Caged Animals and Tamed - A series of drabbles and stories set in the Sublime and Rare universe

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Series: Part 2 of Sublime Verse

Caged Animals and Tamed - A series of drabbles and stories set in the Sublime and Rare universe

by CallYouByYourName

Summary

Like it says on the tin, this is a series of stories and drabbles set in the same universe as my story Sublime and Rare, Jucio pairing. I wrote it for self-indulgent fun, but quickly fell in love with this particular incarnation of Julian and Lucio?? And now I can't bear to leave them. These won't be beta'd, they may or may not be chronological, and I make no promises that the writing will be good; this is purely for fun. Lots of smut, though, if that's any consolation?

My Julian in this universe is pretty damn close to canon, but Lucio is a completely different animal. He's still a bit of a bastard, and certainly a sadist, but this Lucio has a soft, protective side we haven't seen in canon. In this one, he adores Julian, and enjoys taking care of him almost as much as he enjoys wrecking him with his claws and his power and his hard cock. Julian thrives under his cruelty and tenderness, while Lucio secretly treasures his prized possession, all the while denying it as foolish weakness. This is Lucio in love: Soft, cruel, confusing and confused. Delightful.

This continues to be the most self-indulgent thing I've ever done, and I'm not sorry.
Things Go Wrong: Part One

“What do you want?” It’s an ordinary question, one that Julian hears often when he’s on his knees. Which he is, currently.

“I want... I want you to take from me whatever you need most, Lucio.”

It’s an ordinary answer, but Count Lucio considers him with eyes that seem more shadowed than usual. “Are you certain, my love? I’m in a very black mood tonight. I’m going to hurt you.”

Julian smiles, but something feels off. “Don’t you always?”

Lucio strokes his face with his claws, softly. “Yes, but this will be different. You are allowed to refuse, you know.”

“Different? Different how? You’ve hurt me in a thousand different ways, and I always come crawling back for more, my lord.” He nuzzles Lucio’s thigh, looking up, flirtatiously, through his long lashes.

Lucio rests his forehead against Julian’s temple, so close that Julian can taste his breath. Julian longs for him. “This time, if you say yes... I’m going to break you. I’m going to break your heart.”

Julian shudders. He stiffens slightly, but Lucio hasn’t noticed the change yet. “And... and afterward? Once I’m broken?”

Lucio looks at him, surprised. “What do you mean? After it’s over, we’ll put you back together, like always. I’ll care for you until you’ve recovered, give you whatever time and attention you need. Is there something more that you’d like from me then? Name it.”

The doctor shakes his head, very slowly. “I just mean... I just want to be sure. Will I be able to stay with you, here? Even after...?”

Lucio only looks at him, wondering, a faint understanding beginning to dawn on his face. Julian is still trying to speak.

“You won’t... ask me to leave, will you? Lucio? Once I’m broken?”

“Julian?” Lucio crouches down next to him, his plans forgotten for the moment, cradling Julian's face between his aristocratic hands. “Is that something that happened to you, my darling? Were you broken and then cast aside?”

Julian can only lower his eyes, trembling.

“Julian, look at me.”

He’s slow to obey. He can’t. In a moment Lucio’s going to ask who did this to him, and he’ll have to recite the long list of those who’ve known the truth: that Julian simply isn’t worth keeping around - he isn’t worth anything at all. And Lucio will finally realize his mistake, and end this farce of wasting his valuable time on a trash-fire like Julian Devorak.

“Julian...?”

Julian’s mind is racing. Oh, he knew this was coming, he’s always known it! He’s been lucky, he knows, that it’s taken so long before Lucio figured it out. Still... he’s going to miss him, he can’t
help it. Lucio’s been so good to him for so long. He’d even begun, almost, to let himself believe that it might go on. That maybe this time, finally, he’d be good enough for someone as wonderful as Lucio to want to keep him. What a ridiculous idea. In his head, with painful fascination, he begins to catalogue the things he’s about to lose.

Obviously, there will be no more long evenings with his head on Lucio’s lap as he enjoys showing off him off in public, as if he were some kind of prize to be coveted. More to the point, Lucio will no longer be here to play with him, to fill him up with love and attention, his claws and his teeth and his whip giving him the release he craves. Naturally, he’ll never again care for him after their wonderfully brutal sessions: that might be the part Julian will miss the most. After so much loneliness, he’s grown to depend on the times, so frequent now, when he’s petted and reassured, his wounds tended, his aching heart tenderly soothed, and he’s allowed to spend as much time as he needs in the Count’s protective arms, being kissed and caressed and held close. It was foolish of him, really, to think that could go on forever. To pretend to think it, even.

He’ll miss the way Lucio touches him - he’s so generous with Julian! Even after their play sessions, when Lucio himself is lazily satisfied, having spent himself on and inside Julian’s body, he’ll usually deign to take care of him, too. If he hasn’t come during their play, or when, embarrassingly, he’s become painfully aroused while he’s being cared, instead of scolding or humiliating him, Count Lucio will simply take his aching cock in his own hands or even his mouth, caressing him with practiced skill until he erupts - usually shockingly quickly. Afterward, he’ll be overcome with relief and gratitude at this generosity, which he certainly doesn’t deserve. Afterward, always, Lucio holds him and praises him, tells him that he’s done well, that he makes Lucio happy, that Julian’s a good boy. Julian will miss that very much. But even though he’s tried (so hard!) to be good enough, he’s had to know he’s not.

He’ll stop sharing his beautiful body with Julian, stop letting him kiss his perfect skin and suck his gorgeous cock when he’s been a good boy, and for Julian there will be no more endless kisses, his whole body growing warm and languid as Count Lucio kisses and sucks and licks and bites, taking what he wants from him, making him feel controlled and adored under the weight of his possessive touch. He’ll miss the way Lucio fucks him, how perfect he feels inside his body, the way his hands and mouth and words drive him to mindless ecstasy again and again, a bliss he doesn’t deserve. But even more than that he’ll miss the nights in Lucio’s arms, his warmth and the strength of his embrace, the safety Julian always feels there.

He’ll miss it all but... isn’t it time? He’s been given so much, been treated so well. He shouldn’t be ungrateful. He should have known it couldn’t last. He’ll be good. He’ll go quietly, without making any trouble for anybody. He’s... ready.

"JULIAN. Look at me."

But he can’t. He just isn’t strong enough. He always knew this was coming, but it hurts so much.

Docto r Julian Devorak: man of science, bold explorer, occasional criminal — he covers his face with his hands and weeps.

...The next thing he’s aware of is Lucio, who’s joined him on the floor and is pulling him into his arms. Julian panics, frantic to pull away, but he’s still sobbing, which renders him blind and weak, and the Count easily pins his arms from behind, then pulls him back against his chest while he struggles. Distantly, he hears himself begging.

“Please, it’s alright, I’ll go! It’s alright, I understand, I won’t be any trouble, just let me get my things and I’ll go...” but Lucio is unresponsive to his pleas, holding him in a grip like iron while Julian falls apart. Eventually he runs out of words. Some time after that he runs out of tears, although that takes
Oh, my darling,” Lucio murmurs against his temple, after what feels like a long time, “What am I do to with you?”

He’s as hoarse as if he’d been shouting for hours. “Are you... going to let me go?” He rasps.

“Depends.” Lucio sounds almost as tired as Julian feels.

“On what.”

“On whether you’re planning to go pack your bags, like a deranged lunatic, or whether you can control yourself for a little while.”

Julian doesn’t understand. He knows it’s time for him to go. Lucio wants him broken, which means Lucio wants him gone. Why drag it out this way?

“Why? Just let me... let me go.”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Have you actually lost you mind completely, Devorak? You’re my property, and I never give up what’s mine, not willingly. You’re not permitted to just leave, you blithering idiot - that’s called stealing.”

“Stealing... myself?”

“You heard me.”

On second thought, Lucio doesn’t sound tired. He sounds exhausted.

Doggedly, he tries again to make Lucio see reason: “That doesn’t make sense. I don’t understand all this, but I know I’ve overstayed my welcome here. Let me go, pleasae. I’ll just leave, and you won’t even have to trouble yourself - I’m not worth the effort.”

“Try it. I can have six guards on top of you before you’ve got your boots on. I’ll have you arrested for theft.”

“...Theft... you must be joking...”

“Have you known me as a man who makes a lot of jokes, Doctor?”

“No?”

“Then think about what I’ve just said, and draw your own conclusions.”

“I don’t understand. You really don’t... want me to leave? I'll go quietly, Count Lucio. I won't be any trouble to you, I promise!”

“Like hell you will, Devorak. You're a lot of trouble already. I’ll see you in my dungeons first.”

Finally, Julian just... gives up. He doesn’t understand this, but he understands that he’s not, for the moment, going anywhere. He sags against Lucio, lets himself be held. He wonders how Lucio can be so strong, when he’s so small, compared to Julian. He must have learned a trick or two, back
when he was a fighter.

...He must have slept, or drowsed, because he finds himself starting awake as Lucio gently lowers him to the ground, then stealthily moves away. He’s alone. He levers himself upright with a groan as the panic returns… and the sound makes Lucio, who hasn’t gone far, whip his head around.

“Lie back down at once” he barks, “unless you’d prefer to spend the night in a cell, Doctor!” Julian puts his head back down on the cold stone floor, aching and confused, to wait for whatever comes next.

When Lucio returns, he has a thin chain leash and a thick leather collar in his hands. Without speaking, he straddles Julian’s prone form and loops the collar around his neck, not bothering to be gentle with him. Julian doesn’t even realize the collar is the locking kind - Lucio has never used one on him - until the mechanism snaps home with a click. It’s-- tight. Lucio attaches the leash to the collar’s D-ring then uses it to haul Julian unceremoniously to his feet.

Julian’s left leg is asleep after so much time spent sitting curled up on it. He stumbles, but Lucio pulls him staggering to his bed, orders him onto it, then leashes him securely to a ring set into the wall above the headboard - which he locks in place with a small padlock. The leash gives him plenty of slack to move around in bed, but he can’t go more than a step away from it without compromising his ability to breathe unrestricted.

Lucio walks away without a word, but instead of leaving he enters the door that will take him to his private baths. Julian collapses into the blankets with his clothes still on, falling asleep almost at once.

“Get up.”

Lucio’s snapping his fingers in front of his face, to wake him. Forcing his eyes open, he can see that Lucio’s ready for bed, clean and wearing fresh bedclothes. The lamps have been turned down low.


“Get undressed.”

Julian kneels on the bed to comply, but he’s half-awake and his zombie fingers are numb and clumsy. Scowling, Lucio bats his hands aside and does it himself, stripping him efficiently while Julian hangs his head. Once Julian is naked except for his collar and chain, Lucio pulls back the blankets and moves to his own preferred side. He snaps his fingers at him again, nodding toward where he reclines.

“Come here.”

Julian, stupid with sleep and emotional devastation, doesn’t think before asking, “Why?” He knows it’s the wrong response before it’s even all the way out of his mouth... but to his surprise, Lucio’s expression softens.

“I want to hold you while I sleep,” he says quietly.

Julian, who is apparently a slow learner, stammers, “I... I...oh! It's, um, It's alright, Count Lucio, you needn't, I don’t deserve such --” and Count Lucio hits him.

It’s not a very hard slap, especially considering the angle and how tired Lucio is now, but still shocking in the context. Outside of a scene, Lucio almost never hits him, and certainly not in anger -
although he has both Julian’s permission and every right to do so. It's not that it hurts, it's just that it's so strange, unexpected. Julian holds his cheek, staring at him, bewildered.

“Did I ask what you wanted, Devorak? Or for a recitation of what you think you deserve, as if it’s up to you?”

Julian holds a hand to his cheek, eyes red-rimmed and weary. “No…”

There’s another blow, weaker than the first but in the same spot, and his cheek stings as it reddens. His expression is grave. “Manners, slut. If you're going to act like a wild animal instead of a man then you'll be treated like one. No what?” His voice is as hard as stone.

Julian swallows hard. “No, Count Lucio,” he murmurs, trying, despite his swimming thoughts, to show the proper respect. If Lucio notices this effort, he doesn't acknowledge it.


Julian obeys quickly this time, and is drawn at once into Lucio’s warm, familiar embrace. It feels so good, after his tears and his certainty of abandonment - a certainty that is still with him - just to be held. And despite what Lucio says, he knows he doesn't deserve this kindness, not after the way he's acted. Shamefully, he begins to cry again, but Lucio doesn’t seem to mind. He strokes his back in slow circles, his own tension relenting a little as Julian melts into his arms. “There you are, “ he sighs wearily. “Right where you belong.”

Julian is crying still, more softly now, hot tears streaking down his cool skin even as he drifts off. He’s grateful for unconsciousness. Lucio holds him tightly, possessively, even in his sleep.
In the morning, Julian is sore still from his time spend curled on the hard floor, and from weeping all night, and from sleeping in the thick, uncomfortable leather collar he isn’t used to. He’s also still locked into said collar, and leashed to Lucio’s bed. He sits up carefully, stretching his arms, twisting his neck from side to side to relieve the pressure. He feels a moment of relief - then a wave of panic. Lucio is gone.

Julian starts up, scanning the room urgently, pacing all the way to the end of his lead. “Lucio!” He calls, voice rough, frightened. Lucio doesn’t answer… but the figure he hadn’t noticed, reclining elegantly on one of the small sofas near the hearth looks up from some correspondence he seems to be examining, before lowering it in a rustle of paper.

“Ah, Dr. Devorak. You’re awake I see.” Valerius sounds equal parts bored and resentful, but he puts down what he’s doing and saunters toward the bed in a hushed silken brushing of the fine fabric of his skirts, reaching into his layers to retrieve a small key. “Are you ready to get up?”

Julian swallows, looking around the room. “Well, I--”

“...that’s a rhetorical question, of course. I’ve been instructed to see that you’re fed and dressed as soon as possible on waking, then the Count wants you brought to him.”

Julian rubs his eyes as Valerius leans over him to unlock the leash from the bedframe. He waits for him to unlock the collar from Julian’s neck, but nothing of the sort transpires. Julian’s thinking still feels slow and labored, fuzzy. But does recall Lucio’s schedule for today: “But… he’s in council meeting all morning. And isn’t there some kind of gala tonight? Why would he want me?”

“Wonderful memory you have,” Valerius opines, dryly. “I can see now why you’re so suited to your profession. And I have no idea why he wants you, only that he was quite adamant that he does.” He helps Julian to his feet perfunctorily, unfazed by his nakedness, looping the leash over one arm. “You aren’t going to try to run away, are you?”

“...No.”

“Wonderful. I’d hate to have to call a guard. Now let’s see if you can be a good boy, and then we’ll go walkies, hmm?” He fairly drips with disdain.

“ ‘Walkies’? “

Valerius leads him away from the bed and toward his own rooms, the ones where he hardly ever sleeps these days, pulling him along at a brisk pace. “It’s a colloquial term used to refer to walking a housepet on a leash. I believe it is most commonly used when referring to small dogs, but in your case…” he lets the sentence hang, his meaning clear.

“I think I take your meaning,” Julian grimaces, already humiliated.

“Excellent. Now, let’s get you dressed, shall we?”

...It turns out that Valerius is being literal. He chooses Julian’s clothes from what’s both available and clean enough to wear, scowling at the available fashion options, and Julian finds himself grateful that there aren’t that many to choose from. Valerius dresses him quickly and efficiently in the dark trousers and white blouse he normally wears, although the simple, elegant gold sash that he plucks out of Lucio’s own overflowing wardrobe is something of a surprise. “We aren’t barbarians,”
Valerius says by way of explanation, when Julian gives it a skeptical look. Likewise he insists Julian abandon his well-worn boots for some shoes that are both finer and softer, almost slippers, that make no sound at all on the hard floor. Julian doesn’t appreciate these changes, but understands quickly that his opinion is neither welcome nor attended.

Soon he’s being ordered to consume a utilitarian breakfast of bread and cheese, allowed a single mug of hot black coffee, and told to use the facilities - Valerius stops short of actually accompanying him to the bathroom, but he does insist that he stay leashed. Once he cleans his face and his teeth they’re off, presumably to deliver Julian to Lucio.

Julian is, of course, still quite leashed, and draws many curious looks and more than a few chuckles from palace staff and residents. Valerius, clearly finding the errand beneath him, doesn’t acknowledge any of them, and leads him so quickly that even with his long legs he’s almost force to trot.

Val knocks at the door to a room Julian recognizes - it’s frequently used for smaller meetings and he’s accompanied Lucio here before, although not when it was in use. The voices murmuring behind the door go quiet, before Lucio, muffled, calls “Come,” and Val swings it open.

To Julian’s dismay (although not to his surprise), there are about ten minor nobles gathered around a small table, including two courtiers and one state official - of the offices of supply-something-or-other? ...Whom Julian vaguely recognizes. Valerius walks Julia to where Lucio sits at the table’s head, his chair slightly bigger and slightly fancier than everyone else’s. Julian notices that he already has his Mercedes and Melchior with him, both lounging on the left side of his throne-chair on wide, flat cushions. The hounds look up curiously at Julian’s entrance, then put their shaggy heads back down as they recognize him. From the humans in the room there are a few interested murmurs, and at least one quiet chuckle. Julian’s face burns.

Lucio looks up. A slight lifting of one elegant brow lets him know that Lucio’s noticed Valerius’ addition to his outfit, then he seems to dismiss it. “Ah. Valerius, thank you. Here, I’ll take him. He accepts Julian’s leash from Consul Valerius in a completely casual manner, using it to guide him to his right side, then points at the ground near his feet. There a third, similar cushion waits, presumably for him. “Julian, sit.”

Awkwardly, he obeys, dropping down in the exact spot the Count has indicated, long limbs folded up awkwardly, because it requires him to be halfway under the table. “Good boy,” Lucio murmurs, in a soft voice that indicates he’s noticed the effort, and the doctor relaxes a little. The conversation resumes, the others seeming to forget about Julian once the novelty of his entrance faces, as if he is no more an eccentricity than the Count’s other pets. He supposes he’s not at, at that. He’s still embarrassed at first, then grows bored, and finally a bit lonely as the meeting drags on, but he stays where he’s been told.

Lucio doesn’t speak to him again, but during one particularly drawn out explanation of the finances in the flooded district given by a short, stout woman he doesn’t recognize, Lucio snaps his fingers quietly to get Julian’s attention… then taps his knee with his fingertips once he has it. Julian understands and scoots forward between Lucio’s to rest his cheek in Lucio’s lap, blushing.

He wonders immediately if Lucio intends to degrade him by using him sexually in such a public forum? It’s an idea that’s both exciting and awful, but Lucio only tangles his good hand in his hair, petting him absentmindedly while the meeting talks on and on. Julian, who craves his touch, is grateful. When one of the hounds, noticing the special attention that Julian is getting, nudges Lucio’s other knee to be noticed, Count Lucio alternates between petting her and petting Julian.

Julian’s head droops s his tiredness gets the better of him. He wraps one hand around Lucio’s calf,
craving more closeness. Count Lucio’s soft “no,” too low to interrupt the speaker, makes him blush again, and he’s quick to remove it… but Lucio holds out a golden hand, gesturing impatiently. Julian puts his own hand into it, confused, and Lucio guides Julian’s arm across his hip and around his silken waist - Julian’s arms are so long that he can wrap it around him almost entirely, but not quite - and urges him forward with a hand between his shoulder-blades. He ends with his cheek is on Lucio’s thigh, the top of his head close to Lucio’s stomach. It’s a bit of a stretch, but he rearranges his legs beneath himself as well as he can, and finds that he’s fairly comfortable. He closes his eyes, relaxing into Lucio’s touch, not caring (well, not caring much) that the others can see him debasing himself this way, if it means he can be near Lucio, can rest his head in his lap and feel his fingers in his hair. Julian tries hard not to move, so that Lucio won’t change his mind about petting him.

...He doesn’t intend to fall asleep, but that’s what happens. It shouldn’t be surprising, given his exhaustion. He wakes up as the room is emptying, Count Lucio gently jostling him awake. Julian looks up, guilty.

“I’m so sorry, Count Lucio!” he begins, when he realizes what he’s gone. But Lucio stills him with two claws across his lips.

“Shh, it’s alright. But we need to go. The meeting ran long, there’s barely time to bathe before the gala, and we both need to dress. Although,” he adds, pursing his lips against a grin, "I see that you've already seen fit to accessorize."


"I thought so. Still, it's not a bad choice. Maybe we should ask him to dress you more often." He’s teasing, but Julian feels a pull of yearning at the light, playful tone in his voice. Lucio adjusts the edge of the sash, and smooths Julian's unruly hair, fondly. "Should we have him choose your costume for tonight?

Julian’s eyes are soft and uncertain, questioning. “That's right, the gala. You said I'm to come with you?” Lucio rarely takes Julain to these things, preferring to have him waiting in his chambers, often in a state of compromise.

“Yes, love, you’ll come with me. I can’t very well leave you leashed to the bed until I get back, can I? I you might get bored and chew up a pillow or something.” Count Lucio smiles wryly, rising, pulling Julian along with him.

Julian notices as they leave that the hounds are already gone - they must have been taken by an attendant. He finds himself grateful that an attendant didn’t take him as well.
Julian is not enjoying the pet baths.

When Lucio had mentioned earlier that they should bathe before dressing for the gala, he’d immediately begun to anticipate the prospect of a hot bath. For one thing, he still felt greasy and unpresentable, rumpled like used clothing. For another, the prospect of sharing that proximity with the Count - even if he hasn’t earned the right to be played with - had sounded wonderful. Already it seems like a fever dream, a sick fantasy, to have claimed he wanted to take his things and leave… temporary insanity, maybe. The reason for it lurks in the back of his mind like a shadow, but he uses all his willpower to ignore it. Insanity. Sleep Deprivation. Nothing worth dwelling on. Now that he is, questionable, himself again, he wants nothing more than to resume his old place, his proper place, in Count Lucio’s affections. Although they haven’t been apart in the literal sense, it felt (and still does) as though there is a great distance between them, and Julian finds himself longing for closeness and touch.

When, as they entered the his antechambers, Count Lucio had hailed the valet and casually handed Julian’s leash to him, Julian’s stomach had dropped. What now?

The Valet, a sharp-eyed and sharply dressed older man called Valquez, is too good at his job to have given the appearance of surprise when Lucio handed him a leash with a human attached to it, but he had paused for the briefest of moments.

“...My Lord?”

“Have him sent to the groomers. And tell them to hurry.” Lucio had grunted as he tugged off his boots.

“Yes, Count Lucio,” Valquez had answered, with a short bow and a professionally obsequious tone Julian had envied at once. Then, without further ado, he’d summoned a second servant - this one wearing the ordinary palace uniform - and given both him Julian’s leash and the crisp instructions that he was to deliver him to the groomer’s and wait there while he was washed. This servant, who wasn’t introduced, had betrayed his opinion of the matter with a subtle smirk, and Julian blushed to the tips of his ears. This was ignored - so, for the most part, was Julian.

Now, he sits in a shallow tub of tepid water up to his flank, leashed to a hook in the side of the tub by a new, shorter leash, and is being hurriedly hosed down by the a woman in a short dress and a cap, as another scrubs him thoroughly - they’re just two of the small army of groomers that the palace apparently staffs. Julian has never noticed them before, probably because they’re almost identical to the Palace’s other servants, except that the magenta-colored livery they wear ends at the knee and the elbow instead of covering them completely. It’s undoubtedly useful when bathing the Count’s many pets… among which Julian can probably now count himself.

The groomers’ hands on his skin and in his hair are brisk and professional, if rather alarmingly thorough in certain areas - but nothing at all like Count Lucio’s gentle touch, when he’s in the mood to wash Julian’s hair or bathe him himself. The water, while clean and (thankfully!) not freezing, doesn’t compare in any way to his gilded, perfumed baths… or even the less elegant public baths of the palace, either of which would be extremely welcome right now. The washing-liquid that he’s scrubbed with, at least, do smell much more expensive than anything he himself could afford, but that’s small comfort. He’s almost entirely sure it’s dog shampoo. He wraps his arms around himself, and shivers.
Once Julian’s rinsed and dried he’s subjected to being roughly brushed, then given back the waiting servant, who clips his leash back onto his collar and leads him away without a word.

“Ah good, they took care of you quickly! Did you enjoy your grooming?”

Lucio is already dressed, impeccably but in typical Lucio fashion, in an unnecessarily extravagant gold suit, perfectly tailored to his form. The shirt beneath his vest is blindingly white, and the cravat currently being artfully tied by a body-servant is gold and cream. He looks gaudy and gilded, a resplendent show-off. He looks like has something to prove. He looks beautiful, and Julian wants nothing more than to kneel at his feet forever.

(He feels a stab of sick jealousy toward the nameless servants who’ve been allowed to attend Lucio, their fingers doubtlessly brushing against his bare skin as they help him dress. When he’s not being punished for his insane outbursts, Julian is often permitted to do that job.)

“...You know I didn’t,” Julian grumbles, not bothering to pretend. Lucio tsks.

“No? I was certain you’d appreciate being handled properly - I’m afraid I’ve been far too gentle for wild beast like yourself.” He’s grinning, mouth too full of teeth, eyes bright with pleasure at Julian’s new humiliation.

Lucio lowers his gaze, hurt. “Count Lucio, please, let me apologize for my--”

“No time, darling,” Lucio cuts him off, holding out a hand. “Come here to me, we need to get you dressed.”

Lucio - or someone - has picked out a matching, if much more tasteful outfit for Julian. While still more showy than he’d like, it suits him: his tasteful white suit is embroidered with thread-of-gold along the cuffs and lapels, and the flowing cuffs that peek out from under the arms of his jacket are white lace. There’s no cravat, and for a moment Julian wonders why… but he figures it out quickly. Lucio wants his collar to show. Well, of course.

Lucio dresses Julian with his own hands, which Julian enjoys, although he does wish he’d linger! It seems to Julian that he moves with the speed and precision of a servant - or maybe a groomer. Once he’s satisfied, Lucio carefully straightens him, smiles ruefully at his ungovernable hair… and retrieves a key of his own, which he uses to unfasten his collar. Julian is shocked.

Touching his throat, where he can still feel the bite of the punishment collar, he looks at Lucio with wide eyes. “Am I--?” He’s not sure what he means to say… Free? Forgiven? But Lucio just shakes his head with a humorless smile.

“Well that it were that easy, my dear. Alas no. We’re simply going to attire you in something a bit more appropriate for the company,” he explains, before retrieving a second collar and matching leash from his wardrobe (how many does he have in there?). He threads the chain through one of two large O-rings before slipping it over Julian’s neck.

It’s a pretty gold chain, although the links are thick, and it gleams in the light. It’s much less close-fitting than the other one, and Julian is surprised to notice that there’s no lock, and no place for one… until Lucio clips the leash to one of two O-rings, and he realizes what it is.

“A, erm, choking collar, my lord?” Lucio’s answering smile this time seems more genuine.

“You’ve worn one before, Devorak.”
“Well, yes, but…”

“...but?”

“But only... “ he hesitates. “You know. When we play. And never one as pretty as this.”

Lucio lifts Julian’s chin and turns it from side to side, admiring the golden gleam of the metal. “Yes, well, I hadn’t anticipated the need to keep you bound and leashed twenty-four hours a day, so I’m afraid you’ll have to settle for whatever dress-collar I have on hand. Besides... you do look nice in pretty things.”

Julian feels embarrassed, and pleased. “Thank you,” he demurs, running a finger along the links as he turns to admire the effect in the glass. “... thank you Count Lucio,” he amends quickly, not wanting to be slapped for his breach of etiquette. Lucio doesn’t seem to have noticed it, however.

“I should also warn you that the gold is only plating - try to break it and and you’ll discover the reality of that. The links are steel.”

Julian bites his lip. “I wouldn’t--” he murmurs, finally, “--try to break it. I wouldn’t try to get away,” he admits. He fiddles with the interlocking rings. Lucio is giving him a look he doesn’t quite like.

“Wouldn’t you? Last night you were dead set on escape at all costs.”

Julian is stricken with regret. He wasn’t in his right mind last night. But how can he even begin to explain? He takes a steadying breath. “Count Lucio, I--”

Lucio holds up a hand to stop him.

“We need to go.”

Julian nods, feeling his unspoken regret burn like bile in his throat. “Yes, Count Lucio.”

Lucio rewards him with a single perfunctory kiss on the cheek, then leads him out the door the the overly-decorated carriage that’s waiting on them.

They’ve already been en route for several minutes when Lucio tells him, “Oh - and I’m not planning to throttle you in public, in case that’s what you’re worried about. We’re using this collar for expediency rather than utility.”

Julian sighs with exaggerated relief. “Ah. Thank you, Count Lucio!”

“Although…” Lucio considers, eyeing him wolfishly, “I can’t imagine you’d mind all that much.”

Julian blushes, but he can’t hide the face that he enjoys the teasing. “Ohh - is that a challenge? Because I have to tell you it sounds as though I win either way.” He shows Lucio his best, most flirtatious smile, even though it’s not what he’s feeling. He hopes it’ll win him a kiss - or at least another round of being teased.

But Lucio only favors him with a wan smile, the moment of fun between them having passed. “Just see that you behave yourself among the well-dressed people, my caged beast,” he sighs. “If you disappoint me, the punishment you receive in private won’t be the kind of thing you enjoy.”

Julian lowers his head in a bow, as humbly as he can. “Yes, Count Lucio,” he murmurs, striving to
match his rapid shift in mood. He feels as sharp sensation a shard of ice lodges in his heart. *What will Count Lucio do to him, if he fails to be pleasing tonight? Is it possible that he’ll take Julian up on his demand to be released? Does he know that he wasn’t himself when he said those things?*

Well, best not to find out. For the rest of tonight, Julian will be *exceptionally* good. He’ll do everything right. He has to.
“Oh, he’s charming! Such a pretty thing. But I was under the impression that Vesuvia does not keep a slave class?”

Julian, (along with Lucio, to whom he is still leashed) stands at the far end of a gleaming ballroom, along with the Atapran Ambassador and the Milovan Minister of Finance, to whom he has just been introduced. The long, polished room. has been softly lit with mellow golden lamps that burn along the walls, and from the walls and ceiling hang nets of colorful flowers in honor of spring festival, making the whole room smell like springtime.

The speaker is the Milovian Madam Shilan: an exotic, dark-eyed woman wearing a flowing garment as red as a poppy, she stands out like a bright flower in a field of wheat. Her voice has a pleasant lilt, one he recognizes as typical of native Milovan speakers. She runs a graceful fingertip along the bright links of Julian’s leash, but her comments are addressed solely to Lucio. They are conversing in her native tongue, which she likely assumes the man wearing a leash and collar does not understand.

Julia is offended by the implication - but before he can open his mouth to retort he feels Lucio take his hand, lacing their fingers. This touch, he recognizes at once, is less a demonstration of affection than a warning, reminding Julian to bite his tongue and avoid causing an international incident.

“Behave yourself among the well-dressed people, Julian.

“We do not,” Lucio replies, with a charming smile of his own. “Dr. Devorak, here,” he gestures toward Julian, with a hand that also holds a long-stemmed glass, “...is a senior member of the medical staff at the royal palace, where he is known to be quite accomplished! He is also my personal physician.”

“And yet, you keep him collared and leashed?”

“I do so because he enjoys it,” Lucio explains fondly. “He’s free to take it off at any time.”

The Atapran ambassador nods with understanding. “I have seen something similar to this in Prakra,” he acknowledges, “and even in my home country, due to the influx of foreign influence. In my experience it is completely voluntary, and denotes a certain… peculiarity of interest, rather than an outright ownership, lawful or otherwise.” Ambassador Haniche is a small man with lovely proportions, and long, platinum hair that he wears in soft curls threaded with jewels. His eyes are a strange, shifting amber. Julian doesn’t like the way he looks at him.

Madam Shilan still looks unconvinced, or perhaps she’s merely concerned. “Is this so?”

Obligingly, Lucio turns to Julian. “Dr. Devorak,” he asks in politely formal Vesuvian, “Do you wish to remove your leash or collar? The lady is concerned that you are uncomfortable.”

“Thank you Madam Shilan,” he replies to her directly, “I am quite at ease I assure you - although I do appreciate your kind concern,” he explains with a smile… and in perfectly accented Milovian.

The effect is immediate - the Milovan diplomat blushes, demuring, “Oh! I must be your pardon, Dr. Devorak. I am, it appears, as unfamiliar with your fascinating local customs as I am with the talents of your esteemed person. Do forgive this country mouse her blunder, will you not?”

The hand holding Julian’s tightens slowly, until it’s hurting him, and it’s all he can do not to wince. “Why, the good doctor is only teasing you,” Lucio offers lightly, “In addition to his linguistic skills he possesses a singular sense of humor - he means no offense. Isn’t that right, Doctor?”.
“Yes of course!” Julian manages, switching back to Vesuvian as Lucio has done. He manages a bright tone, despite the subtle death threats that Lucio is somehow able to convey through his touch alone. “I hope you don’t mind my, erm, little jokes!”

“Not at all, Doctor,” Madam Shilan promises. Her cheeks, though, are still quite pink. Julian thinks it looks very fetching against her dusky skin. “But please do excuse me - my countryman the Minister of Foreign Affairs should be arriving shortly, and I should be near the entrance to great them.”

Lucio inclines his head, “Of course. It’s been a pleasure, and I trust we’ll see you again before the night is through.”

Madam Shilan assures him that they will, and departs through the crowd.

“Excuse us for just a moment, would you please?” Lucio says to the Atapran ambassador.

Once she’s safely out out of earshot Lucio drops his hand, giving the leash a sharp warning tug. “Behave yourself,” he chides Julian. “We need her goodwill in order to finalize an important trade deal with Prakara and Atapra.”

Oh, how Julian wants to be good! He does! But… he can’t. “Shall I go after her and offer to let her hold the end of my leash?” he asks, feigning innocence. “She seemed so interested. I think it might bring her around.”

Count Lucio gives him a level, considering look, and Julian looks back at him guilelessly. “You know… you aren’t wrong,” Lucio murmurs, half to himself. “Perhaps… yes. Yes, it’s a good idea, in fact.”

Julian bites his lip, regretting his gambit. “What is, my lord?”

“Your suggestion.” Lucio’s smile is thin. “After a little time has passed, I’d like you to seek out Madam Shilan and ask her to dance, by way of apology. You’ll explain that you’re a shameless rogue but you meant no real harm. Flirt a bitot too much. Choose of the slower dances.”

Julian feels his stomach drop. Lucio wants to send him away, and to dance with someone else? True, he deserves it - but he’d expected to be scolded again, an act which secretly thrills him, not immediately made responsible for his own actions!

“...Yes, my lord.” He nods his acquiescence, trying not to look too overtly disappointed. He feels the echo of Lucio’s words again: If you disappoint me… and feels a hollow unhappiness open up within him. Already this evening he’s had to watch, leashed humiliatingly to the leg of a table or chair, while Lucio dances with other people. Oh, he’s undoubtedly working political subterfuge or closing deals between graceful steps, but easy way that he moves on the dance floor, holding another in his arms… Julian burns with jealousy he knows he has no right to. He just wishes he didn’t feel so wretched. Why can’t he be cold and distant when he wants, untouchable and therefore unhurt? Lucio makes it look so easy. He’s not like Julian. He never suffers the pangs of… whatever Julian suffers from. Lucky him.

...About twenty minutes later, Julian excuses himself with a discrete word to Lucio (who is deep in conversation with the glamorous Atapran ambassador, and does not deign to kiss him before he leaves), and begins to thread his way through the crowd. He holds the end of his own leash for the first time in 24 hours, and feels the strangeness of it. The leash provides him only the slightest impediment, which he solves by doubling the handle before sliding it over one wrist so that it dangles from his arm like exotic jewelry, its links reflecting the light.
Madam Shilan is, as he’s pleasantly surprised to learn, an exquisite dancer and light on her feet. She is, just as Lucio had correctly predicted, quite glad to see him, and proves to be a witty conversationalist as well. He thinks he would enjoy her company immensely if he were not here as a peace offering, and more or less against his will.

They exchange no political secrets and swear no oath of affection, and yet Julian is quite certain, by the time the dance is finished, that she’ll now be far more likely to side with Lucio in the upcoming trade agreements. Maybe Julian is cut out for politics after all! When the dance is finished he bows low before kissing the knuckles of her right hand, and is rewarded with another pretty blush. He takes his leave of her, satisfied with his performance, and scans the room for Lucio.

But... he can’t find Lucio. Right away he feels his heart begin to beat too quickly, knows he’s being foolish. Not again! This time, he’ll stay in control of himself. He won’t give Lucio a reason to doubt him, won’t embarrass him, here in front of these important people… Carefully casual, he wanders back toward where he’d last seen him, with the Atapran diplomat… but neither man is to be seen. He feels the weight of the collar, suddenly heavy on his neck. He tells himself that it’s stupid to fret over it, to panic the way some shameful part of him want to. Of course Lucio will be back for him soon.

(Won’t he?)

Well, it’s a large room. A crowded party. And Lucio has better things to do than wait around for him all night. He makes himself breathe more slowly, doing what he can to calm his nerves. After all, Julian wasn’t doing anything wrong, indeed he was doing what he’d been asked, he’s been good! When a rush of irrational fear returns to him, he looks for a place to sit down.

Julian has arranged himself in a posture of casual waiting at one of the tables dotting the edge of the dance floor, his legs crossed at the knee, head cocked at a slightly jaunty angle, as if he has nothing on his mind beyond showing off, admiring the dancers, and waiting for his escort to return. By now he’s accepted a glass of--something-- from a servant circulating with a tray of drinks, which he sips without tasting it. He tries to watch the flashing legs and spinning skirts of the partygoers, but he can’t seem to distract himself. Doesn’t Lucio know that he requires near-constant supervision? Gods only know what he might get up to, left to his own devices… Lucio said it himself, he’s a wild animal!

...Julian sighs. He thinks, with a confusion of longing and shame, about the comfort of Lucio’s hand holding the end of his leash. Is this really what he’s become? ...Pathetic. If he were Lucio, he’d probably want a moment away from himself too. Just see that you behave yourself, Lucio had said.

But he hadn’t, had he? Oh, he’d tried…! But as usual, he’s fallen short of the mark, his mouth moving faster than his brain ever would. Maybe Lucio has abandoned him here, temporarily, to punish him. He deserves it. He unwinds the leash from his wrist, finding it suddenly too heavy, and lets it trail carelessly on the floor.

When another servant passes with a tray of drinks, Julian down the glass of whatever-it-is that he has, and takes two more.

There’s no clock for him to watch, but Julian is working on his fifth cocktail, with Lucio still nowhere to be seen, when he feels a sharp tug at the end of the leash, and he sags with relief. Smiling foolishly, he turns quickly to greet him.

The Atapran diplomat - Haniche, he remembers - smiles back. Julian’s disappointment settles in his belly like a stone.
Still, he hasn’t forgotten his manners. “Sir Ambassador,” he offers, forcing himself to maintain a welcoming smile. “What a pleasure to see you again!” He reaches, casually, for the end of his leash… but it’s pulled out of his reach, with a light tug at his throat. Julian’s eyes widen with alarm. The Atapran diplomat looks at him the way a cat might look at a dish of cream. The must be burning lower, because the reflection of their flames make it seem as if the strange color of his eyes is shifting and dancing in the dimming light.

“I’ve been sent to fetch you for your Master,” he says airly, offering no further explanation. He gives a little rattle of the leash, and a smile that seems almost playful. “...Will you come?”
The question is only a formality, because he’s already on his feet, beginning to move away, and Julian is forced to go with him. “Ah, I, of course, Yes.” Julian stammers. The world spins as Julian rises from his chair, and he has time to think, belatedly, that those drinks must have been a bit stronger than he thought. Struggling to maintain his composure, he allows himself to be led away.

He expects to be led to a different part of the ballroom, or to a meeting room, or perhaps even to the entrance hall… but instead he finds himself in the back gardens, where walking paths have been lined with softly glowing lanterns, and long shadows fall under the wide ivory columns that line this side of the mansion. It’s here that Haniche pauses, looking a little uncertain of himself.

“Where is Lucio?”

The diplomat’s mouth curves back up into his coquettish smile. “Your Master… isn’t here. But he’s told me that you’re to… entertain me… in his absence.”

Julian’s head is still spinning, but… something is wrong. This feels wrong.

“Did Lucio really send you? Did he really… say that?”

Haniche’s purses his pretty lips in a mockery of sympathy. “Ohh… poor thing, didn’t he tell you? The infamous Count Lucio always brings his little… pets to these soirees. It helps him considerably with his politics, and I think he enjoys the degradation of it all. Why, did you think you were the first?”

Julian feels the bottom drop out of his world. He has to lean against the column for strength, as his legs feel too weak to hold him up. Could he be telling the truth?

Less sure of himself than he’d like to be, he offers in a smaller voice. “No-- no. Lucio never calls himself my Master. And he doesn’t loan me out like a party favor. He never would.”

“He didn’t call himself your Master, I did.”

“Well, he isn’t!”

Haniche eases closer to him, taking up the slack in the leash. “Isn’t he, though? Have you looked at yourself? Wearing a collar and leash to a fancy dress party like a lapdog that’s been brought out to do tricks. Isn’t that why you’re here? You aren’t noble, anyone can see that, and you certainly aren’t politically savvy. Why else would you be here?”

“Not for that!” Julian’s eyes snap to his, hurt. Isn’t he right, though? Right about some of it, anyway.

Haniche leans against the flower-draped column with an easy grace, arrogant, beautiful in the dim light. “Alright, then educate me. Why are you here?”

“Lucio brought me because… because…” But what, really, is he supposed to say? ‘Because I had a fit of madness when a scene didn’t go well, and I acted out so badly that he’s been keeping me on a leash until I’ve proven I can act human?’ And really, why is he here? “…Because he enjoys my company,” he finishes lamely, looking down at his hands.

“Well,” Haniche offers, in a voice like oiled silk, “I’d enjoy it as well.”
Julian feels Hanche run his fingers along the leash, following it to his collar, then hooking a finger beneath to draw him forward and down. He can smell his flowery perfume, made acrid by the liquor on his breath. Something in Julian feels weak and wilting, sapping his will to resist.

“Please,” Julian says, his voice barely above a whisper, “I-- I don’t want--”

“Don’t you? But why not, pretty thing? I’ll be good to you. And if you’re good to me as well, I’ll agree to whatever your master wants in our next round of trade talks. That’s fair, isn’t it?”

Julian’s head spins, and he regrets the cocktails. He regrets everything. He can’t think. It IS fair, isn’t it? Isn’t this what Lucio wanted, to help him smooth over his mistakes? It isn’t that much different from dancing with the Milovan woman… is it? Julian is lost in his thoughts, and someone is tugging at his leash.

“…come. I know a place.”

Like a drowning man reaching for a lifeline, he reaches out for the chain, closing his own fist on it before Haniche can drag him off into the night. “I...can’t,” he says, desperately fighting his own natural instincts for surrender.

Hanich pouts, looking put out but not yet defeated. “Give me one good reason why not. You like me, I can tell. I like you, too. And I have something you want. What’s the harm?”

“Lucio… won’t like it,” Julian says, breathlessly. He *does* like the other man, or at the very least, he likes his attention. He likes his pretty eyes. He has a way about him that suggests he’d be able to handle Julian in a way that Julian would enjoy. But… he’s not Lucio. This will make Lucio angry with Julian. It will even hurt him, maybe, and no dalliance is worth that.

The politician’s painted mouth curves into a sly smile. “I thought you said he wasn’t your master.”

“He isn’t!”

“Then come with me.”

“I--no.”

“He is your master.”

“I-- he’s not. He never says that.”

Haniche shakes his head, knowingly. “He doesn’t need to. Look how well you’re trained! He’s abandoned you, collared and leashed, to a roomful of strangers! I thought he left you here alone because he didn’t care about you - I see now that he also doesn’t need to worry about you, you’re so loyal!”

Julian is trembling. **This feels wrong. Something is wrong.** “No, he wouldn’t do that…” he breathes.

Haniche drops the leash, and touches Julian’s cheek with one soft hand, caressing him. Comforting him. “Come with me in secret, then. Prove to yourself you’re not owned quite yet. No one will know.”

Julian sucks his lower lip between his teeth. He’s so… tempted. He’s become lonely and uncertain since Lucio disappeared, and the fawning attention of the Atapran diplomat is so very nice. Isn’t it? Why did he think he didn’t want this? Haniche looks at him with his strange eyes, searching him… Julian feels something inside him unwind, yearning toward the other man. **It would be nice, wouldn’t**
it, to be touched? To know that he’s worth something to someone? Probably, Lucio wouldn’t even mind…

“He’s left you all alone. Let me be good to you. And I’ll keep my promise - when I concede to him in our talks I’ll let him know how very charming and persuasive you are, how you kept me company so thoughtfully during the time he was away. Come.” Instead of pulling at his leash, he holds out a hand. His smile is seductive and sweet, like a lover’s.

Something here feels… wrong. There’s a pressure, a heaviness, and for a moment he thinks of Asra’s shop, the weight of magic pressing him down, down.

Julian retreats a trembling step backward, as one might from the edge of a cliff, in the dark. He fetches up against the flower-draped column, and can go no further and Haniche advances. One palm flat against Julian’s chest, he presses himself up on the tips of his toes, gripping Julian’s collar to pull him back down.

Julian aches with indecision. He shouldn’t, he doesn’t want it, not really, Lucio won’t like it… but Lucio will like it if he gets what he wants in the trade talks, and if Julian is responsible… he’ll be pleased with him.

..won’t he?

Only not this. Not like this. This isn’t what he meant.

Haniche strokes his cheek, his expression warm and concerned, and Julian’s thinking feels hazy again. Perhaps Haniche is right, and Lucio has abandoned him because he doesn’t care about him. Perhaps he won’t care, or maybe he even wants this. His head spins. Yes, or no? Mentally, Julian flips a coin, hoping it never has to come back down.

He closes his eyes, but doesn’t offer himself to the kiss. He’s so lost and uncertain, afraid to do the wrong thing, afraid to move. The other man leans in, all but purring with victory...

...and draws back with a yelp of pain, as something descends on him from the darkness above the trees. In a flash of feathery outrage, a familiar blur of gangly black limbs swats at the air, talons curved to strike at Haniche’s, and red lines appear in the arm he uses to protect his face, marring his soft pampered skin. An angry, cawing voice rends the night air. As if waking from a dream, Julian starts up, retreating several steps.

What the hell had he been doing?? Had he really been about to betray Lucio, to prostitute himself for some vague political gain? Julian might be an idiot, but he’s not THAT sort of idiot - at least not so far. A fog lifts from his thoughts. What happened to him, just now?

With a cry of frustration or maybe just panic, Haniche flees, back into light and safety of the party. But it’s no good - Malak follows him, worrying his hair and face with his talons, shrieking angrily.

He’s not the only one: “Somebody get this thing off me!” he shouts, drawing the attention of nearly the entire party. A few people giggle, some yelp in empathy, and one brave soul - a servant, they’re always the bravest when it comes right down to it - goes after Malak in counter-attack, swinging his empty tray wildly at the bird who’s suddenly appeared in their midst. By now nearly everyone in the large ballroom is pointing and gawking at the winged demon that has somehow appeared in their midst.

Malak retreats from the attack, shouting bird-ish obscenities at them, while going the only direction a panicked bird might go to escape things without wings: straight up. What happens next happens very
quickly.

Julian is already moving, shocked out of his stupor by the sudden drama, in the hopes that he can calm his friend enough to avoid outright disaster (Malak isn’t a pet exactly, and it would be wrong to think of him that way. But he is a friend, and will sometimes listen to Julian’s advice. Not often, though.) In an effort to reach him (it’s difficult to reason with someone several feet above one’s head, Julian has found), he scrambles onto refreshments table, nearly kicking over an enormous punchbowl as he does. Somehow he avoids it, and the tray of cakes next to it as well. He reaches out for Malak, reaching his his arms above his head. His fingers brush Malak’s tail-feathers, just, and then the bird flounders out of his reach.

Before he can do more than call his name, though, Malak has tangled himself in the netting that holds the flower, and someone is calling for a ladder so that he can be captured. But there will be no ladder.

Malak’s thrashing grows frantic, his screeching louder and more grating - with a final squak of frustration he frees himself… and in doing so pulls from the net from it’s fastenings along one side. Malak flies free through an open window, screaming as he goes a final curse for his pursuers. There’s a rain of flowers, as the contents of the net fall onto the heads of partygoers, who laugh with delight.

Less delightful is way the drooping corner of the fallen net falls against one of the lamps burning along the wall… and then dips a few threads, almost playfully, into the flame.

The whole thing seems to ignite at once, going up with a gentle whumph! as it ignites. For a beat the room is silent… and then everyone seems to begin screaming at once, as many flee for the door. The music stops. The fire spreads, quickly, to the rest of the netting, until the entire ceiling is covered in a latticework of flame.

And then it stops.

...Stops?

No, it’s been put out. Water is covering the net, and the ceiling, in a gentle spray, putting out the flames. It’s coming from something in the room - it’s rising from a pair of hands, upheld and outstretched. Julian feels amazement course through him. Madam Shilan?

As quickly as it started, the fire is extinguished. There’s a cry of praise from the astonished room, then a smattering of applause. The musicians, doing what musicians do, begin to play again. Most of the partygoers still chatter excitedly to one another, but a few begin, boldly, to dance. Servants arrive to begin clearing away the water, and the flowers, and the charred remnants of the net. A few black feathers float along the water’s surface.

“What the hell is going on here??”

The newcomer at first only gives Julian the impression of expensive dress clothes and shocked displeasure… then Julian recognizes their host and the owner of the mansion, a short and stout man Lucio had pointed out to him earlier. Julian hasn’t actually had the pleasure of meeting him yet, in fact he can’t even recall his name. Well, no time like the present, right? He remembers that he’s on the table, and leaps down again -- completely forgetting about the punchbowl. Oh, naturally.

In one movement, Julian hooks the punchbowl with his foot, splashing its bright red contents up onto himself (how is that even possible? There are times when it seems the very laws of physics bend in order to do as much damage as possible to him; a very questionable superpower), then kicks it into
the tray of cakes and falls off the table. The cakes slide forward, hesitate… and make a grand exit onto the top of his head, so that a cheerful smattering of frosting joins the punch that is already having a party on his white clothes.

"Who is responsible for this??" The stout, angry man roars, becoming angrier than ever. For some reason, he focuses his attention on the gangly doctor, currently covered in refreshments and sprawled at his feet.

Oh. Oh dear. Their host sounds even more upset now. Julian takes a deep, steadying breath as he gathers the strength for his confession (and probably his execution to follow).

“I am,” says Count Lucio.
Lucio, apparently having arrived out of the ether, stands over Julian where he sits in a confusion of foodstuffs and char, flowers and water. It seems like a minor miracle that he’s still flawlessly golden, untouched by the chaos that’s just passed through the room like a localized storm.

Their host seems taken aback for a moment - torn between an utter willingness to eviscerate Julian (who is the most obviously guilty party) and an equal or perhaps greater desire to avoiding locking horns with the Count. Reaching some kind of conclusion with himself, he says with as much bewildered dignity as he can muster, “My lord, begging your pardon, but I’ve been told that this man,” he indicates Julian with a nod, “is the perpetrator of all this destruction.”

“Oh, I have no doubt that he is,” Lucio says, with no change in his tone. “However, I’m responsible for him. I’ll pay for your damages.”

The host seems a little put out - probably he was far more invested in focusing his anger on someone who’d have to weather it than on calm, uninteresting negotiations around property damage. “Thank you, Count Lucio! But I--” He glances toward where Julian still sprawls on the floor, and Lucio moves smoothly between them.

“Is there a problem beyond the property damage? If so, let us address it at once, at because I have… casts a disdainful glance over his shoulder, mouth curling in disgust, “…another matter to attend to shortly.” The little crowd that has gathered to watch the exchange murmurs with excitement; no doubt they hope to witness firsthand a vicious beating at the hands of the sadistic Count of Vesuvia.

After another small hesitation, their host demures. “I, ah… no, my lord. You are most generous to make reparations.”

Lucio nods, as if he’s concluded nothing more important than some minor piece of household business. “Wonderful - have a list of damages sent to me. Now, if you’ll excuse me?”

Turning his back, he reaches down to hauls Julian to his feet. Julian is grateful that he uses the collar and not by the leash, which would have throttled him within inch of his life before he was even standing, but it still isn’t exactly comfortable. Julian yelps.

“I-I’m sorry, Lucio!” he cries, scrambling to his feet as Lucio begins to drag him away. “Please--! I can explain, you see I was with--”

“Shut your mouth!” Lucio snaps at him, even more viciously than usual. “Just look what you’ve done, you half-witted leech-sucking cur!” His voice is too loud in the ballroom, echoing, and many partygoers watch with interest. “I had already planned to punish you in private for what you did earlier, but now you’ve forced my hand! I hope you know that you’re going to get exactly what you deserve for making a fool of me, and here of all places! You’re an embarrassment, Devorak! I’m ashamed of you!”
There are a few gasps from the crowd, and more than one giggle. His words hit Julian hard, each one hurting a little more than the last. Handling him roughly, Lucio drags Julian out through the same door he just passed through, and into the night gardens.

Mouth pressed into a thin line, he grabs Julian by the lapels, and shoves him up against what may be the very same flower-draped pillar that Haniche so recently pressed him against - there’s a strange doubling in Julian’s mind. But this is Lucio. He’s here with Lucio. Even with everything, he thinks he prefers this to what came before.

Lucio looks around him, taking a long moment to scan all his surroundings; they can’t be seen, here in the shadows so near the ballroom’s open door, and the grounds are dark and empty. Every sound, though, will carry. Lucio comes close, lips curled into a snarl… and whispers into his ear.

“What I want you to do now is scream. Like I’m hurting you.”

Julian is so caught off guard that he doesn’t respond, just staring at him in bewildered silence. Lucio rolls his eyes, and Julian feels him slide fingers into his hair. They tighten with cruel precision, pulling Julian’s head back hard, and he cries out.

“Like that,” Lucio says softly into his ear, all pretext of anger gone now. “But louder.” He must still be frozen, because Lucio gives him a little shake. “Now, Devorak, what kind of actor are you!”

“Ohh! Uh… Lucio, No! PLEASE” He wails, practically shouting.

Lucio slams his open hand into the column, snarling back, “You deserve this and more, you worthless whore!” Julian has time to think, dazedly, that Lucio’s good at projecting: later, he should if he’s had any theater experience. Then Lucio whispers, “I need to hit you. Hold still.”

It’s all the warning he recieves before there’s a resounding slap on his right cheek, a hard one that makes him cry out for real, more quietly than if he’d been pretending. It should probably have sent him stumbling if he weren’t pushed up against the column and being held by the hair. He rubs his smarting cheek. “That one hurt.”

“Good.” Lucio whispers. “Now scream like before, no words this time.” As incentive - or maybe just because he enjoys it - Lucio twists his grip in his hair again, and Julian’s answering shriek seems to please him.

“Good, even better,” he encourages. In his projecting-voice, he shouts, “Don’t you DARE resist me, you’ll STAND there and TAKE what you have COMING to you!” Every emphasized word is punctuated with another loud slap: the first few are loud but hardly hurt at all, but the last one stings like a bastard. Julian decides Lucio probably has had theater experience, or at least experience pretending to hit people.

Unprompted, Julian obliges him with dramatic-but understated gasp of pain that he thinks is a nice touch, and Lucio lowers his mouth to Julian’s throat. “Good boy,” he breathes, kissing along the side of his neck. When his kisses turn into sharp, sucking bites, Julian groans with pleasure, rather loudly, and Lucio gives him a warning look.

Alright, groan like that again,” he says into his ear, “Loud.” Julian does, and Lucio shifts to press his thigh between Julian’s, still holding him in place as he draws back hit him again, backhanded this time. The sound ringingly loud. “Did you enjoy that, you SLUT?” he growls, loud enough to be heard through the doorway.

The thing… is, Julian does enjoy it, and quite a bit. Being alternately slapped and kissed ranks in his
top ten list of favorite things, easily. This is a fact of which Lucio is well aware. The line between performance and simple need is blurred a little, and he looks at Lucio with helpless desire, ashamed but needing it. Lucio smirks as he hooks a finger in his collar. He pulls him down to kiss his mouth, warm and sweet. "My poor beast," Lucio whispers, against his lips.

Aloud, he says, "*My GOD you’re pathetic!*"

Oh, he is! Gods, yes… he closes his lips on an extremely genuine moan, and Lucio puts a hand across his mouth.

“Exercise some control and shut the fuck up,” Lucio whispers in his ear, clearly enjoying himself, “And when I stop, I want you to beg me like you want me to fuck you.”

If his mouth wasn’t covered, he’d tell Lucio that this will be easy, because he does want Lucio to fuck him. *Desperately.*

Lucio grinds his thigh between his legs with increasing pressure, perfectly placed. It doesn’t take long before Julian’s eyes start to slide shut and his head fall back, his breath coming in short shuddering gasps as he thrusts helplessly against him. When it stops, Julian has no problems begging.

“PLEASE my lord… my lord Count Lucio, oh please, I need it…”

“You’re nothing but a bitch in heat!” Lucio shouts. Dropping his voice, but still loud enough to be heard, he growls, “You disgust me. Let’s see how you like THIS, if you want it so much!” Julian cries out like he’s being grievously wounded, and Lucio rewards him by pulling him against the warmth of his body, licking into his mouth. “Again.”

Julian obeys making it low and guttural just for variety, like he’s been punched in the stomach. Lucio hums his approval—and indicates it by hitting him again. It’s one of the for-show hits and doesn’t hurt, which Julian is a little sorry about.

Lucio holds him at arms’ length, examining him critically. At first Julian isn’t sure what’s looking for, or at… then Lucio chuckles as he takes the front of his dress shirt in his hands. He yanks at it, tearing several buttons free. He unbuttons the survivors and drops his mouth to Julian’s collarbone, lips ghosting along it before he’s distracted (apparently) by the presence of Julian’s left nipple, which he takes into his mouth to suck. Julian sighs, eyes fluttering closed… then gasps, as he feels Lucio’s claws raking along the exposed skin of his upper chest, leaving very visible marks that bleed into his already-ruined dress shirt.

“Lucio!” he cries, unable to control his tone, sagging against the door. Lucio looks up at him speculatively.

“A little too much desire in that one,” he decides. “You’re far too easy. We should finish this up before you give us away.” He frowns at him. “Your face should be bleeding.” He pulls him close again, kissing him hungrily he bites at his mouth, tearing at his top and bottom lips until Julian tastes blood. “That’s better,” Lucio says mildly, approving of his own efforts. “Almost done, love.”

Without further warning, he slams back against the column — a thing he seems to enjoy, honestly — knocking the wind out of him, and shouts. “NEXT time… you’ll LISTEN… to what you’re TOLD, you uncivilized animal!!” Each emphasis is punctuated by slamming Julian into the unforgiving marble, actually slamming him into it, until he’s quite breathless.

“Now cry,” Lucio breathes in his ear. “Quite loudly. Can you?”

Julian takes a deep breath. Screwing his eyes shut, he wails, “I-I’m so SORRy, Lucio… Please
don’t, PLEAsE, I’ll be GOOD….!” in his best tearily apologetic voice. When opens his eyes, Lucio is looking at him suspiciously.

“That one was very good,” Lucio admits. “TOO good.” Julian blushes.

Before he can begin apologizing in earnest, Lucio responds, not shouting but still loud, his voice already hoarse: “See that you do, slut. Now I have just one more use for you, before I take you out there to apologize…Let’s see if you can put that worthless mouth of yours to some use for a change!”

Julian looks at him, hopefully.

Lucio raises an eyebrow at him. “You really are a bit of a whore,” he offers, with affection. “We’ll have to hurry. On your knees, my wild beast.”

Julian isn’t sure if he cares for the moniker, but he kneels at once, looking at Lucio for permission before undoing his golden trousers. His cock is only half-hard from the mockery of punishing Julian, and Julian eagerly brings it to his lips. He allows his tongue to wet his sensitive cockhead it all over, luxuriating in both the taste and texture as he swirls the flat of his tongue against him, long fingers cradling his shaft with reference.

Lucio leans on column so that he can watch his cock being sucked, expression already slack with lust. “Ugh, why are you so good at this,” Lucio murmurs, as he often does, and Julian feels warm with pride. He looks up at him from beneath his lashes, memorizing the sight of him, and draws his stiffening length between his plush lips, hollowing his cheeks as he sucks him. He works his tongue against him, already beginning to move up and down along his shaft, each ‘down’ movement drawing another inch of Lucio’s swollen prick into the heat of his mouth.

“Oh, FUCK,” Lucio groans. Julian can’t tell if it’s for show or for real, but it makes his cock twitch in his ruined dress pants either way. He lets himself moan around Lucio’s cock. ...This is apparently too much for Lucio, who grabs Julian by the hair and thrusts hard into his throat, gagging him, choking him on it. Lucio grunts with satisfaction, then withdraws and plunges into him again and again. He uses him with abandon, panting, rushing… the only warning Julian gets is pulsing against his tongue, and then Lucio’s groaning with pure and authentic relief, flooding his mouth and throat with his cum. With a little jerk Lucio pulls out sooner than usual… and the last of his cum splatters against Julians chest and throat.

“Leave it there,” Lucio mutters, letting go of himself, bracing both forearms as he levers himself upright. Julian cleans him off with with his mouth and tongue before tucking him away and doing his trousers back up, and Lucio looks down at him with dark eyes. “You look so lovely like that,” he murmurs, and Julian flushes with pleasure.

“Thank you,” he says, nuzzling against the hand that Lucio extends to pet him with. Then he gasps, as Lucio’s dress shoe slides between his spread thighs, grinding into his now nearly painful erection.

“Hmm… such a filthy animal,” he sighs, pleased. “Want some help?”

“Yes, please?”

Lucio looks at him, and Julian is unwaveringly certain that he can read in his glance the regret that he doesn’t have longer to toy with him, drawing his need out and feeding on it, making him writhe and beg in his arms. But Lucio only says, “Come,” gesturing, and Julian rises from his knees, into Lucio’s embrace.
Lucio wastes no time undoing Julian’s pants and thrusting his hand between his legs, and *god* Lucio’s touch is so *good*, and Julian so desperate… Lucio strokes him slow and deep, watching his face. Julian whines. Lucio wets his lips and pauses.

“Close?”

Julian nods, urgently. Oh god, don’t let him stop now--

As if he knows what he’s thinking, Lucio eases Julian’s throbbing, needy cock back into his pants and zips him up. He grins… then kisses his temple. “Oh, don’t make that face at me,” he purrs. “I’m not half as wicked as you think. I just want you to come in your pants.”

“Come in my--?”

“--pants.” There’s a beat in which Lucio smirks, knowingly. “You’re familiar with the practice, as I recall.”

Julian’s face reddens, but Lucio cups his cheek in one hand, kissing him the way he likes best, which is slow and deep and possessive, with Lucio’s tongue thrusting between his lips before caressing the sensitive places inside his mouth with skillful familiarity. Just as Julian groans his gratitude, he feels Lucio’s thigh between his again, grinding into him.

Julian makes a soft, needy sound, and Lucio guides him to wrap a leg around his hip, pushing him back so that he can thrust against Lucio’s muscled thigh. It shouldn’t be this easy, Julian should need more than this… but Lucio is right about him, and it’s no time at all before he’s coming, hard, with a gasp of relief, fingers digging into Lucio’s lapels to pull him closer, closer, hips jerking helplessly against him as he makes a hot, sticky mess in his dress pants. When it’s over, he lets his head fall back, panting.

“Oh god, Lucio…"

Lucio grins… then draws back to look at him critically. He spits on one hand and musses Julian’s hair with it (gross). He slaps him a few more times, not hard, just enough to make sure his skin is still red and hurt-looking, and smears some of the blood from his mouth with his thumb. He glances down, checking that the humiliating fact Julian’s made a mess of himself is patently obvious for anyone who cares to look… and nods, satisfied. Finally, he makes sure that Julian’s missing buttons, his torn lapels, and the faint but visible sheen of Lucio’s cum on his bare chest is well displayed.

Touching his own hairdo, he asks, “How am I?”

“Perfect,” Julian sighs, gaze roving dreamily over his face.

“You’re no help.”

“On the contrary,” Julian grins. Lucio slaps his cheek lightly with the back of his hand.

“Don’t tempt me to more,;” he murmurs.

“Wouldn’t dream of it, my lord.”

Lucio pulls him close… in order to unclip the leash from the outer ring of his collar, the choking one, and reattach it through both O-rings at once, giving it a small tug.

“Ready?”

“They show must go on, my lord!” Julian emotes in a stage whisper, with an expansive wave of one hand. ...Lucio narrows his eyes at him.
“Erm... yes, My lord Count Lucio.”

Lucio nods curtly. Together, they return to the party.
Julian, safely leashed once more, spends perhaps the better part of an hour at the party - or rather, at what remains of the party: for some reason, it seems to have emptied out a bit following the fire, the flooding that put the fire out, and the violent (staged) beating of the perpetrator of he crime. Julian speaks to no one.

Oh, he’s aware of the curious stares directed at him - some are sympathetic, most amused, a few frankly interested - but he’s frankly exhausted. In truth he’d prefer to be allowed to sit at Lucio’s feet, with his head on his knee - he’d even be willing to share with the Mercedes and Melchior again. But there’s no sitting, they just stand and walk and wait around, and Julian stops paying attention to the conversations. He’s moving on autopilot, walking with his head down, when he feels Lucio’s guiding hand on his low back. He looks up to see that they’re leaving. Finally.

As a rule, Julian isn’t a huge fan of enclosed spaces. But he’s never in his life been so glad to be shut into a box as he is the moment he steps into Lucio’s gilded carriage, flamboyant, ostentatious and safe... to be carried home.

Collapsed against the shuttered window, one of his long legs drag up against himself, he rests. Maybe he dozes even, it’s hard to say. But Julian, who has a hard time surrendering to sleep at the best of times, finds it nearly impossible in a vehicle that’s rattling down the road, especially considering present company. Not to mention with the guilt that’s presently weighing heavy on his heart.

When he opens his eyes again, Lucio appears to be almost completely unaware of him, instead he’s bent over some documents that Julian has never seen before, and seems to be lost in their study. As far a Julian can tell, the one he’s looking at now appears to be a map of some kind. Julian has no idea where he got them, or when, or from whom. In his current state he finds it difficult to to care. His guilt and unease is a weight in the center of him, and he longs to be rid of it for a little while. Even if it hurts.

“Count Lucio?”

For a moment there’s no reply, and Julian has time to wonder, anxiously, if he’s to be ignored, or if what he’s interrupting is more important than anything he could have to say. But Lucio looks up, using a fingertip to mark his place on the page. Now that they’re in private he’s mild, preoccupied, unthreatening.

“Yes, Ilya?” He uses Julian’s given name, which is a rare intimacy.

Julian chews his lip anxiously, straightening in his seat. “Am I, ah… I mean to ask, will I be… you know, in trouble… when we reach the palace? For what I did.” He lowers his eyes in shame, unable to keep look at him.

Lucio, though, sounds mildly puzzled by the question. “In trouble?”

“For what I did,” he tells Lucio’s golden boots.

“Oh, did you do something? I wasn’t aware.” Lucio’s tone is luxuriant with amusement. Julian’s face burns. “Look at me,” Lucio adds, more sharply, “When you speak to me.”

Julian’s looks up again quickly, fear rushing toward him again. But Lucio doesn’t look angry,
merely… watchful? Stern? There’s something slightly unfamiliar in his gaze, and Julian finds that he can’t name it.

“I am… sorry,” he says, earnestly, having nothing but honestly left to bargain with, “for what I--”

“Don’t-- " Lucio interrupts him, in a warning tone, “Say what you’re about to say.”

“No?” Julian frowns.

“No. It’s been a long evening, and I don’t have the patience for your endless martyrdom at the moment. The fault,” he says simply, “was mine.”

*Count Lucio’s fault??* Julian is aghast at the very suggestion. “No, my lord! you didn’t do anything-”

“Devorak!” Lucio puts his fingertips to the perfect, pampered skin of his temple and forehead, closing his eyes as if Julian makes his head hurt. Opening them up, he says, “One more unprompted opinion on this and I swear I’ll make you sleep in the kennels.”

He sounds *exhausted*. Julian feels a stab of pity. Lucio doesn’t deserve to have to deal with a mess like him. Why does he bother? Julian, wisely, is quiet on the subject… for just as long as he can manage, which is about three minutes. Lucio has already gone back to his study of whatever-it-is on the pages he holds, and appears to have renewed his concentration, when Julian reaches his capacity for self-containment.

“So I’m not in trouble, then?” Lucio scowls at him as he’s interrupted again, and Julian feels himself hunching his own shoulders in anticipation of his wrath. But instead Lucio sighs and seems to relent, tucking his mysterious papers away in some inner pocket of the golden suit jacket.

“In trouble? No, of course not, you never were. The fault was mine in leaving you unsupervised.”

Julian tries to sort out what’s happening, but he can’t. His mind is slow and his thoughts clouded. “If I was never in trouble, then why was I punished?”

“Punished?” Lucio raises his eyebrows. “What are you talking about?”

What’s he *talking* about?? Julian replies by holding up his filthy and bloodied sleeves, indicates with a terse sweep of hand hand his bloodied and bruising face, the stripes on his chest, the dried cum on his ruined shirt.

Lucio examines his nails, frowning delicately over a chip that he finds in one. “That wasn’t a punishment, darling. That was just a bit of fun.”

“A bit of fun?”

Lucio grins, showing his sharp incisors. “Well, I had fun. Strange, I could have sworn you did too.” His gaze drops pointed to Julian’s crotch and back up again.

Julian blushes. “But… that’s all?” he can’t help but wonder, incredulous. “All the theatrics - not that I, erm, didn’t like them, but…?”

“Well, maybe more than a bit of fun.” Deliberately, he takes off his suit jacket, which is pretty but restrictive, and undoes his cravat. He opens an arm to Julian, beckoning with the fingers of the same hand. Julian slouches against his side, head against his chest, and Lucio’s arm comes to rest around his shoulders. “We primarily did that to keep you out of harm’s way.” Lowering his mouth to
whisper in his ear, he admits, “I did enjoy it, though.”

“I… I’m afraid I don’t really understand,” Julian admits, more focused on the comfort of his embrace any anything else.

“Of course you don’t,” Lucio says fondly, “You’re an idiot.” He cards through his hair, kisses the top of his head. “Listen, pet. And try to think for once, hm? You’re a doctor, it’s supposed to be your area.”

“Mmm.” Julian, who’s so far beyond being insulted by these sort of slights that he can’t even remember what it used to feel like, nestles against Lucio, wrapping an arm around his waist, and Lucio has to reposition himself to accommodate it.

“People,” Lucio says softly, “will remember what I did do you in the garden. It will be the highlight of the party, and several will claim to have witnessed it all firsthand. For weeks they’ll talk about it: the blood on your face - blood always makes an impression -, the state of your clothes, the sounds of you begging and moaning just out of sight while I beat and abused you…” He gives a little tug at Julian’s collar, as if this is a fond memory for him (which it likely is), “...and by tomorrow morning a thousand more things will have been done to you in the retelling. If there’s anything the public will never tire of speculating on, it’s my sadistic nature and my sexual proclivities. Nowhere will it occur to anyone that you suffered no punishment other than mine.”

“Mmmhm,” Julian hums agreeably, nuzzling beneath Lucio’s chin. Lucio runs his fingers into his hair and pulls him upright. Julian gives a little cry.

“Pay attention, Devorak! Are you listening to me at all?”

“Y-yes, Count Lucio,” replies Julian, who had been. Well sort of.

“Then you understand what I’m telling you.”

“Yes, of course,” Julian attempts. “Ah, sexual proclivities, highlight of the party, blood makes an impression?”

“Yes. And all for keeping you from the hangman’s noose, my pretty idiot.”

“Mm, yes,” he concurs, trying to lay his head head back down on Lucio’s shoulder. Lucio shoves him back up again, impatient. “Wait,” he frowns. “Keeping me from the? How is that…?” He rubs his eyes with one hand, willing himself to think properly through the fog. “I know it was awful, embarrassing, expensive… but surely not a hanging offense, my lord? That seems a bit, er, extreme.”

“It does,” Lucio nods, “Unless one has tried to burn down a room full of important political figures, both domestic and foreign! Tell me, Doctor did you anywhere in your travels encounter the term assassination attempt?”

“Ah,” says Julian, biting his lip. “Well.” He feels foolish and grateful and humiliated, all at once. Lucio eases his head back down, against his chest, petting him.

“I literally have no idea how you survived in the world on your own,” he muses. “You’re extravagantly incompetent. It’s like you have some sort of gift.”

“I have yet to find a practical use for it,” Julian admits.

“One day, no doubt,” Lucio chuckles, stroking his back, then running the tips of his claws up the back of his neck. Julian wonders, not for the first time, how it is that he always seems to know
exactly what feels good, right with it’s most needed. It’s a far more useful superpower than Julian’s, without question.

In a small voice, Julian says, “I’m sorry.”

“...For?”

“I’m sorry I’ve been a bit of trouble for you, my lord Count Lucio.”

There’s a beat of silence… and then Lucio is shaking against him, as a man helplessly sobbing might, although that seems unlikely. Julian levers himself upright to look at him, and Lucio bends almost double… laughing.

“...My lord?”

Lucio looks up at him, seems about to speak… but he’s overtaken by a fresh wave of laughter. Julian is astonished. He’s never seen him laugh like this, but it goes on and on until he has tears in his eyes, and leans back in his seat, clutching his sides. “Oh, Ilya!” he cries, eyes still wet with mirth. “A bit of trouble for me! A bit!” That sets him off again, but he interrupts himself with a fit of laugh-induced coughing and finally subsides, breathless.

Julian doesn’t know if he should be offended or relieved, or if he should conduct a medical review of the Count’s mental health.

“A bit,” he repeats, looking at him with both affection and chagrin. “Oh, my darling. You set the ballroom on fire. You brought in wild animals… you are a wild animal… you fell in the punch bowl, how did you ever manage it? I don’t even know why you were on the table.” He laughs silently to himself, but briefly, his out-of control hilarity apparently being spent.

Julian’s cheeks pink, but there’s something about seeing Lucio in such a state of delight that makes him wish he’d set fire to something sooner. “I was trying to catch Malak,” he admits, as if this explains it all. “The table was the highest thing I could reach just then. I thought I could catch him and take him outside, and then the punchbowl was just there, and… what? What is it?”

Lucio is looking at him in a peculiar way, although the ghost of laughter still lingers in his eyes. Julian wonders, “Is, um, something wrong?”

“No, nothing wrong.” Lucio mumbles, although he’s still looking at him in that peculiar, fixed way. Reaching out, he touches Julian’s cheek with the tip of his middle finger. “Do you know you still have frosting on your face?” His gaze travels upward. “And flowers in your hair.”

Oh, that. Julian lifts his sleeve (which is already a mess anyway) to rub at his face, and Lucio catches his arm. “No,” he says firmly, drawing him closer, “Let me.”

Still holding Julian’s arm captive in his good hand, he tilts his face toward him with his claws, leaning in. Julian feels Lucio’s mouth against his cheek, his touch impossibly soft as he kisses away the sticky remnants of frosting, then the wet slide of his tongue as he licks his cheek clean. Julian lets his eyes flutter closed, surrendering to his gentle attention.

“Hmmm,” Lucio sighs, pleased. Julian feels him lick delicately along his jaw, kiss his forehead and his eyebrows. Then, angling his head a bit, he murmurs, “I’ve overlooked a bit on your mouth as well... “ And Julian feels his tongue licking at the seam of his lips, urging his mouth open. Julian tastes raspberry-cream frosting on his tongue, and Lucio releases his arm to cradle his face in both hands. Julian knows there was no frosting on his mouth. The kiss goes on for a long, long time.
It's Lucio who finally breaks it, looking into Julian's face and smoothing his hair, as if that could make him look presentable at this point. "Oh, my love," he laments. "What are we do do with you? You can't be abandoned at the palace for too long, yet clearly you can’t be left alone in public either."

Julian just presses his cheek against Lucio's chest, hearing faintly the thrum of his heart, as Lucio links his arms around him. He feels himself smiling, slow and foolish and helpless to stop doing it. "A shorter leash, I guess?"

"I suppose it'll have to be, hm?" Lucio rumbles. Julian can hear the weariness in his voice - and something else, too. They don't talk again until Julian wakes up as they arrive home. He doesn't remember going to sleep.
“Can I put it back on…?”

They’re in Lucio’s bathing chambers surrounded by fragrant steam, having just washed, both of them still dripping onto the marble. Julian touches his the base of his throat, which feels unprotected and bare; Lucio had insisted he take off the fancy dress collar to bathe. Now he gives him an assessing look.

“Are you really so eager?” Lucio’s answering grin is knowing, even smug. Julian blushes.

“At first it felt strange,” he admits, haltingly. “But then - now - after everything, there’s a certain…? I want it.” He finishes, simply.

“Maybe I should make you earn it.”

Julian catches his lower lip between his teeth, his pulse quickening. “...Maybe you should.” When Lucio turns his back to reach for a pair of towels, Julian takes a moment to admire his ass, then wonders, “But what could I possibly do to earn such a privilege, my lord?”

Instead of answering, Lucio tosses a towel over his head with a smirk, covering him like a bird in a cage. Blinded, Julian rubs at his hair in the covered dark. Just as he unveils himself again, Lucio says lightly, “You might start by taking care not to tryst with foreign diplomats in visible social settings,” and Julian’s blood runs cold.

Even after they’d arrived back at the palace, there’d been a distance between them. But Julian had been hazy with submission and fatigue, the panacea of being held and reassured acting on him like a mild sedative. They’d eaten a mild repast of bread and cheeses which was waiting for them, and which helped a little. Then slowly they’d undressed and bathed, and Julian had begun to feel like himself again, for the first time in 24 hours.

The food had been good, and the bath had been lovely. Lucio had even washed his hair for him, stirring the ache of tenderness he’d been longing to feel ever since his bad behavior the day prior.

But even with all his relief, all the warmth between them... there had been the distance. He’d been trying to ignore it, knowing and not-knowing what it was, wanting only to release all the tension still coiled inside him. He’d let himself hope that it would fade, or that it would decrease in size and shape, and could be safely ignored.

And he’s known, the whole time, that he’d to tell Lucio what had transpired, to face him. But he’s been so afraid of going through with it! What if he’s angry? What if… but some things don’t even bear thinking about. Besides, it wasn’t as if he’d really done anything, just been pressed up against the column and seduced a little! He hadn’t even kissed Haniche!

But here it is, the dreaded conversation, arriving long before he’s ready for it. Julian clears his throat.

“You… know about that?”

“Mmm. I’m omniscient, remember?”

“Only where I’m concerned.”
“Exactly. My sixth sense told me that some underhanded bureaucrat of a magician had his hands all over my property - you know, if I didn’t know better, I’d think you had a type.” His words are teasing, but they have an edge - and Julian looks at him in confusion.

“Magician?” Out of all the questions suddenly crowding into his mind, this one stands out as the most incongruous.

Lucio leans back back against the wall, one eyebrow raised. “I should be more specific: Haniche is a mesmerist, and highly trained one at that.” He begins to towel-dry his own hair, roughly.

“A… mesmerist?” Julian wracks his brain. “Isn’t that… some sort of stage magician?”

“You haven’t heard of it?” Lucio seems surprised. “Well, I suppose it’s not as common here, but I thought in your travels… any any rate, his is the skill of suggestion. Explicitly not stage magic. It’s extremely useful in politics.” He strokes his chin, then looks at Julian. “You aren’t responsible for anything that happened with Haniche, of course, considering the circumstances.”

His words should be reassuring, and they almost are - but there’s a thin crease between Lucio’s eyebrows, a tightening at the edges of his eyes. His mouth is pressed into a narrow, unhappy line. He doesn’t ask it, the question that is moving between them like a single drop of poison dropped into an otherwise pristine glass, but Julian answers it all the same.

“...We didn’t.”

Lucio’s tone is carefully mild. “I have no idea what you’re talking about. As far as I’m concerned, the matter is--” Julian drops to his knees in front of him.

Scowling, Lucio is forced to look up from a somewhat aggressive toweling of his legs and feet that he’s suddenly become terribly busy with. He is, Julian realizes with something like shock, not that much better at hiding things than Julian is. His tells are smaller, that’s all. Kneeling there between his feet, Julian takes the towel out of his hands.

“What are you doing?”

Julian doesn’t answer at once. Instead he swallows hard, and takes a breath for courage. He folds the thick toweling around Lucio’s left ankle, rubbing it up his calf then his thigh with brisk attention. “He said you’d brought me to help you curry favor politically,” he begins. “Not with my wits, but with my body.” He pauses to brush the hollow of his knee, then moves to the other leg.

“No,” Lucio breathes, peering down at him, as Julian rubs the tops of his feet and between his toes. What he’s denying isn’t entirely clear.

Julian says, “I didn’t fuck Haniche. Or let him fuck me, for that matter. I didn’t even kiss him.” Still on his knees he uses the towel to dry Lucio’s thighs and his ass, then has to stand to take care of his torso and his back.

“I didn’t say that you had,” Lucio tells him, icily. Under his hands, he feels Lucio stiffen with denial. Julian ignores the reprimand in his tone, tending first Lucio’s beautiful golden arm then and then his natural one, carefully patting his manicured fingertips between the folded towel. He takes Lucio’s hand in both of his and kisses the palm tenderly, breathing in and out against him.

“He asked me to entertain him,” He presses Lucio’s palm to his cheek, holding it there. “He said you’d abandoned me on purpose, that you didn’t care what happened to me.” He presses his mouth to the pad of Lucio’s thumb, then closes his lips around it before pulling away. “He wanted me to go
somewhere with him. He said no one would know.”

Lucio twists a golden hand in his hair, so that he gasps. “Stop,” Lucio warns, breathlessly.

Julian persists, falling to his knees again, still leashed by Lucio’s hand in his hair, and looks up into his eyes. “…I refused. I told him you wouldn’t like it.”

Lucio is watching him fixedly, his brow furrowed, the slant of his mouth hurt and uncertain.

Almost, he could stop here. But says the rest, the part that hurts: “And then, I almost let him kiss me,” he says bluntly, looking into Lucio’s beloved face, watching it hurt him. “I think I even wanted him to. Because I was drunk. And lonely. And confused.” He feels angry tears in his own eyes, and rushes to finish before they can overtake him. “Then Malak came, and I didn’t.” He sinks back on his heels, bowing his head until his forehead rests against Lucio’s thigh. “That’s what happened. Everything that happened.”

Julian feels Lucio’s hand in his hair, no longer gripping, just resting there, heavy. He wants to collapse into tears, as utterly spent as he’s ever been. He wants Lucio to tell him he’s forgiven. He slides a hand being Lucio’s thigh and one behind his knee and and clings to him, comforting himself with the warm familiar scent of his skin.

Lucio says, “Did you know what kind of creature he was?”

“No…” Julian lifts his head, and Lucio cups his chin in his fingers, drawing his gaze. “But I knew he wasn’t you.”

A single beat passes between them… and Lucio narrows his eyes. Julian feels his grasp drop to his throat, and tighten there dangerously.

“What’s wrong with you?” he asks. His voice has gone strangely brittle.

“Wrong with me?” Julian breathes. He feels himself walking a highwire, strung across two points of tension in Lucio, a thing he senses and doesn’t fully understand.

“Yes. Is it pathological?”

“I–I’m not at all ill, my lord,” he stammers.

“Oh, are you certain? Because I have done nothing but wrong you, yet here you are at my feet like a penitent! What would you call that, if not pathology!”

Julian knows precisely what to call it, but the anger in Lucio’s voice, in his face, makes him hesitate “My lord, I…”

“Oh do shut your mouth, Devorak!” Lucio exclaims. Julian shuts it. “I gave you a terrible fright you didn’t deserve,” Lucio insists, “and while you were still weak I left you alone with a predator! I made you wear my collar and leash in front of wealthy and powerful people, after which I beat you for the entertainment of the crowd.” Lucio releases his throat, and Julian finds that he can fully breathe again.

“I have made,” Lucio says, “with you, every misstep that I can make. And you still look at me like… that.”

Julian stares at him, but he can’t speak. He has the answer in his throat, he is strangling on it, but he can’t say it. Lucio won’t let him say it, he’s holding it back with the force of his iron will and Julian
can’t breathe for all the things he isn’t allowed to say. Fighting the tears that want to rise up and muddy everything, he lifts his hands to Lucio’s waist, buries his face against him. “You know what’s wrong with me,” he chokes. “You know!” He turns his head to kiss Lucio’s right thigh, and the crease where it meets his body. He lets his nails dig into his bare skin, desperate for something to cling to.

“Weakness,” Lucio hisses, fingers moving in his hair.

“Please,” Julian whispers, kissing Lucio’s thigh, his stomach. He passes his tongue across Lucio’s navel, then explores it with his tongue’s tip, eyes half-closed in pain and pleasure. “Please,” he says again. When he looks up, Lucio is looking down on him, glowering and transfixed, his eyes very dark.

“Contemptible weakness,” Lucio says again, this time more quietly. “Sentiment.”

Julian’s hands move on Lucio’s hips as he nuzzles against the thin pubic patch just above his cock, lips parted, tongue darting. “I am yours;” he says. “Care for me.”

Lucio curses under his breath in a language that Julian doesn’t recognize as Vesuvian, his touch moving to Julian’s nape, his caress like a ghost’s. Julian reaches to brush his fingertips with with his own, then to fold his own long fingers around Lucio’s. Lucio doesn’t pull away.

Julian nuzzles against Lucio’s thin golden fur and the heat of his skin, which grows hotter the closer to his core, breathing him in. How he’s longed for him! Even fresh from the bath, expensively perfumed, he still smells, still tastes of something musky and animal, unable to be obscured completely, purely himself.

“What shall I do with you,” Lucio says, softly. Julian can’t tell if it’s a question. “You are so... fragile.”

“Walk me over a cliff.”

“Not that.” He feels Lucio’s fingers tighten in his spasmodically, gripping too hard for just an instant before he relaxes again. “No.”

Julian looks up, seeing Lucio framed through his half-lowered lashes. “Then do what you like,” he says, quietly and without artifice. “I belong to you. I’m yours.”

Count Lucio swallows hard, and shakes his head, as if he could stave off the truth between them. “No...” he says again, but it comes out like a plea, instead of a command.

Julian sinks his teeth into a spot just above his left hip, and Lucio gives a soft, breathy sound of surprise. Roughly, he reaches down to pull Julian back to his feet. Julian lets himself be drawn without resistance, and Lucio grasps him tightly by the upper arms. He spins him around, and pushes him against the long mirror, pinning him there. The mirror is cool and smooth against his back.

“I’ll hurt you,” Lucio hisses, glaring into his face, “in ways you don’t like! I’ll keep making mistakes. There will be no end to the mistakes I’ll make with you, the little wounds I can inflict on your stupid, soft heart, the betrayal to your childish sense of loyalty. And sometimes I’ll hurt you on purpose, just because I can.”

Julian lets his head fall back against the surface of the mirror, offering his throat. “Alright,” he agrees. There is something in him as soft and formless as melting wax. He feels Lucio’s claws digging into his arm on one side, his fingers on the other, hears Lucio’s huff of frustration.
“This isn’t a proposition you stupid leech-sucking termagant!”

“Yes it is. I consent.” He wants to wrap his arms around Lucio, to hold him and be held. He tries to reach out, but Lucio pins him back down with a little growl.

“Stop!” Lucio lifts his lip in a snarl, teeth bared. But Julian yearns toward him, gaze moving between his mouth and his eyes.

“Stop what?” he asks. He tilts his head slightly to one side, lips parted. If Lucio would only close the distance, their mouths would meet, and they’d fit together perfectly.

“Stop… feeling things all the time!” Lucio cries, exasperated.

“Then tell me what to do instead.”

“You’d like that, wouldn’t you? To be made to crawl, to be debased and used until you’re hard and desperate?”

Julian struggles to keep the smile from his face, but he can’t quite make all of it go away. “Yes,” he says, and “Will you?” but Lucio only scowls at him. He tries again, more softly: “I’d love it. Please?”

Again, he presses forward, and again, Lucio holds him where he is.

“You have no discrimination,” Lucio practically spits, “You’re everything Asra said about you. You’ll kneel for anyone.”

“Not just anyone.” Julian corrects him, not rising to his bait. “Not anymore.” He lets himself go pliant, then arching his back away from the mirror. Shifting his balance, he draws the edge of one foot up Lucio’s calf and then higher, attempting to work one long leg around him.

Lucio glowers at him… and reaches down to help, letting go one of Julian’s arms. He gives every impression of doing it against his will, but still he guides Julian’s knee against his hip, supporting it there while he wraps a leg around his waist, and continues to hold him there. There’s a warmth between his thighs where they meet, a wonderful feeling of connection, and Julian rolls his hips gratefully. Already, he can feel himself getting hard. He slides his newly-freed arm across Lucio’s shoulders, and Lucio irritably swats it away.

“No one else,” Julian says. “No one else, now.”

Lucio’s gaze travels slowly down Julian’s captive form, and then up to his face again, where their eyes meet. His pupils are wide and dark. ‘I think… I hate you,” Lucio says, softly.

Julian bites his lip, and watches Lucio’s gaze fall helplessly to his mouth. “Hate me all you want, then,” he offers. “Punish me for it. Do whatever you like with me. I am yours.” Slowly, carefully, he reaches for him again. Meeting no resistance, he brushes his long fingers against the short, fine down at Lucio’s nape, caresses him there.

“Stop,” Lucio breathes, his gaze moving between Julian’s eyes and his lips.

Julian threads his fingers into Lucio’s golden hair.

“I do,” Lucio says, “hate you.” His voice comes out in a whisper, yearning.

“As you like, my lord,” Julian whispers back. He pulls him in close, to be kissed.
Chapter Summary

This one has smut in it! :) And also, y’know, some other stuff.

(Confidential thank you to Devo and Leo who helped me with my German vocabulary, Ria for her support and suggestions, and to all my other dear friends who put up with my constant demands for attention to my scribbling: you’re all so generous and kind. I’d *gladly* Lucio you any day of the week. <3 )

Julian pulls Lucio in close... and is almost surprised when Lucio allows himself to be kissed. Their mouths meet carefully, in a tenderness of mutual yielding that is altogether unfamiliar, a softness which he has known Lucio to be capable of offering, but not a thing he is inclined, often, to receive.

Now, though, Julian is allowed to pursue this rare intimacy, and even to tease his lips apart with slow sucking kisses and the inquisitive tip of his tongue. Julian’s heart races. With one broad hand he cradles the back of Lucio’s head, fingers tangled in his golden hair as he presses in on him, then in again, warm and steady. He allows him no quarter for retreat, but neither makes any aggressive advance to which he might react with his characteristic viciousness: he only presses and touches and presses again, withdrawing minutely after each caress, only to return. Each point of contact is made with such attention to his response as to be, each, its own small act of communication.

He brings his parted lips to Lucio’s, finally, and finally lets himself rest against him, mouth moving languidly, tasting his breath and then seeking with deliberate pressure the warm darkness inside his mouth. Here he will probe for the secret loci, remembered, and caress searchingly with the dexterous tip of his tongue, stimulating sensations particular to Lucio, so that Lucio will soften against him with half-resisted desire, opening further as he allows Julian to give him even more pleasure… but Lucio doesn’t yield.

Instead Julian feels a slight stiffening in him, a held breath where there should be a sigh, a tautness beneath the skin of his jaw instead of a deepening relaxation. Julian draws back, slowly, opening his eyes while his own vision is still clouded with lust, to see Lucio’s expression. (This is a risk, as so many things are with him. But it can’t be avoided, because to ignore the almost imperceptible changes in his mood has many times proven a far greater danger.)

Lucio studies his face with urgency, his silver eyes restless on the landscape of Julian’s features. Julian finds, to his stark surprise, something like his own sense of vulnerability reflected there in the other man’s face. His mouth is swollen with kisses and his fine skin slightly flushed, but in the deep crease of his brow and the rare openness of his expression is a wild uncertainty, as of that of a man poised above some high ledge visible only to himself, not knowing where his next step will lead.

“You should know, I… would not have left you behind,” Lucio finally, speaking slowly. He reaches up to take Julian’s face between his hands, drawing them even closer to one another. Lucio is looking hard into his eyes now, still searching.

“I know,” Julian says softly. Then, “I was so afraid you had.” He swallows. “You... you have to take better care of me. If you want me tamed.”
Lucio leans in, close enough to brush his lips with his own when he speaks. “I promise.”

Julian kisses him again because he can’t help it, tasting the promise in his mouth. They pass it back and forth between them like a shared secret, taking it in turns to press and to yield. Julian is already feeling the first tug of yearning that will draw him toward surrender when Lucio reaches down to caress Julian’s hip, then pull his leg tight against his waist, from where it had begun to slip, and pushes him hard against the mirror at the same time.

The sudden, possessive gesture makes Julian’s pulse jump, and he’s immediately and acutely aware of every place where their bodies meet. He gives a satisfied little groan into Lucio’s mouth and Lucio draws back, thumbing his cheek and smiling his arrogant, cocksure smile. Julian wants nothing more than to curl up under his feet, maybe forever. He reaches around Julian for something on the dressing-table next to the mirror - Julian is sure it’s the collar, but he’s wrong.

Lucio says, deliberately, “You don’t run from me, not ever again. I don’t care how frightened you are. That’s no longer allowed.” He spills bath-oil into his palm, letting it coat his fingers and drizzle carelessly onto the floor.

“Yes, Lucio.” Julian closes his eyes, feeling shame and lust well up in him at the same time. Lucio’s claws gripping his chin and jaw are sharp, his tone remonstrative.

“No, keep your eyes open. Stay here where I can see you.”

Julian swallows, hard, against the lump that wants to form in his throat. He opens his eyes. “Y-yes, my lord Count Lucio,” he says, with difficulty.

Lucio nods, holding him with his eyes (and his claws) while he reaches down to massage the thick lubricating oils around Julian’s entrance and then into him. He’s not rough, not exactly, but there’s a sense of efficiency and detachment, this part of their play lacking the sensuality that it usually has. It’s as if he’s an animal, Julian realizes, or even a piece of machinery, or any other possession: he’s being carefully prepared for use. The idea of this is overwhelmingly exciting: Julian shudders with need. He has to fight, actively, to control the urge to shut his eyes and retreat into himself. Lucio’s gaze is penetrating.

Lightly, Lucio trails his claws down Julian’s chest and throat. Julian feels the moment when he curves his fingers just enough to leave faint red marks on his skin, and aches for more. Lucio watches his face even as he slicks his own cock; there’s a moment when his eyes go soft with pleasure, dilating slightly, one corner of his mouth curling up more than the other. Julian realizes, with an erotic shock: he’s thinking about fucking me.

“Put your arms around me,” he Lucio husks, voice pitched low. Julian complies at once, wrapping them around his neck, the feeling of obedience somehow delicious as it’s renewed. “Good. Hold on tightly,” Lucio tells him. It’s all the warning Julian is given before the Count pushes into him, filling him completely in one slow, unrelenting slide, and with a guttural sound of relief.

“Ah, gods” he groans, appreciatively. “Always so good... oh, Ilya...!”

Julian has just enough time to feel flattered, hasn’t even fully settled into the sensation of being so utterly, wonderfully full, or the hot pulse of Lucio deep inside him, before Lucio startles him by sliding both arms under him, then hoisting him up as if he weighs nothing. As if, in fact, he doesn’t both outweigh Lucio and have several inches on him —and push him back against the mirror which is also the wall, adjusting his stance so that he can take more of Julian’s weight. Julian is too shocked to do anything at all - although he does manage to hold on.
“Your legs - wrap your legs around me, idiot,” Lucio grunts, slightly breathless with the effort. That doesn’t make any difference - Julian’s still impressed as all hell, even as he complies with the order. He knows, has known, that Lucio is strong; he’s small but compact, and Julian has seen his tight, muscled body often enough, been effortlessly manhandled often enough, to know that he has, erm, excellent core strength? But this… this is altogether new.

“Am I… aren’t I too heavy?” He whispers, suddenly afraid of hurting him.

In response, Lucio narrows his eyes… and thrusts up and into him with a snarl of effort. Julian cries out, letting his head fall back, his eyes going half-lidded as his vision swims. Everything is different like this: the new angle, the short hard thrust of Lucio inside him… and more than anything the vulnerability of his body in this position, the passivity it requires, as if he’s nothing more than a toy to be used as it’s owner wishes.

Lucio makes an adjustment to the way he’s holding him, an awkward sort of juggling as he bounces him on his cock once (eliciting another cry), rolls his hips subtly and widens his stance… and then he begins fucking him in earnest, supporting his full weight with the help of the mirrored wall as he pistons in and out of him with calculated savagery, something wild and hungry in his face, his powerful hips flexing as he thrusts and withdraws and thrusts again, not holding back any of the significant strength in his body and his will, taking what he wants. Taking what’s his.

Through the miasma of pleasure, so intense that it’s difficult to put thoughts together, Julian finds himself understanding, maybe for the very first time, how much Lucio holds back when he takes him, the appetite he channels and tempers and protects him from, how careful he is when he’s playing with Julian, who is his favorite toy. There’s none of that restraint now, no softness real or feigned. Only a relentless driving need, behind while Julian can sense a will like iron, like nature herself, a will like a god’s.

And it’s So. Fucking. GOOD.

In this position of being absolutely controlled, there’s little he can do but cling to Lucio, open his body to him, and be fucked. It doesn’t allow him to thrust, or take his own pleasure, all he can do is surrender to Lucio’s use of him, the possession of his body and his will. Julian doesn’t think he’s ever been fucked this way - he’s always been too big, too imposing, to be made small like this. (Well, always until now.) The sensation of being used like a compliant object, his very weight supported by someone stronger than he is, is an intoxicant. He abandons himself to Lucio’s desire and his use of him, drifting. He isn’t sure he’s ever felt this good, this right in his entire life. Oh, this is what Julian is for! A savage joy fills him like light.

"I said, keep your eyes on me!" His drifting is interrupted by Lucio’s terse command, as he stops moving inside him. He can’t lift his hands to strike him, but he doesn’t need to.

"I’m sorry!" Julian cries. “I didn’t mean to look away—"

“When I’m taking you, pet, you’ll keep your eyes on me. On me. From now on. This is the last warning you’ll…ngghh… get, sub… oh! my darling… subsequent failures will result in… ah… disciplinary… measures.” He’s resumed fucking him while he talks, which must mean either he’s close to his own edge, or that fucking Julian this way just too good to deprive himself of. Whichever it is, Julian is glad. He’s not even tied up, but he’s never felt so powerless, so helplessly controlled as he does right now. He wants it to never stop.

“Yes, Lucio,” he breathes. “I’m sorry, Lucio.”

This earns him a single, hard thrust that almost hurts, and he cries out - although he manages to keep
his eyes on Lucio, this time.

“Not good enough,” Lucio growls. “I want to hear you say it.”

This takes a moment to penetrate, as Julian in his drifting, distracted state struggles desperately to understand what he means, what he wants. Meanwhile, Lucio’s still fucking him, his rhythm slower but no less punishing, staring into him with those silver eyes of his, as bright as knives flashing in the moonlight, and as dangerous.

“I, ah… I will, um… ohh!” he gasps, as Lucio speeds his response with another cruelly deep thrust. “I’ll keep my eyes on you!” he yelps in a rush. “From… ahh! n-now on! My lord! oh. gods…” he parrots, desperately.

“Good,” Lucio says. It’s not praise, though - he’s acknowledging a correct response, training him the way one would train a stubborn or particularly stupid dog.

Lucio does reward him - or more likely, he’s rewarding himself - with a few slow, deep thrusts each ending with a sharp, sudden jab that makes them both moan at the same time. His lips brush against Julian’s ear. “If you come before I tell you to,” he breathes, “I’ll punish you.”

Before Julian can respond, he feels Lucio’s fingers tighten where they hold him, and his claws dig in hard. Lucio fucks into him hard and deep and in an ever-increasing staccato rhythm, not holding anything back, and Julian knows he’s racing toward his climax, using Julian’s tight and willing body as it’s meant to be used. He’s nothing but an object for pleasure now, the means by which Lucio may enjoy himself. Julian hears himself crying out Lucio’s name, his throat raw with it and unable to stop. He doesn’t think he can keep himself from his own climax, when he’s being treated so coldly and used so hard by this beautiful, cruel man, but oh, he tries!

All too soon he feels the stiffening, the tightening of Lucio’s body, then he thrusts deep into Julian but doesn’t withdraw again, just stays buried to the hilt inside him, as deep as he can possibly get, pushing into him with sharp little contractions of his hips, groaning in relief...

Julian feels his release, feels him come inside his body in hot, strong spurts, and he receives it like a blessing, like an approval, like love. And, by some miracle, he doesn’t come then, at the same time, although the effort of holding himself back, even by such a thin thread, is intensely painful, and not in a metaphorical sense.

“Lucio, please!”

“Shut up,” Lucio says, ignoring his desperation. Julian shuts up. Lucio lets himself fall forward against Julian’s shoulder, leaning on him, breathing hard, as he rides out the last aftershocks of his orgasm. His body softens against him, and Julian can feel it wanting to sag with satiated relaxation, but he can’t, he’s still holding Julian. Muffled, Lucio tells him, “When I put you down, don’t collapse like broken puppet. I know you want to. Stay on your feet like a man.”

“Yes, Lucio.” Agreement is all he has strength for. He doubts he can stay on his feet, even if Lucio wants him to, but that’s a problem for future Julian.

Bracing himself, Lucio lowers him slightly, and helps him unlock his legs from their death-grip around his waist. He withdraws from Julian’s body, which Julian feels with a pang of loss, still taut with need as he is. He’s remarkably careful with him, for a man whose arms are trembling with the effort, and still suffering the lethargy of what seemed to be an intense climax only moments before.

It’s a near thing - he stumbles, sliding down the wall on tingling legs… but he manages, in the end.
Apparently his desire to please outrules his habitual behaviors, when it comes right down to it. Lucio grins at him, still panting a little. His eyes are still bright, but the wildness in them has been dimmed a little.

“That was good,” Lucio grins. “I thought for sure you’d go ass over kettle and melt into the floor,” he says.

Julian feels the heat of his blush creeping along his neck, heating his face. “I don’t do it every time,” he protests, defensive.

Lucio rests a forearm against the mirror next to him, and leans in to kiss him. “Yes, you do.” The kiss is warm, and delicious, and doesn’t contain the same ferocity with which he was just fucked within an inch or two of his sanity.

Julian still clings to him, if not as tightly as when he was being suspended above the ground. “I guess I’m just overcome by your remarkable skill and rare beauty, my lord,” he offers, soft and breathless.

“That must be it,” Lucio agrees. Julian can hear the smile in his voice. Lucio’s hand - his good one - trails down his chest, light and teasing, until he reaches Julian’s throbbing and neglected cock, which he begins to stroke in an unhurried way. Julian’s breath stutters, his hips jerking involuntarily toward Lucio’s touch.

“No,” Lucio purrs, “tell me, my darling. Just how desperate are you starting to feel?”

“Um. Very? M-my lord?” It’s not eloquent, but it’s not a lie. The fact that he didn’t lose control while Lucio first fucked him, then came so magnificently inside him, is a testament to how deeply he wants to please. But now he also needs to come so badly it hurts him, and Lucio’s renewed teasing makes everything worse.

“That’s what I thought,” Lucio hums, pleased. “And you know I’d never leave you in such a state. Not a good, obedient creature like yourself,” he murmurs. So saying, his hot mouth finds the lobe of Julian’s ear, and he bites down with carefully controlled pressure, until he draws blood. Julian gasps.

“Please…”

But Lucio only sucks the blood off, worrying the tiny wounds with his tongue, enjoying his discomfort. “Shh-shh,” he soothes. “I won’t leave you like this, I’m not that wicked. Well, not usually. But since I’ve already enjoyed you once, let’s make a game out of it.”

“Y-yes, my lord,” Julian breathes, already regretting it.

“Good boy. Now remember, I still haven’t given you permission. So let’s say… if you can make it five minutes without coming while I suck your cock, you can have a reward. What would you like?”

Julian bites his lip, but he doesn’t have to think long. “Could I… could I have the collar back on?”

“Hmm, I’m surprised you didn’t ask to be allowed to come,” Lucio muses. Julian realizes his mistake.

“No! Oh, please, I want that instead! Please let me come, Lucio?”

“I’m just teasing, darling. If you can manage it, I’ll let you come and you can wear the collar to bed. Now, isn’t that generous? Never let it be said that I’m not good to you, love.”

Oh, he is! “Thank you, my lord,” Julian rushes to say. “Thank you for your, ah, your kind
"Good," Lucio says absently, and Julian knows that it was the right answer. "So if you can manage it, I’ll let you come and you may wear the collar to bed. But if you can’t... there’ll be a punishment. Tomorrow, I think, because you’ve worn me out for tonight."

"I’m sorry, my lord."

"I’m not. So? Do we have an agreement?" He doesn’t offer to tell him what the punishment will be, and Julian doesn’t bother to ask. It won’t make any difference to know.

Julian nods quickly. Not only eager to please, but desperately eager to feel Lucio’s mouth on his cock, even if he means torment him. “Yes, my lord!”

Lucio strokes his hair, reward him with a sweet, chaste kiss. “Good boy, Julian.” Then, before Julian has time to enjoy his praise, Lucio slides gracefully to his knees. He’s kneeling - at Julian’s feet, which feels wrong but also arouses him in some deep way - looking every bit at home there, his among the spilled oil and the faint but visible spatter of cum from when he pulled out of Julian, and perhaps a few drops of their sweat. Steam rolls in the room like a sweet warm mist, and Julian feels like he’s dreaming. He closes his eyes, taking a breath for strength, suddenly overwhelmed.

...In a flash, Lucio is on his feet again, striking him hard in the face. “What did I say about keeping your eyes on me?” He asks. He doesn’t even have to raise his voice, the displeasure in it is enough to hurt, and enough to correct him.

Julian feels his heart sink. “You said I am to keep my eyes on you when you take me, at all times, from now on, unless you’ve said otherwise. My lord.” He finishes, miserably.

"Correct," Lucio affirms. "But apparently you have difficulty remembering. That’s something else we’ll have to work on,” he sighs. “My, what a lot of work you are, doctor. It’s a good thing you’re so pretty.”

"Thank you," Julian says, miserably, lowering his eyes.

Lucio takes his chin between his fingers and kisses him, gently. “There, love,” he says against his mouth, relenting a little. “I toy with you because I enjoy it. Is it really so difficult to endure?”

Julian can’t tell, anymore, if he’s being soothed or teased. He supposed it doesn’t make much of a difference. “No,” he says, honestly. “It’s... wonderful. I’m just sorry when I displease you. I wish I’d remembered.”

Lucio cocks an eyebrow at him. He waggles his chin gently between his fingers, his tone indulgent. “You’re so pretty and charming that I keep forgetting that you are really very stupid.”

"Am I really?"

“Yes,” Lucio says, decisively. “You do please me. Don’t you realize that I enjoy it even more when you fail, and I have license to hurt you, and punish you, and make you weep with shame?”

Julian frowns at him, hurt. “But you don’t need permission for that.”

“No, I don’t. But it’s more satisfying when I have. Because then you blame yourself more.”

Julian shivers. “You’re cruel,” he says without thinking.
Lucio nods, with a rueful smile. “I keep telling you so, but you never seem to believe me. When I convince you, finally, will you escape me once and for all?”

It seems to be a real question, so Julian answers it. “No,” he says, simply and honestly. “Even if you were to mistreat me, I’m not sure I could. You’re the best man I’ve ever known. I lo—”

Lucio cuts him off with a hard, sudden kiss, thrusting his tongue between his lips. There’s nothing of love in gesture, or even of desire. “No,” he says, firmly.

Julian sucks his lip between his teeth, stuck. He looks into Lucio’s eyes. Pleading.

“No,” Lucio says again, more gently. He kisses pulls him down to kiss his third-eye spot. “No. Now be a good boy, and come in my mouth,” he says, matter-of-factly. A moment later he’s on his knees.

Lucio makes Julian’s brain hurt. Has he given him permission…? Or…? Gods, he can’t think!

Lucio doesn’t offer him any clarification, but immediately all other considerations are driven from his mind as Lucio leans forward, kissing the head of his cock with tender adoration, exactly as Julian might have done in his place. He flicks his gaze upward, to make sure Julian’s watching like he’s supposed to, then holds his gaze as he circles the head slowly with his tongue, letting his own eyes close in lazy enjoyment. Pleasure like pain gathers in Julian’s center, aching with the need for attention and release, and Julian chokes on a groan.

“Have I ever told you,” Lucio says, “how good you taste?” The swollen head of Julian’s cock is already drooling precum, which laps and swallows, licking his lips. Julian feels his body’s need, locked-down as he has it, begin to unspool toward failure. He wants so badly to be good, but Lucio.... Lucio is kneeling between his thighs and lavishing him with praise as he teases his poor, neglected prick, and one is as irresistibly good as the other and it’s clear that Julian is about to die.

“Have I ever told you,” Lucio is saying, unaware of his impending demise, “How much I love the feeling of your cock in my mouth?” He suckles at his cockhead, drawing it into his mouth, then taking a little more, before he pulls back with a lewd popping sound.

Fuck! Julian feels his body straining to betray him, and curses beneath his breath in Nevivon. Oh, it hurts! His need burns like fire. He sucks his lower lip between his teeth and bites down hard, to distract himself. He needs to look away, he has to! But Lucio is watching him, can predict him with a frustrating precision.

“No,” he purrs, before Julian can shut his eyes disobediently, “look at me. I want you to watch.” Julian feels his tongue exploring the slit in the head of his cock, and his knees start to feel weak. He whimpers, pathetic, and Lucio favors him with another upward look, coy and devastating. “Everything about you is a wonder,” Lucio is saying, “every part of you perfect. You fill me with delight.” He licks a long, wet stripe up Julian’s aching shaft, and then another. Julian is almost beyond caring about whether he’s about to win or lose.

“I’m going to keep you at the end of my leash forever,” Lucio says, his voice soft and warm with happiness as Julian suffers under his experienced mouth and hands. “I’m going to hurt you so much.”

With that, he abruptly takes Julian in his mouth: his pretty, aristocratic lips stretch Julian’s cockhead, his cheeks hollowing to suck him as he pushes forward, hard, taking most of him into his throat. Julian feels the repressed gag reflex, admires it in a distant way... and holds onto his self-
control. Barely. Forced to watch this unbearably erotic performance, tears of frustration stand in the corners of his eyes. Lucio groans around him, the vibrations transmitted to his desperate cock.

Then Lucio’s claws dig into his hip, hard and unexpected: the pain comes at once, sharp and bright and... so very, very good. Julian arches his back, crying out, and comes.

It’s so intensely unexpected that it’s almost painful and he arches backward, closing his eyes, lost in the overwhelming sensation. “Lucio!” he gasps, as if his name alone could anchor him. But he’s coming, hard, helplessly, into Lucio’s mouth and throat, which is a sacrilege and unbearably good at once. Lucio sucks him until he’s empty, Julian’s legs shaking with the effort of staying upright, swallowing, and doesn’t even punish him by continuing once he’s finished. When the last spasms have left him, Lucio releases him, pulling back slowly, and even gives a tender kiss to his wilting prick and then to his trembling thigh. Then he simply holds his arms out to him, staying where he is.

“Come on, dummkopf.”

Julian sinks toward the floor with relief. Lucio, anticipating him, takes part of his weight before he falls, so that it’s more of a supported sprawl. Then he’s in Lucio’s arms being held: spent, satiated, grateful.

It’s a little while before he can speak, during which time Lucio holds him patiently, sometimes kissing his hair or idly stroking his back.

Eventually, Julian says, somewhat blurrily: “Did I... win or lose?”

Lucio yawns, nuzzling his hair. “Doesn’t matter. I was going to punish you either way.”

“Mmm.” Julian tucks his head beneath Lucio’s chin. Lucio prods him with a couple of claws, none-too-gently.

“Ow!”

“...I’d rather not sleep on the floor of the baths, if it’s all the same to you. Can you walk yet?”

“Hm. Carry me,” Julian grins against his neck. Lucio pushes him away, but he’s smiling.

“Get up, idiot!”

The idiot gets up. He can, in fact, walk, although it seems like a huge chore. Lucio supports him with an arm around his waist until they can make it to his bed.
It’s morning. Julian wakes in tight cocoon of warmth that he gradually identifies as a combination of silky sheets and warm limbs, both of which he’s wrapped up in so completely that it’s difficult to move. After a few moments of sleepy-eyed contemplation, he decides he doesn’t really need to move after all, and resigns himself to the comfort of being restrained. He draws a slow breath, releases it, and closes his eyes.

There’s a stirring to one side, and the bare leg that’s been carelessly tangled in his ankles shifts against him, until it’s sliding across his hip and between his thighs, its owner nestled against his side, one golden arm lying heavily across his chest. “It’s going to be like that, hmm?” Lucio rumbles. “You’re just going to lie there, pretending sleep, until I wake up and find a use for you?”

He turns his head and finds himself looking into Count Lucio’s quicksilver eyes as Lucio rests his cheek on Julian’s shoulder, the sharp planes of his face still soft with sleep. He loves the way Lucio looks in the morning, tousled and unguarded, not yet masked by makeup and severity and seeming.

“I thought it was a pretty good plan,” Julian grins. “Have you thought up a use for me yet?”

“Working on it,” Lucio admits. “Any suggestions?”

Turning slightly so that he’s flat on his back, Julian hooks an arm around Lucio’s waist and pulls him against himself, urging him on top of his own prone body. “A few,” he offers, biting his lip around a pleased smile as Lucio indulges him.

Straddling his hips, Lucio leans over him, only holding himself a little apart, his good hand splayed on Julian’s bare chest, smiling his arrogant smile. “Well?”

Julian holds up a hand, extending his index finger. “One,” he says, “We could stay in bed today.”

Lucio scoffs, one side of his mouth curling up into a smirk. “We can’t do that *every* time we have a bit of drama, you know. People will talk.”

“Since when have you cared how people talk?” Julian laces his fingers behind his head. “Last night you took me to a fancy dress party on a golden leash.”

“You make a fair point, but I do have one or two things to do aside from being at your beck and call all day long.”

“Pity.” Julian holds up a second finger, moving down his mental list of Things, then pauses. “Hang on: how much time before you have to abandon me while you minister to the needs of the realm? I can think of several inventive uses for a captive doctor, but a few are time-dependent.”

Lucio looks at his four remaining fingers, presumably his four remaining ideas - and closes his hand on them, pressing Julian’s palm back down against his own chest, gently. Julian feels a vague sense of unease.

“There’s that word again,” Lucio says, looking at him steadily. “You say it a lot, do you know that?”

“Captive?” Julian asks, innocently enough. “Doctor?”

“Abandoned,” Lucio enunciates carefully.
“Ah,” Julian says, glancing away. “Well. It’s a common enough word, my lord, but clearly I need to expand my Vesuvian vocabulary if I have already begun to—“

“Eyes on me.”

His conversational tone hasn’t changed, but it’s a clear command, and Julian’s gaze snaps back at once. “Yes, my lord,” he says, apologetically, although Lucio hadn’t been playing with him, so he wasn’t breaking any rule.

Lucio says, “Good.” Then, evenly, “The evening before last, when you were so badly frightened that you would have run from me like a feral animal— that can’t be allowed to happen again, Julian.”

Julian bites the inside of his cheek to distract himself, but he can feel his face begin to crumple all the same. “My lord, please…” he begins, unsure of where he means for the sentence to end up, or indeed what he’s pleading for. He just can’t go through with this, not again. It hurts too much, it’s too fraught, and above all he’s afraid of what Lucio will think of him, what will happen to him, if he loses control of himself again! He doesn’t want this! Please. Let it stay in the past and be buried.

“Calm yourself,” Lucio orders, his cool voice breaking through the rising panic. He’s aware of Lucio again, looking into his eyes, holding him there with the power of us on gaze. “Look at me. Focus on me, Ilya. Stay out of your head. Just look at me.”

Julian finds himself struggling to do as he’s bid, as simple as it is, squeezing his eyes shut. For once, Lucio doesn’t correct him. Instead he feels Lucio’s firm touch, warm and comforting, as he leans forward to stroke his cheek. “That’s a good boy, Ilya. You’re doing fine.”

“Am I?”

Lucio nods. “Yes,” he says, his voice sure and steady. “And all you have to do is keep your focus on me, and I’ll tell you what to do. Alright?”

“Y-yes, Lucio,” he says, still shaky but able to speak, relieved for the moment of the burden of making decisions. “Thank you, Lucio,” he adds, which earns him another caress. Tentatively, he opens his eyes.

“Ah, there you are.” Lucio leans in to kiss his mouth, and his kiss feels like heaven. Julian sets his hands on Lucio’s waist, just to feel how close he is, his solidity. When he breaks the kiss, lingering to look into his eyes, Julian finds that he’s able to look at him again.

Speaking slowly, as if he’s choosing his words with care, Lucio says, “I can’t understand… why you fear this as much as you do, when your value is so great.” Julian opens his mouth to say something, although he’s not sure what, and Lucio forestalls this with two fingers across his mouth. “No, let me talk.”

Julian kisses his restraining fingertips to signify his acquiescence, and Lucio smiles at the gesture. “What a good boy you are,” he murmurs, fondly. Julian blushes, and Lucio kisses him again, through his own fingers.

“As I was saying,” he continues, self-importantly, “I don’t understand, but I don’t think I need to. There is no need to tell me the history of whatever wounds you carry —it won’t help and I’m not especially interested. However,” he says, “it’s time that you began differentiating the present from your past. It inconveniences me that you should live in constant fear of rejection, when there are so many more reasons for you to be afraid of me, many of them quite valid, and all of them far more
interesting than the wrongheaded idea that I intend to abandon you at any moment.”

Julian listens as well as he can, but he’s not really sure what he’s meant to say. Hope and unease roll in him, colliding, and it’s difficult to understand. Lucio peers at him. “Can you hear me properly?”

“I… I think… no,” Julian admits, at some length. Lucio nods, with a grimace.

“I thought not. It’s not your fault, I’ve always known that you’re a bit of an idiot. It will help if I can show you. Come with me, Doctor.”

He climbs out of bed, extending a hand to help Julian to his feet. Lucio slips on an ornate silk robe and golden slippers, but Julian is allowed to dress in last night’s dress-collar. He bites his lip as Lucio clips the lead to the collar, then prepares to lead him out of his chambers.

”Lucio!” he whispers, urgently. Lucio only arches one golden brow.

“Problem, doctor?”

Julian’s face and chest both feel hot. “I’m, well… I’m naked! Aren’t there a lot of people about already?”

Lucio grins. “A good number, I imagine. Yes. Now are you my creature, or are you not?”

“I’m… yours,” he admits, after only the slightest pause, lowering his eyes. Lucio tips his chin back up with an approving smile.

“Good boy,” he says. “Then no one else’s opinion should matter to you. Come.” And he leads him away out the door and down the hall.

Julian thinks, given the route, that they’re going to the groomers, and he wonders if he’s about to be exposed to the indignation of the pet baths again. But they pass by and go through another door, where Julian’s ears are assault with a cacophony of discordant screaming.

“Shula! How are you this morning? How are all my orphans?”

The woman he’s addressing is a crag-faced, serious type, stocky, wearing the same sort of uniform the groomers do, scowls good-naturedly at him. “You know I hate it when you call them that!” She returns, above the noise of the room.

From every corner, or rather, every wall, birds of various kinds sing and screech and yell, at what seems to be the top of their lungs. Julian, still naked, has been outfitted in a pair of rubber boots identical to the ones Shula wears, presumably because of the unpredictable nature of what might be on the floor.

“Shula is trained in the care of our injured and sick winged friends,” Lucio says easily, and Julian tries not to smile at the schoolteacher-ish tone that creeps into his voice. “She’s highly qualified and indispensable - but she’s not what we’re here to see,” he explains, pulling Julian to a large enclosure. “I want you to see some of these lovely creatures.”

Julian allows himself to be pulled along, not bothering to shout above the noise, and having no idea at all what he’s meant to be observing. Has Lucio reserved a cage for him? Maybe the pet baths weren’t so bad after all.
“This fellow is a horned owl,” Lucio says, as they stop before one large cage, sounding as proud as if he’d invented the bird himself. The bird who regards them is perhaps half as long as Julian’s arm, mottled brown, with suspicious, staring yellow eyes. Julian’s seen an owl before, so he’s not entirely impressed, but he decides to let Lucio have his moment.

“He was found stuck into a chimney-stack in the Temple District,” Lucio is saying, “although the sweep who found him had no idea how he got there.” The bird turns its head to peer at Lucio at a queer angle, apparently unafraid of him - Lucio peers back in much the same spirit, widening his own eyes comically “He was emancipated, wounded, anemic… although he’s much better off now. We’re still rehabilitating him, and he may end up as a permanent member of the menagerie if Shula doesn’t deem him suitable for release. I’d love to keep him here where I can look after him, of course, but he’ll be much happier in the wild, if he can be brought back to health.”

In a larger enclosure, in the company of a few other large birds of different kinds, a big-bellied white bird with a graceful neck and a ridiculous mouth comes close to make an unpleasantly, hoarse sound in their general direction, and Julian smiles. “Pelican,” he says.

Lucio nods, looking pleased. “You know them?”

“I’m familiar. Terrible thieves of fish, if you want to know.”

“I can imagine! This one was found with a broken wing and a broken foot, arrested in his migration. He’s been patched up for now, but will be recovering for awhile yet.”

In a separate section, slightly apart from the other cages and heated by insulated braziers kept carefully low, Lucio indicates a shy pile of pinfeathers and beady eyes, that resolves into three separate birds in one insulated box, their makeshift nest cradled by soft blankets and warmed by a nearby heat source. “Mourning doves. These ones are just nestlings.” His expression softens. “They were abandoned in the nest, probably their parent was either injured or killed while foraging for food, and unable to return. The were brought to me by one of our groundskeepers, and I brought them here. I don’t hand-feed them myself, but I do check on them daily or as often as I can, and oversee their feeding schedule.”

“His lordship doesn’t fully trust me,” Shula offers, with a wink at Julian. She’s come up behind them and is preparing to feed the nestlings. “He’s protective. But in fact, I quiet a bit more experience that even his lordship. It’s the whole reason I’m employed here - or so I’ve been led to believe.”

“You never can be too careful, my dear,” Lucio remonstrates, apparently unperturbed. Their bickering feels worn-in and comfortable, as if they’ve been having the same argument for as long as Shula’s been in the Palace’s employ.

They continue through the room, Lucio stopping at every few cages to show him wounded songbirds and recovering scavengers, raucous seabirds who feel they’re being kept prisoner and shy nestlings too afraid to complain. After they’ve made the circuit of the room, Julian expects another lecture, but Lucio simply rests a hand on his arm. “Let’s go,” he says.

“Yes, my lord. Where are we going?”

“You’ll see.”

They are going to the groomers. Damn! Julian’s stomach sinks. He feels Lucio’s hand at his low back, as if he knows what he’s thinking.
“We aren’t here to have you bathed,” he laughs. “At least not this time. I think you’re clean enough for now.”

“My lord Count Lucio!” cries the first person who sees him, a male groomer Julian doesn’t recognize. “What an honor to see you here in person! Will Doctor Devorak be needing to be bathed today? Or perhaps a brush and a groom?” He isn’t teasing, simply referring to Julian as he would any other of Lucio’s pets. Despite the strangeness of the morning, Julian can feel himself blushing.

“Not this time, Martin,” Lucio smiles. “I’m here to pick up Mercedes’ old dress collar, do you still have it? And her tags as well, if you please.”

“Ah! Yes of course, Count Lucio! It is in the safe, allow me to fetch it for you.” The young man bows and goes into a smaller back room, returning with what appears to be a jeweler’s box. Julian is skeptical.

“You keep your dogs collars in a safe box?”

“Hounds, not dogs, Doctor. And yes, when they’re worth as much as this one I do. Martin, is there a mirror we could…?”

It’s an unnecessary question, as the one wall of the room is lined in tall mirrors as if it were a salon for humans, but Martin shows them to a small, curtained area with two tall mirrors and some sort of metal table that seems to be made for restraining restless animals. Julian eyes it nervously.

“I won’t need to use those restraints on you unless you resist,” Lucio promises, noticing the direction of his attention. “Were you planning to?”

“Well, I’m not sure,” Julian says dryly. “I’ve been feeling a bit nervy ever since I saw that squirrel earlier, you know.” Lucio cuffs him gently.

“Get on your knees,” he says, “You’re much too tall for your own good. I’m not even sure this will fit, but I think…” Lucio opens the jeweler’s box with a snap of hinges, and Julian catches his breath involuntarily.

Certainly, he’s seen the dogs (or the hounds, rather) lounging about the palace in their expensive accessories, without thinking much of it - but he’s not sure he’s ever examined one closely - why would he need to? And besides, this is a dress collar, presumably for when Lucio wants to take his hounds to some kind of black-tie affair, which Julian has to admit might be a better bet than taking him to one, at this point.

However, this is less of a collar than an exquisitely jeweled choker, the gold chain embellished with a number of small but brilliant diamonds, interspersed with rubies the color of blood.

“Lucio,” he says, shocked at the opulence of it, although he should know better. “Are those… well, real?”


“Sorry,” he says.

“Don’t worry, Devorak,” Lucio says curtly. “Mercedes managed not to break it, or lose it, or trade it for a round of drinks, and I have every confidence you can do the same. Probably. Tip your head up.”

He does, and Lucio holds the extravagant ornament to Julian’s throat, examining him in the mirror.
“Yes, I think this will do,” he says sounding satisfied. Pushing his head forward, Lucio fastens it at his nape. It’s larger than it should be, being made for the thick neck of Lucio’s hunting dog, but it will fit him. Lucio, though, tsks.

“It’s too big. It’ll slip right off over your head,” he frowns.

Julian looks straight up at him. “Maybe if I do headstands in it,” he teases. Lucio cards his fingers through his hair, turning Julian’s head to one side and then the other.

“Martin!” He calls, not very loudly. “We’ll need a locking clip for this collar, please. Did you find her tags?”

“Yes, Count Lucio!” Martin arrives almost at once, a bit breathless, as if he’s been rushing. Lucio holds out his hand, and the man drops a jangle of metal into it. Lucio gathers a loop of gilded collar at Julian’s nape, then there’s faint snap of metal as he does something to it so that it stays short, followed by a heavier click that he recognizes as a padlock.

“What are you—“

“Shh,” Lucio hushes him, absently. “Animals don’t talk.”

“Human ones do, I’m almost certain,” Julian argues.

“True. Unless they have gags in their mouths.”

Julian takes his meaning, and closes his own mouth for the moment. Lucio examines the collar at his throat, where it’s slightly scratchy against his human skin, and the weight of clip and padlock at the back of his neck, and seems to judge it good, or at least good enough. He takes one more thing from his palm, and affixes a weighted silver tag to the front of the collar, adjusting it until it’s perfectly centered. Julian squints to read it in the mirror, but can’t.

“It says, ‘Property of Lucio of Vesuvia.’ I put these on the hounds so that if they wander too far from home for some reason, they’ll be returned here, to me. He tweaks the tag, and seems pleased with the way it twinkles in the light. “Now the same will be true of you. And I’m going to leave word with the guards than any human caught trying to leave in one of my collars should be stopped at the gate, and held until I can get there to reclaim them.”

“Are there a large number of us?” He’s teasing - at least, he thinks he is. Lucio smirks.

“No, just the one. You overestimate my patience by a large margin if you think I’m capable of keeping a herd of ill-trained pet doctors, even with my resources.” Lucio eases two fingers between the collar and his skin, and Julian realizes he’s checking the fit - not too tight, not too loose. “Do you consent?” he asks, lightly.

“Yes,” Julian says at once. “How long will I wear it?”

Lucio frowns, considering. “A week… perhaps two. Does that suit you?”

Julian nods, fingering the heavily-jeweled edge of his new accessory. “Yes, if you wish. Is that how long you think it’ll take for me to… what did you call it? Tell the present from the past?”

Lucio seems amused. “No, I think that’ll take much longer.” He ruffles Julian’s hair, then strokes his scalp with his claws to make him shiver. “I think it’ll take a week or two to have one made to your own measurements. I mean, If you’d like one, of course,” he appends, as if only just now remembering that this is something to which Julian will need to agree. Julian looks up at him,
surprised, his eyes wide.

“You… want to give me a collar?”

“One more suited to you, yes,” Lucio says. His voice is cool, any emotion there carefully controlled, but there’s something uncertain at the very edge of his expression. “That is… if you want one? I thought that wearing it might help to set your mind at ease. However, if you’d like to wait, I understand. I’m a difficult man, everyone says so, and it makes sense that you’d like to keep your options—“

But Julian is springing to his feet in a rush of energy, which he knows is disobedient but it can’t be helped, to press himself close to his Count and kiss his mouth, again and again. “I want it,” he says quickly. “I want it! Please? Please!”

Lucio kisses him back, laughing.

“But why did you show me your birds?” He asks this question much later, when Lucio has attended to his actual duties and Julian to his. They’re in bed once again, Julian lying safely encircled by Lucio’s arms. Julian still wears Mercedes’ old collar, which he is unable to stop touching no matter how many times Lucio tells him to.

Lucio seems surprised. “So that you’d know that I enjoy caring for broken things, of course,” he says, as if it should be self evident.

“Because I’m a broken thing?”

“No, dummkopf, because you keep telling me you’re one.”

Julian plays with his tag. He tries to bend enough so that he can read it, but he can’t. “What will my tags say.”

“Much the same thing, except with your name. Why?”

“I just wondered if they’d have any particular instructions.”

Lucio chuckles. “Oh, yes. I’m trying to decide between ‘Must be restrained at all times’ and ‘Don’t leave unattended near open flame.’ “

Julian elbows him, which only makes him laugh harder. “It’s your own fault, you know,” he says, sulkily.

“What is, my lovely disaster?”

“Leaving me unsupervised! You know better than that.”

Lucio pretends to remorse. “Indeed I do. Which is why I accept all responsibility for property damage, fires, floods, and influxes of wildlife.” The mood shifts slightly, and Lucio pulls him closer.

“Lucio?”

“Mm?”

“Do you really mean it?
”Mean what?”

”You know. That you’re going to, you know, keep me?”

Lucio kisses the top of his head, on the edge of sleep now. “I’d be a fool to let you go,” he promises.

Julian fidgets with his collar again. “Even though I’m so much trouble for you?”

“Mmhm. Even then. Stop jangling that, I’m trying to fall sleep.” Lucio hooks a finger beneath Julian’s borrowed collar, to keep him from fussing with it.

“...What if you get tired of me?”

“I won’t, love. Unless, of course, you keep me up all night asking one inane question afte another.” He yawns, pointedly.

“But what if I do something truly awful? Erm, again, I mean.”

“You do terrible things on nearly a daily basis, Devorak. Yet here you are in my bed, wearing a small fortune in jewels, labeled with a return address in case you should wander off, and keeping me awake for no reason. What’s all this about?”

“I don’t know. I’m sorry. I worry about it.” He hears the edge in his own voice, and hates himself.

Lucio sighs, and Julian worries that he’s edging toward true irritability, not just the fun kind. “Doctor. What did we say about the past?”

“Differentiate,” Julian mutters.

“Good. Whatever old memory you’re keeping around to hurt yourself with, fine. But stop writing me into it. I have so many new and creative ways to hurt you that soon you’re going to forget all about that one, I promise.”

“But you ARE going to keep me.”

Lucio buries his face in Julian’s neck with a groan. “If you ask me that one more time, I’m going to tie you down and find a better use for that busy mouth of yours, I mean it.”

Predictably, Julian asks one more time.

...it’s a long time before either of them get to sleep, after that.

THE END

(well, the end of Things Go Wrong, anyway. More dribs and drabs to come, of course!)
Chapter Summary

**Sometimes, these things take Julian by surprise.** (A syrupy sweet he/drabble hybrid about their current relationship versus what Julian is probably used to.)

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**One: Lucio doesn't deny him in public.** At first it confuses Julian, but against all odds it seems to be true: Lucio treats him the same way in public as he does in private. It's not what Julian's used to, and in fact, the first time that Julian ever reached for his hand, shyly, at a small public gathering, his stomach had been in knots.

They'd played together earlier that day, but what should have been an ordinary, casual scene turned heavy, emotional, satisfying. Although it'd been more than worth it, the intensity of their play had left in his consciousness thin threads of submission/headspace/neediness that he couldn't quell. Submissive or not, his attendance at the event couldn't be delayed or avoided, and Julian had done his level best to pull himself together. He'd done a pretty good job, and things were going well - until, about halfway through, he'd said something foolish to somebody important, turned as red as a lobster, and then tripped over something that knocked over something else - nothing too important had been broken, in fact only the people nearest him had even noticed - but he'd humiliated himself, undoubtedly embarrassed Lucio (again). Even under the best of circumstances he'd be self-conscious after such a blunder, but in the state of mind he'd had at the time he wanted to fold in on himself and cry. Why did he always have to ruin everything! Why does Lucio trust him in public to begin with!

When the individual he'd been talking to made a slightly snide remark in response to his blushing apology, he'd had to excuse himself, biting the inside of his lip hard, before he made a complete spectacle of himself.

He'd calmed down in the bathroom, splashed cold water on his face, and somehow managed not to burst into tears... but when he was finally able to face the party again, his heart ached for Lucio's reassurance and wouldn't be satisfied with anything else. Finally, feeling nervous, he'd sought him out. In the past, he'd been rebuffed for trying to approach some of his dominant lovers or playmates in a public setting. Julian understood - they were embarassed to be associated with him, to be associated with what they did together. It was understandable, and while it hurt his feelings, he didn't hold it against them. After a time, he stopped trying for that kind of validation, and just took what he could get.

But this time he wasn't able to help himself; without realizing it, he'd come to depend on his lover's cool gaze and steady reassurance in moments of overwhelm. Now he needed Lucio's touch, needed to hear his voice, even if it was just going to tell him to leave him alone while he was doing more important things. It would, he'd assured himself, be alright. It would be enough. Probably.

He'd found Lucio in an anteroom, deep in conversation with some important head of something-or-other... Julian wasn't very good at keeping track of these things, and after all it was Lucio's job, not his. For his part Julian tried to be pleasant conversation, and to look pretty in dress clothes, and to stay out of the way. But he'd stolen up next to him, selfconscious and shy, and slipped his hand into the Count's. He'd stood with his eyes on the ground, waiting to be reprimanded, when he realized that conversation had stopped. He'd dared a glance up, heart beating too fast.
Lucio was simply smiling at him - surprised, but he didn't looked shocked to see him, or unhappy with his overture. "Ah!" Count Lucio was saying, almost as if he was pleased to see him turn up at his side, uninvited, to interrupt what may have been an important conversation. "Loise, this is my personal physician and..." he'd hesitated just enough to give the next few words an appropriate weight, "...dear friend, Doctor Julian Devorak. Julian, Loise Midrian, head of the Security Council of Domestic Affairs."

And just like that, Julian had found himself shaking the stranger's hand, being greeted politely, almost as if he were an equal, almost as if he had a right to be there. Should he leave Lucio to his conversation, having received what he came looking for? But before Julian could extricate himself, Lucio's golden arm slid across his back, Lucio's hand spread possessively at his waist, and he'd pulled him in against his side - right there in front of everyone! Without missing a beat or even making things awkward, he'd cajoled, "Just a moment, love. Stay and answer some questions for us about the medical community, would you mind? It's so informative to have an insider's point of view."

Julian had known for a fact that Lucio didn't need any such thing. But he'd felt flattered all the same, honored to be included. And Lucio had called him love in front of the statesman! Right out in public he'd held him close - and seemed to have little intention of letting him go! Surprised, Julian had tingled all over with happiness. Later, he wouldn't be able to remember what they'd talked about, what inane thing he might have said. The feeling of being acknowledged though, of being drawn in rather than pushed aside, had stayed with him for a long time.

For Lucio, who answers to almost no one, it's a much less complex issue. He's never been shy about displaying his more, ahem, unusual hobbies, especially his beloved and carefully curated pets, in front of anyone at all. Why should he be? His darlings are chosen for their beauty and intelligence as much as their submission. He dresses them himself, makes sure they have a moderate understanding of court etiquette, and has no problem disciplining them if they step out of line; this has always been true. Why, then, should he be ashamed? If anything, his contemporaries should feel inadequate because they don't have a beautiful, adoring creature to show off at every opportunity!

Especially, he isn't shy about his association with Doctor Devorak -- or stingy with his acknowledgement of him. He keeps him, after all, because he enjoys his company, and it's no less enjoyable in a crowd than it is in private. Why bother have nice things, if you can't show them off to other people, to demonstrate how important and powerful you are? He doesn't want his associates to think him proper and ordinary! He wants them to burn with jealousy.

For these reasons and others, he never pulls away when his pretty pet doctor reaches for his hand and he never would, regardless of who's watching. In fact he'll usually thread their fingers together at once, giving him a reassuring squeeze if he seems to need it. And his affectionate acknowledgement of him is hardly limited to holding hands. Instead, he caresses him whenever he's nearby, which is often: in public he'll frequently guide him with a hand on his low back, or drape a possessive arm around his waist. If he is in fact busy, well it's no trouble to allow Julian to trail along beside him, clinging to his hand for as long as he likes, or even to sit quietly at his feet, regardless of what he's doing. He's noticed, of course, his pet's tentative shyness when he longs to be near him - while he finds it endearing, he absolutely doesn't understand it. Lucio is, after all, the wicked and sadistic Count of Vesuvia, what does he care for the opinions of others? Why should Julian concern himself with any opinion except his? Julian belongs to him, as much as the hounds or the servants or the palace itself. If he wants him nearby, then that's where he'll be.

When he’s in the mood to really show him off, Lucio will occasionally take it upon himself to court him for the benefit of onlookers - at fancy dress parties or formal banquets he'll bend his head to kiss his long-fingered hands with a coy brushing of lips, offer his arm when they walk together, pull out
his chair when he sits down. At formal dinner affairs he'll either insist that he be given a proper place setting at Lucio’s side, or allow him to sit at his feet with his head in his lap while he strokes his hair, feeding him from his own golden plate. At balls and masquerades he'll lead him onto the dance floor over and over, even though his height means Julian has to lead - knowing that his pet is an excellent dancer, lithe and graceful and eye-catching. What he wants is for other people to notice Julian, and want his attention for themselves, and then be forced watch him fawn over Lucio's every word and gesture. Maybe Lucio will pull his great lanky body into his lap to coddle him, or maybe he'll push him up against the wall to force his tongue between his lips until he moans. If they're lucky, maybe they'll get to watch the pretty doctor suck his cock until Lucio cums down his tight throat, or witness how sweetly he begs for Lucio to enjoy him. Lucio certainly hopes so.

**Two: Lucio doesn't ignore (or belittle) the fact that Julian is touch-starved.** It’s true Lucio has never before heard the term “touch starved” and feels a little confused by the basic concept, but he’s certainly become aware of the gnawing, lonely desire that is a constant in Julian Devorak. With him, Lucio never uses his touch as either a punishment or a reward, as he might do with his other playthings - and particularly not in front of others. That sort of thing, he's quickly learned, triggers in his darling a pain that runs deep and seems old; a fault-line in him, something that leads to profound underground earthquakes that sometimes requires days of careful reassurance to soothe back into stillness. That sort of thing, while enjoyable for awhile, is dreadfully time consuming, interfering with Lucio's ability to use him as he likes. Thus, Lucio avoids it.

Because he's aware of it this strange and fascinating thing in him, Lucio never rolls his eyes at the way Julian sometimes shivers at his lightest caress, leaning into his touch hungrily. Why would he? The amount of control and power this gives him over the larger, stronger man is absolutely intoxicating. No, Lucio wouldn't refuse a gift like that. Instead, when he notices such a response he’ll repeat the caress three or four times, usually with subtle variations, curious as to which has the greatest effect on the doctor - mentally archiving the information, as he always does, so he can better manipulate him and efficiently bend him to his own desires whenever he wishes. And if his experimentation causes poor needy Doctor Devorak to shudder or gasp, crying out with need -- well, so much the better. He doesn't do it strictly to torment him, although that can be a rewarding game in itself. No, if time allows he'll often follow this teasing by inviting him into his lap, where he can be petted and cosseted to his heart’s content, soft with happiness. If there isn’t time, which is too often the case, then he’ll most often leave him with the kind of kiss that promises much, much more later, if he’s good.

Attention of this sort of invariably leave poor Julian a blushy mess, humbled as always by Count Lucio’s generosity. For Julian, who has rarely experienced the kind of attention the Count seems to lavish on him without a thought, it sometimes seems that he's been blessed by luck beyond all measure, beyond what he could ever deserve. It feels, almost, like he hadn't known just how badly he'd been craving it, how lonely his body had been for affection, until Lucio came into his life like a miracle and began to give it to him whenever he wanted. He doesn't even have to earn it, it's just his for the asking! Most of the time, it still feels like a dream, one he hopes he won't have to wake up from.

Julian lives for the nighttimes, when Lucio invariably summons him, and will often fall at Lucio’s feet the moment he enters his chambers, eager to please. And no matter what he’s done to him, afterwards, always, Lucio cares for him, usually dresses his wounds himself, cradles him in his arms and tells him he’s done well. Even when he does something wrong, he still wants to hold him afterward, keeping him safe. Julian would do anything for him, this powerful and beautiful man who has no reason to want him, but does.

The truth, though, is that Lucio cherishes the power he has over him in these moments; he needs it
almost as much as his beloved submissive pet does. It bolsters his own insecurities to be needed this way, feeds his bottomless hunger to be worshipped and adored. In fact, each desperate groan, every soft plea, sends a jolt of pleasure straight through him: pure electricity. He thrives on it, finding the hollow, hurting places in the other man, and being the one to fill and comfort them each time: doing this, Lucio becomes his savior, his beloved, his god. Oh, he has no illusions: they're both broken men. But they're broken in opposite places, and they fit together like puzzle pieces: perfectly. He can't be sure that this is what love feels like, having no real basis for comparison. But whatever it is, it's better than anything else he's ever had, and he intends to keep it. If it's up to him, Lucio will never let him go.

Three: Lucio doesn't neglect his pet's appetites. Julian's insatiability is a thing that has often been a source of shame and degradation for him. This seems strange - on first blush, it's surprising that his playmates, particular the more eccentric among them, wouldn't welcome and nurture such a thing. And at first, that's usually true. When he's new and still exciting, the fact that he's always ready and willing to fuck is an incredibly desirable quality. But once the novelty wears off, Julian starts to seem like work. He knows this, and hates it, and can't seem to escape it. No matter how respectful and subtle he tries to be, he always tries to instigate too many times, begs for attention too much, makes himself too available. He's worked hard to counter this with excellent proficiency at anticipating and catering to his partner's desires, along with a strict attention to his skill in bed, so that they'll want him, but it's never enough. At some point, the excitement always turns to irritation, disdain. Julian tries to hide his body's eagerness, at best this causes him physical and emotional pain, and at worst can result in the kind of cruel games that make him feel so small, reduce him to begging when the ache is too much to bear, leave him hurting for the attention he'd willingly give to his partners regardless of his own mod, but has become afraid to ask for. As a consequence, he's learned to be ashamed of the heat and strength of his desire. He uses it to please others as often as he can, and tries - oh, he tries! - not to ask for too much for himself, so that he won't offend. But the aching need is always there, eating at him, hollowing him out.

Lucio, though, is different. Lucio is different than anyone he's ever known, in this regard as in others. Although Julian's been his adoring plaything for a long time now, Lucio never mocks him for his unending desire, never degrades him and calls him cruel names because of it, never teases him for it - or when he does tease him, he's sure to allow him, whenever his sadism is satisfied, to sate himself, the pleasure at these times so great that he sees flashes of color behind his eyes before the world goes entirely black, finding himself turned inside-out, screaming, sobbing... satisfied. Strange as it may seem, Lucio seems to enjoy this aspect of his pet doctor, taking great pleasure in knowing that he's nearly always ready and willing to be fucked, that no matter how recently he's come he'll be able to get hard again after only a short recovery period, and that Lucio can enjoy him over and over until he's exhausted himself, as if Julian was a playground he can delight in until he's worn out, and always come back to when he's read for more. He knows Devorak will always welcome more use, harder fucking, will beg for it even. Lucio uses words like "remarkable" and "wonderful" and "a treasure" describe him at these times. Julian always feels a slow, uncertain pride well in his chest, knowing that what he is pleases this man he adores above all others. It makes the cruelty of his past lovers seem distant, unimportant, in the light of Lucio's approval.

Shockingly, Lucio is often willing to tend to his pet's needs even when he himself isn't aroused or doesn't have time to really play with him, a thing which never fails to both embarrass and thrill Julian. There's just something so unsettling, so out of place, about the icy aristocrat suddenly dropping to his silk-clad knees to undo Julian's trousers, his smile as knifelike as ever, to take his aching cock into the warm, wet confines of his skilled mouth. Lucio feels both deep amusement and quiet pride whenever he reduces such an articulate man to mere whines and half-syllables. He does it often.

The truth is that caring for him this way never takes much time: he's just so damnable easy that it's
hardly even any trouble, although Julian will never understand or believe this. In fact, when Lucio’s in a particular hurry, it’s a matter of a few minutes at most to push a hand between his darling’s thighs and stroke him - either whispering abuse and endearments into his ears as he shudders, or else kissing him deeply and possessively, the way that he likes - soon he’ll be trembling and gasping and coming messily into his hand, eyes glazed with gratitude and relief. He’s always ashamed, afterward, of needing this, although he does need it, and is much better kept when he’s well tended to.

Julian still protests, with annoying frequency, that it isn’t right, that he doesn’t deserve it. Lucio, however, insists, quite correctly, that it isn’t any of his business. He claims that this is part of the care and upkeep involved when one has a beautiful pet doctor who’s always ready to fuck at the drop of a hat, and that to do otherwise would be irresponsible pet ownership. Does Julian want him to be an inhumane and thoughtless pet owner, an irresponsible hoarder of doctors? And besides, it isn’t really up to Julian, in the end. He’s Lucio’s property, and Lucio will do as he wishes with him. If that happens to include tending to his lovely body, making sure that he’s content as a kitten in a basket of laundry, so that he stays soft and malleable and always a little in his debt… well, Julian should shut up about it, shouldn’t he? It’s hardly his place to tell Lucio what to do.

Four: Lucio doesn’t sleep alone. It should go without saying that Lucio holds him close at night. While Julian doesn’t officially live in Lucio’s private rooms, Julian does have several changes of clothes there (including some clothing for more private viewing, if that could really be considered clothing), a toothbrush, and a scattering of personal effects. While he still uses his own quarters, which are very well appointed and not far away, it must be pointed out that his bed hardly ever has to be dressed, because it’s rarely if ever slept in.

On most of their nights, of course, Lucio enjoys him first, making the full use of the doctor’s strong, lithe body, his dark appetites and his fragile heart. But regardless of what they do or don’t do before bed, when Lucio sleeps he wants him in his arms, close to Lucio’s own heart, where he belongs.

On their first few nights together, back when they were new, Devorak had seemed so nervous! He was afraid to be held, even more afraid to ask for it, although every nuance of his body language cried out for physical affection. Those nights, although he might not like to admit it, had been unexpectedly sweet ones for Lucio: reveling in his role as both caretaker and dominant, he’d gone to great lengths to soothe and reassure him, convincing the frightened doctor that, yes, Lucio wanted him there, despite the fact that he’d already enjoyed his body and his surrender. He assured him that he, Lucio, adored him, that he enjoyed showing him affection and caressing him, as he was both pleasant to the touch and his responses quite rewarding. He’d said that Julian should remember that many people enjoy petting even dogs and cats, and as a human being Julian is potentially and even more rewarding object of affection. He’d promised him, not long after, nothing would please Lucio more than Julian learning how to ask if he might be held and given attention, that he’d never be punished or scorned for such a request. On that, he’s kept his word: All Julian ever has to do is ask.

(Lucio wondered then, as now, who would hurt him so much... and why, when the man is so very easy to manage. Most of the time, Lucio puts it down to laziness and a lack of imagination. But he tells himself (and almost believes it) that doesn’t matter now: He’s Lucio’s problem now, he belongs to him now, and he’ll sleep wherever Lucio wants him.

Where Lucio wants him is wrapped around his body like a gangly clinging vine, needy and eager, nuzzling to be fondled and kissed. Lucio wants him burrowing closer and closer in his sleep, as if he could somehow merge with him completely, become part of Lucio’s skin and bones, and never be apart from him again.

Lucio, who is at his core insecure and jealous, finds this particularly endearing. He’s often thought of literally leashing him to his bed, handcuffed and blindfolded, each night. But while the symbolism is
lovely, it inhibits his ability to keep him as close as possible, to arrange him to his liking or save him from his nightmares, and even to ravish him if he should wake in the night (as he often does), so it won’t do.

At any rate, the leash or lack of leash isn’t the important thing: the important thing is that if Lucio has anything to say about it, Julian Devorak won’t sleep alone ever again, unless for some unfathomable reason he should want to. (And it means Lucio won’t have to sleep alone, either.)

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