down the visceral effect Eliot had on him, this time and every time.

“Nothing. It doesn’t matter,” he said, murmuring and still marveling at Quentin. His eyes closed, lashes hitting his applèd cheeks and Eliot let out a small laugh. He cocked his head and looked at him again, eyes green and loving. He nodded.

“Okay.”

“What?” The ground was unsteady beneath him.

“Okay to what you’re saying,” he said, his joy slowly fading into his usual neutrality with a shrug. “Okay.”

“Oh,” Quentin said, grabbing the counter and tapping his foot. He’d expected a hell of a lot more opposition and his energy was unfettered. “Um, okay then.”

Gaze still unmoving, Eliot’s brow wrinkled over those eyes, and they took on a different, rarer quality, somewhere between fervent and devastated.

“Quentin, I…” he said, searching his face, soft and aching. “I really appreciate you.”

“I appreciate you too,” Quentin said, his own eyes caught open in the shock of the moment. The words tumbled out and his heart turned upside down. Eliot looked downward in response, his smile strained, maybe a little sad. He cleared his throat and took another sip of his coffee.

“But if you change your mind, that’s fine,” he said, his usual tone and demeanor back. “I mean it. Drinking, drugs, whatever. I insist on you following your bliss, not my bullshit.”

“El, you’re…” Quentin bit the inside of his cheek and nodded, thinking better of what he was going to say. “Yeah, okay. But I promise that won’t happen.”

_Fucking liar_, his taunting brain sneered at him.
He centered his gaze ahead, rationalizing. He wasn’t taking drugs to get fucked up. He wasn’t even taking them to escape. He was taking a drug—a specific, useful drug—to get to the bottom of questions that plagued his mind, doubts that formed ceaselessly. If he had the opportunity to do what Eliot did, to see it again, all of it, to feel it, to live it, then maybe he could understand.

Briefly, he wondered if Eliot was still stuck in the alleyway.

Guilt blanketed him, twisting around his torso. He probably should have let Julia or Josh know where he was, so that he didn’t get seriously hurt or anything. Quentin felt the acuity of the spell; he knew that it came out cleanly and powerfully, without any tactical errors. It was also stronger than usual. But realistically, Quentin also knew that even his ‘stronger than usual’ wouldn’t really prove much of a challenge to Eliot, an exceptionally adept Magician in his own right. Chances were close to certain that El was free, out and walking, pissed as hell.

Not that he had any right to be. If Eliot still thought Quentin was a closeted heterosexual (the fucking irony, El), then he really didn’t have any patience left. All he had instead was, you know, deep frustration, anger, sadness, anxiety, sorrow, and a thousand knives stabbing each of the broken little pieces of his shattered heart. But patience? Nope, fresh out of that today.

He ground his teeth, the nerves from his molars tweaking against his gums. Holding the bridge of his nose, he rolled his shoulders into the large palm-tree shaped chair and watched the shadows of the wedding guests-cum-ravers dance in the light of the torches. He was inside one of the tiki huts now, surrounded by a group of young, sweaty drunks, writhing in their own adventures. The floor was deep cool sand and the hut’s interior was temperature controlled, so the sweat came from the substances, not any heat. Q was surprised that he wasn’t even a little bit interested in joining them, even in all their carefree glory. Maybe he really was growing up. Again.

Finally, Josh re-appeared, from behind a sunshine patterned curtain, one tiki hut over. He was chatting with someone Quentin didn’t recognize and watched as Josh gave him a massive hug, nearly spilling the large platter in his hand. Again, he always forgot that life existed out of their little fucked up group dynamic; it gave him both a strange sense of hope and a deepening sense of dread. Catching his eye, Josh waved without his usual giant smile and matter-of-factly placed the large platter filled with desserts on Q’s lap. He pointed to the tool (because that’s what it was, more of a tool than a drug) on the furthest lefthand corner.

“Here you are, my hapless, reckless friend-o,” Josh shook his head. “Once again, I hope you know what you’re doing.”

Quentin nodded, not in the mood to respond verbally, and picked up the small round pastry. This time, seeing into other worlds didn’t come from a cake. It came from a French macaron, chocolate flavored, because it was the “most romantic dessert,” according to Josh, still talking in the background. Q ate the whole thing in one bite, his heart thumping, careening in his brittle chest. The air dry crust and thick center cream reminded Quentin of an embalmed Oreo, but he wasn’t actually looking to enjoy Parisian delicacies.

“Try to relax as much as possible and let the worlds flow over you,” Josh said, covering Quentin with a weighted blanket. “The point is to experience, not to interact. That’s where...well, You-Know-Who went wrong.”

“He’s not Voldemort, Josh,” Quentin said.

“Trying to be sensitive,” he patted Q’s back. “Well, Eliot got sucked into the Matrix, so try to avoid going down that path if you can.”
Of course, Quentin couldn’t tell Josh that the path in question was his exact plan. So instead, he nodded again.

“Now, I have other guests to attend to, including the grooms, who are heading on an early psychedelic honeymoon,” Josh waggled his eyebrows suggestively. “But if you need anything, I’ll be around and checking in on you.”

Then, Q was all alone. In a matter of seconds, he felt his muscles melt into the padded green plastic beneath him. His pupils dilated with a sizzle and his head felt like it was floating into space. While he knew what was coming, he had to admit the come-up of this particular drug was incredible. Freeing, like he’d never been upset, like nothing had happened that night. For a brief moment, he even forgot which drug he had taken—something about words, maybe? Words or wards or weird wormy worms. Whatever. It didn’t matter. What mattered is that he was on some really good shit that he never wanted to end. He never had to feel anything again, ever, ever again. No more feelings ever. Eeeeevvveerrrr—

—The blue web formed and then, he remembered. Right. The Mosaic. The plan.

The differential equations disappeared, making way for a male figure, standing on colorful tiles. He was blurred in a land across the Neitherlands, a long time ago. He wore a white Fillorian jacket, with flared sleeves and his long brown hair, lightly graying at the sides, was tied back with a single ribbon. It wasn’t intricate - a simple knot. Eliot’s work, not Arielle’s. He was probably around thirty-eight. Forty at the most. The man stepped forward, shielding his eyes from an overhead sun and stared at Quentin, a mixture of disbelief and dispassion quirking his features.

“Well, this is different,” Older Quentin finally said. Then he paused. “Your hair is short.”

“Shorter, yeah,” Q said, not sure what more to contribute. He cleared his throat and kept to the mission. “I’m from a different timeline.”

“I mean, yeah, I figured,” Older Quentin squinted. “Which one? Have you…have you ever heard of something called The Beast?”

“I’m from Timeline 40,” Q clarified and the older man nodded, absorbing. “Well, the latter half of the split timeline. It basically wrapped itself around…itself, I guess. I, uh, I lived the entirety of your life, once.”

“Got it. Okay.” Older Quentin began to rub his neck and then pointedly plastered his arm down at his side. “How is this happening? The loops are supposed to be continuous. Is this putting my existence at risk?”

“Right, so my Eliot—” he cut himself off, heart cracking and uncertain. “Um, I mean, uh, the Eliot from this part of the timeline…it happened to him too. And when he told me about it, I thought it sounded like a paradox, at best. So I looked into it, using the books.”

Q bent down in the sand and flattened a space. He began drawing as he spoke. “By creating the time loops, the Watcher Woman essentially created, uh, what’s known as a pocket universe, right?”

“Obviously, but our structural integrity is based on the continuity of the single loop,” Older Quentin bent down with him, watching Q draw circles and a map. “Even with the contributing factor of self-awareness. Actually, especially because of it.”

“Right, but—but I think the reason this circumstance doesn’t interfere is because of the Loon of Ages.”

“Wait, you mean in the Broken Bay?” Older Quentin pressed his thumb to his lips. “I’m not
following.”

“Remember, Rupert discovers in *The Flying Forest* that you can feed the Loon through its metronome eyes by offering it——“

“The Gift of Heart,” they both said at the same time and the Older Quentin smiled.

“So by swallowing the loops, the Loon allows for inconsistencies and aberrations, so long as there is emotional resonance,” he nodded, hand on his forehead. “Of course. By us merely having this conversation, the Loon can take flight, even across decades. Hell, centuries. It journeys where people need to go.”

“Yes, exactly, thank you,” Q had never felt so understood by another person in his life. “When I tried explaining it to Eliot, he said it sounded like nonsensical bullshit.”

Older Quentin’s eyes darkened into slits.

“Glad to hear he’s as kind and supportive as ever,” he growled.

Q blinked, not expecting that reaction at all. His shoulders tensed, and defensiveness for Eliot rushed to his chest, even if he absolutely didn’t deserve it right now.

“Well, I mean, he didn’t have all the context,” he said, crossing his arms. “And I was kind of throwing a lot at him when he was still recovering from...something really bad.”

“Don’t make excuses for him,” Older Quentin shook his head and looked up at the Fillorian sky. “Not today.”

“What?”

What was happening?

“He’s definitely smart enough to sit down with you and understand, but he doesn’t bother because it’s not worthy of High King Eliot’s time,” Older Quentin yelled the title behind his back, presumably at the cottage. “Better to belittle than try, right, El?”

…This was not what Eliot had described.

Eliot said that meeting his older self was a revelation. That seeing himself, poised, collected, so much more mature and thoughtful with the clear-headed vision of a thousand loops lived had completely changed his perspective. It made him realize where he’d been weak and where he could be strong again. And Q so badly wanted the same wisdom, but from the viewpoint of his own counterpart. But instead he had...pissed off Quentin. Emotional Quentin. Not particularly helpful Quentin.

“Wait, you’re angry at Eliot,” he said, clarifying, still disbelieving. “Like, right now?”

“That’s one way to put it,” Older Quentin barked a laugh that sounded more like, well, Eliot than himself. “Do you have any idea the shit he’s been pulling? Sometimes, it’s too much. He’s infuriating.”

“The whole reason I did this stupid drug is because I’m fighting with Eliot,” Q said, not really caring if he sounded selfish. So his past self was mad at Eliot. Big fucking deal. That guy knew it ended well, began well, and always ultimately went well, so what was the point?

“Wait, let me guess,”Older Quentin’s eyes widened with a cultivated sarcasm Q barely remembered
embracing. “He’s detached, saying hurtful things, but that’s fine, right? Because his words are always so clever and eloquent. Wit is so much more important than tending to what is actually real between the two of you.”

“Um,” Q said, his stomach churning uncomfortably. This line of thought was a little too close to home.

Older Quentin let out a hollow laugh and started pacing, “And if you—the person he supposedly loves most in the world—end up hurt, gutted, destroyed in the process? Well, too bad! That’s just the collateral damage of loving Eliot Waugh.”

*Damn. Okay.*

“Well, yeah. I mean, pretty much,” Q wrapped his arms around himself, dread bubbling up his core. “I… I mean, yeah.”

“Typical,” Older Quentin shook his head. “God, I’d kill for a cigarette. Do you have a cigarette? You should smoke one right now. You have no idea how lucky you are.”

Q stared straight ahead and opened his mouth, and then swallowed, his brow framing his eyes in despair. The Older Quentin stared at him, impatient.

“What’s that look about?”

“Sorry—it’s just, um, when Eliot met your…his…you know, the other Eliot,” Q kept swallowing, feeling like the pit of foreboding in his throat would never dissolve. “His attitude was a little different.”

“You’ve got to stop with the verbal tics,” Older Quentin rubbed his temples and Q remembered that he’d try to cut out all of his nervous habits in his 30s. “And as for Eliot, I don’t know. Maybe he was pulled out at a different point in the cycle. How the fuck should I know? That jackass isn’t exactly forthcoming.”

“I mean, but can he really talk about it?” The defensiveness for Eliot’s sake bubbled up again. “From what I understand, the cycle isn’t something you can change. There’s no variance, so it’s not like he could—”

“Again, the excuses,” he said, biting on his own teeth. “He really doesn’t deserve them.”

“So what, we’re doomed then?” Q’s hands flailed in the air.

“Doomed?” Older Quentin looked genuinely confused.

“Well, like, our life here,” Q swallowed. “It’s been hard lately. And we both…we’re struggling to be who we used to be, back in your life. Because what we remember was something beautiful and—perfect, untouchable—”

“Well, then you remember goddamn wrong,” Older Quentin’s face was stern, set in lines making him look older, angrier, completely lacking in bullshit. “And I rarely use Earth words like that anymore. That’s how wrong you are.”

“So then, what? It’s not worth it? Any of it?” Q’s heart dropped to his stomach. “We’re just fucked.”

“I never said it wasn’t worth it,” Older Quentin rolled his eyes. “I’m angry at him, it happens. I still love him more than every world combined. But if you have somehow deluded yourself into thinking
he didn’t hurt us here or that he was somehow not exactly who he’s always fucking been, then, yeah, you’re wrong.”

“That’s not helpful.” Q felt like his jaw muscles were going to leap out of his skull.

“What are you looking for, exactly?” Older Quentin was irritated. “Because I’m really not sure what to tell you.”

“I’m looking for a spell,” Q said, cutting to the chase, too frustrated to continue the conversation further. “So I can experience it again. All of it. That Eliot did it for this Eliot. And I want you to do the same for me.”

His counterpart blanched, dumbstruck. It was clear he knew exactly what Q was talking about. It was also clear that the idea completely freaked him out.

“Well, I can try,” he said, voice barely above a whisper. “I know it. But Eliot’s telekinesis work… how he combines it with dimensional circumstances? It’s remarkable and rare. Don’t you remember that?”

Q did. Kind of.

“And besides, either way, I might really mess that up,” Older Quentin continued. “El’s always been…”

The words “the better Magician” hung in the air. But Q wasn’t concerned about that. Water is wet. At least Eliot never made him feel like shit about it, unlike Alice. Instead, he walked as close to the mirage of his older self as he could. He had to try to make him understand.

“I just—I’m twenty-eight, right? And yet, I have seventy-eight years of life experience. I’ve barely passed over half my time with the Mosaic in this life. But as formative and fucking enormous as that part of my experience was, it’s all internalized, not actualized,” Q said, and then pointed downward. “The immediacy of my life is here and that’s what feels real. Where I’m sure you barely even think about Julia.”

“I think about her,” Older Quentin said, but Q wasn’t convinced. He remembered forgetting.

“Yeah, well, I have coffee with her every morning. It’s a ritual and it’s so important to me. We live together, as roommates, best friends. She has saved me in so many ways, put herself before everyone over and over again, when none of us deserved it. I wouldn’t give up anything for her friendship.”

Q sighed and folded his arms, “But you know who I can barely remember? Arielle. And sometimes I think that’s for the best.”

Older Quentin flinched. Based on the look of his age and the romantic implication in how he spoke about Eliot, Arielle had likely been dead for more than a few years. It wasn’t fresh. But he remembered that grief was a lifelong journey.

“Oh, point made,” he said, pulling on a string in his jacket. He never really did get all of the habits under control.

“So how do I keep these two worlds inside me?” Q asked, sinking to the ground, his body feeling too heavy to support. “How do I move forward? I need a chance to...reconcile it all, I guess. At least try.”

Older Quentin scratched his chin and sighed, turning his eyes to Q with a deep gaze, like he was
trying to see through him. Again, he looked quite a lot like Eliot.

“You’re holding something back,” he said. “What does all this have to do with your being mad at him? And why does it bother you that I’m mad at him?”

“It’s that he’s right,” Quentin let out a strangled sound of frustration, willing himself not to tear up again. “Eliot—he’s right. He said it’s a fever-dream and he’s right. Every day, more and more. It’s starting to feel that way, even him and me, and he was—is the most significant…”

He trailed off and looked at his hands, the details of his knuckles soothing, “I can’t remember anything but the broad strokes and that fucking terrifies me more than anything.”

“Why?” Older Quentin’s eyes were still probing, his arms folded tightly across his chest. Q looked down, those goddamn tears blurring his line of vision. He blinked them away and stared at the shine of the flame on the fine grains of sand, sparkling like a thousand stars.

“Because how many buildings can keep standing without their foundation?”

A pregnant pause passed between them and Older Quentin stared down, right at the Mosaic. Silence was heavy and Q shook with the urge to fill it. But then his older self sighed and nodded.

“Okay,” Older Quentin furrowed his brow and swallowed. “Okay. Okay, I’ll do the spell.”

“Thank you,” Q whispered.

And so, Older Quentin pulled his chest up, realigning his posture into casting position, and he stared at Q.

He moved his hands, adequately, gracelessly, in a tutting formation he only vaguely knew. It was obvious he was going through the steps technically in his mind. He was remembering each detail like it was written on a page, instead of something known in his soul. He spoke the Gaelic, clinical and satisfactory. Finally, he finished and there was a large burst of light.

Q felt the dimensions swallow him whole.

He was so fucking ready.

First, it was blurred.

It wasn’t the settling, the ease,

the seamless transition that Eliot described.
He was cold.

He felt everything.

But then, the world settled into his skin
and his skin settled into the world.

The Mosaic. The Mosaic.

The Mosaic.
Quentin was standing inside the cottage, leaning against a wall frame. The ceiling was low and there were no lights, not even a candelabra. Over the hearth, a single painting of Castle Whitespire hung and a bright orange rug was laid out from the wall to soak up the ash and soot. Otherwise, the interior was empty, except the cobwebs.

“It’s definitely,” Eliot stood in the center of the main room, his face pale, “…cozy.”

Discomfort radiated off him. Eliot was more than accustomed to royalty and the entire cottage was less than half the size of his personal quarters. Quentin faintly rubbed El’s tense arm before walking past, trying to get a better sense of what they were in for.

“Two bedrooms,” he said, peeking behind a wall. “We’ll be able to get some sleep at least.”

Eliot walked behind him, looking over his shoulder into the room. The room was dark, damp, and empty, except for a double bed. It had a frame of foraged sticks and twigs, and there was a brown burlap blanket covering the thin mattress. Threadbare pillows topped it off.

“Oh my god,” Eliot was shaking. “I can’t do this, Q. I can’t do this.”

He sat down in the middle of the floor and held his head.

“Eliot,” Quentin rushed over to him and sat. “It’ll be a few days. A week, max, okay? You faced down a murderous shadow monster priest and boat raping pirates. You can manage an uncomfortable bed.”

“Shitload of zeroes.”

“And I am working on a spell that will go through all of the possibilities, fast. It’s still...a lot, I know. But I’m estimating it’ll take three days, once I get the Slavic right. That’s not that bad.”

“I don’t have three days,” Eliot laid down, his arms sprawled over his head. “I’m High King.”

Quentin laid down beside him and gently reached for his hand. In turn, Eliot grabbed Quentin's and squeezed, like he was going to break. His hazel eyes moved restlessly, taking in every crack in the ceiling, every dripping leak, and every speck of dust that adorned the ill-kept surfaces.

“I know, El,” he said, hoping he sounded soothing. “And we’ll get you back to Margo soon. But for now, I think we have to embrace the suck.”

“Embrace the suck, embrace the suck...” Eliot said under his breath, his eyes closing. “This really does suck, Q.”

“It’ll be brief in the scheme of things. I promise.”

The scope was wrong.
“Sometimes it was microscopic, too focused, too insular.”

“‘Dear Diary, Why doesn’t Alice love me?’ Eliot threw a tile down with a crash, luck alone saving it from shattering. ‘I’ve been such a good boy, Diary.’”

“Fuck you, Eliot.” It was really all he could say.

“Your love life isn’t exactly life and death stakes,” Eliot sniffed and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, unwarranted anger flying off him. “I’m dealing with a goddamn Fairy coup, we’re on the verge of war with every other nation on this terrible little planet, and the people are starving, Quentin.”

“I get it.”

“And-and I still haven’t perfected my champagne vineyard which is the one fucking legacy I want to leave, and my fiancé is probably wondering where the fuck I went—”

“I get it, you’re a king,” Quentin bit out the words, practically ripping the pastel through the page. “But my life still matters, humble as it may be compared to Your Grace.”

“Thank you for using my proper address,” he snarled and Quentin flipped him off.

“Let’s just work so we can figure this out, and both get home,” Q closed his eyes and finished the pastel drawing of their 980th attempt, trying to remember the Serenity Prayer. “And then we won’t have to deal with this or each other anymore.”

It had been a long three months.

“Quentin, you have to wake up,” Eliot blinked and then grit his teeth. “This isn’t going to be over any fucking time soon. We are stuck here, together, for the long haul.”

Sometimes days or weeks or months passed in a swirl.
Faces flickered in and out.

They started sleeping in the same bed nightly by the fourth month. Both claimed it was because the magical energy expended on heating the place was too taxing, but they both knew that was a lie. It was the loneliness.

(There was no spooning.)
The sun was exceptionally hot on that summer afternoon. Quentin scraped dust off his trousers and pressed his hands down on the ground, somewhat registering the burning from the tiles. But he was far too overwhelmed to do anything about it. He needed a break. He needed to breathe. He needed shade, and a cocktail, and a cigarette.

He closed his eyes and imagined he was back at Brakebills. But instead of transporting to the Physical Kids’ cottage, he was on the main green. He sat under a tree, shaded from both the warm September sun and the first touch of an autumn breeze. And Eliot was there, sharing cigarettes and his vast array of social wisdom on the lost new kid.

It was a real memory, he realized. From before The Beast, before all the death and destruction, in those first couple of glorious days or weeks or however long it was. When everything was new and everything was possible, and Eliot was his first friend. Ever. At least, the first friend he’d made as an adult who didn’t have some tie to him through childhood. And that was almost as great as magic itself.

“So Quentin,” Eliot’s eyes trailed up and down his face, discerning. “Do you have a nickname?”

“What?” He felt scrutinized and a little itchy. Eliot was disarming, but intense.

“Well, I’m definitely not going to call you Quentin every time. How tragic,” he laughed and pulled on his cigarette with a worldly finesse. “So? Anything? Quinn? Quinny?”

“Sometimes my friends call me Q,” he said.

“Letter or stage direction?”

“The, um, the letter.”

Eliot wrinkled his nose, his eyes at a mid-point between charmed and mocking. Quentin realized too late it wasn’t a serious question—he obviously knew.

“You’re very literal,” Eliot said, like he was cataloguing. But then he raised his eyes up and tilted his head back and forth, considering. “Q. Okay, yeah. I like that.”

Quentin felt the roughness of a new tile in his hand and the heat of the Fillorian sun on his back. He placed it down and rubbed his face, sitting back on the puzzle.

“Is ‘Quentin’ really that bad?” He asked, knowing it was abrupt. Eliot stopped his own work and stared, his sweat-drenched face screwed up with concern.
“Are you having a heat stroke? You are Quentin.”

“No, the name. Is it really that bad?”

Eliot pulled his lips together and drew in his eyebrows, expression unreadable. With a sigh, he shook his head and went back to the tiles. Quentin assumed that was the end of that. Until a few moments later, when he heard his voice.

“It grows on you.”

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**Missing puzzle pieces**

*Like the Mosaic, unfinished*

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“Except you’re missing the beauty of it, Q,” Eliot leaned into the overseers’ chair, cradling the nape of his neck between his palms, elbows out. *Le Fleurs de Mal* is about exalting the most profane forms of love, making the grotesque stunning, like, complete fucking sublimation. The French alone, my god.”

Quentin shook his head, placing a tile, “I’m not saying the words don’t matter. But without the historical and philosophical significance, then you’re missing huge amounts of context.”

“Fuck context, Q,” he said, leaning forward with the stick to point out an error. “Let a poet be a poet.”

“Baudelaire was more than that,” Quentin said, switching the last red and green he placed down. “He’s the father of Modernity, the fucking revolutionary of Romanticism—”

But Eliot wasn’t listening, his gaze fixed on the horizon, dreamlike. As Q continued his arguments about Baudelaire’s political relevancy, about his impact on literature, his likely contribution to the development of Erosmancy, Eliot leaned against his palm and spoke over him in a wistful, dulcet melody,

“Usant à l’envi leurs chaleurs dernières,
Nos deux cœurs seront deux vastes flambeaux…”

The last day’s light gleaned from behind him and the evening mist, thick and ethereal, rolled over the trees in the distance. And as Eliot spoke, looking right at him and yet lost in a reverie at the same time, Quentin couldn’t find the will to be anything but entranced.

“Qui réfléchiront leurs doubles lumières
Dans nos deux esprits, ces miroirs jumeaux.”

Then, Eliot smiled and Quentin lost his breath.
“Are you still awake?” He asked into the darkness, flat on his back.

“Sleep it off, Q. Don’t get in your head.”

Quentin hadn’t been doing well that day, mental health-wise. He’d spiraled. In the technically rational part of his brain, he understood that Eliot probably needed a breather from his bullshit. But he was far too lost in his own neurosis to let his panic rest.

“Why me?” He stared up at the ceiling, his eyes still barely adjusted to the lack of light. “At Brakebills. When I was new, you wanted to be my friend, no questions asked. Why?”

Eliot didn’t respond for a few moments.

“You know why,” he finally said. It was the closest Eliot had ever come to acknowledging his early crush without the safety of a quip.

“Right, but I mean, it must have occurred to you pretty quickly that I wasn’t really, you know...”

“G-A-Y? Yes, Quentin, it occurred to me.”

He had actually been planning to say that it was clear Quentin wasn’t his type. He wasn’t alluring, or worldly, or lewdly sexy, or the kind of charismatic that could charm the charmer that was Eliot Waugh. He was exactly none of the things he was certain Eliot would require in a partner. And so, he felt a pang of irritation at the clean box in which Eliot consistently tried to force his sexuality.

“Okay,” Quentin said instead of addressing the comment. Even in his fucked up mental state, he knew it wasn’t the time to delve into that wellspring. He turned his face toward Eliot, “So what made me different that you kept hanging out with me?”

“It’s not attractive to fish for compliments,” Eliot’s head turned away from Q with a thud. He was annoyed. “You should go to sleep.”

“I know, but it’s just, like, it doesn’t make sense to me, right? I mean, I was this total fucking nobody, straight out of discharge from a mental hospital, and I could barely string two words together,” Quentin spoke faster and faster. “And then, there’s you. And you were, like, the epitome of everything magical and cool and interesting and—”

He brought his hand up to his hair and pressed down on his scalp, his brain hurting and his heart pounding, but it was like the words wouldn’t stop, couldn’t stop, until he reached some kind of sensible conclusion to the strange paradox of his friendship with Eliot.

“And you should have hated me, or at most been indifferent,” he continued, his insides swirling until he was nauseous. “Because you were already the ring leader with so many fucking friends. And all of you were so much better than me, more talented than me, smarter than me, way less likely to
invite The Beast onto campus than me—"

“Okay, Q,” Eliot sat up and pulled Quentin along with him. “Jesus. Stop.”

The black darkness had turned a deep pale blue as he spoke and the moon illuminated the shadowy forms of the room. He could see Eliot cradle his head in his hands. He was silent and Quentin had finally run out of words to say.

“I mean, why does anyone like anyone?” Eliot asked, looking up, his voice a little higher than usual and Quentin wasn’t convinced his answer was totally directed at him. “You were…nice.”

“Nice?” He was dubious of Eliot giving any amounts of shit about someone being nice.


“Nice.”

“Exactly how many of those ‘friends’ did you see around me when shit got bad?” Eliot asked, stretching his fingers out, his palms suddenly crucially interesting. “Even before the exile to royalty. Margo and…?”

Quentin didn’t have an answer to that and Eliot let out an empty laugh.

“I was a vehicle to partying or a fucking stereotype as far as they were concerned,” he said, before finally looking over at Q. “So yeah, when I met you, I thought you seemed like a good person. One who also happened to have a cute face. I had a dearth of that in my life. And nice seemed…better than not.”

“Nice,” Quentin repeated.

“For the record, I was right,” Eliot said, quiet. “If I’d written you off, I would have really fucking missed out.”

“Thanks,” Quentin said, twisting the sheet between his hands. “I’m just having a hard time believing that anyone could see anything worthwhile in me right now.”

“Your broken brain’s talking, that’s all,” he said, lightly pressing his fingers against Q’s hairline. “You really should get some sleep.”

But instead, they both kept sitting there, not speaking, not moving.

“You know, this is one of the few times you’ve seemed as, like, Earth-born as me,” Quentin broke the reverie, half-laughing. “Like we’re from the same species.”

Eliot tensed and that profile of his shone in the moonlight. His eyes trailed upward and his mouth opened, like he was going to say something. Then, he apparently thought better of it and he flopped down on the bed, turned away from Quentin.

“Get some sleep, Coldwater.”

*It was bits and pieces, melting, faltering.*
Light came through the windows and Eliot was shaking his shoulders and Quentin wanted to die. They’d been drinking nightly recently, enjoying, healing, escaping. And it all fucking caught up with Q at once.

“Quentin, you have to wake up,” Eliot blinked and then smiled, too cheery. “Come on, sleepyhead. Time to get moving.”

How Eliot always avoided hangovers was almost enviable to him. (“All it takes is practice and extensive liver damage,” he always joked, but it wasn’t really a joke, not at its heart.)

His head really fucking hurt.

He was aware of himself.

Eliot.

It was the only word he could think, the only word that mattered. They pushed their way into the cottage, articles of clothing (a hoodie, a vest, a button-down) falling haphazardly until they finally landed on the bed, in each other’s arms, where they fucking belonged.

The mead—which tasted really good this time—was an easy excuse, liquid courage to get where they’d been building for weeks, months, years. Eliot’s hands ran up and down the sides of his torso, his mouth trailing down his chest, burning, tattooing trails of everything Quentin had always known he wanted. His hands landed in a tangle in Eliot’s hair and they rolled sideways on the bed together, their lips coming back together and the chorus rejoiced.

Eliot.

His heart would have crashed through his chest if he’d been able to feel the sensation. His brain would have gone through every implication—what did this mean, what would the morning look like, how did he feel, how did he feel, how about Alice, who the fuck is Alice, what was going to happen next.

But Quentin’s body was in control that night, present in its sensations. And he—he was kissing Q’s whole body, every available surface, and biting above his hip bone as his expert hands undid his belt. Dizzying, electrifying, pained, heated. His tongue drew skillful lines and circles on his pelvis, until everything shuddered and crashed and he couldn’t have given a shit about anything in the world, except…

“Eliot.”
He wasn’t sure how long it had been, hours or centuries, but time was irrelevant. They moved against and with each other, Q’s lips capturing Eliot’s, barely stopping for breath, and Eliot’s hands in turn never stopping across his body, like he was memorizing.

“Oh god, from the start,” he murmured into Q’s neck, rolling on top of him, kissing his collarbone and entwining their legs. “I’ve wanted this from the start.”

“Eliot…” It was still all he could say. His heart was outside of himself, trembling under his touch. He had felt him before, touched him before. But this was something different. Something spectacular.

“I’m fucking gone for you, Quentin,” his mouth was back on his neck now, teeth scraping upwards to infinity. “I’ve always been gone for you.”

He traced his tongue along the ridges of Quentin’s ear and Quentin was certain that if he died, right in that moment, it would have been a life perfectly lived.

“Me too, El,” he leaned his forehead against his and kissed him. “I...me too.”

Eyes closed, he felt Eliot tremble and he kissed Q back, urgent, fierce. In the back of Quentin’s useless rational mind, he almost noted that it didn’t feel like a beginning. It was desperate, hoarding, like their time was borrowed and precious. But as Eliot’s hands went back into his hair and they dipped over and under each other, crashing in waves and out-of-body experiences, Quentin pushed that all aside.

It was still hours until daylight.

Too aware.

“You know exactly what that means.”

In and out.

Quentin’s head landed on the pillow and he exhaled.

He’d heard her voice, so downcast, so defeated, and it sent him on a wild tailspin. Lunk, with the perfect name, had cheated on Arielle, the beautiful and charming peaches and plums vendor. He and
Eliot bought them every day—it was a break in the Mosaic monotony, the fruit tasted really good, and Q got to spend a couple of moments looking at one of the most gorgeous women he had ever seen. And since he and Eliot were… saving their overthinking, it was a helpful, harmless fantasy.

Eliot wasn’t interested. Not in the way Quentin hoped he would be. Fine. That first night had been a drunken encounter, brought on by loneliness and ennui, and nothing more. Even Quentin had to admit it was probably for the best, since they needed to remain a cohesive team and ready at a moment’s notice if (when) the Mosaic was complete. He had to compartmentalize and remind himself (over and over) that what he was feeling for Eliot was circumstantial, brought on by now years of near-constant proximity. So when they reached for each other in the night (every night), wrapped in each other, murmuring stolen words into the other’s skin, it was because they sought solace and release. Nothing more.

His little crush on the peaches and plums girl really helped keep everything in perspective. Arielle was slender and tall with honey brown hair, and her dresses were…really nicely fitting. But it never occurred to him that he could have a real chance with her. Here, in Fillory, decades and decades before his own birth. The tips of his fingers floated away in time with his burning scalp, and he exhaled.

As he did, Eliot walked into the room and grabbed his newly hewn work shirt off the chair in the corner of their room. He offered a brief wave without eye contact and walked back to the door, stopping at the frame.

“I’m not feeling well,” he said, vocal chords weak. He barely even turned around. “One of us being sick sucks enough, so I’m going to sleep in the other room tonight. To preserve your immune system.”

Quentin nodded and instinctually pulled the blanket up his chest, irrationally terrified at the idea of sleeping alone. But he knew saying that was a bad idea, for myriad reasons.

“Sure,” he said, unsure why his heart twisted the way it did. It was just one night. “Get well.”

Eliot knocked twice on the door as a goodbye, and walked out of their room.

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_Time was skipping, jumping, and he saw his tuxedo still._

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It wasn’t just one night.

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_“Quentin, you have to wake up.”_
Arielle was everything light, everything sweet, everything kind. She reminded Eliot of Fen, he said, and that was a good thing. As Quentin looped his wedding tie over and around itself—it was his soon-to-be father-in-law’s, a family tradition—Eliot smoothed down his lapels for him.

“She’s wonderful, Q,” he said, voice full and rich with sincerity. Quentin smiled, bright and big, relieved and joyful.

“Glad to have your approval.”

He meant it. And as Eliot returned the smile, Quentin felt his heart glow and his eyes water. It had taken him and Eliot a long time to get here, to this place of happy co-existence and the deepest friendship he’d ever known. But they did.

“We’ll both have Fillorian brides,” Eliot laughed, his eyes alight. “Only you’ll actually get to see yours.”

And the joy stopped. The reality of who they are, what they’ve been searching for, their entire purpose…it ran like a hamster in a deadly wheel in his brain.

“Unless we figure out the Mosaic,” Quentin sighed. “Then you’ll be stuck back in a loveless marriage and I’ll—”

“Don’t think about that,” Eliot clapped both hands on his shoulders and ducked his head to catch Quentin’s eyes. “Not today, okay?”

“El, I still want it to work, for our life at—” he couldn’t say home, not anymore “—for what we promised, but…”

“I know,” he said, whispering, cupping Quentin’s face. “I get it, Q. Don’t think about it.”

He brought Quentin in for a long hug, hand resting on the back of his head, like always. Q briefly closed his eyes and allowed himself to enjoy Eliot’s embrace, despite himself, despite everything. It was a mere moment and it hurt nothing, and no one, to enjoy his friend’s comforting presence, he convinced himself.

“I’ll worry about the puzzle tonight. You get married.”

This wasn’t what he’d described. It was different.

The spell Eliot perfected to bring modern music to their cottage was a godsend. It took Quentin a little longer to master, which was par for the course. But once he did, he found himself working on the Mosaic faster, with more focus and energy. Which was excellent since otherwise he barely had time for his wife.
He knew his devotion to the quest, to his previous life, to Eliot...all of these things irritated Arielle, steadfast as he was despite her protests, explicit or otherwise. But he promised to try harder to make her a priority and so he turned up the music, bending down with purpose.

When he looked up at the overseer’s chair for more direction from Eliot, he instead found him looking down with that too familiar, too annoying grin on his face.

“What? He asked, resigned.

“You would like fucking ska.”

He could still feel his skin.

The lump in his throat was nothing compared to the knot in his heart, glowing and growing and pained. Arielle cooed down to the bundle in her arms; he had her eyes, Quentin’s nose.

“I think someone wants to meet his Daddy,” she said, her melodic voice all the more gentle. Then, she handed Theodore to Q, and everything came into devastatingly sharp focus as he brought him to his chest.

“Hey buddy,” he said, grinning at Arielle, whose hands were on her chest, in awe. “Pleased to make your acquaintance.”

Teddy curled his tiny hand around Quentin’s finger. He buried his nose in his son’s scant hair and didn’t fight against the tears anymore. The love was most overwhelming, but the guilt followed.

“If I’m ever gone,” he whispered, so Ari wouldn’t hear. “Just know Daddy loves you so much.”

He was back at work on the Mosaic the next day. For once, Eliot had no commentary.

Something was wrong.

“Quentin, you have to wake up.”

A tile narrowly missed his head and he spun around, indignant.

“Enough with the fucking ska,” Eliot spat out through grit teeth.
Something was wrong.

It was a new kind of anniversary. It was a new kind of sickness. He remembered the wrenching pain of losing Alice. That had been child’s play, borne of greater trauma. This, a year without Arielle, a year without his wife, a year, a year, a whole fucking year. This was real pain. Sorrow.

He sunk low into the armchair, staring blankly out into the living room. Eliot was dancing with Teddy, keeping his son happy on the worst of days.

“One, two, skip to my Lou,” Eliot held the giggling Teddy in his arms, like a grand waltz, jumping around the room. “One, two, skip to my Lou...”

He threw Teddy high in the air and swung him back down, placing him on the floor. Then, he covered his eyes and gasped, spinning in a circle. Teddy was in hysterics.

“Lost my partner, what’ll I do? Lost my partner, what’ll I do?” Eliot dramatically held his hands to his chest, looking around like he couldn’t see the small but mighty child. “Skip to my Lou, my darlin’...”

“Papa, here! I’m here!”

“I’ll find another one, anyone will do,” Eliot grabbed the broomstick and started square dancing. “I’ll find another one, anyone will do...”

“Papa!” Teddy shrieked with laughter, falling to the ground.

Quentin brought his hands to his mouth and felt something like joy for the first time in months. He thought of Julia, years from now, and her small spark of magic. It was the same.

From the ashes, rebuild.

Too much missing
Too much missing

“Blue to B5.”
"I already have green on B5."

"Shit, you’re right. Sorry. Blue to B7."

They still fought, every now and then. But Teddy was fragile and hated raised voices, so they always saved their more heated conversations for after he went to bed, fast asleep. Then, they stood on the Mosaic, their voices whispering at each other with a newly restrained ferocity.

On that particular night, if they could have screamed, they would have.

“I’m not sorry for trying to find some happiness, Quentin,” Eliot went to slam his hand against the cottage wall but stopped himself at the last second. “You might want to wallow in misery for the rest of your life, but don’t ask the same of me.”

“That’s not fair,” Quentin hissed out. “That is not fucking fair. We have Teddy to think about and—and our entire life’s purpose and—“

“Don’t lie to me,” Eliot stood close to Quentin, but his body was hot and tense with anger instead of desire. “Don’t say that this is about any of that when it’s really about your guilt.”

“Arielle has only been dead—“

“For three years, Q,” he placed his hand on his arm, pleading. “Q, you can be happy. We can be happy. She would want you to be happy.”

“Not like this,” Quentin said, shaking his head. “Not with you.”

Eliot’s face was a storm cloud, “Because I’m a man.”

“No, because it’s you, Eliot,” he shook his head, fighting tears. “She wasn’t stupid. She knew there was something between us.”

“And there still is,” Eliot stepped even closer, anger and desire mingling in that strange way of his. “But you’re going to let some sense of moral righteousness, some fucked up misplaced sense of loyalty, prevent the best thing that could—? We could be happy, Quentin.”

Q shook his head and looked down, the colors of the Mosaic taunting him.

“You were the one who was never interested in a ‘we’ from the beginning,” Quentin swallowed, his voice small and faraway. “So to spring this on me, to act like—“

“I’m sorry I’m such an inconvenience, Coldwater, but we can’t live like this. You know we can’t.”

“Well, I lived like this for years, El,” he turned his face away, stony. “Maybe it’s your turn.”
“So what, this is emotional payback? Are you fucking kidding me?”

Then, a cry, a sweet little voice called their names and they froze. Another sound gently mewed from the door and they both glanced over to see five-year-old Teddy (“five and three quarters,” if you asked him) looking at them blearily, a soft sheen of tears in his eyes.

“Dad? Papa?” He said again, walking out through the door and rubbing his eyes. “Are you fighting?”

Springing into practiced action, they both immediately rushed over to him, bent down. They soothed and cooed like the experts they were.

“Hey buddy, no, we’re not fighting,” Quentin hugged him from the side and Eliot ran his hand down Teddy’s arm.

“We’re disagreeing,” Eliot said, kissing Teddy’s cheek, wiping away an errant, sticky tear. “Sometimes families disagree and that’s okay. It’s how we get stronger.”

“Do you still love each other?” Teddy cried, and Eliot and Quentin shared a pained glance.

“Of course we do, Teddy,” Quentin hugged him again, full bodied. Eliot nodded, rubbing his little boy’s back as it quivered under his giant, innocent tears.

“Always,” Eliot said, his voice a little strained, though he recovered well. “It’s way past bedtime though, so why don’t you go pick out a story and Papa will come settle you back in, deal?”

As Teddy cautiously, but trustingly, gave them both another hug and turned around, dragging his tiny little feet back inside. Eliot studiously avoided looking at Quentin as he followed. Struck by pain or love or something beyond either, Q reached out and grabbed Eliot’s arm, before he could retreat.

“El, wait,” Quentin said, regret and longing building up under his breath, but Eliot pushed his hand off.

“Don’t touch me,” he said, growling under his breath. He took a breath and swallowed, averting his eyes. “Not yet.”

Too much missing

Eliot stared straight out into the peach tree grove. He was a man of thirty-seven, but he looked older than Quentin ever imagined he ever would. His face was pallid, gray. His hair fell wildly over his cheekbones, unsettled and without style.

“I forgot her name, Quentin,” he whispered, reaching for his hand.
“Whose?” Quentin asked, and Eliot turned to him, unshed tears warping his green-brown irises.

“My daughter,” he choked out, coughing. “I don’t...I was writing about Fen, and remembering, and I-I don’t remember her name.”

“Eliot,” Quentin wrapped his arm around him, kissing his temple. “El, you met her only a few weeks before we came here. That was over a decade ago. You never got the chance to know her, never given the chance to be her father. Not really.”

“She was—she is my daughter, Q,” his tears broke. “I promised myself...I promised myself that if I was ever a father, I would be a good father. A good one. Not like him.”

He collapsed in Quentin’s arms, “And now I can’t even remember her fucking name.”

He pulled Eliot up and held him tightly across his chest as he sobbed, just as Eliot had done for him years prior.

“Eliot, you were so young. You are a good father. You are a good father. You were so young, but you still protected her. And you give everything of yourself to Teddy. You are a good father...”

Too much missing

The walking path was covered in green ferns and small white flowers. The air smelled of mist and opium, and a small campfire crackled a few steps away. Teddy, a sweet and sensitive and innocent boy of thirteen, stood next to Quentin, bouncing on the tips of his feet excitedly.

“Papa, how did you do this?” He marveled down at the two gold rings Eliot held in his outstretched hand. “Was it more...magic?”

Teddy was fascinated with magic. There was no sign yet that he was a Magician himself, and Quentin was glad. Teddy got the best of both worlds—access to the beauty of spells, but none of the devastation that went along with the practice.

“Good old fashioned melding work,” Eliot said, giving the disappointed Teddy a quick pat on the arm. “You know when I do spells, I always let you know. But this was important to do myself, with metals from the earth and over a fire, over time. The hard way.”

Then his eyes lit up towards Quentin, gentle and unarmedly loving, “Most of the best things have to be done the hard way.”

“Eliot...” He was crying, of course. His mind was a dizzying whirl of joy and love and feeling like he was the luckiest man who’d ever lived, in any place, any time. Teddy leaned his body against Quentin, giving him a side-body hug, still bouncing against him.
“Quentin,” Eliot started, smiling and then he cleared his throat, his words catching. “Quentin, you are my constant. My anchor, between here and…well, you know. I love you, so much, and I feel like this is paltry compared to what I should offer you, how I should prove myself.”

He shook his head, “It’s not, El. It’s…not.”

Eliot stepped forward, tears in his eyes as well, and cupped Quentin’s cheek with his free hand. He kissed him, premature, before they’d sworn any vows, if only aloud since the promises had lived in their hearts for years. But it was like he was moved by a force outside of himself, and Quentin felt the planet settle into perfect stillness.

He pressed his cheek against Quentin’s and sighed. But instead of saying the words Q knew were supposed to come next, the ones he always returned to, in light and dark, joy and pain, he said something else, something he didn’t recognize.

“The spell work
Too much missing

Quentin was shirtless when he ran, out of breath, his aging lungs and bones failing to carry him gracelessly. But Eliot was shouting his name, frenzied. Terror seized him; he’d had his own health scare too recently and Eliot…well, Eliot’s body was deteriorating faster than his, from the choices in his youth. They both knew it, though they never talked about it.

“No, no, no,” he wasn’t looking at Quentin, his hands were searching, pulling. “No, it was…glowing. It was glowing, Q.”

“What are you talking about?” He looked around, taking in the scene. The Mosaic was complete, albeit not in the outlined design. A brief bite of annoyance wrenched his gut, but Eliot was still pulling up tiles, not writing it down, just searching like he’d seen something precious and it had been ripped away.

“What are you talking about?” He looked around, taking in the scene. The Mosaic was complete, albeit not in the outlined design. A brief bite of annoyance wrenched his gut, but Eliot was still pulling up tiles, not writing it down, just searching like he’d seen something precious and it had been ripped away.

“Quentin,” he said, gasping. “Quentin, it glowed. I—I think I had it figured out, but it went away. We were almost…done.”

“Eliot.” Concern bubbled in his chest. It had been thirty-five years. The Mosaic had never given them any indication it was actually even magical, let alone given them feedback.

“I know what I saw,;” he growled out, sounding much younger, much angrier than he had in many moons. “I know what I saw, Quentin, so don’t look at me like that.”
“Eliot,” he touched his back, but Eliot shoved him off. “I think maybe you’ve been working a little too long. Perhaps a rest would—”

“I know what I saw, Q.”

“El,” Quentin pulled himself closer to him, resting his hand on his knee. “El, I think maybe you had a…moment. It’s normal sometimes, you know, for people our age.”

“Don’t you dare,” Eliot’s eyes blazed and his set jaw twinged.

“Eliot, we have to face facts. We’ve gotten—”

“Don’t say that fucking word.” They rarely used Earth swear words anymore. They only said it when they meant it. When something brought them back. Eliot was shivering now.

“Quentin, it happened,” he was pleading, begging Quentin to believe him. And Quentin really wished he did.

____________________________________________________________

“Quentin, you have to wake up.”

____________________________________________________________

And then, Eliot was dead.

Jane Chatwin walked away from the cottage with a key and Eliot was dead. Quentin was all alone. Ted would come visit soon. Quentin would send him a message about his beloved Papa. They would mourn together.

But something didn’t feel right. His grief didn’t sear him. He didn’t feel lost. It was like he knew that this wasn’t the end.

He knew.

The cottage and the Mosaic shook. The lines around him turned bright white and he was on unsteady ground. He looked down at his hands—they were young. Younger. Young again. He was on drugs, he remembered. He requested them from Josh. He was wearing a tux. But he was still in Fillory, still standing over Eliot’s grave. He was about to write a letter to Margo, to try to save magic, a million worlds away.

The forest was silent, except for the sound of a familiar voice, yelling through the trees.

“Quentin!”

He looked behind him, and there he was. Eliot. Young Eliot. Eliot from before they went to Fillory, Eliot who had placed the key in the clock, Eliot dressed in dark blues and greens and black, Eliot who was staring right at him. Eliot with desperation and relief on his face.

“Quentin,” he panted out. He smiled. Then he strode over and grabbed his face. “Quentin, you have to wake up.”

“What?”

“Quentin, you have to wake up.”

“El, what’s going on? How are you here and talking to me? I thought this was—“

“Quentin, you have to wake up.”

“Is this real?”

Eliot let out a sound that was a half-laugh, half-sob. He traced his thumb along the line of Quentin’s cheekbone and wrapped him in a hug, firm and warm and full bodied. He ran his hand down Q’s back like he was starved for his touch and pressed his lips against his hairline, like he had a thousand, million times before and after. For a brief, infinite moment, Quentin closed his eyes and knew that even in all their complexities, all their bullshit, all their pain…

They had loved each other in every timeline.

“Quentin, you have to wake up,” Eliot’s voice was raspy, overcome with love. “Quentin, you have to wake up.”

And so, he woke up.

He blinked, slow, too slow. The world was spinning, bright colors dipping in and out of reach. He tried to open his mouth, but it wasn’t cooperating.

He was on a cold floor. His head ached.

A pair of thick round glasses floated in space.

“Quentin, are you with us? He’s back!” The voice was distant and sounded like Josh. “I’m here with Julia, buddy.”

“Q, it’s me,” a hand grabbed his and the touch was soft, the voice feminine and familiar. “You—you had a bad reaction to the magic. We think.”

“It’s never happened before,” the Josh-like voice rushed in. “My antidote didn’t work. But we’re doing everything we can.”

“What…” Quentin managed to get out and Julia’s hand brushed against his forehead. He was sweating. He was shivering.
“You’ve been in and out of shock,” her disembodied voice, save those hands, said. “You have a 108 fever and you’ve seized multiple times. I’m keeping you steady, Q.”

The room dipped like a wave and he was underwater, crashing like an undertow.

“Quentin, pal, stay with us.” Urgency from the Josh figure.

He resurfaced, and everything was gray and bleak and he was in the coat room.

He vomited.

He remembered.

“Eliot...”

He had been right there. Younger Eliot, High King Eliot the Spectacular. Where was he?

Quentin felt blistering cold and frozen hot at the same time.

His legs trembled.

“He’s coming, Q,” Julia came into focus, his hand clutched to her chest. “I-I’m sure he’s coming.”

“He’s fever is down,” Josh said, a handful of herbs in his hand. He pressed them along Quentin’s forearms. “But I can feel another tremor on its way.”

Quentin couldn’t find him. Everything shook.

And then everything was black.

tbc.
Part V, i.

Chapter Notes

So I'm not doing totally okay, but I hope the rest of you are handling the latest developments better than me. Big ups and group hugs to my favorite fandom.

Logistics: Another split single chapter due to length. Writing this was cathartic, so I got a little carried away. Oops! ;)

Disorientation hit first. Then it was thirst, and then the goddamn spins. White lines and red bursts of blood vessels glowed against the inky undersides of Quentin’s eyelids and he was certain he was in the Underworld. *41st time’s the charm*, he thought, bringing his hand to his forehead to rub right into his skull, to ease the relentless ache. Of course, that only served to prove that he wasn’t actually lucky enough to be dead.

See, if he were dead, he wouldn’t feel so miserable. Death would be sweet release and sweet nothingness. Not, he assumed, the feeling that all of his cells were being sent through their own microscopic paper shredders. That every single particle in his body was ripping apart and coming back together, mangled, with each breath he took. Death is a mercy, Quentin Coldwater, and never were Margo’s violent words so true.

He was probably going to throw up. Soon.

His hands reached backwards from his forehead and rested on his hair, like a crown. His lungs were jagged, haggard, run totally ragged. In all, he was just fucking…gone. Trace saliva and a deluge of blood filled his mouth, and he forced it back down his throat.

“I’m fucking gone for you, Quentin.”

The Mosaic.

Right.

*Fuck.*

“Fuck,” he said aloud, bringing his pins-and-needles hands to his eyes and pressing down.

He couldn’t think about that now. His brain wasn’t functioning. He’d apparently gotten thoroughly fucked up on botched dimensional telekinesis, thanks to his apparently multiverse-spanning mediocrity. So not only was his body totally wrecked, his goddamn soul was warped and the disjointed memories were settling uncomfortably under his skin like maggots. *Fuck, fuck, fuck.*

Bracing for pain, he lifted his eyelashes a millimeter, the thin black lines still mostly clouding his vision. But when the first vestige of light proved gentle, he blinked open all the way. No scalding irises, no trembling retinas, no splitting headache. Instead, he could easily look directly into the twinkling pendant fixture above him. It was dimmed, warm pink, and—he realized—charmed, covered with spells, making the atmosphere entirely painless for his weary eyes. He let out a breath he didn’t know he was holding. His friends had taken care of him.
Swallowing sandpaper, he blinked again and looked around the room. He was home. In his own bed. Several large pillows propped up his neck and shoulders, likely to ensure he didn’t choke on vomit. A luxuriously knit blanket draped over him from chest to feet. The window, usually barely covered with a translucent gray curtain, was completely blacked out and no ambient noise from the city made its way through.

(Again, magic.)

Meanwhile, on the nightstand, a tall glass of water waited on ice, with three ibuprofen placed in a triangle at its base. Sigur Ros played softly in the background, and the air smelled like fresh lavender. At first, he thought that Julia and Josh had really outdone themselves. But that didn’t feel right in his gut, and not simply because of the nausea. The room was too perfect, too personal.

Sure enough, when Quentin scanned the perimeter, his heart ker-thump’d down and soared back up again with a ping of light when he saw him. He was crunched uncomfortably into their reading chair, his long legs and arms pulled up at his sides, his head lolling against the wooden backrest. Across his broad shoulders, he’d spread out his tux jacket like a makeshift blanket. He was asleep.

Eliot.

Right.

He remembered. Eliot had been there, after all. He showed up.

In the coat room, Quentin spent an undetermined amount of time in and out of consciousness. He wasn’t even aware of the concept of time, but he could see and feel Julia’s patience and resources grow thin as each spell failed. Bright flashes of light warmed him, soothed him, but only for moments. After, his soul floated painfully in his bloodstream, his body shaking under its toil. He could feel his shade and he could feel his body rendering itself together, blood and muscle sticking to his bones. And at some point, he heard Penny and assumed he’d skipped the line directly to hell.

But hell would never have the voice that followed.

At the familiar, comforting sound (“What the fuck happened?” asked desperately, feet skidding down to the ground), Quentin tried to wrench his eyes open again, watery and shaky. But the light was still swirling and he couldn’t really see. It didn’t matter. What mattered was that the warm, solid voice and his familiar scent was bent over by his side, asking rapid-fire questions and insisting on helping Julia with her healing casts, even though no mere Magician could come close to doing what she did. She told him exactly that.

“What makes you think this is a negotiation?” His voice was monarchal. “I’m not going to just fucking sit here, Julia.”

“I think you’ve already done enough, Eliot,” her voice was deep, reminding him of exactly who he was dealing with. Then, a human sob of frustration. “Why isn’t anything working?”

“Try recalibrating the formation, but with Josh’s sage instead of the wild flower,” his voice—his voice—suggested, softer and scared. “It worked on Margo once when she had a bad trip.”

Julia obliged, if only because in that moment they shared the same goal.

“Nothing,” she said and he could see her hands shaking in triplicate. “I’ve tried everything, even my—nothing is working.”

Then, Quentin’s chest lightened and the heavens parted. Eliot came into focus.
He was crouched next to his torso, eyes red-rimmed and restless. He took deep breaths, urgently keeping his composure. He traced his thumb against Q’s bare forearm (his tuxedo shirt was ripped, so Josh could apply salves) and whispered under his breath, over and over. He couldn’t quite make out exactly what Eliot was saying, but each syllable was a small prayer, and all were variations on, “I’m here” and “I’m sorry” and other words more precious and sacred yet.

Quentin blinked as loudly as he could and made a sound from the back of his mouth. Eliot turned to him immediately, his hand reaching forward toward his face and pressing behind his ear.

“Q,” he said, an electrified smile and sob breaking through his terror.

Blackness.

More light, still in the coat room, but this time, the world was clearer. He saw the blurred figure of Julia repeatedly pound her fists into the blurred figure of Eliot’s chest. She didn’t actually want to hurt him. At least, not physically. He was a mite to her mountain. This was a human pleading, an emotional punishment. Meanwhile, the blurred figure of Josh was standing over Quentin, keeping time of his pulse.

Things had fallen apart all over again.

“This is your fault,” Julia was crying, red cheeked. She pushed the figure of Eliot hard, and it looked like a trail of dull colors and cloud. “This is your fault, and you know it.”

“Listen, I know my way around drugged and drunken stupors, okay?” The blurred Eliot moved forward, taking her hands. “Let’s get him home and stable. Then you can eviscerate me as much as you want, I promise.”

“He loves you so much and you treat him like—”

“And as much as I’d like to tell you exactly how little that’s your business, there are bigger issues here.”

“I think they’ve both had a rough night, Jules. Back off,” the voice closest to him spoke and everything started fading again.

“Don’t think you’re off the goddamn hook, Hoberman.”

It wasn’t Julia who responded.

Then, it was blackness, until Quentin woke up in the perfect recovery room, Eliot asleep in the corner and much too far away from him.

He let out another harsh breath and swallowed, his mouth still barely producing saliva yet plenty of blood. Using the pillows to leverage himself to a seated position, he lurched his aching, dazed head forward, trying to convince himself that his body was fine, that this was all fine, that this was normal and expected. He looked back over at the sleeping Eliot, and something warm and almost pleasant rose through Quentin’s spine as he realized that he’d completely ignored his own comforts in favor of Q’s, even on such an objectively horrible night.

“Eliot,” he coughed out, weaker than he would have even guessed. “El.”

Immediately after speaking, Q leaned over the side of the bed and found the conveniently placed bucket. With a guttural roar, he expelled all the horror he held inside. His throat and diaphragm continued making lovely retching sounds, and death was preferable to continuing to inhabit his
Eliot sat up with a startle, like he wasn’t sure where he was. He looked down and then up, before his eyes landed on Quentin. He blinked once and a thousand different emotions ran over him before he finally made a small choking sound.

“You’re awake,” he said, barely a whisper, lips twitching and the muscles in his jaw tensing. His hands started to reach out toward him but he consciously pushed them against his sides.

“Hey,” Quentin croaked out and Eliot swallowed.

“How are you feeling?”

His body was still as glass, but his eyes—those goddamn eyes—were moving across Quentin’s form like a starved and skittish animal. Quentin wiped the last vestige of vomit off the side of his mouth. It was bright red. He made eye contact with Eliot, who also noted the color. He sucked in his cheeks and crossed his arms, his first gross motor movement in a solid minute.

“How are you feeling?” Eliot repeated, eyes still wide and unsettled.

“Um, honestly, kind of embarrassed?” Quentin rubbed his eyes sockets with his knuckles. The word didn’t come close to capturing the gravity and depth of how he felt, but self-deprecation was always his first instinct. “I’m basically the guy at the party who had to get his stomach pumped.”

The statue shattered and El waved his hand in the air with a flourish, “Oh, who among us hasn’t had their stomach pumped once, twice, six times?”

(Levity was his.)

Quentin smiled weakly, looking back up at Eliot, trying to acknowledge his sort-of joke. In turn, Eliot swallowed harder and averted his gaze, like Q was a much too bright sun.

“I meant physically, though,” he said with a deep sigh, giving himself away. “You were touch and go for awhile.”

Q knew that **touch and go** was a euphemism for **almost dead, repeatedly**, and he shook his head, grabbing the back of his neck compulsively. The fact that Eliot wasn’t completely losing his shit either spoke to the difference in their emotional regulation or it spoke to exactly how much the evening had drained him. Possibly both.

“I’m fine,” he said, opting to downplay the physical toil his whole body was currently going through. Eliot had once been possessed by a god-killing monster; a little spell gone wrong was nothing. He grabbed the water next to the bed and took the medicine. “Sore, but fine. Thank you for this, by the way.”

Eliot nodded, unconvinced. But he had too much tact and patience to question him. He was vaguely grateful.

“What time is it?” Quentin asked. If someone told him that only five minutes—or, alternately, five whole months—had passed since he had been on the beach, he would have believed them. Knitting his features together pensively and letting the subject of Quentin’s physical health sit to the side, Eliot looked down at his watch.

“Almost six in the morning,” he said. Then, realizing what he was really asking, he clarified. “We brought you home around midnight.”
“You should be in bed, El,” Quentin raised his eyebrows, chiding. “You’re way too tall for that chair.”

“Well, I, uh, I wasn’t sure if I… if you…” Eliot trailed off, unusually ineloquent, those eyes burning into space. “I thought you’d prefer a little separation.”

*I never prefer that,* Quentin wanted to say, but he didn’t. Maybe that was part of their problem, but he was too tired. Way too tired. Instead, he cleared his throat and looked around, desperate for something else—something different—to say, something to focus on that wasn’t the ocean of distance and pain between the two of them.

Their last conversation was starting to seep back into his bones again.

“Where’s Julia?” He asked, settling on logistics, pushing away his devastated errant thoughts. “I remember that she was pretty involved? I was kind of in and out.”

Eliot nodded slowly, eyes still unfocused, “She’s resting. You were difficult to keep afloat. Even for her.”

A nauseating wave of guilt fell over Quentin and he let out a slow whistle, tucking his knees under his arms.

“Yeah, that’s—uh, that’s probably because she was solving for the wrong problem,” he said, and Eliot ticked his head to the side, wordlessly asking him to explain. “It wasn’t the drugs. I mean, it was, kind of, but…I mean, didn’t Josh tell you what I took?”

“We’re not strictly on speaking terms,” Eliot bit out, dark and harsh.

A rush of sympathy for Josh bubbled up Q’s chest. Eliot was more forgiving than, say, Margo, but only slightly. And though he was generally sanguine, Quentin knew firsthand that being on the wrong side of Eliot’s rare but intense anger couldn’t have been fun for the happy-go-lucky Herbalist.

“It wasn’t his fault,” Quentin shook his head, tapping his fingers against his knee caps, still covered under the blanket. “It was—it was my fault.”

“Twin truths can exist at once,” Eliot’s tone let out a first spark of anger directly towards Quentin. But he caught himself and squared his shoulders, taking a steady breath. He was neutral again. More or less.

He continued.

“Unless you put him under some kind of, I don’t know, *magical bind* and then robbed his stash, he should have known better than to give you drugs when you were upset,” Eliot glanced over. “And I’m assuming he knew you were upset?”

“Yeah,” Quentin flushed, averting his eyes. “He might have suspected.”

“Then he’s an asshole.”

“El…” Quentin bit down on his teeth, ashamed. “I—I wasn’t exactly going to take no for an answer.”

Eliot nodded again, impassive, not looking at Quentin. His cheeks burned with a rage he was trying not to let reflect in his expression. He only barely succeeded.
“And, um, I’m sorry.”

“For?” Eliot threw the word out carelessly and Quentin felt a brief flash of his own anger.

“For breaking my promise,” he said and Eliot rolled his eyes.

“I don’t give a shit about that. All that matters is that you’re okay. Physically, at least,” he started tapping his own fingers against his leg and took a sharp, shallow breath. “So if it wasn’t the drugs, then what was it, Q?”

His voice wasn’t curious. It was suspicious. Too suspicious. Quentin swallowed hard.

“I took the See Into Other Worlds strain,” he said, holding eye contact with Eliot, like it was something totally reasonable to say. Eliot’s sudden rapid blinking and gaping mouth disavowed him of that notion immediately.

“On purpose?” He dropped his hands to his sides like dead weight. There was a hint of resignation in his eyes and it took everything in Quentin not to turn away from it. They were both too far gone to make any sudden movements now.

“I mean, yeah,” Quentin said quickly and kept talking over Eliot’s initial sound of indignation. “But—that’s—not even all of it, okay? I, uh, I saw myself in the Mosaic, like you did.”


“And I asked him to do the spell that would bring me in, like you. He was reluctant, but I insisted, so he did it and I think he fucked it up.”

Eliot tapped his thumb against his lip slowly, staring at Quentin, eyes unblinking and face completely lacking in any expression.

“My dimensional telekinesis spell?” He asked, his voice rough. “The one I developed in Fillory, to try to reach Margo? The one that took me years to even come close to mastering?”

“I think so,” Quentin bit the inside of his cheek. “I don’t…completely remember. But that sounds right.”

“Jesus Christ, Quentin,” he buried his head in his hands and Quentin’s chest vibrated with his pounding heart.

“I wanted to experience it again,” he said. “Like you did.”

“How could you be so stupid?” Eliot slammed his hand down on the chair, nearly breaking the wood, startling Quentin in his intensity. “That easily, fucking easily, could have killed you and—and it almost did. What the hell were you thinking?”

“Your counterpart did it too and it was fine,” He argued like a child and Eliot ferociously lifted his head, teeth gnashing.

“It was my spell. You know there is no version of you that could handle something like that. But you risked it anyway, for what? A stroll down goddamn memory lane?” Eliot swallowed hard and a quiet terror glinted in his eyes, barely visible under the fury. “We have been through way too much for you to be so reckless with magic, Q.”

“Right, because I’m such a shitty Magician,” he said, feeling shame and pride commingle in his
aching chest. He’d been trying to do a good thing, to maybe even bring them closer, to help reconcile the past and present. But all Eliot saw was the worst of his intentions. Fuck that.

Eliot brought his palm to his forehead, like he had a blinding headache.

“You know I didn’t say that. Don’t do that.”

“All I know,” he said, crossing his arms and burning, “is that you don’t really have any room to say shit to me, Eliot.”

“You almost died, Quentin,” Eliot said, looking at him like he really was stupid or worse, crazy. “I think that’s a touch more pressing than me saying a few thoughtless things during a fight.”

“A fight or a break up?” Quentin shot out before he thought it through. He was aiming to wound. It worked.

The air shifted, the freeze palpable. Eliot shrunk back into himself and looked down, chastened and small. He slumped into the chair and ran his fingers along the arched edge of his eyebrow and stared back into that unfixed point in space, defeat permeating his form. Immediately, Quentin wanted to leap across the bed, to hold him, to push Eliot up against the wall the way he liked (“Q.” he could already hear; voice cracking, eyes closed, head back, hands tangled in his hair), to completely lose himself in him. But instead, he tightened his arms, unwilling to give, unwilling to bend. He was tired of being the one to always give, to always bend.

“Okay. Yeah, fair enough,” Eliot said, murmuring as he traced his finger along one of the starburst designs on his pants. “Fair enough.”

Quentin felt the weight of the evening’s pain and he wanted to curl into a fetal position until everything was gone. He wasn’t actually seeking to end things with Eliot—the thought alone made him feel like burning down the world. And he also knew that resorting to such cheap tactics was completely defeating the purpose of what he’d just experienced and apparently almost died for. Of all his near-death experiences, the ones that were in vain tended to be the sourest memories.

But goddamn if Eliot didn’t still get under his skin, in all ways incredible and awful.

“El, I didn’t mean—” He started, but Eliot held up his hand, commanding as always.

“Yes, you did,” he said, monotone. “You meant it and you didn’t, at the same time. I know the feeling.”

“I obviously don’t want to break up,” Quentin looked down at his hands. “Come on.”

Eliot’s jaw twitched, “What you meant is that we can’t continue like this. And you’re right. We can’t.”

Quentin pressed his head back against the pillow and sniffed, a new layer of tears forming. Eliot in turn pressed his hands against his palms and stood up, abruptly and with purpose.

“Eliot,” Quentin said, pleading.

But Eliot ignored him, striding across the room as swiftly as his long legs could carry him. He gathered his tux jacket, folded it, and put it on the dresser, every movement intentional. And just as Quentin thought he was about to walk out of the room, and possibly out of his life, Eliot instead sat
down on the bed next to him, their knees barely touching.

“So we sort it the fuck out, right the fuck now,” he said, still looking ahead, still avoiding Quentin’s confused gaze. But he grabbed his hand. “We’re mad at each other, but we’re in this together. I don’t give a shit if you agree or not.”

“No, I do,” Quentin said, palpable relief massaging his throbbing chest. “I agree. I want to figure this out. Together.”

“Good,” he said, and he squeezed his hand tight, but still didn’t look at him.

As he opened his mouth to begin, Quentin instead coughed, his body shuddering under itself. He placed his hand on the mattress to stop himself from falling over and Eliot instinctually wrapped his arm around Quentin’s torso, pulling him against him and propping him up.

“Sorry,” Quentin said, embarrassed, but Eliot brushed his hand up and down his arm.

“No, fuck, I am,” he said, quiet. “We should do this another time. You need rest.”

“I’m fine,” Quentin said, rolling his head onto Eliot’s shoulder, out of exhaustion rather than affection. “Or at least, I’ll be less fine if we don’t talk.”

Eliot nodded, the movement rote at this point. With an audible and reluctant swallow, Eliot let go of Quentin’s waist and pulled himself back to his original space. Quentin slumped against the bed frame, feeling cold and weary. But then the long length of Eliot’s warm fingers curled around Quentin’s and they both sighed at the same time.

He was fairly certain that they were at odds with one another. The shit Eliot cared about—like why Quentin would risk his life to purposefully relive a dead past—was not the shit he really wanted to get into. And he was equally certain that the shit that haunted him—like whether Eliot would ever trust him to really, truly be in love with a man—was the kind of thing Eliot pushed and pushed and pushed down, until it barely even existed in reality anymore.

Unmoored, Quentin focused on Eliot’s rings, which we were all different silvers, carved, with one large Emerald stone on his ring middle finger. He both desperately missed seeing the simple gold on his left hand and also felt a soft kind of hope, an excitement towards what their future could look like all over again, with new rings, new light, new life. All built from the ground up. It was a weirdly optimistic thought, given the circumstances, and so it was probably part of the drug’s comedown.

Quentin felt nauseated all over again.

Rare uncomfortable silence passed between them. Eliot opened his mouth and let out a long breath. Then he turned to Q, his eyes a little warmer than before and filled with what looked like genuine curiosity under wrinkled eyebrows.

“That spell you did...was it Cryomancy?”

He meant the spell in the alleyway. Quentin cringed a little at the reminder, but nodded for the sake of total transparency.

“Modified,” he said. He’d wanted Eliot to stay away from him, not get hypothermia. In retrospect, it wasn’t worth the risk and Quentin felt another overwhelming wave of guilt.

He immediately gagged and his hand flew up to cup his mouth, and Eliot wrapped his strong arm around his back. After the moment passed, he pulled away again, taking away at least three degrees
of warmth away from Quentin. But as a consolation prize, he rested his head against Q’s shoulder with a repressed yawn. He was exhausted.

“That’s Margo’s discipline,” Eliot almost smiled, but not quite, looking up at him through his eyelashes. “It was stronger than your usual larger Physical work.”

“Well, it doesn’t come from talent,” Quentin said crisply, reminding him of one of their earliest conversations. Maybe it wasn’t the kindest way to put it, but he was tired.

Eliot’s eyes shuttered closed and he looked so much older than his body’s years. Moving away from Quentin altogether, he fell into his hands, and his fingers ran up his forehead and into his hair.

“Right,” he whispered, but said nothing more.

The silence was thick as concrete, calcifying in each moment that passed between them. For a brief, terrifying moment, Quentin wondered if this really was the end. If they were talking through their closure, talking through how they could move forward, but not together. If that was their doom, if they really just didn’t work here. More vomit-blood pooled in the back of his throat and he swallowed down his heart, panic stirring and stewing. But then Eliot looked at him, his eyes haunted and sad and… loving.

Still loving.

Quentin breathed again.

Quentin breathed again.

“So now we’re at the part where I apologize for being a colossal asshole,” Eliot said, every muscle in his body tensing and his tongue running over his teeth. “I should be used to it by now, what with colossal assholedom being the closest thing I have to a raison d’être, but…”

He trailed off and bit his lip. Clearing his throat, he lifted his head like it wore the world’s heaviest crown and forced himself to make eye contact with Quentin. He gave him a teary smile and gently brushed Q’s hair to the side, more out of habit than anything else.

“I’m sorry,” he said, his voice as thick as the silence had been. “I was a colossal asshole. You never deserve that.”

“I mean, I guess we kind of both have stuff to apologize for,” Quentin said softly. But again, Eliot held up his kingly hand, stopping Quentin’s train of thought.

“Be that as it may, let me have this, Q,” he said, pained and sorrowful and Quentin almost leaned in to kiss him. “Don’t do the thing where you take on someone else’s fuck up as your own, okay? You fuck up plenty. This one is mine.”

“Okay,” Quentin said, unsure what more he could offer. Eliot ran his eyes up and down Quentin’s face. He opened his mouth and closed it again, formulating his thoughts. Q’s heart rate quickened, realizing that Eliot was ready to actually delve into the thing.

“Do you doubt I love you?” He asked, voice low and hard. Thankfully, that was an easy one.

“No,” Quentin said, his voice catching a little. Eliot’s tension lessened a little and he took Q’s hand, bringing it to his mouth. He kissed his knuckles with reverent force and sat there for a few moments, lips and breath warm and gentle on Q’s hands. It made his whole arm feel like it was tingling with painless fire.

“But you doubt I’m committed to you. In a fundamental way.”
It wasn’t really a question. It was the heart of the matter, and Eliot was all sharp and hard lines, on a precipice waiting not for Q’s answer, but for his confirmation.

“I mean, yeah, I guess,” Q hoped that he softened it enough, to make the message easier to handle. But Eliot’s face still fell like something precious died. “Sometimes.”

Eliot squeezed his hand so hard that it almost started to hurt. Shaking a little, Eliot covered their entwined hands with his free hand and took long breaths, in and out. If Q didn’t know better, he would have guessed that Eliot was doing grounding exercises, like the ones he went through every time his panic made him feel like the world was ending.

“Ohay,” he finally said, voice weak and whispering. “Okay. Well. That is…good information for me to have.”

“So you are, then?” Quentin asked, hope pattering against his heart despite itself. “Committed to me?”

Eliot closed his eyes and made a slow sound, likely meant to be a laugh, but it came out agonized. He shook his head, again resting his lips against their entwined knuckles for a moment.

“I, um,” he said, swallowing his inarticulate words. “I’m really not sure how to express how I feel about that question. I know you think this should be an easy for me because of…you know. But it’s not. I constantly feel like I’m doomed to disappoint you, even when I’m trying.”

“All I’m looking for is a simple yes, El,” he said.

“And I wish I could give you that.”

The hope exploded into dust in Quentin’s chest.

Fuck.
“So you’re not,” he said, flat. He extracted his hand from Eliot’s. “You don’t—you don’t really want to be with me. Not for the long-haul.”

He should have known. He should have fucking known. His throat constricted in on itself, completely foreign from the way his traitorous body was revolting. Overwhelmed with pinching, aching malaise, Quentin started to turn himself away from Eliot. But he was stopped by a strong hand on his shoulder and a loud, frustrated groan.

“That is not—that is absolutely not what I’m saying,” Eliot said, forced eye contact, putting his hands on Quentin’s face, in determination, not tenderness. “Must we do the passive-aggressive Chicken Little thing every time?”

“Well, what am I supposed to think?” Quentin crossed his arms and banged his head softly against the bed frame.

“That I fucking love you, but that I also acknowledge that nothing about us is simple,” he sighed and pulled away, rubbing the bridge of his nose. “You say I don’t give you enough credit, but you’re giving me none.”

“All I know is that at the end of the day, you don’t trust that I’m actually…” Q looked straight ahead, the lines of the room growing sharper as his anger rose from his gut to the top of his scalp. “You think I’m play-acting.”

“I shouldn’t have put it like that,” Eliot said. His neck muscles tensed and he scratched the top of his head. “That was catastrophically shitty. I’m sorry.”

“You shouldn’t even think it, though, El,” Quentin shook his head, his eyebrows painted down along his eyes. “I mean, Jesus, after everything, you seriously think I’m not attracted to you?”

“Again, that’s obviously an oversimplification of what I’m saying,” he said, closing his eyes in new frustration. “But I really don’t think I’m a dickhead for having concerns about your overall sexuality and what that means for us, long-term.”

“So you don’t trust me to know my own wants, my own—”

“I respect your experiences, Q,” Eliot pressed his hand on Quentin’s leg, smiling sadly. “But I told you from the beginning that I have to protect my heart. You can’t blame me for that.”

“Fucking horseshit, Eliot,” he said, since that’s what it was. Eliot’s eyes flashed in response.

“How many men have you been attracted to, Quentin?”

“What the fuck does it matter?” Now it was Quentin’s turn to slam his hand down. But he was much weaker than Eliot, so his arm more bounced off the top of the bed rather than having the devastating effect he was aiming for. Eliot bit his lip and let out that barking laugh of his, rubbing his neck.

“At the end of the day, I’m the only man you’ve ever been with. Possibly ever been interested in,” Eliot crossed his arms, pulling them against his chest like he was hugging himself. “That means
“Again, what the fuck does that matter? I am wildly attracted to you, Eliot,” Quentin waved his hands above his head, flailing. “The end! That’s fucking all, folks.”

“It matters because innate preferences matter. And I am not your innate preference.”

“That’s reductive,” Quentin said, bringing his fist to his mouth and resisting the urge to scream into it, letting out every frustration he ever felt.

He wasn’t going to talk to Eliot about his adolescence, about his confused crushes on boys and girls, all jumbled together and fighting him. He wasn’t going to tell him about how he always convinced himself that it was pointless, worthless, because he wasn’t good enough for any of it anyway. How his desires were always violent and painful in his fucked up, lustful, confused little baby brain, swirling with sadness and frustration, every moment of every day. Because as much as it was a compelling narrative, it didn’t matter.

What mattered was how he felt about Eliot, right then and there. And also how much Eliot’s stubborn, arrogant insistence on disregarding it fucking sucked.

“I don’t want you to love me in spite of who I am,” Eliot said, sucking in the inside of his cheeks between his teeth and tapping his fingers wildly. A slight wave of sympathy blamed Quentin’s chest at that. They both had their insecurities. He understood that.

(It still sucked.)

“Eliot, I love you because of who you are,” he said. “And I feel like I prove that every damn day. But it’s not enough because, what, I don’t have a Chris Hemsworth poster over my bed?”

“Chris Hemsworth?” Eliot screwed his face up for a moment. “That’s your go-to example?”

“Focus,” Quentin’s jaw tensed, before letting out an empty laugh. “You know, it’s fucking ironic. I’ve actually wanted you—wanted to be with you—every step of the way. Since a long time before Fillory. So your doubting me is just…fucking ironic.”

It was a confession, in and of itself. Despite everything, he still felt a deep shame about his first crush on Eliot, the one that took root early on and festered in his core, rotting every small purity during that harrowing first year at Brakebills. At the time, he was supposed to have been in love with Alice Quinn, demure and kindred, brilliant and lost. And, holy hell, he was. He loved her more than anything; he lived for her smile and her happiness. She brought him joy in the midst of terrible chaos and his gratitude for that was boundless.

But it wasn’t enough. When push came to shove came to Battle Magic emotion, he chose Eliot. He wanted Eliot. Fucking goddamn he wanted Eliot. Margo was a conduit, at best. But then, Alice was so brave and so forgiving, and then she died. And his overwhelming guilt was the single driving force in his life for the longest time.

Still, even then, Eliot remained.

Quentin never told him, never fucked with their equilibrium, then or now. It was too raw. Too emotional, and definitely not helpful or all that relevant. But now, he had to make Eliot see.

Meanwhile, Eliot considered his statement with gently squinted eyes.

“No, you wanted the cool, magical Oscar Wilde to deem you worthy,” Eliot said, trying to sound
matter-of-fact, but his voice still wavered. “Flattered as I was by your pedestal, it didn’t exactly lend to you seeing me for who I actually am.”

…That was also a fair interpretation.

“Yeah, okay,” Quentin reached for Eliot’s arm and tried not to be frustrated by him freezing under his touch. “But El, once I did? Once I saw you? That’s when I was really done for.”

Eliot remained quiet, stretching his palms inward and outward, his brain thinking almost as loudly as Quentin’s was wont to do.

“But I’m so obviously an aberration, Q,” Eliot tutted a small spell and the bed sheets raised and lifted, creating small waves under his hands in a rhythmic loop. “How can we ignore that?”

“You are not a fucking aberration,” Quentin pressed down on his moving, spellbound hands, stopping the magic but trying his damnedest to create some of his own. He smiled and felt tears prickle at the back of his eyes. “You’re a revelation.”

Eliot sucked in his cheeks and laughed through a thin smile.

“That’s sweet of you to say,” he said. “Very gay rom-com.”

“Fuck, Eliot, I’m trying to be real with you,” Quentin said, running his fingers down his face and pounding his fist against the side of his head. “You definitely don’t make this easy.”

Eliot laughed bitterly.

“That’s because this isn’t easy, Q. You want real?” He turned to face him straight-on and shrugged, exaggeratedly, for effect. “I’m scared that I won’t be able to give you the traditional life I know you want deep down, and one day you’ll wake up and realize that it’s not enough. That I’m not enough.”

“We’re Magicians, Eliot,” Q said, his heart bursting with intensity. “And particularly death wish happy ones at that. Traditional isn’t actually in the cards for us.”

“We know better than most how long life can actually end up being,” Eliot said. “And I’m sorry if my concerns make you feel bad, but I wish you’d at least try to see where I’m coming from here.”

The thing was, Quentin understood. He thought it was fucked up and reductive and completely lacking in nuance, but he understood. Eliot was afraid. Of losing him, of losing what he’d always wanted even if he preferred to pretend that he didn’t give a shit about any of it. He cared about it more than he wanted anyone to ever know. But Quentin knew.

As much as Eliot claimed it was Quentin who wanted the traditional life, the trappings of domesticity, it was actually Eliot who’d sunk into their beautiful Fillorian life with gusto. He was the one who made their house a home, he was the one who devoted himself to Teddy as much as the puzzle, he was the one who kept flowers on Arielle’s grave, the one who took care of them both, cultivating their marriage like an orchid, well into their golden years. Eliot and Quentin both sought love and home and acceptance in the same way, like sponges, and when they found it in each other, they were whole. That was the heart of Eliot’s truth and Q knew it hadn’t changed, not fundamentally.

But right now, that man felt centuries away. And the heart of Quentin’s truth pricked at his tongue, acidic and threatening.

“Honestly, I’d have a lot more sympathy if it wasn’t so damn obvious that I’m the one who hasn’t
been enough,” Quentin said, swallowing back a new barrage of tears. “For you.”

Eliot sat up straight like he’d been electrocuted, his eyes burning and his throat trembling.

“What are you talking about?” He asked, his voice hard and gravelly.

“I’m starving for crumbs, Eliot,” Quentin cried out, slamming his hands onto his forehead. Eliot sank into the bed, his eyebrows folded over his intense gaze. “All this wedding bullshit? I wouldn’t have cared about any of it if I didn’t feel like you’re constantly trying to escape from me, from our life together.”

His heart beating outside of his chest, Q dropped his arms down on the bed, defeated. Eliot’s mouth fell open and he gasped for a small breath, his features sinking downward into a haunted sadness.

“That’s not—” Eliot closed his eyes. “That’s not what I intend.”

“You have to help me understand then, because I’m kind of at a loss.”

Eliot launched his head backwards against the bed frame and tapped his fingers against the bedsheet. Quentin was tempted to offer him a cigarette—to say fuck it, even though they’d agreed not to smoke inside anymore. But he wasn’t sure if his body could take the lack of oxygen from breathing in smoke, even second-hand, so he stayed quiet. If he needed to leave, to smoke, to calm down, he would. And Quentin would be waiting.

Then, Eliot broke the silence with a crash.

“I’m trying to escape me, Q.” He slammed his eyes closed tighter, a false smile on his face that looked more like a scream. “And who I am and who you’ll eventually know I am.”

Squinting his eyes in confusion, Quentin’s head was dazed and disoriented again. But it had nothing to do with his hangover.

He focused on Eliot—mesmerizing Eliot—and really looked at every detail. He was sitting, hunched over, his long arms stretching out towards his legs. Dark curls fell in tandem with his long lashes, framing every part of his exhausted frame. His lips pulled downward, desperately sad and Those Goddamn Eyes were shielded, glazed, lost. And now, Q felt completely out of air, not because Eliot had said something cruel or magical or life-affirming or so loving that he couldn’t see two inches in front of him. But instead, because he realized that maybe he’d been missing something crucial all along.

“Let’s take stock of the facts, shall we?” Eliot was trying for his usual carelessness, but stoniness prevailed. “I am turning thirty. I am an alcoholic, a drug addict, a miserable hedonist, and a colossal asshole, as we already established.”

“You’re not—” Quentin began, but Eliot just looked at him and he ceded the path.

“I’m the deposed king of a land that even most Magicians think only exists in children’s storybooks,” he looked upward at that and bit out something like a smile. “I can’t keep my shit together except in the barest minimum of ways. Even my best friend doesn’t have time for me and my baggage anymore—she’d deny it, but I know when I’m an imposition.”

Quentin didn’t argue. If Margo’s discipline was Gossip, Eliot’s was Social Cues.

“I was possessed by the most dangerous force in the universe, brought on by my own hubris,” he continued, and Quentin was brought back to that moment, Eliot holding the gun. In so many ways, if
there was anywhere he would return, anything he’d change, it was that. Even with all the good that came after, the damage was still pervasive in every part of their lives.

“You were trying to save me,” Quentin said, quietly reminding him, but Eliot shook his head.

“No, I was trying to take control back because I’d just been dethroned and I was in love with you. I didn’t know how to handle either,” he said. “But that’s neither here nor there.”

“Eliot,” Quentin said, reaching for his hand, but he simply leaned forward like Quentin didn’t reach out to him at all.

“And now, I fuck up the one good thing in my life because why the fuck not,” he laughed.

“Everything else I touch turns to shit, so why should this be any different?”

“I know it can feel like that, El,” Quentin said, tentatively resting his hand on his arm. Eliot didn’t pull away, but he didn’t lean into his touch either. “I used to think everything broke around me too. Because it kind of did.”

“I struggle to be worthy,” Eliot said. “Of my life, of my friends, of you. And while you really have been the best thing thus far, Q, I also know there’s nothing about me, about who I am or what I’ve done, that deserves it.”

Eliot curled in on himself, wrapping his arms around his shins and he laid his forehead between his knees, “I’m just waiting for you to eventually come to your senses here.”

Quentin’s jaw tensed instinctually and his hands trembled with the urge to shake Eliot’s shoulders, to both tell and show that idiot how wrong he was, but Eliot turned his head back towards Q, smiling a little.

“And you want to hear the most fucked up part?” He waited a moment and Quentin realized he was actually asking.

“Uh, that wasn’t it?”

“Please,” Eliot barked out his signature false laugh. “This isn’t amateur hour.”

“Then, uh, yeah. I mean, I guess,” Quentin said, not really sure what to expect. “Tell me.”

Eliot pursed his lips, almost like he was kissing the air. His eyebrows drew in tightly over his eyes, his fingers tapping on his legs in time with his slow breaths. In, out. Tap, tap. In, out. Tap, tap. The veins along his neck trembled, his skin growing red and white in splotches. Finally, he let out a final breath, like a whistle, and nodded curtly. He cleared his throat and stared at his hands.

“And I think I’ve fixated on—I’ve created this fucked up rationalization where if you left me for a woman because, you know, the Great Gay Experiment didn’t work out,” he chuckled a little, but his eyes remained blurred red and locked downward. “Instead of leaving because…”

Eliot cleared his throat, his Adam’s apple bobbing, “That would be easier.”

Uncertain and entranced, Q lifted his hand, then placed it down on Eliot’s back. Running his hands up and down his shoulder blade, he released his captured breath and slowly nodded.

“That is kind of fucked up, El.” It was all he could say, his brain processing in double-time.

“Not to brag,” he said, stealing Quentin’s line, “but my fraternity nickname was Eliot ‘Kind-of-
Fucked-Up’ Waugh.”

Q wanted to laugh at that. He wanted to make a Send in the Clowns joke (“Aren’t we a pair?”) He wanted to push forward, understanding and learning, growing with Eliot. But he couldn’t. There was too big of a problem hanging between them now and he wasn’t sure what to do about it. And the problem wasn’t that Eliot had shared—finally, really fucking shared. That was good. It was better than good. It was a spark, like magic, like the phoenix from ashes, that could really get them moving forward again. No, the problem was of a different kind, deceptively simple.

It was that Eliot was wrong. About all of it.

“I reject your facts,” Quentin said, declarative. Eliot immediately blanched.

“Don’t,” he said, but Q held up his own hand, trying his best to emulate Eliot’s quieting presence.

“Let me fucking finish,” he said, surprised at his own indignation, but leaned into it. “You know what my facts are, El? Despite your constant insistence to the contrary, you are the bravest person I know. And the strongest.”

“Citation needed.”

“I’m fucking getting there,” Quentin took Eliot’s strong jaw in his hands and guided his chin towards him. Eliot was stubborn and kept looking down, but he angled his body closer to Q. “You pour your heart and soul into everything you do. You give your heart and soul to the people you love, every day. You fought your demons, you lived and thrived.”

“We are clearly operating under different definitions of ‘thrive,’” Eliot rolled his eyes half-heartedly, but inched closer to Quentin nonetheless. “I’m a barely titled nobody in Fillory, we have no apocalypse to prevent, and I’m unwelcome at Brakebills. I’m spinning my wheels.”

“If you are, then we all are,” he said. “It hasn’t been easy for me either to spend most of my time doing weird, boring work for what I think is, like, a bank or something? It sucks.”

“At least you’re doing something,” he laughed, a hollow sound. “What do I have?”

“You’re focused on getting better,” Quentin said.

“I’m constantly failing,” Eliot said, cutting Quentin off. His voice was even-keeled but his eyes were wild. “Like, there’s no real end point. At least, not until I crack.”

“What I see is you succeeding, every day. You are fighting for yourself and the people who love you, even when it’s really hard,” Quentin said, rubbing Eliot’s knee. “Do you have any idea how fucking proud of you I am for that, El?”

At that, Eliot finally looked at him. A few of his tears released, painting silvery lines down his long, defined cheeks and over the artful layer of stubble that Quentin now associated with him as much as his eyes. And speaking of, they happened to be positively glowing right at him.

“Q,” he said, all aching tenderness. But Quentin was officially on a roll.

“And whether you deserve me or I deserve you…it doesn’t factor. We’ve both done shitty, selfish things, but we love each other. And more than that, we’re good for each other.”

“Q,” Eliot said again, running his hands down the length of Quentin’s arms.
“I mean, in this universe alone, we’ve been together ten times the amount I was ever with Alice and our biggest conflict thus far is about something as normal as navigating our commitment. That’s fucking proof of concept, that’s—”

But Eliot cut him off, lips pressed featherlight on his and Quentin’s eyelids fell closed. A quench of calm and a rush of desperate love enveloped his core.

Eliot.

As Quentin was about to deepen the kiss, to lift his fingers to Eliot’s jawline and hair and curl into him, lost forever, Eliot pulled back and simply rested his forehead against his.

“Thank you,” he said, quiet. And Quentin rested too, letting the beauty sink in. For a fraction of a moment, all he could feel was his breath in time with Eliot’s and the Earth was silent, steady, still.

But his stomach had other plans.

It wrenched and twisted painfully and blood gushed up from his gut, into his mouth. The metallic taste and syrup thickness gagged his throat and he pressed his hand to his mouth, black spots blurring in front of him and obscuring Eliot from view. He forcefully pulled away and threw himself over the side of the bed, and the vomit poured itself out of him and into the bucket.

Eliot’s hands pressed on his back, warm and firm, and fingers gently stroking the hair on the nape of his neck. And when Quentin sat back up, bleary and his whole body thrumming to the same tune as his racing heart, El simply handed him a small bottle, seemingly materialized from thin air. Or, more likely, from wherever Eliot called it, using his swift and silent telekinesis.

Quentin swallowed the liquid inside in a single gulp. Immediately, his scalding, aching mouth quieted and his body felt somewhat more in equilibrium. The blood taste completely disappeared and he’d never been more grateful to the man beside him.

Eliot dropped his hands and tensed his jaw, muscles rippling in and out of time. Quentin swallowed again, and reached his hand back out to Eliot. He took it, but the air had shifted again. Not dangerously or into an outright freeze, but there was certainly a coolness that hadn’t been there a moment ago.

“Okay,” Eliot said. “Not to ruin a nice moment or anything, but can we take the pin out of the whole Fillory clusterfuck now?”

“Um, yeah,” Quentin’s back broke into a chilled sweat and he scratched his neck. “I guess so.”

Eliot heaved a heavy sigh and turned his head over to Quentin, “What the actual fuck, Coldwater?”

He wasn’t angry anymore. But the resignation, the disappointment, the sadness was almost too much for Quentin to handle. It was obvious that Eliot didn’t understand why he would want to go back to Fillory, why he’d mess with something that was long over, instead of trying to ground himself in their current relationship, in the tangible here and now. And Quentin wasn’t totally certain he’d be able to convince him of his perspective either. But he at least had to try.

“Look, I get that it was a risk—” He started, but Eliot immediately cut him off.

“Too big of a risk, Q,” he glanced downward, dark and inward. “You can’t do that to me. We’re not as disparate as we used to be. Your actions affect more than yourself now. Acutely.”

“To be fair, I didn’t—” Quentin opened his mouth further but found no sound came out. He cleared
his throat and squeezed Eliot’s hand, hoping for a little more strength. “I didn’t know that it could go so badly. I didn’t remember.”

“When has fucking with an unknown spell under highly emotional circumstances ever gone well for us?” Eliot shook his head. “Even if you didn’t know the specific risk, you knew it was a risk. Not a new rodeo.”

Quentin felt the familiar sting of tears in his eyes and he blinked them away as rapidly as he could.

“I’m sorry. It’s just, uh, I couldn’t remember. I couldn’t remember so much of it,” he said and Eliot leaned back against the bed frame, his eyes softening from a cool devastation to warm empathy. “So I felt like I had to—like I needed to go back. So I didn’t lose the memories. Our memories.”

They both knew how precious that time was, how much it had changed their lives. Even Eliot had to have some understanding for the pain and sorrow of that beauty slipping through his fingers, out into the ether.

“Oh, Eliot breathed out. “I can get that. Sort of. But Q, maybe that’s how it’s supposed to go. It was obviously important for us to remember back then, but maybe it’s also important for us to—”

“To what? Forget?” He shook his head, urgent. “No, it’s too important.”

“Look, I know that if I think about our life there, the people we—” he didn’t say Teddy’s name, but it was painted in the air like funeral incense “—if I think about any of it too much, it’s excruciating. I don’t see how I could keep going, Q. It’s too much.”

“I miss him too,” Quentin said, but Eliot shook his head harder, faster.

“It’s more than that. I don’t think we’d be able to survive if it felt immediate. Our brains’ protective instincts are working to give us space from it,” Eliot said, running his thumb along Quentin’s temple. “So you actively going out of your way to fuck with that natural deterioration seems…”

“Stupid?” Quentin filled in bitterly. Eliot kissed his hand.

“Counterproductive.”

“But I don’t think it was just about the key, El. I think the Mosaic gives us what we need, when we need it,” he said, arguing lightly. “Even today.”

“Right, because of the Loon?” Eliot said, nodding. At Quentin’s shocked look, he rolled his eyes. “I listen.”

“I know you do,” he said, marveling a little nonetheless. “And yeah, because of the Loon. It’s power beyond both of us, El.”

“Q—” Eliot started, but Quentin touched his knee.

“And you’re right. I shouldn’t have fucked with unknown magic,” he dipped his head to capture Eliot’s eyes. “If it had been you, I would have been livid too.”

“I wasn’t livid, I was terrified,” Eliot said, his hand tightening around Quentin’s, pressing deep guilt into his veins.

“And I’m really sorry about that,” Quentin said, now kissing Eliot’s hand in a reversal. “It was irresponsible and selfish.”
Eliot nodded almost imperceptibly and glanced at Quentin sidelong.

“But?” He asked, knowing him well. Quentin took a ragged breath and swept his fingers across the back of Eliot’s hand, trying his best to be calming and loving before he said what he was going to say.

“I’m also still glad I did it,” he said, speaking over Eliot’s loudly grinding teeth and jaw. “Because while I didn’t get to see everything again, I saw enough. I saw what mattered.”

“Quentin—” Eliot shook his head.

“We both saw what we needed to see,” Quentin repeated, rushing forward with his ideas. “The Loon brought us different stories, both true, both important.”

“Or the other you fucked up the spell,” Eliot looked at him meaningfully and Quentin waved him off.

“I mean, yeah, he did, but that was part of it, I think. How it worked. Because while I got to see that our life was sort of beautiful, I also saw that it was also sort of messy and complicated and shitty too.”

“That’s practically sacrilege,” Eliot said, but his eyes lit up with the smallest amount of intrigue. He pressed soft patterns into Quentin’s legs, meditative and thoughtful.

“I don’t think we knew how to be together. How to even get our shit together. At least, not for a really long time,” Q sighed, resting his hand on Eliot’s, stopping the movement. Even in a poignant moment, he was still a man and the touch was a little too electric for the circumstance.

“No, we didn’t,” Eliot’s lips quirked into a kind of smile, eyelids lazing down in remembrance. But then, it passed and he looked back at Q. “But look at us now. Talking everything through like grown-ups.”

“Almost,” Quentin laughed, resting his head forward onto Eliot’s chest. “We might both have a little bit of work to do still.”

Eliot stretched his long arms in the air and brought them back down, wrapping Quentin in a bear hug and kissing the top of his head, tucking Q’s head under his chin.

“You know, apropos of nothing, you pretty much lost your shit over me,” he said, tightening Q into his arms and sighing into his hair. “Which isn’t good. I know. But it’s still…”

“What?” Quentin tilted his head up to look at Eliot, who immediately laughed.

“Kind of hot?” He wrinkled his nose and smiled. “Is that fucked up to say?”

“I mean, yeah, a little.” But Q was laughing too and his heart was glowing right through his chest. “Not totally consistent.”

“Oh, get used to that,” Eliot laughed again and ruffled Quentin’s hair. “But no, my official stance is still that you’re a goddamn idiot.”

“Thanks.”

“Come on, it’s going to take me some time to process,” Eliot ran his index finger along the curve of Q’s hand and smiled a little, as his intensity softened. “But I love you. I see you. And with a fuckton
of distance, like, ten years from now, I’m sure we’ll find it all devastatingly romantic.”

“Well, I’ll work on my more reckless impulses if you work on trusting who I am and what I want,” Quentin said, half-joking voice, all serious meaning. Eliot knit his brow together and nodded, then wrapped his arms around him again, gentler, with more tenderness.

“Oh,” he said, back into his hair. “That’s a fair deal. I can do that.”

And so they sat like that, wrapped up together, for a few more moments and Quentin started to feel the weight of exhaustion all over again. He really was a goddamn idiot, if only because his body felt as fucked up as his brain on a bad day. But he had Eliot, and Eliot had him, and for once, maybe, that made everything really okay. Breathing in Eliot’s cologne, he nuzzled his head into his neck and kissed him three times in a short trail.

“Mmm,” Eliot hummed, returning the nuzzle with his nose against his hair. “Feels good.”

“You still see us together in ten years?”

Quentin knew it was a silly question. Childlike. But his heart was still a little sore and a little fragile, and dammit, he wanted some reassurance. In response, Eliot laughed a gentle sob.

“Yeah, sure. Ten years, another fifty,” he pulled Quentin close and kissed his hairline, again and again, breathing in like he was starved for his scent. “Figure out a whole immortality gambit. Whatever suits.”

And that was that. The dam broke, and Quentin Coldwater was fucking gone for Eliot Waugh.

He swiftly pulled his hands up to Eliot’s face and kissed him as hard as he could. Eliot wasted no time, his mouth deepening itself into Quentin’s, pouring everything he ever was and ever would be through himself, right to Q’s heart. His hands pressed their way up Quentin’s chest and landed in his hair, tracing delirious circles and Quentin pushed into Eliot, their bodies curved together like long lost puzzle pieces.

“Take your clothes off, now,” Quentin demanded, pulling Eliot on top of him, entangling their legs and running the pad of his thumb along Eliot’s defined jaw.

“Yes, sir,” Eliot laughed hotly at the unexpected role reversal, locking his mouth onto Quentin’s shoulder. Like he was snapping his fingers, but with a silent twist in the air, all of his buttons undid themselves, his sleeves slid down his arms, and he levitated the tuxedo shirt down into a forgotten heap on the floor, all in a single motion.

Q grabbed Eliot’s back without grace, in full-body, visceral passion, and slid them both down onto the bed, pressing himself into his hips, so Eliot could feel how hard he was, how much he wanted him, how much he always wanted him…

“Fuck,” Eliot stopped abruptly, pushing Quentin off him. Shaking and bringing his hands right up to his forehead like he was in tortured pain—panting—he pulled himself slightly away from Quentin, his eyes closed and his mouth still swollen from the ferocity of which Quentin had launched himself at him. He swallowed, dazed.

“I recognize that I am a magnificently stupid man for saying this, but I think we need to take a beat, Q.” His eyes opened again and he looked at Quentin with a mixture of anguish and resignation.

“What?” Quentin said, blinking. He couldn’t be serious right now
“You need rest,” Eliot said, cupping Quentin’s face, but steadfastly keeping his body a ridiculous distance away.

“I’m fine, El,” Quentin push himself back up at Eliot, his tongue in his ear, and he could have sworn the former High King whimpered as he gently used his hand to extract Quentin’s face from his own.

“You’re still recovering,” he said, tracing his fingers across Quentin’s cheekbones, dipping them down to his lips.

Slowly capturing his hand, Quentin kissed each finger in a row, before biting down on Eliot’s thumb, staring up expectantly. Eliot’s pupils dilated and he roughly grabbed Quentin into another kiss and Quentin smiled into his mouth, all victory.

“I want you,” Q said emphatically, panting between their desperate movements, reaching down into Eliot’s pants. “Like, right the fuck now.”

“Oh god,” Eliot was barely coherent as Quentin hand went around him, but then he gently pulled him back to solid ground, letting out a slow breath. He shook his head and pulled Quentin into a hug, laying them both down on the bed, Q’s head on his chest.

“I’m serious. Not happening. You need rest,” he said, whispering and stroking his hair. Reluctantly, Quentin settled into Eliot’s clavicle and sighed, half-weary, half-frustrated. Underneath all his Eliot-charged adrenaline, he had to admit he was still pretty weak. His skin was still stretching uncomfortably across his bones and his eyes were strained.

“Fine,” he said, a yawn creeping up his back and his muscles trembling. “But as soon as I’m stronger —"

“I make you see stars until you can’t breathe,” Eliot wrapped his tongue around Quentin’s earlobe, his voice low and intense. But then he kissed his temple, sweetly, softly. “For now, though, try to get some sleep.”

It was only seconds before Quentin was lulled by Eliot’s warm, steady heartbeat. It had been a long day. Wrapping his arms around El’s torso, Quentin pressed deeper into his chest, and Eliot ran his fingers back through his hair. Then, he dipped his lips back down to his hairline, like the perfect click of a key in a lock.

“So what happens next?” Quentin asked. “Are we all better now?”

“I think ‘all better’ is about as much in the cards as ‘traditional,’” Eliot chuckled. “But if you mean the two of us, then, yeah. I think so. If we keep sorting it the fuck out as we go. Might not be instant or easy, but if we keep trying...”

“Yeah,” Quentin nodded. “That works. We work.”

So they sat, holding each other in companionable, comfortable silence. Quentin closed his eyes, letting the rhythm of Eliot’s heart calm him again. He was safe, with the person he loved, had loved, and would love. That was all he needed. And like he heard his own silent cue, Eliot dipped his mouth to Quentin’s ear and whispered, prayerful, urgent, and loving.

“I’m all in, Q,” he said, like it was a secret, like it was sacred. “And I’m hopelessly yours.”

Quentin closed his eyes and let the joy wash over him, before turning around and hugging Eliot as tightly as he could. Reaching his hands up to curl his hands around the nape of his neck, he also brought his mouth to Eliot’s ear and whispered, prayerful, urgent, and loving.
“Okay,” he said, like it was a secret, like it was sacred. “But you can’t say shit like that and expect me not to jump you.”

It was worth it, because Eliot laughed. Really laughed. Bright, clear and spontaneous, sounding like he hadn’t in far too long. Playfully, gently shoving Quentin’s side, he pressed a firm kiss on his cheek and pulled him back into his arms.

“Come here, wiseass,” he said, his hands back in Quentin’s hair, letting the strands fall over each finger like waterfalls. “In that case, I’ll be quiet for once so you can rest.”

“Buzzkill.”

“We’ve got plenty of time, Coldwater. Rest.”

And as Quentin slowly fell asleep in Eliot’s arms, he actually believed that for the first time in years.

coda to come.

Chapter End Notes

Incredible thanks to everyone who stuck through the main narrative to the end. This has been so much fun. <3
Like a Biblical figure, Quentin Coldwater technically rose from the bed on the third day. But it took five to reach equilibrium.

On the first day, after that harrowing and wonderful night, his body gave out from underneath him. Fresh off the adrenaline and breakthroughs of the early morning, it was only two hours later that he collapsed while brushing his teeth. Quentin was in and out of consciousness again, as his body was no longer trying to sustain itself for the good of his emotional well-being. Terrifying Eliot and Julia in rapid succession, he lost vast amounts of blood through several orifices, though mostly through ceaseless vomiting. The world was relentless, painful, and disorienting.

When he was briefly lucid, leaning against a remarkably tenacious Eliot on the living room couch, Julia explained what was going on. El’s telekinesis spell should have, in theory, successfully imprinted Q’s consciousness and shade into Mosaic Quentin. This would allow him to live through the loop in exactly the same way, without any interference or detection. Sort of like a golem, but without clay or any real free will. Meanwhile, his body on Earth would maintain a mild fever to keep its basic functions going until the original unit was rejoined. Deceptively simple, highly technical work.

“It’s actually impressive, Eliot,” she said, folding her arms over her chest, still barely looking at him. “Meta-comp, really.”

“Actually impressive,” he repeated, with a harsh little smirk. He was always mean when he needed things and right now, he needed answers. Julia glared at him, deepening the chill, and he clicked his tongue against his teeth. “So when you’re done explaining my own work to me, are you going to—”

“Q’s counterpart fucked it up by forgetting to account for the Earth weight of the shade. He only used Fillorian metrics,” she said and Eliot closed his eyes, cursing silently. He wrapped his arm around Q and pressed his cheek against the side of his head.

“What does that mean?” Quentin asked, staggering and unsteady, gray pallor veiling everything he could see.

“Your shade’s like a trapped eyelash,” Julia said, holding her fingers up like a frame to take in his current state. “Your body is trying to flush it out through natural recourse, but can’t because, well, it’s your shade.”

“So that’s why all the blood?” Q asked, hiccuping metal flavor and hating himself. “And what can we do? I don’t feel like becoming The Beast today. Or dying, for that matter.”

“Neither of those is going to happen,” Eliot said, grabbing Q’s hand and tightening his grip around his shoulder, almost painful in his desperation. Quentin pressed his forehead against Eliot’s forearm
and moaned, his body ready to collapse. Julia reached out and shook his shoulder.

“Hey Q,” she moved him gently back and forth until he groggily turned to look at her. “I need you to stay as alert as you can, okay?”

“No,” he mumbled and Eliot propped him up from behind, rubbing circles on his back. “No, need sleep.”

“How about water instead?” Eliot asked, motioning for Julia to move to the kitchen. She quickly stood up to grab a glass. “If Julia got you some cold water, would you drink it? I think that would feel good.”

“Sleep,” he said, and the last thing he remembered was Eliot frantically tapping his fingers against his cheek.

The second day, Quentin’s whole body compulsively shook nonstop and he had to strip down naked in front of Julia while she did several spells over several hours, anchoring his shade to him both physically and metaphysically. That felt like she pushed a cattle brand through his spine and twisted his soul inside out.

But he could sip broth without throwing up, and he spent the evening lying with Eliot in bed, nestled between his legs, watching Star Wars on his laptop.

“Han Solo can get it,” Eliot said, wrapping his arms tightly around Q’s chest and lightly kissing his ear.

So, an improvement.

Between the evening of day two and the first of light of morning on day three, Julia’s spells were complete and Quentin was whole again. His energy came back fast, and he was starving and restless. He ate an entire box of Pop-Tarts and ran around the house, both cleaning and reorganizing all the furniture.

It was three o’clock in the morning.

As he pushed the lamp against the window-facing wall, soft thudding footsteps sounded on the carpet and Eliot stepped into the dim yellow light, rubbing his face awake. He was wearing nothing but silk pajama bottoms and his hair fell whispering over his bleary eyes.

“Q, come to bed,” he said, tugging at his elbow. Quentin quickly side-stepped Eliot’s hands, not ready to slow down, tired of being so cooped up and worthless in his own body. Plus, he had a ton of cool ideas that he was certain Mr. Interior Design would be equally interested in executing on,
once he woke up a bit.

“I’m all good, El. Seriously,” he said, leveling his gaze across the living room and taking in his efforts. “I just really think if we moved the loveseat to the opposite side of the coffee table, we could, uh, maximize the flow of space, right? And then if we readjusted the two armchairs, the conversational potential would be—”

“Quentin,” Eliot repeated, a little more forcefully. Those goddamn eyes glinted. “Come to bed.”

He spent the rest of the day floating through the solar system, deliriously without breath. As promised.

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Then, it was the fourth day and Quentin was standing in the kitchen, pouring that first cup coffee for him and Julia. Their morning ritual.

“Well, I’m glad things worked out,” she said with a serene smile. “Not glad it took you almost dying, but you do tend towards the dramatic. So, you know, it tracks.”

“Ha, ha,” he said dryly, handing Julia her mug—a pink and green swirled ceramic from Mexico—and laughed at her stuck-out tongue. “Does that mean you’ll thaw the freeze?”

“It doesn’t hurt for him to remember that while his best friend may be a violent king, yours is a spiteful, loyal demigoddess,” she smiled. “But yes, I’ll ease up. If that’s what you want.”

“It’s what I want,” he said pointedly.

“Boring.”

Sliding onto the stool opposite her, he placed his hand over hers and ducked his head.

“Love you, Jules.”

She blew him a gentle kiss and mouthed the words back. They drank their coffee in warmest silence.

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The fifth day, same time in the morning, same caffeine ritual. He and Julia were more animated, even happy—they talked about music and added extra, sneaky bits of sugar to their mugs, like they did when they were young teens, trying to convince themselves they liked the taste of coffee. Julia laughed out loud at the last thing he said, holding her hands against the counter to stop herself from sliding off the stool.

“Oh, shit,” he laughed, reaching out to her when her legs slipped and she was barely hanging off the edge. “Fuck, are you okay?”
“I’m fine, just a clumsy dumbass,” she smiled, readjusting herself onto the stool. “But come on, Quentin, seriously?”

Before he could retort, the elegant figure of Eliot crossed into his periphery, raising a quick wave hello. His heart jumped a little, in that giddy, freeing way it always did when he was close to him. He wondered if the radiance of Eliot Waugh would ever dim with time or if it was a sweet doom he should just accept now.

“Don’t mind me,” he said, squeezing behind Quentin to drop a quick kiss on the back of his head, strong hand lingering against his bicep. Eliot pressed himself into his back for just long enough that Q’s insides felt distinctly gooey. “Grabbing some sustenance and I’ll be out of your way.”

He walked to the pantry to pull out a large bulk bag of granola and shook it at them as a farewell. But just as he was about to turn the corner back to his and Quentin’s room, Julia cleared her throat.

“Hey, wait,” she said and Eliot froze, turning his head with equal parts fear and intrigue. Julia had eased up as requested, but not considerably. “Do you have strong opinions about The Bangles?”

“The band?” He asked, momentarily confused. At her nod, he shrugged. “Who doesn’t?”

“What’s their best song?”

“Eternal Flame,” he said without hesitation and Quentin groaned as Julia pumped her fist in victory. “Q thinks it’s Manic Monday,” she said with a, frankly, over-the-top eye roll and Eliot immediately pulled a face.

“It’s a good song!” Quentin said.

“What is wrong with you?” Eliot asked at the same time, barely joking.

Smiling conspiratorially, Julia patted the stool next to her, pleased to have an ally. Offering back his own sheepish smile, Eliot sat, pleased himself at the change in the air. Quentin handed him a mug and winked. Then, he immediately launched into his impassioned and definitely not on-the-fly argument for the 1986 pop radio hit.

“Oh, wait. But, no, it makes sense,” Q slipped off the stool and grabbed a cereal bowl from the cabinets. He offered one to both of them silently; Julia shook her head and Eliot pointedly popped the dry granola into his mouth. “It’s catchy, it exemplifies a really specific era, and it’s relatable.”

“Maybe if you’re Garfield the Cat,” Eliot said into his coffee and Julia laughed, in a way that was, again, a little over-the-top, if you asked him. Quentin sighed and pulled Raisin Bran out from the pantry.

“You two are snobs. It’s explicitly a song for the proletariat—”

But when he turned back around, he heard a soft pinging sound and Josh Hoberman was standing there, still dressed in his tuxedo from the wedding, looking run-down and lost.

“Fuck, that potion is never going to be my friend,” he breathed in and out heavily. He blinked when he saw Quentin. “Jesus, you look way better than I expected. That was fast. Damn, Julia.”

“Uh, Josh? It’s been five days,” she said. “I think Fillory did its timey-wimey shit on you.”

“Goddammit,” he said. “Only been a few hours for us. Well, I brought this Phosphocream to help
stabilize your pores, but man, your skin looks great now. Positively glowing.”

“Yeah, I’m good now,” Quentin said, pouring milk over his bran. “But thanks for the effort and the weird compliment.”

“Anytime,” he said with a bow. “Is that coffee I smell?”

“You got it,” Quentin said, reaching for a mug (plain white, *You’re Not Perky, You’re Obnoxious* written in calligraphy on the side) and handing it over. “Cream and sugar?”

“Dash of cinnamon if you have it,” he said, before turning to his right and clapping a stone-still Eliot on the shoulder. “How’s it going, El?”

Immediately, Eliot arched his back, shoving him off and gave him the darkest glare he could muster.

“Don’t touch me,” he hissed out, his straight white teeth looking like fangs. Josh backed away entirely, pursing his lips in disappointment.

“Sorry, man,” he said, gently. “I thought since Quentin’s doing better—”

“You thought wrong,” Eliot said, staring angrily down at the counter, studiously avoiding Josh’s puppy dog gaze. Quentin handed Josh his prepared drink with an awkward, sympathetic smile and, like a coward, immediately turned away from the situation. He’d already mediated one difficult peace and this one wasn’t really his business to interfere in, even if he was more or less the cause.

...Okay, more.

Still, not his circus, not his monkeys, as his dad used to say. Busying himself, he realized that there was no way he’d be able to civilly eat his cereal without a spoon, so he opened the utensil drawer. Empty. They were all dirty. One would think a group of Magicians would have their chore shit figured out, but one would be deeply wrong. Bending down, he looked in the lower cabinets on the sink side of the breakfast nook, certain that he’d seen some plastic cutlery from the last time they’d all procrastinated washing their flatware.

There was another ping of a potion arrival and he heard Eliot’s voice, softer and more excited, jump from the stool with a rush.

“Bambi! You look a fright.”

“I am a fucking fright, Eliot,” Margo’s usually commanding voice was wavering, deeper in its false attempts at stability. “Where the fuck is Quentin? What the fuck happened?”

“Bambi—” Eliot started.

“Josh told me that—that it’s bad, El, and that he might not make it?” Her voice was a mile a minute, lost and scared and touchingly sad. Realizing what was going on, Quentin popped up from behind the bar and tried to wave to get her attention. But she was laser-focused on Eliot.

“Please, tell me that he’s okay? Are you fucking okay?” Margo reached up to stroke Eliot’s cheek and he leaned into her touch, sighing.

She was decked out in full Fillorian formalwear, all rich crimsons and emerald greens, yet decidedly without a Christmas vibe. The ruby-encrusted crown of the High King—still strange to Quentin on her deep brown hair, as compared to its coronated place on Eliot’s head—was folded into intricate braids, wrapped in gold and silver strands of thread. She’d obviously been holding court when Josh
called her away, rushed to Quentin’s bedside.

In a strange way, her distress and urgency actually made him feel a little happy, a little loved. That the great High King Margo the Destroyer would care that much about him was not something he ever could have anticipated and his toes tingled with an unexpected warmth.

“Bambi,” Eliot took her slender shoulders in his arms and ducked his head, trying to smile at her. “Bambi, it’s fine. Everything’s fine. It’s been a few days here. Quentin is fine.”

“Well, shit-dick,” she said, pressing her hand to her heart and shaking her head. “I fucking hate this inconsistent time bullshit. Julia, can’t you do something about that?”

“Demigoddess, not full-blown goddess,” Julia said, not even looking up from her coffee. She had to remind Margo of that a lot, in particular.

“I still don’t get the difference,” she said, blowing her off with a flip of her hand. “You’re useless.”

“Good to see you too.”

“Hey Margo,” Quentin waved and her wide brown eyes rushed to him, filled with bald pain and relief. Then, she tilted her head and narrowed her those namesake eyes into burning slits of rage.

“Hey Margo?” She repeated, her voice barely above a whisper. “Hey-fucking-Margo?”

“Bambi,” Eliot’s voice was a warning now and he grabbed her arm defensively. But she pushed him off, stalking over to the bar and standing so close to Quentin that her hot, angry breath was scorching his neck.

“You are a fucking—” she pushed Quentin so hard he staggered back and then she kicked his shin for good measure “—shitstain, Quentin Coldwater.”

“Jesus, Margo, ow,” Quentin said, rubbing his leg. Any feelings of warmth or affection he had evaporated immediately. But Margo didn’t care. With a feral roar, she launched herself full speed at Quentin, her fists raised in battle position in the air.

“You motherfucking cockwaffle,” she spat out, her fists pounding down onto his shoulders with an intensity of a thousand armies. Swiftly, Eliot picked her up from behind, carrying her away as she thrashed and kicked violently into the air, yelling coarser and cruder obscenities the further he pulled her from Quentin. He whispered something in her ear and she yelled, then huffed, then blew her hair out of her face before shuddering into calm.

Tentatively placing her back on the ground, Eliot gave her another stern glance from above her tiny, fearsome head before completely releasing her.

“Fine,” she snapped at Eliot, walking away and brushing off her legs. “I won’t. But your dickwad of a boy toy still needs to know what a testicle he is for scaring the shit out of the people who love him.”

“It’s so adorable when you get sappy, sweetie,” Josh curled himself around Margo and kissed her nose. She made a slight face but then quickly kissed him on the cheek, before turning her rage back to Quentin.

“Don’t be a stupid asshole again, you got it?” She said, pointing right at him. Quentin held his hands up in surrender.
“Um, got it,” he said. Eliot ran his tongue over his teeth to keep himself from laughing, though a small smile still made its way through on his features.

“You’re so colorful,” he said to Margo, dragging his fingers through her hair and kissing her forehead.

“Okay, then,” she sniffed in the air and sat down at the stool, shaking off her fear, anger, pride, and love. She smiled. “So how’s everyone? Give me the deets, give me the gossip, and give me that cereal.”

Knowing better than to protest, Quentin sighed and pushed it towards her, deciding that it was probably better to go hungry at this point. As she dug into the bowl (“I fucking hate raisins,” she said, picking the small black pieces out), Julia made good on the gossip front, with a retelling of Todd’s elaborate and confusing wedding. Josh, in turn, offered some volleying defenses, explaining all of the couple’s surface bizarre choices, which led to some energetic debate about everything from the definition of the word ‘tacky’ to cultural appropriation.

When it seemed like everyone was fully distracted, Quentin suddenly felt Margo’s cool, soft hand on his, her simple gold bracelet tickling his arm hairs.

“Q,” she said, lightly, calling him by the nickname she rarely used. A sudden silence and rich cloak of humid air enveloped them, visceral and tangible. “You know, I also wanted to say that you… look better than the last time I saw you. And I’m glad for that. Really glad.”

With a quick reveal of her two middle fingers and a knowing smile, Quentin felt warm with both embarrassment and affection at the same time.

“Um,” he started but she shook her head, shushing him.

“Hey, I get it, okay? This shit isn’t easy for any of us. Giving your heart isn’t easy. But I’m trying to be vulnerable more often myself, and I just want to say…” She smiled, rare warmth permeating her delicate features. “I’m so thankful that Eliot has someone like you, who keeps loving him through all his bullshit. I know he has a lot of it. But he adores you, Q.”

She leaned forward and whispered directly in his ear, “And so I do too.”

“Holy hell, Margo,” Quentin said and she laughed, a gentle tinkling sound, like the highest keys on a piano.

“I’ll violently, publicly murder you if you ever mention this again.”

“Understood,” Quentin said, smiling now himself, squeezing her hand. “Thanks.”

Then, the cloak lifted and the cool air from the kitchen flowed freely again. Eliot stared intently at the two of them, confused and intrigued. Margo had clearly charmed the conversation so no one could actually make out what she said, but Eliot was the master of nonverbal communication nonetheless.

“Wait, what am I missing?” He asked, crossing his arms and shooting his eyes gleefully between them. He always loved when Margo and Quentin connected.

“Not everything’s about you, El,” she said, her small smile still directed at Quentin before her armor clicked back into place. Eyes focused lovingly on Eliot, she sighed. “Though, of course, I’d obviously prefer if it was.”

“God, likewise,” Eliot laughed, then sighed, hugging her. “Your hair is different.”
“I curled it the other way, twisted to the right. Do you like?”

“I haven’t decided.”

(Margo’s hair looked exactly the same to Quentin.)

Stretching out her arms into a yawn and a tut, Margo levitated a mug (bright pink with a unicorn graphic) and her own stream of coffee, needing no host to accommodate her. Taking a delicate sip, she grimaced at the bitterness, but then ran her hand up and down Josh’s arm, standing to her right. She nodded curtly, seemingly having made her mind up about something.

“Anyway,” she said, taking a big bite of cereal, staring straight down at the counter, addressing the group as a whole. “Speaking of weddings, Josh and I are getting hitched. Next year. You’re all invited. And can someone get me some fucking sugar or…?”

Every face in the room slowly turned toward Margo, jaws agape. Eliot slinked backwards from her, his features curled into tight, wild lines, shellshocked and silent. While congratulations were on the tip of Quentin’s tongue, he realized that no one else was privy to his last moment with Margo, so this appeared—for all intents and purposes—to be the most random fucking announcement she could have possibly made, given everything. And especially given everything they’d ever known about, well, Margo.

“I thought we were going to announce that later, honey,” Josh said, acutely aware of the shocked faces around them. He grit the term of endearment out a little, but then covered it with a laugh. “You know, once things settled down.”

“I changed my mind,” she said with a shrug. “Shit’s settled.”

“Gogo,” Josh said with a quick bend down to her ear. “We talked about this. You can’t just change your mind without—”

As they bickered en sotto voce, Eliot turned to Quentin, horrified, and mouthed ‘Gogo?’ and Quentin shrugged. Maybe he was a cheesy sap, but he thought it was actually a little sweet. Josh opened up Margo’s softer side like the night to a cereus. Eliot wasn’t always a fan, since he loved Margo as she had always been just fine, thanks. But deep down, Quentin knew even he had to admit that Margo was happier and that it was an objectively good thing.

“So wait, is this a joke or…?” Julia asked and Margo shook her head.

“Why the fuck would I joke? It’s political, guys,” she said, explaining with her finger pressed tightly down on the counter and her eyes practically screaming backwards into her head. “Part of being a monarch.”

“But I thought you outlawed forced political marriages?” Quentin asked, crossing his arms.

“I did, but it’s, like, de facto,” she said, waving him off. “There are still forces that want to banish the Children of Earth, entirely, and marriage makes us stronger than not.”

But Q wasn’t quite ready to let her get away with it.

“Okay, then why not get married now, Fillorian courthouse style?” Quentin’s eyes twinkled a little as he started to smile. “Why wait a year? It sounds like you want—”
“You’re still on thin ice, Coldwater,” Margo pointed directly at him. “Don’t get familiar.”

Eliot started pacing abruptly, his eyes narrowed and his fingers tapping against his pants. Margo slowly turned around and crossed her arms, taking in his wild form with a ticked eyebrow. She was all bravado, seemingly ready to pounce if Eliot said anything negative. But Quentin knew better; she was actually terrified of Eliot’s response. She’d moved mountains and skies for him, and would do it a thousand more times. His approval and love meant more than anything and everything to her.

“Well, this calls for a celebration,” Eliot tapped his hands on the counter before dipping down and kissing Margo’s cheek. She slowly brightened under his lips. “While obviously, I can’t imagine anyone making an honest woman out of your ferocity—”

“Who said shit about honest?” Margo pushed Eliot off her with a dazzling smile. “To be clear, I still have a girlfriend.”

“And several concubines!” Josh chirped, putting his arm around Margo’s shoulder.

“Yes, my parade of kept men,” Margo looked off in the distance, wistful. “Livin’ the dream.”

“In any case,” Eliot said, laughing a little and rubbing her shoulder, gazing down at her with a special affection he saved only for her. “I’m always happy if you’re happy. And you seem happy.”

“I am,” Margo said, squeezing Eliot’s hand. Then she glared at him. “So stop being mad at Josh, you fucker. I can tell you are.”

“Bambi—”

“Quentin’s fine!” She waved her hand into the air. “I mean, he’s still Quentin, but…”

Eliot cleared his throat and swiftly turned around, pointedly ignoring Margo, “We need something to toast with! Is there any champagne left around here?”

“I’ve got that,” Julia said, stepping up quickly and touching Eliot’s arm. “Maybe you can grab some sparkling cider for you and Q.”

As the group hurried around the kitchen, hugging Margo and Josh, and busily grabbing as many champagne flutes as they could scrounge up on such short notice, a swooshing sound permeated the air. Penny—also still clad in his tuxedo—waved a hello, looking around and taking in the scene.

“Shit. How long has it been?” He said, groaning and immediately reaching out to Julia, who popped the cork on the champagne and handed it off to Josh. She winced a little as she leaned into his chest and kissed his chin.

“Five days,” she said, peppering kisses up his cheek. “Welcome back.”

“Fuck Fillory,” he said, wiping his hands on his trousers. “Fen’s all good though. She said she loves everyone very much and she’ll see you soon.”

“Thank you,” Eliot said, meaningfully, pouring the two glasses of apple cider and walking over to Q for a tiny, private cheers. Penny nodded in acknowledgment and then turned to Quentin himself.

“You all right?” He asked, eyebrows shielding his expression. Quentin shrug-nodded and Penny rolled his eyes. “You are a complete dumbass. Fuckin’ A, man. Chill your shit.”

“Hooray, Penny’s back,” Q said, in a flat, mock-celebratory mumble. Eliot gave him a small, teasing
pout in sympathy and kissed his forehead before walking back over to the happy, apparently betrothed couple.

“Theme? Colors? Linens?” Eliot asked, abruptly, looking at Margo. “We’re already behind schedule.”

Margo jerked her thumb at Josh, “Talk to this guy. I truly give zero fucks about anything except the number of times I come on the wedding night.”

Eliot glared darkly at Margo, who matched his stare with equal or more intensity. Tensing his jaw but seeing that she wasn’t going to back down, he finally forced himself to look at Josh, who smiled cheerily right back at him.

With an annoyed grimace, Eliot launched into his curated questionnaire, trying his best to capture the essence of Josh in a few well-structured and planned concepts and ideas, that would come to fruition via center pieces and music choices. Things almost went poorly when Josh floated the idea of teleporting some dubstep DJ into Fillory (“I’m sorry, are we reviving the Golden Age of Shitty Clubs, circa 2008?” Eliot sneered) but they recovered, thanks to Margo’s literal bone-crushing insistence on their cooperation with one another.

Meanwhile, Margo described her ideas for a gown—the one thing she did care marginally about—to a pleasantly polite Julia, who definitely had no real interest in how high of a hemline Margo could get away with in front of the High Council without losing clout. Eliot quickly intervened and they spent several passionate moments discussing the different types of white and which one popped best against Margo’s skin tone. Once they settled on a shade called “Ivory Pearl,” Margo turned to Quentin, placing her hand back on his, but without any of the previous affection.

“And Quentin, to be very fucking clear, you and Eliot are invited as a unit, so no need to throw a hissy fit, ‘kay?” She said, wrinkling her nose with a wink before turning back to her cereal. Quentin threw his mouth into a firm line and stared down Eliot, who immediately grit his teeth.

“Margo,” Eliot squeezed her shoulder a little harder, using her given name. He only did that when he really wasn’t fucking around.

“Seriously?” Quentin asked both of them in equal parts, hoping his eyes were flashing enough to convey his annoyance at their gossipy bullshit.

“Oh, like you don’t tell Hedge Bitch over there everything.” Margo rolled her eyes. “I know what Eliot knows. Get over it.”

“Hedge Bitch?” Julia cocked her head, incredulous. “Are you kidding me?”

“Cruel nicknames aside, she does have a point,” Eliot said out the side of his mouth, smiling pointedly. With a burst of frustration and sweetness, intermingled together, Quentin threw a dish towel at him and Eliot ducked, laughing.

“Not a tactful one,” Julia chimed in again, crossing her arms. She was less amused. Her time as a Hedge witch was still a painful subject.

“Right, ‘cause that’s my fuckin’ middle name,” Margo took another big bite and swayed her head back and forth, chewing exaggeratedly. “But fine, I get it. Too soon. Jeez.”

“Slightly, Bambi,” Eliot said, sighing. He raised his eyebrows at Quentin in a silent apology and Quentin was a sucker. His softening smile was inevitable, and the bright one he got in return from Eliot made it all worth it.
“Y’all would have figured this shit out weeks ago if I’d been around though,” Margo waved her spoon between the two of them. “Remember that.”

“You do knock sense into skulls breathtakingly,” Eliot said, in star-struck agreement. She smirked and popped her head up, kissing his cheek.

“Damn fuckin’ right.”

And so, the group kept celebrating and chatting, swapping stories of disaster weddings, etiquette breaches, and the pain and joy in growing older. Josh regaled everyone with the story of his proposal —après-sex, unsurprisingly, but still sweeter and more sentimental than one would usually associate with Margo. Eliot pulled out a laptop and started quickly cataloguing all of the different ideas being thrown around the room, his brilliant, organized, and aesthetically driven mind already sorting them into categories and instinctually knowing how to bring a vision to gorgeous life. Quentin felt warm and almost complete, when the door opened with a slam.

Kady stomped her way forward, covered in dirt and a small amount of blood on her arms, panting heavily.

“Sup, guys?” She said, nodding especially to Julia, who lurched forward upon seeing her. “I’ve had the craziest fucking few days.”

“And the smelliest,” Margo said, sneering her nose. “A shower would be your friend.”

“Fuck off, Ice Bitch,” Kady said, with a friendly smile and Margo blew her a kiss. The two of them got along particularly well these days. But Kady’s attention quickly shifted back to Julia, whose eyes were strained and dark.

“Is everything taken care of?” Julia hopped over to her, desperate. “Is it done?”

Quentin and Eliot exchanged a quick, confused glance. They had absolutely no idea what Julia was talking about. Once again, Quentin was reminded how small his world really was these days.

“We’re good, Jules,” Kady nodded, intense. “Not, like, totally out of the woods—”

“I didn’t expect that,” she said, running her hand down Kady’s shoulder. “But as long as…”

“We’re good,” Kady assured her. Julia nodded and then sat back down. Kady turned back to the group at large with a wicked smile. “So, what’s been going on here? How was that silly-ass wedding?”

Eliot drew his features in for a moment, considering the conversation they’d all just witnessed with an intense, simmering interest. But instead of going down a line of questioning, he instead laughed, a little too loudly, and went around the counter to grab the coffee pot. He poured Kady her mug (all black, no embellishments), handing it to her with grin.

“Oh boy,” he said. “I think we all should eat some breakfast first. We’ve clearly got stories, so let’s settle the fuck in.”

“I can make scrambled eggs,” Quentin offered, stepping off his stool. But Josh beat him to the punch, rolling up his sleeves and grabbing a frying pan. Gliding between them, Eliot placed his placating hand on Josh and sighed, pushing him slightly to the side with a small, warming smile on his face. Quentin stood back and watched, amused and curious.

“My kitchen, Hoberman. You’re celebrating an unearned betrothal to the greatest woman in the
multiverse,” Eliot said, taking the pan himself and starting the burner. “Relax, enjoy, and let me handle it this time.”

“Uh, your call, El,” Josh said, brightening cautiously at the crack in Eliot’s anger.

Quentin and Margo exchanged quiet glances of their own, before turning back to Kady, who had promptly ignored Eliot’s directive and had begun describing her latest Battle Magic strategy with graphic, gruesome details.

And as Eliot flambéed crepes and poached eggs with a flourish, everyone’s voices grew warmer and more laughter-filled, bright and lively as the sparkles in the champagne and juice passed between them. Margo laughed at Josh’s corniest jokes, Penny and Kady swapped horror stories, and Julia centered them all with her ease and serenity. The group felt whole, cohesive and happy.

Affectionate arms wrapped behind him and a strong chin rested on his shoulder. The argument turned passionately to the merits of amaryllis flowers over anemone, and the glowing in Quentin’s chest came back tenfold, his chosen family surrounding him, stabilizing him, and freeing him.

Maybe home wasn’t too far away after all.

epilogue to come.
Epilogue

Chapter Summary

Gentle denouement. Nothing more.

Chapter Notes

Love to you all. Thank you. <3

One Year Later

*Hell hath no fury like a Josh Hoberman scorned* was not a phrase that normally meant much to Quentin Coldwater. Nor did he ever think he could possibly be the one to ever scorn him.

He was wrong.

For as long as he’d known him, Josh was the quintessential Magician stoner. This was different than any of thestoners out in the boring, magicless existence blessed and cursed on the majority. The stereotypes were different. There were no drawn-out vowels, no dullard giggles around a bong, no racially-questionable dreadlocks adorning his scalp. Josh didn’t hashtag his Instagram posts with “fourtwentyy,” nor would he ever be caught dead putting peanut butter on Chips Ahoy and eating the whole sleeve.

No, Josh’s well-earned stoner credentials came from his wryness, his intensity, his unexpected intellect, and his passion for all things natural and mind-expanding. Getting high with Josh was making a friend for life, one who would have your back in every circumstance, come hell or high water. It also meant that he’d make you laugh, wipe your tears when you cried, and wipe your ass if you shit yourself in the process, then never tell a soul. In many ways, it wasn’t surprising that he softened even the hardest heart Quentin had ever come across, in High King Margo the Destroyer.

Yet, as Josh’s beet-red face sputtered angry obscenities directed right at the core of his soul, Quentin had to admit that he was both taken aback and a little impressed by the Herbalist’s savage fury.

“You have to give me more, Quentin,” Josh almost punched the nearest wall, but grabbed at his head instead, barely keeping physical aggression in check. “Do you want to kill me? Do you want me to die? Because you’ll be my murderer if you don’t shape the fuck up.”

“Let’s take it down a notch,” Eliot said from beside Quentin, their fingers entwined. But Josh shook his head repeatedly.

“It can’t be for nothing!” He screamed, kicking into the air. “This is everything, Eliot. Everything.
And he’s demolishing it, without a second’s thought.”

“Jesus, I think that’s a little bit of an exaggeration,” Quentin finally said, running his free hand through his hair. “I mean, I’m trying my best here.”

“Obviously your best isn’t good enough. Fuck,” Josh leaned down into his legs, holding his face in his hands. A small wave of guilt ran over Quentin and he looked at Eliot desperately. Unhelpful, Eliot chuckled and sighed lightly.

“Drama queen,” he said, vaguely glancing downward at the heap of sweat to which Quentin had reduced Josh.

“I don’t know what more you want me to say,” Quentin pressed his hand down on the table in frustration. “I’m being honest with you.”

“I want you to be open with me, Quentin,” Josh rushed across the room and took Quentin’s hand. He implored him, leaning in, desperate, soul-searching. “What do you think? What do you feel? What do you dream? Does it make that brain of yours tick? Does it fill you with wonder?”

“It’s pretty good,” he said again, gesturing towards the clam soup in front of him. Immediately, Josh threw his chef’s hat in the air and Eliot laughed into his napkin. “That’s really all I’ve got.”

“This soup is the first course, the first savory, beautiful morsel of my wedding—”

“Margo’s wedding,” Eliot pointedly corrected.

“—And I need something other than ‘pretty good’ to work from. I know I specifically asked you to come to this tasting because you have the most average palate I’ve ever cooked for,” Josh sighed. “If I can move you, I can move anyone. But fuck, I didn’t think it’d be so infuriating.”

“Flattering as that is,” Q said, dryly, “I think ‘pretty good’ is actually, you know, pretty good. Most people won’t really be all that concerned about the food.”

Josh simply stared at Quentin, eyes blazing harder than his current high and he shook his head, slowly, painfully.

“I will be out soon with the second course. And you can sit there and think about all ways you’ve been so hurtful this afternoon,” he said, turning on the ball of his foot and storming into the kitchen. The throne room was deathly quiet and Quentin again turned to Eliot, mouth open and shocked. He simply shrugged.

“Drama queen,” he said again.

The second course didn’t go much better. Quentin took a bite of the deconstructed Beef and Sardine Croquette, a combination that really shouldn’t have worked, but somehow did. But when he dipped the battered meat and fish pastry into the pale yellow sauce on the side, the immediately recognizable flavor sent his brain into overdrive. He knew the protocol.

“Ah, nope,” Quentin grabbed the plate from under Eliot’s downward moving fork. Off his annoyed-meets-amused glance, Q raised his eyebrows meaningfully. “The sauce has mayo in it, El.”

“It’s called umami, you unrefined son-of-a-bitch—“

“Oh, yes, a slop of oil and egg. Fucking groundbreaking, truly the essence of haute cuisine.”

Eliot pushed the plate away from him and stared Josh down cold, refusing to even look at the delicately and beautifully plated meal in front of him. Opening and closing his mouth like a fish, Josh crossed his arms and glared right back at Eliot. The two of them had been working together a lot over the past few months, preparing for the event of the Fillorian century, and things hadn’t always been…smooth. Frustrated, Josh swiveled his head quickly to Quentin and stomped his foot.

“Q,” he said, demanding. “Back me up here. You like aioli, right?”

Quentin thought about it and tilted his head back and forth.

“Uh, I mean,” he said, scratching his neck. “Mayo is good on a turkey sandwich, I guess.”

Josh and Eliot both stared blankly at him for a moment. After a pregnant, awkward pause, they both sighed dejectedly, like Quentin had deeply disappointed them, and immediately turned back to each other. As they argued the merits of various sauces and flavor combinations like he’d never spoken at all, Quentin shrugged. He took another bite of the meal and rolled the meat and pastry around in his mouth.

It was pretty good.

There were five days left until the wedding.

Fillory was much the same as Quentin remembered it, though he rarely tried to remember it these days. The disappointment was tangible, even as he was still a reluctant King, walking through the large, stonewalled palace, servants and guards bowing to him. Trellises still hung from the large airy windows, which looked out over the Silver Banks to the East and the Southern Orchard to the Southwest. In some small way, it was all his now. It was real and it was his, far more than it ever was when it only existed in his mind. But he’d never expected it to be real and he certainly never expected it to be filled with such complexity, anger, and pain.

He remembered when he and Eliot met Umber, sitting by the fire, and Eliot’s glowing face—his eyes green and reverent—declared Fillory his home, in a rich voice that thrummed the very heart of Quentin. He also remembered the emptiness he felt, knowing that he couldn’t relate, not even a little, to the High King. To Eliot, who barely even knew the Fillory books. To the effortlessly cool and elegant man who, mostly good-naturedly, teased him about his nerdy interest in all things Fillory and Further and held absolutely zero of his own. Fillory was—or had been—Eliot’s home and never Quentin’s. At least, not in this universe.

But now, as he walked alone through the castle, which was still technically kind of his castle, it was hard to feel anything but hollow. Margo and Josh were getting married, and all of the nation was invited to the grand event. It felt like most of Earth was invited too, and so preparations had been in full swing. As the paramour of the Best Man, Quentin had been run ragged with errands, barely catching a moment for his much needed solitude. Ideally, he would have preferred to take these quiet moments in with Eliot by his side, but he knew he was busy. Thrivingly so, and thus Quentin was hardly in a position to complain.
The hallway had no overhead lighting and the sun shimmered through the row of windows, placing a golden footpath below Quentin’s wandering form. The last time he’d been in this exact spot, he’d worn a guard’s uniform to evade the suspicion of the Fairy Queen. It felt like a hundred thousand years ago, Eliot racing up to him, patting his shoulders and chest in that casually physically affectionate way of his. But nothing was casual between them ever again, not after their quest. The tension, the unresolved sadness had been palpable, even with quiet touches and quips about Quentin taking Benedict as a new life partner. Eliot’s spiraling deliriousness in response to rejecting Q, telling him that they’d never choose each other, clouded their every interaction, until they finally did choose each other, well over a year later. Or maybe even longer than that, depending on how you looked at it.

Life was different now. It was slower and faster at the same time, like the differential between Fillorian and Earth days and hours. Quentin and Eliot solidified their life together, rooted in their efforts at home, changing their slowly into something deeper, something more. And meanwhile, Eliot finally turned, finally regrew, into his phoenix-self rising. He wasn’t newborn or changed back to anything from the past. He certainly wasn’t that boy Quentin met on the Brakebills campus, snarkily calling psychics losers and wearing pocket watches and getting fucked up on blue orgasm cocaine. In truth, Quentin wouldn’t want that and neither would Eliot.

But Eliot was lighter. His hair was shorter and his disposition bright again, his movements sweetly languid and graceful, as he moved through life with renewed vigor. His je ne sais quoi was back in full force, hypnotizing the world to his feet and drowning Quentin along with him. He was finally on the precipice of something looking like happiness or self-acceptance, and the difference was clear in how he approached the world. And nothing brought Quentin more relief or contentment.

Like a cue, he heard swift and steady footsteps down the hallway and Quentin automatically smiled, knowing even the sound of his footsteps’ echoes by heart. Craning his head to the left, his smile widened as Eliot ducked out from behind the hallway corner, smile bright and eyes warm.

“There you are,” he said, matching Quentin’s lovestruck face. “I’ve been looking everywhere for you.”

“Sorry,” Quentin leaned against the wall, taking in all of Eliot. He was dressed in a flowing black shirt and golden pants, looking every bit the Fillorian high society member he was. “I figured you’d be tied up with the whole flower debacle for a while.”

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arms, gazing down at him. “I’ll make it up to you.”

“Well, our room’s right around the corner…” Quentin smirked and Eliot kissed him, hard.

“Wish I could. Into infinitude, trust me,” Eliot traced his fingers around Quentin’s lips and jawline, and swallowed. “But what I want to do to you takes time I simply don’t have.”

Quentin rolled his eyes, “Quickies are a thing, El.”

“Let’s not debase ourselves, Q,” he said, annoyingly stalwart in his insistence on thorough sex, every damn time. “Anyway, I don’t even have the bandwidth for this quickie of which you speak.”

Quentin smirked again, knowing exactly what was coming. Eliot held his hand to his head, sighing deeply, and swallowing every tiny bit of the frustration that was tensing him down to his core.

“Josh, it turns out,” he said, wrenching the words from his gut, “is a shockingly high maintenance individual and requires the majority of my energy reserves.”

“Turnabout’s fair play,” Quentin said gently, teasingly, kissing Eliot’s fingers. He knew that Eliot was trying his best and that Margo’s wedding mattered to him, in a way parties generally didn’t. It was an important moment for him, for letting go of the life he’d always known with his closest friend. But it was still his job to at least try to keep Eliot somewhere near Earth (or Fillory, as the case may be.)

For his part, Eliot simply glared at him.

“Are you in cahoots with Margo now? That’s exactly what she said,” Eliot ruffled Quentin’s hair playfully before closing his eyes, voice grave. “But the idea of the groomsmen wearing USS Enterprise costumes is worming its way into the discussion and I can’t—I’m not equipped for this level of stress, Quentin.”

“Poor baby,” Quentin laughed lightly and brought Eliot’s head down onto his chest, wrapping his arms around him soothingly. Eliot nuzzled his nose into Quentin’s clavicle and breathed in and out, like he was steadying himself on his heartbeat.

“You don’t know the half of it,” he finally sighed and pulled himself up, cupping Quentin’s face in his hands. “Honestly, I’m thrilled for Bambi in my own way, but I just want to be on Earth, with you, in a bath.”

“Sounds nice,” Quentin smiled. “If we had a bathtub.”

“Details, my love,” Eliot tilted his face forward and kissed him, before sighing yet again, more truthfully this time. “And as much as I’d prefer to wile away the next few moments whispering sweet nothings, I actually have something a little more serious to discuss with you.”

This startled Quentin and he tilted his head, curious and a little nervous. Things with Eliot had been great lately—more than great. Spectacular, to use Eliot’s favorite term. But the look on his face right now, quiet and morose, a little distracted, brought some churning emotions front and center that he thought he’d left well behind.

“What’s up?”

“Before I start, I want to be clear that my answer was an unequivocal no,” Eliot took Quentin’s hands and ducked his head to make eye contact with him. “But there are some mitigating factors that make it a little dicier than it seemed on the outset.”
“What, did, like, *Idri* proposition you?” The words fell out of Quentin’s mouth before he could stop them.

The Lorian delegation had arrived the day prior. Quentin had never actually met Idri before—he’d heard about him, endlessly, back when he was mourning Niffin Alice to the skies and Eliot was obsessively throwing himself into wedding planning, as though that alone would prevent a coup from beheading him. Idri represented hope to Eliot. Not freedom, not love, but a hope that he could still have a relationship with someone he was attracted to, someone who made him feel things beyond gentle endearment and frustration. He’d loved—and still loved—Fen, but their sex life had been a little traumatic for Eliot, both in its forced heterosexuality and the ultimately tragic pregnancy it brought about. At least in Idri, Eliot saw a path to happiness. Not the happiness he would have necessarily chosen or built for himself, even back then, but happiness nonetheless.

Quentin understood this. He knew that Idri was an important person to Eliot, even now. It made sense, theoretically. But goddamn, did he want to punch that smug bald asshole in the face when his gentle brown eyes fell on Eliot, looking at him like he was the great lost love of his life. They hugged and Idri’s arms lingered around Eliot’s waist for a moment too long and Quentin definitely saw his stupid gentle eyes close as Eliot whispered something funny or charming in his ear. *Fuck you and fuck off*, Quentin had wanted to say. Idri barely even knew Eliot. They’d met, like, five times, max. But at his question, Eliot burst out laughing.

“No, of course not,” he said, his eyes wide and amused. He ran his tongue over his teeth and pulled in his cheeks, biting his lip. “*Interesting* first instinct though. We’ll have to circle back to that.”

“Let’s not,” Quentin said, scratching his neck, his cheeks tinted pink. Eliot pressed his lips on the rising color with a heady sigh. His eyelashes fluttered against Quentin’s temple and the roaring ache quelled.

“Jealousy is an adorable color on you, Coldwater,” Eliot said, laughing a little, quite pleased. He was a vain creature, after all. “Now I’m going to feel dull, but I’m actually talking about the riots in The Great Bramble.”

That…was not what Quentin expected to hear. He hadn’t read the *Fillory and Further* books in well over three years, but he still remembered most of the details. What Eliot was describing shouldn’t have been possible.


“A desolate wasteland filled with nothing but oversized tumbleweeds, I know,” Eliot said, pulling fully away from Quentin, all business. “Turns out, the tumbleweeds are threefold sentient, responsible for large sources of wind power throughout the southern region, and deeply loyal to High King Eliot.”

“I didn’t think anyone was loyal to High King Eliot,” Quentin said, matter-of-factly. Eliot had been a good ruler. He loved Fillory. But it was common knowledge that it had been a mostly unrequited affair.

“Right? I guess that’s where the 26% came from. Ironic considering I didn’t even know they were constituents.”

Really, it was more surprising that Tick Pickwick didn’t know they were constituents. Still, if there was anything that Quentin had learned about Fillory over the years, it was that the books were a rough guide at best and that the only thing anyone should ever expect about its plotless, feral
atmosphere was always the unexpected. But Eliot always took that reality in stride more than Quentin.

“Anyway, they’re a passionate, rowdy base and also slowly cutting off access to the free flow of magic to a little less than half of the more socioeconomically disadvantaged population,” Eliot said, explaining with a rough grin. “Bye-bye, windmills pushing the magical current from the wellspring outposts.”

The wealthiest of the Fillorian population had full flowing access to the wellspring, but the poorer regions relied on the wind blowing directional droplets. It was a deep systemic injustice that Margo and Josh worked tirelessly to correct. However, it never occurred to anyone that the source of the wind could be sentient and use it as political leverage.

“Shit, okay,” Quentin crossed his arms, deep in thought. “So what does Margo want to do about it?”

Eliot gruffly shook his head, eyes pleading with Quentin preemptively.

“Margo has no idea,” he said, with finality. “It’s her wedding week and she’s got some other major shit with the Brass City taking up all her headspace. Tick’s the one who approached me.”

“For?”

“To join the High Council as the Tumbleweed whisperer,” Eliot winced a little as he said it. “Think Abigail and Rafe but for the concerns of the suddenly revolutionary and pissed off diaspore.”

“Wow, that’s pretty...weird.” He said that because it was. Eliot had run as fast as he could his whole life from his agrarian past and now he was in the possible position of advocating for one of the roughest, most unruly forms of agricultural wildlife. It was the definition of weird.

“Tell me about it,” Eliot almost laughed, but then he tucked a strand of hair behind Quentin’s ear, looking at him in that warm way that made Quentin want to soak up every last bit of him. “Like I said, obviously my answer was no. But I told them that I’d possibly be willing to stay back for a short time, to smooth things out. Barring a conversation with you, of course.”

“Why was it an obvious no?” Quentin asked. It seemed rash. He and Eliot could at least have had a full conversation about it.

“Q,” he said, his eyebrows crinkling seriously. “I’m not going to upend our life. We chose to live in New York, you have a job, we’re finally settled into a good rhythm. I’m trying to follow through here.”

“Yeah, but—”

“No buts. Not worth it,” Eliot pressed his hands down on Q’s shoulders. “But I do owe this place some amount of assistance, after I completely abandoned it on a monster-induced whim. So I stay here a week, maybe two? Three, max, I promise. And if time gets fucked, I’m out.”

When Quentin first met Eliot, there was no world in which he could have imagined calling him sweet. Eliot was many things—he was elegant, rough, beautiful, masculine, poised, heady, light, dark. He was the highest highs of magic and the lowest lows of human despair. He was biting and kind, sensual and cruel. The sexiest man he’d ever known, the one who’d made him feel more than he thought his emotional center was even capable.

But right now, as Eliot looked down at him, a little nervous and a little hopeful, sweet was the only word that came to mind. He was so sweet.
“No, of course, El. Do what you need to do,” Quentin brushed the pad of his thumb against Eliot’s hairline, just because he wanted to. “I’ll be fine. I’ll miss you, but I’ll be fine. Obviously.”

“God, I’ll miss you too,” he said, whispering urgently. He leaned in and kissed him, tongue sweeping gently across his mouth. Quentin’s heart burst out of his chest, into the gentle light. Then Eliot sighed, pulling away with another soft press on Quentin’s lips, and looked at the sundial overhead.

“And that’s the total amount of time allotted in my schedule for Conversation with The Love of My Life,” he said, straightening up with a bleak smile. “Now, I’ve got to go convince Josh to do something about those eyebrows of his.”

“What’s wrong with Josh’s eyebrows?”

“Oh, you.” That was all Eliot said, with a soft stroke against his cheek.

Margo and Josh were to marry at dawn, in stark defiance of Fillorian tradition.

The throne room was expanded, magically and through physical labor, to account for the vast numbers of citizens, both from Fillory and Earth, who came to watch the High King and Queen join their lives and their hearts, for good. Politically, the marriage gave Josh the official “in” as High Queen, a role that had been precariously absent since Eliot’s election loss. A gap of that enormity provided ample opportunity for sabotage, both within the realm and from outside forces. Margo hadn’t been joking—the marriage was important politically and with each passing moment, the opportunity for subterfuge grew.

That’s why Quentin was pleasantly surprised to find his front row seat surrounded by his friends and the members of the Fillorian High Council, speaking not of darkness and war, but instead love and light. The belief in Margo and Josh’s union was filling the air with warmth and good cheer. Even the Lorians behind him—the least advantaged by the union—seemed excited to finally see the High King and, in particular, Josh find a true happiness in each other. Josh had won the delegation over years ago with his perfect rendition of the traditional Lorian Beef Stew and that commonality bound them together in friendship more than any land wars could divide them. It was a nice change of pace, Quentin had to admit, and he briefly wondered if Margo’s rule had started to turn Fillory into a place his child’s heart recognized.

Driving the point home even more was Julia, sitting beside him. Her mere presence made everything in his chest swell again. Without her, there would be no Fillory. No magic. Nothing. Timeline 40 threw untold shit at them and the layers masked the beating heart underneath it all. But now, years removed, with her strength and his growing fulfillment, he knew that she was the one who gave him the spark needed. Julia was the impetus, for all of it. Every single time.

He pressed his hand on hers and she turned her palm towards him, squeezing. No questions asked.

“If I’m not here later, Q,” she said, leaning over and whispering. “Tell Margo and Josh I love them and that I’m so happy for them, okay?”

Quentin nodded and wrapped his arm around her, hugging her close. Her life was removed from his now, in some fundamental ways. She wasn’t totally human. She wasn’t totally a goddess. But her concerns were out of this realm and growing stronger every day. Whatever or whoever may be
calling her was beyond his rationale and comprehension. Years ago, he would have resented her for it. Now, he loved it within in her and just sincerely hoped she was okay. That she was happy.

The smile she gave him when he pulled away assured him that she was, like she could see his thoughts. And it was quite possible that she could.

“We’ll have a morning coffee date soon to catch up, I promise,” Julia said and he returned her smile, bright as their friendship.

Breaking through his reverie, a forceful hand tapped him three quick and consecutive times on the shoulder and a high-pitched “Ahem!” called his face over to the side. Jumping a little at the intrusion, Quentin gathered his bearings and took in the sight of Tick Pickwick, standing over him, practically breathing down his neck.

“Sire,” Tick said with a bow and a false smile. “The High King urgently requests your presence.”

“Um, now?” Quentin looked around. Everyone was in their seats and the small orchestra was tuning their instruments. It was basically go-time. “Isn’t she, like, getting married? In minutes?”

“It is neither my place nor my interest to question Her Grace.” Every one of Tick’s teeth were visible as he spoke to Quentin, all painful homage. “What I know is that I’m simply honored to be at her beck and call on this, the most frivolous of days. And she deeply, deeply desires and commands your company.”

“Frivolous is a bad thing, Tick.”

“I recognize that you are still my liege even in your chronic absentia,” Tick’s eyes flashed. “But you are trying my patience.”

“Uh, sorry?” Quentin wasn’t really sure what to say. This was by far his longest conversation with Tick and it was clear they weren’t exactly on the same page. “I’ll try not to do that.”

Still, ever a man of Fillorian honor, Tick smiled, saccharine again, “Uh, that is, I meant to say: You’re trying my patience, Your Majesty.”

“Not really what I was concerned about,” Quentin said, dryly. Tick sighed, throwing his hands in the air.

“She is in the dressing room, awaiting your arrival,” he said with a yelp. “May the gods have mercy on your soul if you deny her.”

Realizing that Tick had a point—pissing off Margo moments before her wedding probably wasn’t in anyone’s interest, particularly not Quentin’s—he asked Julia to save his seat and he walked backward down the aisle, through the main hallway and ducked into the small bridal suite. The ladies-in-waiting obviously knew he had been summoned, for the instant they saw his face, the tittered excitedly and scattered like bats in the light. All that was left in the room was Margo, sitting in an ornate chair, frowning into the mirror. She looked stunning.

“Hey, what’s going on?” Q looked around, his stomach dropping in slight disappointment at the lack of a certain someone in the room. “Where’s—?”

“This isn’t about Eliot,” Margo said, cutting him off. “I sent him to get Josh’s tie into a half-decent Windsor. He didn’t need to be here for this. Can you get me the crown?”

Quentin obliged, taking the circle of rubies from the top of the dresser and delicately placing it on her
head. She caught his eye in the mirror and brought her hand up to his own, placing it on her shoulder. She swallowed and pressed down, the tips of her fingers cool and soft against his skin.

“Here’s the thing,” she said, setting her mouth into a line. “I had a really shitty relationship with my dad. And don’t get me started on the cunty twat-shit known as my egg donor. I don’t actually have family that gives a shit about me. They obviously don’t know I’m getting married.”

“Yeah, that’s…uh, sorry.” Quentin really was. They all had terrible family relationships of some kind, but Margo in particular avoided discussing the shit she’d left behind her at age seventeen. All Quentin really knew was that Margo had troubled teenage years, culminating in her bank robbery. That gave her the funds to leave her hometown forever—a place he still didn’t know and Eliot always said wasn’t his story to tell. She hadn’t seen anyone from her previous life since and spoke about them somehow even less. Until now.

“Don’t be sorry. I’ve accepted it. I’m not looking for pity,” she leveled an intense warning glare at him through the mirror. Quentin nodded, understanding. But then, again, she swallowed and a rare vulnerability passed over her face before it hardened.

“I also want you to know that I am the baddest fuckin’ bitch this universe has ever seen and I need exactly zero men in my life,” Margo said, holding her crown high and tall. “Even Eliot has the pleasure of being my best friend, rather than our connection being borne out of any need or dependency on my part. And you are even more disposable. Dump truck disposable. I stand the fuck on my own.”

A prick of disappointment stabbed Quentin’s gut and his brow furrowed despite himself. He should be used to Margo’s coarser manner of speaking by now, but sometimes she still burned parts of him that were too scared and too damaged, even if she likely didn’t mean to.

“So did you just call me in to be mean to me or…?” He hoped he sounded lighthearted. Margo simply shook her head and squeezed Quentin’s hand, a little shaky.

“We need someone to bless the union,” Margo swallowed for a third time, her eyes turning a little red. “Like, to say that it’s a good thing and that they support it and blah-di-fucking-blah. And you know, walk me down the aisle or whatever.”

The prick of disappointment disappeared in a flash.

“Wait, seriously?” A small, knowing smile formed on his face, but Margo shut it down with a burn of angry eyes. She still would only look at him through the mirror and Quentin realized that she was nervous, asking him to do this favor for her.

“I know, it’s retrogressive as shit,” she said, her voice higher and gentler than usual. “But I figured, fuck it, Quentin’s my bitch boy, he can do it.”

“Margo…” A catch in his throat turned to a lump. Quentin was genuinely touched.

“Don’t,” she said, hard and ice. “It’s not a thing. The rare, but powerful marriage between a High King and a future High Queen won’t be recognized without it. I can’t crater every tradition at once.”

It was a lie. He could tell from the fear in her eyes, the soft hope, that this ask meant more to her than she was letting on. And so, Quentin returned her love with his own, and gave her the out she so desperately craved.

“Yeah, I, uh—yeah, I got it,” he nodded, patting her shoulder and putting his hands in his pocket. “Um, sure. I’d be happy to help you see this obligation through.”
“Thank you,” Margo said, looking down at her hands. Then she looked around and rolled her eyes. “Okay, we’re obviously done here. Get the fuck out.”

“Um, but Margo, what and where am I supposed to—?” He’d assumed he would stay with Margo until the procession, but that clearly wasn’t happening as Margo grabbed his elbow and forced him out of the room.

“Figure it out, dickhole,” she said, before slamming the door in his face.

To his credit, he did easily figure it out once he found Fen, waiting in the wings of the throne room, wearing a lovely lilac dress. She smiled brightly and called him over, clearly aware of his role in the procession. She and Margo had a connection, the depth and meaning of which he still wasn’t completely certain. But she was obviously thrilled, flitting about and excitedly talking about the reception plans, so whatever it was didn’t have its foundation in jealousy. It was kind of nice for them, he had to admit. Happiness begets happiness.

“So once the flautists finish their rendition of ‘Bitch Don’t Kill My Vibe,’ you and Margo will ascend the golden staircase,” Fen said, effervescent. “And the amaryllises will bloom in rhythm with your steps, so don’t go too quickly. That way everyone can get the maximum impact.”

Lush, intricate, and well-organized, the overall ceremony structure was clearly curated by Eliot. And speaking of, Quentin caught a brief glimpse of the man in question as he ushered Josh, dressed in a combination Earth and Fillorian formalwear, out into the throne room. He caught Quentin’s eye and shot him a bright smile and an air kiss before turning completely away, like he wasn’t even there. Which for all intents and purposes, Quentin wasn’t. This morning belonged to Margo. That’s where Eliot’s heart and focus was, rightly.

As the first light of dawn filled the richly decorated room, Quentin stood next to Margo—strong, breathtaking Margo—and walked her towards the two most important people in her life, both gazing at her like the crude, perfect miracle she was. With a hitch in her breath, she stopped and looked at Quentin, squeezing his hand.

“Love you, you dumb motherfucker,” she said, aloud and the crowd tittered, half in amusement, half in scandal. Eliot’s face nearly broke with its smile. Then she turned to the Fillorian minister and rolled her eyes. “Okay, get the fuck on with it.”

And so, they did. The applause at their kiss could be heard throughout the multiverse.

High King Margo the Destroyer was serious when she said she didn’t care about any of the wedding details and this was never more apparent than when Quentin and Eliot walked arm-in-arm into the reception hall. Or, rather, the large floating silvery bridge above the spire, expanded out over the sky into and over the water. Quentin never had a fear of heights, but looking downward through the enchanted glass gave him vertigo nonetheless. It was beautiful, but terrifying, like marriage itself. Apropos. But his date was even tenser, holding himself against Quentin like he was on a death march. Eliot had less control over the reception and his anxiety over this fact was growing with each step they took through the crowd.

“Blame me for nothing,” he warned, gripping Quentin’s hand as the deep crimson uplighting and twinkling nymph lights wrapped around them, magically greeting each guest upon entry. “I did my
best with shocking little."

Really, everything was beautiful. Eliot was truly a master of spinning gold from shit. Or from the mind of the nerdy, zealous Josh, in any case. The interior was a perfect reflection of the couple—sexy salon style with a hint of torture chamber for Margo, happy and sweetly humorous with a big dose of scrumptious for Josh. The juxtaposition took Eliot a long time to come to terms with, similar to his feelings on the couple themselves, but the end result was breathtaking. Quentin was particularly impressed by the glittering ruby statue of Margo and the ivory statue of Josh, both adorned in crowns with the word *Ballin’* carved in a ribbon below them, joining them in sculpture as in life.

…but Quentin was only human and he couldn’t resist teasing Eliot, just a little.

“What,” he asked, pointing above at the intricate ceiling, “you mean the fresco of The Wu-Tang Klan in the style of *The School of Athens* wasn’t your idea?”

Skipping zero beats, Eliot grabbed Quentin’s butt and squeezed tight, before laughing at his loud yelp and bright red face.

“Every time you’re a smart aleck, I do that,” he said, before leaning down and pressing a quick kiss on his lips. “Onward to glory. Margo requires my attention.”

This didn’t appear to be strictly true, as she was currently yelling at Tick Pickwick—still one of her favorite activities in the world—but Quentin understood Eliot’s desire to be near Margo. As much as he’d been the picture of support for Margo’s engagement and as much as Eliot was also in his own loving, committed relationship, Q knew that Margo’s wedding was the official end of an important era for their friendship.

It was the end of Margo and Eliot being able to imagine, even for moments, that they were still far and above the most important people in each other’s lives, forsaking all others. It was true that they had a rock solid relationship; their very own proof of concept. And they hadn’t forsaken all others since Quentin Coldwater originally walked into their lives to begin with, if they were glaringly honest with themselves. Regardless, their truest adoration for each other was still something to celebrate and, in a bittersweet way, mourn. Eliot’s love for Margo was transcendent and it was crucial to honor it, especially one of the most precious of days.

Smiling to himself, Quentin ducked his head down at the buffet table. Josh had laid out several delicacies, glittering salt, fat, acid, heat, and sweetness throughout the vast venue. And that was just for cocktail hour. Funnily though, Q found himself at a table labeled *Munchies for the Soul*, which presented a vast array of Twinkies, nachos, Twizzlers, pretzels, you name it. Perhaps he’d been wrong to assume that none of the traditional stoner tropes applied to Josh. Grabbing a few chips, he stuffed them into his mouth with a slight groan. He hadn’t eaten in hours.

When he reached the punch bowls, he laughed at the largest one, labeled *Mountain Dew*. Quentin may have grown far beyond his wildest dreams, but he was still a nerd in his heart of hearts and Mountain Dew was the official elixir. Indulgently, he poured himself a glass and took a quick, nostalgic sip.

“I’m pretty sure that stuff will rot your teeth,” a soft, slightly nasal voice came from behind him and Quentin froze, terror and nostalgia solidifying his blood’s movement.

Swallowing the rest of his soda in a single gulp, he slowly turned around and blinked furiously at the woman in front of him. Shoulder-length blonde hair still straight as an arrow and thick black glasses rimming her bright blue eyes, Quentin’s mouth dropped as he realized he was standing right in front
“Alice?” He asked, incredulously. “What—are you doing here?”

“Hi to you too,” Alice said with a small bit of hesitancy, crossing her arms. Quentin immediately felt like a dickhead. After so many years, she still had the preeminent ability to evoke that feeling in him.

“Sorry, I’m a dickhead,” he said, pulling her into a brief hug. “Hi.”

“It’s good to see you,” she said, rubbing his back and sighing, before reluctantly pulling away. “Not a lot of friendly faces here. A sloth already accosted me to let me know that my dress is more appropriate for a Fillorian birth than a wedding. Which I obviously should have done more research, but…”

“Abigail is prickly,” Quentin assured her. “You look great.”

“Thank you,” she said, with a small smile. “You do too.”

Alice bit her lip and Quentin rocked back and forth on his feet, before raising his eyebrows at her in a wane grin. She opened her mouth to say…something, he guessed, but she closed it again, tightly pressing her lips together. She crossed her arms again and he cleared his throat. It was the world’s most boring dance and he was desperate to wish her well, to be on his way, off to his real friends. But he knew he owed her more than that.

He and Alice were never really talkers. That was true even at the height of their relationship, when it was good, far too briefly and far too long ago. At least, they didn’t often talk about anything other than whatever current mortal peril they were in or about the next time they’d get to have sex. Sure, they had little jokes, here and there. His heart warmed with a sudden remembrance of Cirque du Soleil. But for the most part, they never really got to know each other. Never had the chance to. Not in the ways that actually mattered.

She would have argued this point, years ago. She would have said they knew each other better than anyone. That their hearts knew each other, and that mattered more than a list of facts or shared hobbies. But deep down, Quentin always knew their connection was tenuous. It was made more from trauma, desperation, bittersweet innocence, and a desperate need for love and acceptance. It came from everything… except true kinship and an electric joining of their souls. He especially knew that now that he lived the latter. And now, without any romantic connection to bond them, it became more and more clear with each time they saw each other. It was a little sad, but mostly it was a relief, if Quentin was honest with himself.

“Josh invited me,” Alice finally said, brushing her hair behind her shoulder, a little tense. “He’s reached out a few times here and there, to make sure I’m doing alright. We’ve become friends, I guess.”

“That sounds like Josh,” Quentin said with a small smile.

“And besides, apparently my death a few years ago didn’t technically abdicate my claim to the crown, so Margo said it was more politically expedient for me to be here than not,” she swallowed, gritting her teeth slightly against her next words. “Even if she hates my ‘cuntbag face.’ Specifically speaking.”

“And that sounds like Margo,” he said with a wince. Margo could really be unnecessarily cruel at times. “Sorry.”

“I’ve been called worse, Q,” she said, looking down sadly. Quentin’s heart ached for her. All she’d
ever wanted was to save her brother and find hope in life, in that order. Friendship was even more
difficult for her to cultivate than it was for him, and at times, it seemed like an impossibility. Maybe it
was really the true tragedy of Alice Quinn. But he couldn’t focus on that. Not now and not here.

“How are you?” She asked, like she could tell a subject change was needed, even in their own silent
minds. “It’s been a little while.”

“It has. Uh, it has,” he said, clearing his throat. She still made him nervous. “I’m good.”

“You look good,” she said again. “Happy.”

“Thanks. Yeah, um, you too,” Quentin tugged at the corner of his Fillorian dress shirt and looked
around, hoping that a topic would present itself. “How’s Brakebills?”

Work. Work was always a safe conversation starter. He’d read that in a book once.

“A bureaucratic shitshow,” she said, her mouth still a little awkward around swear words after all this
time. Q briefly smiled in remembered fondness. “I love Henry like family, but he’s an incredibly
inefficient administrator.”

“No surprise there,” he said with a forced laugh and Alice smiled again, then crossed her arms, with
her left arm over her right arm this time. Mixing it up.

Another slow, uncomfortable silence crossed between them.

“How’s—?” She started, then looked down. Quentin cleared his throat. He knew what she was
asking.

“Um, he’s good. Most of this is his handiwork,” he gestured around the opulent throne room and
Alice nodded a little too brightly.

“I assumed. It’s beautiful. And tasteful, of course.”

“Thank you,” a deeper voice said from behind Quentin and a familiar shoulder pressed against his
back. Alice blanched. Quentin raised his eyes up to Eliot, who stared at Alice with the perfect mask
of placidity. A small grip of anxiety pinched his chest. He wasn’t entirely sure what to expect.

“Alice,” Eliot said, with a slight bow to the Queen. She tensed and sniffed.

“Eliot,” she said, hesitant.

They hadn’t seen each other since their disastrous brunch date. It had started similarly, with Eliot
greeting Alice kindly, Alice responding hesitantly. But as soon as Quentin tried to get the flow of
conversation going, she made a snarky comment about the original threesome that broke her and
Quentin up, and that was that. Alice thrashed, Eliot snapped, and Quentin knew he could never have
the two of them at the same place again. On this day, though, the energy was different. The tension
behind them was softer, more uncertain, rather than raring to rip each other to shreds.

“You look very nice. I like your—“ Eliot trailed his eyes up and down “—necklace. It’s lovely.”

“Thank you,” Alice touched it, with a tiny smirk. “Margo made me wear it because the one I chose
was unacceptable, I guess. But I also like it.”

“Hmm,” Eliot said, not unkindly. It was his version of an awkward stammer.

“Well,” Alice said, pursing her lips and looking around. “Take care, then.”
“You as well,” Eliot said, palpably relieved. “It was nice to see you again.”

“See you around, Q,” Alice said, with a wave, before starting to scurry off as quickly as her legs could carry her. “Bye, Eliot.”

“Ta,” Eliot said lightly and Quentin waved.

She stopped then and stared at them for a moment, open-mouthed, before turning around and shaking her head. Alice slinked into the crowd until her hair was but a blonde dot in the distance. As usual, Quentin was equal parts fond, bittersweet, and glad to see her go. Blowing out a breath he didn’t know he was holding, he looked right at Eliot and gave him a quick kiss on the cheek.

“Hi there,” he said and Eliot breathed out forcefully himself, raising his eyebrows. Looping his arm into Quentin’s, he leaned into him, like he had a secret, mock-whispering out the side of his mouth.

“Fucking mature, right?”

Quentin laughed, the tension breaking, “Yeah, I’m impressed. It was almost pleasant.”

“Almost,” Eliot said with a snort. “I only have a few seconds though, so let’s spend on them on literally anything except Alice—”

“Uh, fuck,” Quentin said, pointing ahead. “She’s coming back.”

She was stomping towards them, determined. The her fists were wound into tight fists and her heels were clanking against the magic glass, like the angry hooves of a bull. Quentin automatically pressed his hand in front of Eliot protectively.

“Oh god,” Eliot said, gulping audibly. “I—I don’t have anything else pleasant in my arsenal, Q.”

“Just shush, it’ll be fine,” Quentin assured him, waving cautiously at Alice as she stopped right in front of them, her eyes fierce and her mouth open. He braved himself for Round Two of the Brunch Wars, but when he opened his mouth to placate her, she held up her hand to silence him. Alice fidgeted on her legs, twisting her fingers together in her hands.

“I just wanted to say that I’m really happy that you’re happy, Quentin,” she said, her eyes focused on the bottom rim of her glasses rather than either of their faces. “And obviously, Eliot, you must be a major contributor. For that, I’m grateful, even if I have no claim in regard to anything in your lives anymore.”

“Um,” Quentin said, but she leveled him with an intense glare, immediately cutting off any other words he was about to ineloquently speak. She placed her hands on her hips and lifted her head high, a false bravado and confidence that crumbled in her eyes if one looked too closely.

“Let me finish,” Alice said, valiantly keeping any waver out of her tone. “This isn’t easy for me.”

“Sorry,” Quentin said, but then shut the fuck up as much as her face insisted.

“I’ve always cared about you both a lot,” she said, quietly, genuinely and Quentin felt that ache in his heart again. “And I just…I felt it was important for me to tell you, while I could.”

She nodded her head and Quentin felt Eliot falter slightly, under his hand, still protectively pressed against his chest. Quentin shot a brief glance at his face and was surprised to find his eyes wide and mouth opened even wider. He licked his lips and shook his head, clearly a little bit at a loss.
“Um, wow, Alice,” Eliot was genuinely dumbstruck. “I really don’t know what to say.”

“I’ll relish the rare opportunity then,” she said with a half-smile, which Eliot tentatively returned. “I know I may not deserve this, for a lot of reasons, but I do hope someday we can all be on better terms.”

“That would be…” Eliot trailed off and his answer died on his lips. He wasn’t ready for the affirmative and Quentin surreptitiously squeezed his hand, to let him know that it was okay. Alice nodded too, sad but understanding.

Then, she pulled her face up, much like a squirrel, and nodded, “Okay. Bye.”

As quickly as she returned, she was gone.

“That was…” Eliot tilted his head and softened his gaze, staring after her, as she busied herself over a plate of raw vegetables, clearly trying to ensure they weren’t spiked with some magical drug. She tentatively bit into a carrot stick, before thinking better of it and dropping it on the table and walking away quickly.

“Awkward?” Quentin asked, embarrassment still rising up his neck.

He really hadn’t expected Eliot to have to deal with Alice, of all fucking people, at Margo’s wedding. He was briefly annoyed at Josh for not giving them a heads’ up. Though, he supposed, his romantic entanglements probably weren’t exactly top of mind for the groom. And besides that, Eliot was still gazing off in the distance, watching Alice with that almost gentle, almost affectionate look in his eyes.

“Sure, but also a little endearing. I don’t know,” Eliot sighed and wrapped his arm around Quentin, pressing his lips to his temple. “Took guts. I think if the situation were reversed, I wouldn’t be so gracious.”

“Did you just call Alice Quinn gracious?” He wrinkled his nose and looked up at him, amused.

“Quote me and die,” Eliot said, as he gave Quentin a promised ass-squeeze. “Very well. The few seconds are gone, and now I’m late. Once again, duty calls. Speech time.”

Patting Quentin’s chest twice before leveling him with a twinkling smile, Eliot turned around, ready to stand in front of the large group and speak about how much he loved Margo—and by extension, Josh, sort of—and Quentin felt queasy even just thinking about such a large public speaking activity. It wasn’t, though, enough to distract him from the one thing he was supposed to check on, in regard to Eliot’s…famed verbosity.

“Wait, Eliot,” Q grabbed his arm. “You cut it down, right?”

“Enough,” he said lightly over his shoulder, walking past Quentin with purpose. Quentin reached out and grabbed his arm, fully stopping him.

“Eliot,” he said, lowering his voice into a warning. Eliot immediately turned around and snapped at him, his eyes blazing.

“I cut it down enough, Quentin,” he growled out, before immediately brightening his face and kissing Quentin’s forehead. “You’re a doll.”

“El, the Fillorian etiquette guides were pretty clear—”
“‘Kay, bye, love you,” Eliot shot the words over his shoulder, as he departed to the front of the room. Quentin sighed and shook his head, glad that Eliot’s retreating form couldn’t see the grin on his face. He definitely couldn’t give him that satisfaction.

Eighteen minutes later, Eliot was wrapping up his speech, which had naturally entranced the whole room. Not that Quentin had expected anything different, but that warmth of falling in love with him all over again crept through his veins nonetheless. He really was a magnificent orator. And magnificently handsome too, he couldn’t help but thinking, glancing over Eliot’s top-to-bottom silver and red pattern and flowing Fillorian wear. He still looked like a King to Quentin, here and everywhere.

King of Hearts, he thought, fingering the deck of cards he always had in his pocket.

“And so, I suppose, at some point I should mention Josh,” Eliot said with a good-natured smile and the crowd laughed in chorus. “Though I have to be honest, I often find Josh… irritating.”

The crowd gasped on cue and Quentin smirked inwardly. Eliot always knew how to get anyone and everyone eating out of the palm of his hand.

“He gets under my skin with an adeptness known to no other human.” He was speaking in hushed tones, like he was sharing intimate secrets with each person, rather than addressing a crowd counting in the hundreds, possibly thousands. “We bicker endlessly when we’re together and there are times when I’m overwhelmed with the urge to punch him on the arm as hard as I can, simply because he’s breathing near me.”

At Josh’s mildly confused and hurt look, Eliot sent him a wide smile and a wink.

“So, in short,” Eliot paused before sinking the landing, “Josh is the brother I never had.”

“Oh my god,” Josh said, crumpling his face into his hands, tears flowing immediately.

“You’re also one of the kindest, most loyal, and creative people I’ve ever met. No one is worthy of Margo, but you are up for the challenge every day and I admire that. I honor it. And I thank you for it.”

“Love you, brother,” Josh somehow managed to get out between his soaked hands. Eliot patted him on the back and kissed the top of his head, hugging him close for a brief moment. Then, he swallowed and looked over to his best friend, the radiant and smiling High King. He took her hand and brought it to his lips, with a soft kiss.

“And one last thing about Margo, I promise,” Eliot said, his voice wavering in a way that only Quentin and the woman in question could pick up. “I know I’ve said it a few different ways over the last—oh, shit, twenty-three minutes. Sorry, Q. He told me to cut this down and he was right.”

Everyone laughed and Quentin gamely raised his eyebrows, like What can you do?

(That bit was written in the speech notes left on Eliot’s chair.)
Eliot refocused his sincere and awestruck gaze back onto Margo, who sniffed a little too.

“I know I criminally under-say the actual words, so allow me now, in front of our family, our friends, and our beloved kingdom: I love you, High King Margo the Destroyer. My Bambi. I’ve loved you since I met you and I shall love you beyond my time on this or any other planet, cross galaxies and multitudes.”

He bowed his whole upper body to her, reverent to the King and Margo on her own, “Your power, your poise, your grace, and your heart shine into my soul, and I am a deeply lucky and grateful man to know you.”

“Fuck, Eliot,” Margo finally broke down, her face wet and her eyes red. “Goddammit.”

But she held out her hand and he grasped it, crying in earnest himself. Then he grabbed Josh’s hand, bringing the three of them together into a group cry-hug-hand-holding session. Eliot lifted his head up a little and caught Quentin’s eyes and gave him a private smile, as he finished his speech.

“When I get married, I hope that I am as joyful and brave as both of you are today,” he said, and Quentin’s breath hitched in his chest. “None of us deserve either of you individually, and we’re all doomed now that you’re an official twosome.”

One last laugh from the crowd and Eliot held his sparkling cider to the sky, “Cheers to the High King and High Queen. Long may they reign.”

“Long may they reign,” Quentin said, in unison with the rest of the room. Then, he sipped his Mountain Dew and clapped wildly, as Margo threw her arms around both Eliot and Josh like she may never let go.

At exactly 8 o’clock Fillorian time, as the second moon rose over the spire, the reception went into full swing. Josh Hoberman ascended above the crowd, wearing a large top hat in honor of a fallen friend and twirled in the air, turning his Fillorian formalwear into a top-to-bottom silver tuxedo. His voice resonated through the crowd, like a booming call.

“Let’s get this fucking party started, you motherfuckers.”

Instantly, the lights fell and blares of electronic dance music dizzied its way through the air, permeating the atmosphere with beat drops and sensory orgasms, with nary a single intoxicant in the flow. Margo’s dress went from the elaborately gorgeous Ivory Pearl draping to a short ruby red dress and she wrapped herself around Josh with a long kiss and they danced together on the risers, throwing confetti and condoms into the jubilant crowd.

“If you don’t get fucked up, then you’d better get fucked!” Margo shouted, thoroughly scandalizing Tick Pickwick, who was quickly picking up as many of the pieces of confetti as he could and steadfastedly refusing to even look at any of the prophylactics.

“That’s my wife!” Josh shouted right after, kissing her on the cheek and then dipping her down, so that their mouths met more vigorously. It was…sweet, Quentin decided, turning away because he couldn’t bare to look at their writing forms anymore. Definitely sweet.

“They love each other,” Eliot shrugged, laughing at Q’s embarrassment. “Though the lighting is all
The night dipped in and out of clarity and light, with waves of music and joy and dancing. Tick was right—it was everything frivolous and wonderful, and Quentin had never been happier for his friends in his entire life. At least, that is, until the late dinnertime was finally upon them and they all sat along the large head table, feasting into the waning evening hours. Sparkling conversation was followed by a soft, slow waltz from the orchestra and Quentin closed his eyes, letting the night wash over him.

After a moment, his favorite hand was on his shoulder, and Eliot’s lips dipped down to his ears, whispering in his ear. Turning pink at his words, Quentin turned around and smiled right at Eliot, who held his hand out to him. Taking his hand and running the pad of his thumb over his knuckles, Quentin smiled and cocked his head, all tenderness.

“Thanks, El,” he said, hoping his eyes were shining as much as his heart. “But nah, I’m good. See, I don’t really do cheesy, so—”

But Eliot had taken the opportunity to lift him out of his chair by the arm and had already deftly pulled him into his arms, immediately taking the lead, like it was the most natural thing in the world.

“Fuck off,” he said, smiling, “and dance with me, Coldwater.”

“I mean, fine,” Quentin wound his hands into Eliot’s hair and squeezed his hand, the one in dancing position. “If you’re going to be so needy about it.”

“I feel like you’re just trying to get your ass squeezed at this point.”

“Maybe I am.”

“Touche, you tease,” Eliot said with a laugh, but then quietly rested his temple against Quentin’s, pulling them further out onto the dance floor, moving gracefully and perfectly in time to the music. He could have stayed there, in Eliot’s arms, for a lifetime, all over again. Sighing, he pressed his lips against Eliot’s ear and then remembered something he’d wanted to bring up earlier.

“So when you get married, huh?” Q asked and Eliot brightened, pulling back to look right at him.

“Caught that?” He pulled his chest, so that their heart beats could feel the other. “I threw that in for you. I’m very romantic that way.”

“I thought you said…” Quentin trailed off, his eyebrows crinkling a little. Eliot’s face flickered and he swallowed.

“I know,” he said, quietly. “Then, I don’t know. For such a long time, everything seemed so shitty and out of my control. But it’s not like that anymore.”

“What’s it like now?” Quentin asked, a sincere question. Eliot chuckled a little.

“Are we having an impromptu Feelings Session?”

He and Quentin had devised a system where they carved out regular time to discuss their relationship and their own needs individually. After Quentin’s spell accident, they knew they needed more structure and honesty with each other. And honestly, their biweekly talks had been going remarkably well, especially in terms of keeping them on the same page, communicating, and moving forward. It was always loving and bond-affirming.

But it was also always really hard.
“Just wondering,” Quentin said, quirking his lips down. “We don’t have to talk about it.”

Eliot shook his head and smiled, his eyes painting Quentin in a haze of love and affection.

“All I know is that I actually have the wherewithal to think about my future, my priorities. I know what matters to me, moving forward in this vast unknown,” Eliot let out a jagged breath. “And I can’t imagine I’m such a mysterious man that my focal point isn’t obvious.”

His heart dropped down and soared, as always.

“Mine too, El,” Quentin breathed out and Eliot pulled his head onto his chest, as they swayed. Q closed his eyes and relished the sound of his heart, against the traditional Fillorian music filling the hall. And for once, he didn’t think that if he died right then and there, he’d be happy. He couldn’t think that. Because he and Eliot had so many more moments like this and he intended to enjoy every last one of them, for years to come.

“I guess that means I should expect a proposal in the sometime future?” Quentin asked, brave. But to his surprise, Eliot snorted.

“Uh, no?” He said, laughing, and the startled Quentin quickly lifted his head up. But Eliot’s eyes were twinkling and reassuring, against his words. “It’s your fucking turn.”

“Excuse me?”

“In Fillory,” he said, mentioning their life together for the first time in months, “I recall I forged two gorgeous golden rings and blew your mind with the best proposal and elopement known to human history.”

Then, Eliot’s eyes darkened quickly, sadly.

“Unless you don’t remember that anymore?” He asked and Quentin smiled. The memories were fading faster than he could keep up with some days. But the gods would have to wrench that one out of his bare, bloody hands.

“Yeah, I still remember, El,” Quentin said simply, reaching up to push Eliot’s hair back. El breathed in relief and twirled them again, his eyes glowing mischievously.

“Right. Therefore, in one of our lives together… Of which, incidentally, I assume there will be many, in all different forms because look at us. But I digress.” Eliot cleared his throat, grinning. “In that life, I was the proposer. Now, I get to be the proposee. Fair’s square, Q.”

“Okay, fair enough,” Quentin said, laughing and running his fingers along the nape of Eliot’s neck. “My turn. Got it.”

Eliot’s face fell a little, weighty and alarmed.

“And it’d better not be some quiet, intimate moment, like the peasants do,” he said urgently gripping Quentin’s waist. “That was a Quentin proposal. I expect an Eliot proposal, in all its grandeur.”

“Oh, so no pressure then,” Quentin pursed his lips and rolled his eyes. But Eliot stopped dancing and ducked his head, quite serious.

“No, Q,” he said, his eyebrows coming together. “Lots of pressure. Aren’t you listening? I’m talking mountains of pressure. Coal-to-diamond in a single day levels of pressure.”
“Great, my favorite way to perform,” he said, dropping his hand down to squeeze Eliot’s wise ass this time, making him laugh and smile again, dipping his lips down to their home on Quentin’s forehead.

“I don’t make the rules, sweetheart,” he said, murmuring into his skin. Quentin brought his lips to him and kissed him, soft and gentle and Eliot made a small humming sound and fuck, he loved him so much.

Pulling away, he took a deep breath and decided to just go for it.

“Speaking of our future,” he said, licking his lips. “I think you should take that Ambassador position.”

Eliot blinked and let out a strangled laugh, shaking his head in sudden, overwhelming disbelief. He stood still then in earnest, rather than to tease Quentin.

“What?” He asked, his eyebrows coming together but his eyes glinting with hope he couldn't hide. “What are you talking about?”

“I think we should live in Fillory, El,” Quentin said. “I think it’s the right thing for us.”

It was true. He had thought about it, a lot, since that conversation with Eliot. He’d thought about it almost nonstop and the truth was simple: He couldn’t think of a single reason not to go for it. Eliot was so much healthier now. He was on an upswing. And the last thing Quentin ever wanted to do was hold him back from being the source of light and leadership that he was meant to be. He may not have been a Fillorian High King anymore, but kingship and ruling was in his blood and in his soul. His connection to Fillory was in his blood and in his soul. That meant something, to both of them.


“New York is a placeholder. You know that. I know that. It’s not our forever.”

“But—"

"And I’m not even going to dignify the question about my job with a response," Quentin said with a laugh and Eliot smiled back.

"Fine, fair enough. But that's not everything."

He was talking about Julia. About their friendship. About how good it had been for Quentin to reconnect with her and how much Eliot understood that need. He had lived with Margo for years and it brought him more solace and a stronger foundation going into the rest of his life. Selflessly, Eliot wanted to give Quentin the same experience. And Quentin had appreciated it, greatly. But that time was over now.

"Julia? Look around, El," Quentin said, scanning his own eyes around the room. "Where is she? Julia was nowhere to be seen. As she said, higher duties called. The last Quentin saw of her, she was urgently speaking with Kady, and Penny came behind both of them before they disappeared in a flash of barely seen light. Of course, Quentin hoped desperately for their safety. But he also felt an intense relief at his complete lack of involvement. He and Eliot had earned that much.

“In the ladies room, maybe?” Eliot guessed, but it was clear from his tone that he knew the real
“She already left the wedding with Penny and Kady, because some grander duty called her away,” Quentin said, perfunctory. But then he sighed and looked Eliot straight in the eyes. “I love her and she is my best friend, but let’s not kid ourselves that we share the same dimensional space anymore. Our journeys will always intertwine but she’s seeking greater calling. I’m seeking rest.”

Eliot’s face set into a harsh line, “Then Fillory is not the place we should go.”

Once upon a time, that would have been true. During Eliot’s entire reign, Fillory had been a complete ass-wiped shit show, as Margo would say. But things were different now. The kingdom was more peaceful, with more access to magic and even technology. The mores were calming and the rights of the people progressing. It was now that Eliot could come in and sweep through with his gentle and firm touches, solidifying beauty throughout the land. And Quentin—still something of a Fillory expert in his own right—was certain that he could find something, anything in his childhood dream land that brought him greater fulfillment than what he could find on Earth.

“Rest, not retirement,” Quentin said, raising his eyebrows meaningfully. "Fillory’s not the same place it used to be. Margo’s kind of got this, you know?”

“She really does.” Eliot couldn’t help the wide smile across his face.

“And our routine is important, I know that. You know I wouldn’t do anything to fuck this up. But at the same time, we are young and we are smart,” Quentin straightened himself up to lift his face right up to Eliot’s. “There’s a lot of good we could do, especially together. I mean, I’m technically still a King.”

“Shit, that means I’d be your consort,” Eliot leaned down and gently bit Q’s nose. “That’s sexy.”

“Imagine the possibilities.”

But then Eliot sighed a little and cocked his head, his eyes hesitant under his lashes.

“Q—”

This time, Quentin was the one who stopped dancing. He pressed his finger against Eliot’s lips. Puzzled, Eliot relaxed his jaw muscles and let out a breath, lifting his features upward, indicating Quentin to continue.

“El, I heard the other thing you said in your speech,” he said, quietly, taking Eliot’s hand. “You didn’t call it Margo’s beloved kingdom. You called it ‘ours.’ You still love Fillory. It’s still your home.”

“My home is with you,” he said simply, wrapping both of his hands around Quentin’s.

“Our home is with each other,” he said, voice a little thick. “But your home is also here. With Margo, and this castle, and all the plans I know you have stewing in that brilliant brain of yours.”

“Be that as it may, I couldn’t ask you for that,” Eliot paused. “I couldn’t ask you to give everything up for my whims.”

“They aren’t whims and I wouldn’t be giving anything up,” Quentin said, firmly. “I’d be gaining. I mean, fuck, it’s a chance to make Fillory my home. Fucking finally, El.”

“Quentin…” His voice was still hesitant, like Quentin didn’t really know what he was suggesting.
But at the end of the day, to make his decision, Quentin only needed to know the answer to one question.

“Do you miss Fillory?”

“I do,” Eliot admitted reluctantly and he pulled Quentin’s hand to his chest. Quentin could feel his steady, quickening heart beat and it was all he ever needed. “But I want what’s best for us much more than I miss it.”

“And I’m saying that going where we can both contribute good to a magical world, together, is what’s best for us. Or at least, it’s worth a shot,” Quentin tilted his head and repeated words he’d said to Eliot years ago. “Why the fuck not?”

“Why the fuck not?” Eliot repeated, soft and mesmerized. “Indeed.”

“So that’s a yes?”

Eliot smiled and took Quentin’s hand in his, pulling him close to him again, in dancing position.

“That’s a…we’ll talk about it more later,” Eliot sighed, swaying them in rhythm again. “And a… thank you. And a… you’re amazing. And a… for now, let’s dance and celebrate, away from the cares of the real world, yes?”

Letting his feet move gracelessly to the music and letting Eliot glide him through the opulent throne room, Quentin’s heart caught solidly in his throat and he felt a small wave of tears force their way out of his overactive ducts.

“I love you, El.”

“Fuck, I love you too, Q,” Eliot looked at him, in That Way, with Those Goddamn Eyes. “You know that.”

Eliot stopped dancing again, bringing his hand up to the back of Quentin’s neck and pressed his lips against his, parting his mouth and pouring every ounce of love he felt into their embrace. Quentin’s hands found Eliot’s hair and everything was magic.

Caught in the perfect moment of Eliot’s kiss, Quentin was rudely ripped away, by a cool hand with long red fingernails. A loud rap song started playing and the thumping base reminded Quentin exactly who was running this show. Smirking at them, Margo pushed her way in between their bodies and threw her arms around their shoulders.

“Enough of your mushy-blah boring dumbassery, motherfuckers,” she said. “It’s my wedding and if you don’t dance with me, I’m gonna throw a shit fit.”

“My Bambi’s wish is always my command,” Eliot bowed, kissing her hand dramatically. “Come the fuck on, Q.”

“Uh, I don’t really—” Quentin started shaking his head and Margo laughed, her bright white teeth wide in the air.

“You definitely don’t have a choice, Coldwater. You’re gonna grind this booty and you’re gonna like it.” To emphasize her point, she smacked her own ass.

“Oh god,” Quentin gulped as both Margo and Eliot grabbed his arms, and laughingly pulled him out onto the floor.
“He’s got more moves than he lets on,” Eliot told Margo, lying terribly with a wink.

And onward they went, to dance, to love, and to enjoy their glorious, beautiful future, in all its possibility and joy.

fin.

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