A Slow Drip of Miseries

by struckthunder

Summary

It is stupid and dangerous, and yeah it is, but to Quentin, it is worth it. It is worth everything to get Eliot back. Worth his life, worth magic, all of it. But, it doesn't work. He doesn't even know what happened to Eliot, if the Monster is still there or if Eliot was even okay.

You don't deserve to know.

He tells himself.

It's your fault, it's your fault, it's your fault.

He knows this, they all know this. So Quentin disappears.

Notes

A/N This was plotted around episode 4 or 5 of Season 4, well before the finale. Even with that, there are a lot of similarities, I took into account what has happened but my own twist. But, be advised that there are thoughts of suicide and self-harm in this story. Please read the tags before proceeding.
Quentin has practiced the spell so many times that he ends up burning off parts of his fingerprints. He shoves a few bloodied fingers into his mouth and swears around them as his last attempt of the spell fails. Flipping back a few pages he sees where he went wrong. He swears again and gets off the floor. Kicking over the stack of useless books piled high in the corner he lets out a frustrated scream. He knows that if Alice were here, she would have had the spell done hours ago, but he can’t go to her. This is something he has to do alone. Gathering himself back up he goes back to the spell circle he has made, sits in the center of the charcoal drawn ruins and relights the candles.

_Please, please, please._ He prays as he goes through the motions again and again and again. His body is aching with the repetition and his mind goes a little foggy.

He only knows he has done it right when the world warps and he feels the ground shake. His skin is on fire. He looks at his hands and they are glowing. He grabs the stone in the copper cup and focuses all his energy on it. He chants the spell and tries not to pass out. The air becomes thin and thick at the same time, it’s like breathing through honey. Sound is bombarding him from deep within his chest. He thinks he’s going to destroy the world, but he also thinks it’s worth it. Blood racing through his veins is hot and too fast. The stone starts to sing in his hands and he has to stop chanting to start screaming. The stone feels like it is burrowing itself within his palm, burning through his flesh and bone.

The air is back in the room with a loud snap and a burst of white light. Quentin gasps and falls to his knees, one hand still clutching the stone. He lays down on the floor just breathing for a long time before he can unclench his fist and look at the stone. It hurts to look at for too long, almost like looking at the sun. Quentin rolls to his back and tries to get up and can’t seem to make his body work. He’s drained, but he knows that it’s now or never. The spell gives him one shot, a shot no one else was willing to take. A shot that no one was stupid enough to take. He pushes himself up and stumbles back down. There is a ringing in his ear that won’t fade. He gets back onto his feet and the world is misted by tears. He’s not sure why he’s crying, pain, exhaustion, triumph, loss, take your pick. He needs to get to the Monster. He needs to shove this stupid stone into his chest and let it burn its way through the body it holds. He needs to believe that this will work. He needs to hope against hope that it doesn’t kill that body. He needs Eliot back.

He gets to the door of the ratty room he did the spell in when the Monster blips in behind him. Quentin spins and rushes him. There is a brief look of confusion before Quentin has the stone pressed to his chest as he pushes with all he has left. The scream that leaves the Monster’s mouth is the most inhuman sound it has ever made. The Monster drags Quentin down to the floor with him. He manages to stay on top and digs the stone deeper and deeper until it disappears. His vision and hearing seem to be clipping in and out. There are flashes of the Monster with Eliot’s face then nothing over and over. It’s nauseating. His head hurts and his hands are on fire, then there is nothing.

He wakes to someone shaking him. Blinking back into the world and sees Julia’s frantic face above him. She is saying something although he can hardly hear her. Tears are in her eyes, leaving traces of black mascara down her cheeks. She turns and says something to whoever else is in the room with them. She looks back at him and shakes him some more. Slowly sound comes back. It’s muffled like he is listening underwater, but he can finally make out what Julia is saying.

“Q, Jesus Christ, what did you do?” Her voice breaks. “What the fuck did you do?”

Quentin’s head falls to one side and he sees Margo and Alice leaning over Eliot. Over Eliot’s _body_
He wants to ask but he can’t seem to get his mouth to work. Alice is trying to do a spell and all she keeps getting are little firefly like sparks. Margo yells at her to try harder then she catches Quentin looking at them. The rage in her face is enough to tell him that there is no coming back from this. Even if Eliot lives. If.

Penny 23 pops in and Quentin hears him say something about the Library, then suddenly he is being whisked away. Away from the charcoal covered floor and blood magic. Away from New York. Away from consciousness. Away. Away. Away.

When he wakes he knows he’s in Fillory, but he's not in his regular room. There is no full bed with red and gold blankets, no light streaming through the windows and no warmth. He is in the dungeon. The ground is hard and cool, so much so that he presses his burnt hands there to quell them. There is no one in the cell across from him and from what he's hearing, no one occupying any other cell. What he had done had warranted him to be alone. He wants to scream. Instead, he pulls at his hair. He knows what he did was stupid and impulsive, but he had to try something. He couldn't wait around any longer to see if Eliot was still there or if the Monster was going to kill them all.

As he lays there he can sense that something off about Fillory. There is still magic in the air however, it’s different, it feels far away. Like smelling the ocean even when you're miles from the shore. When magic was full and bright Quentin could feel it all around him, big and welcoming. Now it was there, but as if it was hidden beyond a hazy film. That surprises him, he was sure it would all be gone.

Footsteps echo from the stairwell and Quentin has just enough time to try and straighten himself up before he faces his friends. Margo's face speaks so loudly. Her fingers twist in her dress and her lip curls up in disgust. Alice opens her mouth to speak, but Margo holds up her hand to stop her.

“Q.” She starts. Her voice is clear and biting. “What you did was reckless and stupid. You nearly killed El and because of that I don't think I'll ever be able to forgive you.”

He perks up at the mention of the word ‘nearly.’ Eliot must be alive. A feeling bigger than hope fills him. It's almost like joy. Quentin thinks he can't quite have that yet.

“If it were up to me you would live out your days here, alone.” Margo continues. “But, it's not just up to me. Penny is going to take you back to New York and he's going to leave you there. What you do there is your choice, but if I ever see you in Fillory again, I will get my way and you will die in here, you get it.”

Quentin nods.

“We understand why you did it,” Alice says and Margo scoffs. “We all wanted Eliot back, but you don't have all the facts, you never do. When we found that spell we all agreed it was too dangerous, that it was too risky. That spell nearly wiped out magic. You nearly destroyed magic again Q.”

Quentin hesitates before replying. “I knew the risks.” His voice surprises him. It's low and rough as if he hadn't spoken a word in months.

“What?” Julia asks, her voice is hollow sounding.

“I knew that there was a good chance of me destroying magic. I knew that going in.” He says it to the ceiling since he can't say it to their faces “And I did it anyway.”

“Quentin, why?” Alice says in a near sob. “You love magic, why would you risk it like that?”
“Why would you risk Eliot like that?” Margo hisses back. She doesn’t wait for an answer. “23, take him away.”

Quentin tries to speak only to be cut off by Penny's hand on his arm then he's back in New York, in the penthouse apartment. He grabs for Penny to take him back, but he's too slow. He's gone and Quentin is alone.

His hands start shaking. It's slow at first, the steady tremble making its way from his fingers then to the wrist, then it's the arms. He shakes himself to the ground, curling into a ball and lets himself cry. He knows that even if Margo had given him the chance to explain he probably wouldn't have taken it. It's his fault, he knows that. It always seems to be his fault. He had tried to get them all on his side like before with Blackspire, except they said no. They said it was stupid and dangerous, and yeah it was, but to Quentin, it was worth it. It was worth everything to get Eliot back. Worth his life, worth magic, all of it. Yet it didn't work. He didn't even know what happened to El, if the Monster was still there or if he was okay.

You don't deserve to know.

He tells himself.

It's your fault, it's your fault, it's your fault.

He sleeps on the floor and when he wakes the sun has been out for hours. It's so quiet in the penthouse. The only sounds are the hum of the fridge and the air conditioner turning on and his own breathing. He stays on the floor for hours, listening and waiting. He's not sure what he's waiting for exactly, but he waits all day and when evening falls he still has nothing. He gets off the floor around one in the morning only to open the liquor cabinet downs the first bottle he sees. It's bitter and hurts on the way down, but he can't stop. He drinks that bottle then another, then he goes to the bedroom and lays face down. He checks his phone as his vision sways. No new messages. He powers it off and lets it slip off the bed.

His head is swimming with thoughts of Eliot and his friends and he can't shut it off. His brain is screaming at him to get a grip, to fix this mess and yet there is another part of him that doesn’t want to. He does get off the bed and goes back to the kitchen and plucks a full bottle from the liquor cabinet and brings it to bed. He flips on the TV and tries to drown out his thoughts as he sips on, he glances down to see what he pulled, gross, peppermint schnapps. He drinks and watches TV and hates himself until he passes out.

Quentin wakes on the floor with a little pool of vomit next to him. It smells and makes him gag. He rolls over and sees his phone. He picks it up and turns it on. He stares and stares until he realizes that no new messages are coming, there are no missed calls, no one reaching out for him and there was no way he would be the one to risk the reach back.

Quentin gets himself into the shower and cleans up the best he can. He gets dressed and gets ready to leave. He puts his hand on the door and can't turn the knob.

He stays in the penthouse for a week. It's quiet and empty the entire time. There are no bunnies that drop in. Not even a vengeful Hedge looking for Marina. The only thing food he can stomach is cereal, everything else feels like too much.

It takes the full week for reality to set in and for him to realize what is happening. No one is going to be coming back for him. He fucked up. And he did so in such a way that there was no coming back. He understood in a way, in many ways why they cut him off, but it didn't mean it hurt any less.
He thinks about going to Breakbills and rejects it almost immediately. He can't risk running into one of them or anyone who knows what he did. He can't face that, not now and maybe not ever. The next idea is just as stupid, except it's the only other one he has.

He packs up a bag and goes home.

Quentin gets a cab and rides out of the city. The drive to his mom's place takes a few hours and in that time he allows himself to nod off without the help of alcohol. He wakes up to the cabin driver shouting over his shoulder that they were there. He pays the man then heads up the driveway. He berates himself for not calling ahead and telling her he was coming, she is not going to be happy to see him, she never is. He stands in the doorway blinking into nothing for a few minutes trying to gather the courage to knock. When he finally does no one answers.

He waits for another minute or so before calling her. She answers after the last ring.

“Quentin?”

“Hi Mom,” he says softly. “Are—are you home?”

“No, I'm in Dallas.” She's short with him, he doesn't blame her.

“Oh.” He says dumbly. “I'm at your place, do you have a spare key anywhere?”

“Why?”

“I need somewhere to stay, ” he tells her.

There is a long pause on the other end.

“I don't think that's a good idea.” She finally says.

“Oh,” Quentin says again. He stares at the door, his eyes not focusing on anything. He sees the wood grain and the paint chipping in the corner and he sees none of that.

“You still there?” She asks and sounds inconvenienced by the whole thing.

“No, I'm not,” Quentin says to the door. “I'm gonna go.”

“Oh,” Quentin says again. He knew this would happen. He knew she would react like this, although he still had held out hope that this time it would be different. This time she would want to listen to him. It was a lot to hope for. He begins a small spell to unlock the door then stops. He's not sure there is enough magic even for that. Quentin tries it anyways. What has he got to lose? He does the first motion and the lock flips. He blinks in disbelief then feels guilty for doing it, for breaking in and for using what little magic there is, but he needs somewhere to sleep for the night. Tomorrow he'll leave and she won't have to deal with him anymore. He walks around the house and sees pictures of his mom's new family, yet none of him or his dad. Did they mean so little to her? He falls asleep on the couch and wakes in the late afternoon. He thinks about writing her a note telling her not to worry, funny enough he doesn't think she will.

He sleeps on the couch, not wanting his mom to come back and see the bedding disturbed. In the morning he makes himself a small breakfast and a couple of sandwiches for later. He leaves her door unlocked when he goes. Making his way back to the city takes a while. He catches a ride with some college students who take him about halfway, then hoofs it from there to Central Park. Not
really knowing what to do, he ends up just walking around. He walks until his legs give out, then he pushes himself up and keeps going. It hurts to keep moving but he does it anyway. It gives him something else to think about rather than the monstrous pit of depression that lurks right beneath his surface. He finally has to stop when he literally can not get up after falling. He drags himself over to a large tree and leans up against it. He rubs at his calves that burn and cramp wishing all the while he was in Fillory, where at least he could pretend he had some semblance of belonging.

Night passes around him and in the morning he still can’t move. His legs won’t cooperate no matter how much he tries. He stays by the tree and watches as people go by. Closing his eyes he listens to bits and pieces of conversations that don’t matter to him. He sleeps in the afternoon and wakes in the middle of the night. He makes himself get up and leaves the park. Once out he doesn’t know where to go next. He can't go back to the penthouse, his mom doesn’t want him, Breakbills was not an option, so-

He ends up at a homeless shelter, standing outside for an hour weighing the options.

The pros of eating, even just a little, win out. Stepping inside he instantly feels like he doesn't belong. He ducks his head down and goes to a table set up with donated food. Quentin waits in line and thanks the guy working there. He finds somewhere to sit that's a little further away from anyone. He eats slowly, not really tasting anything, just going through the motions. He stares off into nothing until someone sits beside him. He’s an older guy, maybe mid-fifties, and is wearing a name tag from the shelter that reads ‘Greg’ in blurry block letters. Quentin looks up briefly then casts his gaze away.

“You look like you could use some help.” He says. Quentin does nothing. Neither shakes his head or nods, simply takes another bite of food. “Or maybe you want a little fun?” He nudges Quentin's side.

Quentin's eyes flick over him again. He's not the worst looking. Fit for his age and clean nail beds.

“You're pretty,” Greg whispers. “I'll give you fifty bucks to blow me.”

The open proposition takes him by surprise. He knows he doesn't have any dignity left but he wants to at least pretend he does. He looks away and goes back to his food.

“Oh, how about a hundred?” Greg puts his hand on Quentin's leg and squeezes.

He could use the money. He weighs options again and a hundred dollars could get him a motel room for a night. And he would really like a shower more than anything.

It’s just a blowjob. He tries to convince himself. Just a blowjob then he can sleep in a real bed. Just a blowjob then he can leave. Just a blowjob then he will be able to pick himself back up. Just a blowjob and then, and then, and then.

Say yes, you know your worth.

A voice that he has tried to keep quiet for so long hisses out to him. It’s the reflection of the Abyss. He can see it clearly in his mind, the malicious smile and glint in its eye. It whispers again and Quentin can’t help but agree.

He nods and is brought to an office in the back of the building. Greg locks the door then pushes Quentin to his knees. He threads a large hand through Quentin's hair then sharply pulls.

“I like your hair,” he breathes out and unfastens his pants.
Quentin opens his mouth before Greg can ask and closes his eyes. He can hear the older man rustling with his clothes then the soft slap of skin on skin as he jerks himself off a little. The head of his cock pushes against Quentin's lip then slides to his cheek. Greg pulls away then slaps Quentin across the face. He lets out a soft gasp. It wasn't that hard of a slap but it's the most he has felt in days. The older man grasps Quentin's hair and pushes himself inside his mouth. Greg slaps Quentin again and he can't help the little moan that is forced out.


Quentin lets the guy fuck his mouth for what seems like ages. Now and then Quentin has to push him off to gag or cough, but then he is right back in his mouth until he pulls out to come on his face. Quentin wipes it off and smears it on the floor. He's still on his knees when Greg takes his wallet out of his pocket and pulls out a bill. He folds it a few times then pushes it against Quentin's closed mouth. Tring to take it by hand only gets him tsked at. Begrudgingly he opens his mouth once more and lets Greg slips the bill on his tongue. Greg puts two fingers under Quentin’s chin and makes him close around the money with a soft click of teeth.

“Come back and see me,” Greg says as he pets down Quentin's hair and face.

Once he is out of the room Quentin spits out the cash and tucks it into his pocket. He leaves the shelter as quickly as possible, setting out to find the cheapest and closest motel. Before he gets there he buys a toothbrush and a couple of other things to eat. The motel is dark and dirty though it's only fifty a night. On the way to his room, he passes a man leaning against a car smoking a cigarette. He feels the man's eyes flick over him, making him recoil. Quentin feels like he has a huge neon sign over his head saying he'll blow anyone for a hundred bucks. He unlocks his motel room door and locks himself inside.

He thinks like he should feel worse about the blowjob. About the whole situation. He feels a little tired and maybe still a little hungry, but not like he had done something terrible. The only thing he truly felt was a bit of relief. For, during the blowjob, for just a small amount of time, Quentin’s mind was able to stop thinking. He didn’t think about his friends, or magic, or his mistakes or about anything at all. The only thing he could think about was the ache in his jaw, the bitterness of salt and how good that taste of pain was.

Because he thinks he should feel gross, he brushes his teeth until his gums bleed. He watches himself in the mirror. His eyes are bloodshot and his beard has grown in a little. He could never grow a full beard, just peach fuzz that got a bit out of control. He rubs his face and makes a mental note to get a razor.

The mere thought of a razor makes his fingers itch. He hasn't purposely hurt himself in ages although the notion and feelings have always been there in the back of his mind. Experimentally he drags a nail down his arm leaving an angry red mark. He hisses aloud and does it again. He pushes down over the same mark to make it deeper. He doesn't draw blood but it's close.

He wants to do more. It feels good. It feels so good. Good in the worst sense of the word. He wants to hurt himself and that scares him.

There is something else. The Abyss whispers in his mind.

Before he can even try to unpack those thoughts he opens the motel door and looks out to where the man is still smoking and catches his eye. The man raises an eyebrow then stubs out the cigarette. Quentin stands aside as the man comes into his room.
He starts selling himself at every chance he gets. He goes back to the homeless shelter once a month and sees Greg, who smiles like it’s Christmas morning when he sees Quentin and pays him well. Most, and best of all or maybe even worse, they always rough him up a little. The slaps and hair pulling give him a little relief from his malintent towards himself. The days he can’t find someone to fuck him until he can’t think anymore he finds other ways to pass the time. Some are better than others. Drugs are good but the pain is better. These outlets make him feel something, whether it be pain, pleasure, disgust or delirium it’s all better than the emptiness that otherwise occupies the spaces in his chest and mind.

He gives in on a Sunday. Quentin spends all night wandering around the city looking for someone to pick up and has no luck. As he walks back to his motel he passes by the alleyway that had once taken him away from his mediocre life. Standing at the entrance to the alley he hesitates before taking a step forward. He walks to the end and gets to the chain-link fence covered in vines. He reaches out to touch it only to pull sharply back. He knows he will only be disappointed. Panic rises in his stomach and spreads to his chest making him feel light-headed. He’s not sure what sparks it but it is running hot and bright throughout him. He feels all his mistakes building up somewhere in the back of his throat. He runs all the way back to the motel room where he throws himself in the bathroom. He vomits until there is nothing left in him. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he knows that this is a panic attack. He knows that if he gives himself enough time he will calm down and be able to think clearly again. He knows this, but he also knows that he has been looking for a reason to give in. So he takes it.

He bought razors weeks ago and keeps them in a plastic bag at the bottom of his backpack. Quentin is sickeningly happy as he unwraps a razor. He rolls up his sleeve and carefully sets the razor on his skin. He lines it up so that it matches with an old faded scar, one that Julia saw and cried over until he promised her he would get help. The metal is cool to the touch and makes him shiver. He presses down and pulls.

The built-up pressure is released with a slow drip of blood. Quentin doesn’t make another cut for a long time. Instead, he watches the blood bubble up and slip around his forearm where it drops onto the tiled floor in round red specks. Quentin watches it until it dries up. He draws the razor up once more and adds another line next to the first. The blade is still cold even though it has been held in his hand for so long. He makes two more cuts after that and he finally feels good. He allows himself to fade away for a little while. When he comes back to himself he expects to feel guilty, ashamed at what he has done, but he doesn't. He cleans up the floor, washing away the dried blood and making sure none of his cuts are infected before bandaging them tightly.

The room feels warm and there is something in the air. He can’t place it, the feeling, but it feels like coming home.
The aftermath of the parade is being swept up into garbage bags and lifted into trucks to be taken away. Watching from his curbside view, Quentin waits for sunrise. It’s the 5th of July and he has just been kicked out of bed by the guy who he has been staying with for the past three days. The Jon pressed cash into his hand and said his girlfriend was coming back in a couple of hours. It’s nearing four in the morning and Quentin is down to his last cigarette. He stubs out the end on a piece of red, white and blue confetti.

Quentin plays with a lock of his hair to give his hands something to do. His hair has gotten long in the last couple of months, longer than he has worn it in years. Pulling it out straight in front of him he thinks back to high school when he had it so long that Julia was jealous. She had cut her hair short sophomore year in an attempt to be punk. He had started wearing eyeliner. They were both equally hopeless.

He likes his hair long, it’s one of the only things he likes about himself these days. It’s easier to hide behind, easier to blend in and easier to pick up guys. He finds that squirrely men are more willing to pick him up if he looks a little more feminine, prettier. Sometimes, when he’s a little more desperate, he even puts on lipstick. The men who want him pretty are the ones who fuck the best, who hurt him a little more, who make him ache for the next few days. And because of that, he’s able to put off taking a blade to his skin, even if it’s only for a day or two.

The sun rises and Quentin gets off the ground. He slowly makes his way downtown killing time until he had to go to work. He had gotten a part-time job stocking books at a small bookstore. The paycheck and the cash he earns on the side gets him a shoebox apartment on the bad side of town. It’s entirely just a bed and bathroom, but it’s enough. Enough that he can get fucked up on drugs and pass out at his leisure. Enough that he can bring someone back and they will want to leave when morning comes. Enough that he can sit in the shower and make measured and precise cuts down his forearms and thighs and not have to worry about getting the bloodstains out before the motel staff finds them.

Quentin trades off cutting and drugs and sex. The days he can’t find someone to fuck he cuts, and the days he feels like ending it all he chain smokes and pops pill after pill until the world spins out of existence, and when the pills are gone he hangs out in seedy areas hoping someone will want him for the night. It’s a shitty system but Quentin finds some sense of comfort in the routine. Lather, rinse, repeat.

He stuck to pills and cigarettes until a regular, who Quentin took to calling Mickey for his high pitched voice, offered him coke. Quentin had shrugged and accepted, what had he to lose? He watched Mickey snort the white powder then took his own hit. He didn't feel anything right away but Mickey reassured him that it could take a little while to kick in. As Quentin waited to see how it would make him feel he let Mickey suck him off. He came and felt his chest give fluttery breaths as the drugs took over. Mickey flipped him over and Quentin felt good for the first time in years.
Mickey made him take a second hit half an hour later and Quentin let himself get lost. He felt nice, so nice, and he never wanted to give up that feeling of euphoria.

Is this what it is like to feel good all the time?

It ended though.

It ended and Mickey leaves money for him on the nightstand.

“Wait,” Quentin reached out a hand and grabbed Mickey’s arm. “Let me have another hit,”
Quentin begged. Mickey chuckled and shook his head.

“I don’t have anymore,” he took Quentin’s hand off him then brought it to his lips to kiss. It’s almost romantic. “When I come back I’ll bring you more, yeah?”

“Yeah,” Quentin sighed.

“Good boy,” Mickey said and patted his cheek.

He picked up Mickey a week later and the first thing he asked for was a bump. Mickey laughed and gave it to him. Quentin let Mickey fuck him in exchange for drugs instead of money. When Mickey got what he wanted he left a few baggies on the bed. The moment he was out the door Quentin got high again. His fucked up brain didn't feel so awful. He enjoyed the high for as long as he could and when he came down there was a headache and a touch of nausea, but he could deal with that.

There is a baggie burning a hole in his back pocket. He wants to pace himself though, to save up for when he really needs it. But, it’s all he can think about most days.

He still has a few hours before he needs to be at work so he stops at Kalabar’s Coffee. He comes here so often that the workers know him and have his order ready by the time he reaches the front of the line. He is dozing into his coffee when someone takes the seat next to him.

“So, I've been watching you.”

The words set him on edge. He looks over and sees a girl he’s never met before. She’s pretty, with dark eyes, silver hair and gold-rimmed glasses which rested on a wide bridged nose.

“Creepy,” Quentin mumbles to her.

“Sure,” she shrugs uncaringly. “We’ve been looking for a new boy and I think you could fit the bill.” Confusion must be evident on his face because she sighs and continues. “Look, my boss, Jade, she has a nice thing going for people like us. She treats us right.”

Quentin looks her over more carefully this time and sees what she is talking about. She has hickies on her neck, is a little too thin, has a look in her eyes that is more weathered than her age and she has bruises on her knees. Quentin knows that body. It’s the body he sees when he looks in the mirror.

“What are you offering, exactly?” Quentin asks.

“Safety.” She says bluntly. “And a place to sleep. Jade has us set up at an old apartment complex. If you’re lucky you could get your own room. If not you’ll share with one of the other girls.
probably. I noticed you sleeping in the park. That can't be comfortable.”

That is true, he sometimes does sleep in the park. Sometimes the walls of his place are too small, or his skin just feels too tight, or the neighbors are being loud. Sometimes the park is better than not sleeping at all.

“Come meet her, she'll show you what you’re missing.”

“I’ve got a job to go to, so…” He isn’t not interested.

“Come by later then,” she says and grabs his napkin. She pulls a pen out of her bag and writes down an address.

“What's your name?” He asks.

“Maggie.” She says. “Yours?”

He contemplates giving a fake name like he does to all the guys he sleeps with, but there is something about her that made him tell the truth.

“Q.”

“Nice to meet you Q.” She says and it's the first time in months that he has heard his own name.

He does a line off the back of a Stephen King book then shelves it with the rest of his collection. Quentin had been planning not to get high until after he went to see Maggie and Jade, but he couldn’t help himself. He’s anxious up to his eyeballs and he knows he has no reason to be. It’s not like he is going to be excommunicated by someone he doesn’t know. There is a bit of white dust on the shelf. He brushes it away with his fingertip.

After he clocks out he types the address into his phone and follows the directions. It takes him not far from where his own studio is, the biggest difference between the two apartment buildings is that one had a Hedge symbol on the front door and the studio doesn't. He stares at the little seven-pointed star with a keyhole in the center trying to figure out what to do.

It hadn’t seemed like Maggie was insinuating that he was a Hedge, or even that she was. He understood it as he and her were both prostitutes, but had he been reading it all wrong? One way to find out.

He opened the door. No magic required.

Speaking of magic, it feels different to him. Before, at Breakbills or in Filory, when he was doing a spell magic would feel warm around him, like he was rubbing his hands together to create friction. Now, he can feel it without even having to do a spell. But it isn’t warm anymore, it also isn’t all around him. He drags a hand through the air and catches a touch of blistering hot magic, like plucking a lone string of a harp. It’s a flash of lightning, there, then gone in an instant. This is what he has done to magic. Instead of the full range of strings to play a melody on, he whittled it down to one or two notes that don’t even play in harmony.

The lobby is empty. He walks past mailboxes and to a door that leads to an outdoor courtyard. There he sees her silver hair glinting in the sunlight. She’s bent over a book with a cigarette hanging from her fingers.
“Your offer still stand?” Quentin asks.

“It’s really not my choice,” she says without looking up. “You’ll have to get Jade’s approval.” She shuts her book and stands, waving a hand for Quentin to follow her. “But, I’ve put in a good word.”

“You don’t even know me,” Quentin mumbles, mostly to himself. She responds anyways.

“Well, if you stick around I might.” She walks him to an office and raps twice on the door before opening it. “Go on in.”

She swings the door open, stepping aside as Quentin moves past her and into the room. Sitting behind a small wooden desk is the most striking woman Quentin has ever seen.

“Q?” She asks with a twinge of a southern accent. He nods and comes closer. “I'm Jade. I'm the boss around here.” She stands and holds out her hand for his. He takes it and Jade smiles then lets go. She sits and gestures for him to do the same. Quentin does the same to her. She has golden-brown skin and almost perfect almond shaped eyes. Her hair was cut close to the skin and everything about her radiated femininity. He can also see the Hedge tattoos, freely shown, up and down her arms.

“Maggie said she’s seen you around the park picking up our clients for weeks now,” Jade says. “I’ve been looking for a new boy for a while now. How long have you been on the street?’

Quentin is not sure how to answer. He's always been shit at interviews, but he feels like he needs this job, that he needs to be near magic again, even if it kills him. He presses his nail into his palm and answers.

They go back and forth, Jade asking and Quentin answering. He keeps waiting for her to mention magic, for the shoe to drop and for him to be outed. It never comes up. In the end, Jade offers him a job and a place to stay. He could keep the studio and he contemplates it then settles on saving more money for drugs.

“This offer is only good if you don't OD in one of my rooms.” She tells him. “I'm not calling an ambulance.”

Quentin doesn't ask how she knows about the drugs, he's sure it's pretty obvious. He has a slight tremble in his hands nearly all the time and gets a bloody nose probably once a week.

Quentin agrees to her terms. Jade smiles and it lights up the room.

“Great. If you are lucky I might have someone for you tonight, but until then I'll have one of the others settle you in. I'm gonna room you with Kat for now.”

Jade stands and walks to the door she holds it open for Quentin. He hurries out and she takes him back through the courtyard which is now occupied by a few girls and one boy. They are smoking, drinking, talking and just hanging out. Quentin can't remember a time where he and his friends had a moment like this. Where they were relaxed. Jade introduces him to Kat who blows smoke up into the air around them instead of saying hello.

“She's not much of a talker,” Jade explains.

“Me neither,” Quentin admits. Kat quirks a smile at him.

“I'll show you room,” Kat says in a very thick Russian accent. Quentin follows her without a
word. She takes him up an elevator which Quentin can tell is laced with magic. He figures that they are running it with a spell instead of calling a mechanic. Dangerous for the riders, but keeps outsiders out if Hedge territory.

There is no door to the apartment. It and all the other rooms are the same, open to the hallway. The bedrooms and bathrooms, thankfully, have doors. And a lock. He sets his bag on the bed and lays next to it. He doesn't realize he has fallen asleep until Kat is shaking his shoulder to wake him.

“Boss has a man for you.” She says once he blinks himself awake.

Quentin heads into the bathroom and cleans himself up. He wants to shower but he'd rather do that after he meets with the guy Jade has for him. He splashes water on his face and swishes some around in his mouth.

He goes down to the lobby area where Jade is talking with another girl Quentin wasn't introduced to. Jade smiles when she sees him and excuses herself from the girl.

“You up for a client?” She asks.

“Sure.” Quentin shrugs. He'd rather take a bump before, but he's out.

“Great,” Jade says then asks him to follow her. He does so without comment. She takes him to another elevator and presses the button for the third floor. “Third floor and down are for clients. They aren't allowed on the upper ones so don't worry about that.”

Quentin figures there must be a spell keeping them off of those floors.

“Your client, Cam, is a regular. So if he likes you, you'll probably see him every other week.” Jade says. “There are condoms and lube in all the dressers in every room. Every client gets the same rundown. They all have to wear the condom, if your guy doesn't want to just let me or Maggie know. We’ll set them straight. Anyone gets rough with you and you don’t want it, there is pepper spray behind the headboard of the bed. Clients also pay by the hour and if you got another client waiting we will come and get you. Sound all right?”

“Yeah,” Quentin shrugs.

They get to the third floor and Jade gives him the room number. She wishes him good luck and steps back into the elevator without him.

Quentin wastes no time in getting to the door, knocking softly and letting himself in. The client, Cam, is sitting on the bed texting on his phone. He looks up when Quentin shuts the door behind him. He is not terrible looking. Cam glances him up and down and Quentin feels unusually nervous for some reason.

“Oh, look at you. Aren’t you pretty.” Cam says in a posh British accent that reminds Quentin of Martin. That alone sets his teeth on edge.

“Thanks,” Quentin says and lets his hair fall in his face. He plays it off as shy but inwardly he is cringing at the praise.

“What's your name?” Cam asks, getting off the bed and moving closer to him. Quentin hesitates before giving a fake name, the same name he gives to all of the men he slept with.

“Pretty name for a pretty boy,” he breathes heavily. “I'm Cam.”
“Nice to meet you.” Quentin deadpans, fiddling with the hem of his shirt as he looks around the room. “Where do you want me?”

Cam says nothing to that just reaches out to touch him mumbling ‘pretty’ over and over. Quentin lets him touch then lets him lead him to the bed. Cam is too fucking sweet. He pulls off Quentin’s shirt and runs his hands all over his chest, kissing and sucking at the skin.

“Take them off, yeah?” Cam says and pulls away. He strips off his own shirt and pants as he watches Quentin shimmy out of his jeans. He preps him too gently. Pushes inside with careful consideration and worst if all takes his time to make sure Quentin comes. Cam strokes him with a soft hand and kisses his neck until Quentin's body gives in. He feels awful afterward. There is no euphoric moment that pain or drugs typically give him. There is pleasure but it's coupled with a sinking pit of self-hatred that makes him feel like he's drowning under honey. Like it could be so good and so delicious if it weren't for the endlessness of oblivion waiting for him at the bottom of the pot.

Cam pulls out and flips him over, he straddles his chest then puts one soft hand on Quentin's jaw.

“Don’t touch me there,” Quentin says and moves Cam’s hand to his chin instead. Cam shrugs then starts to jack himself off. He comes in short quick gasps, casting wetness onto Quentin’s cheeks and lips. Cam sighs happily then wipes the cum onto a finger and slips it into his mouth. He swallows and Cam smiles.

Cam leaves but not before saying how good he was and how hot that was and how he can’t wait to fuck him again. He rambles even as he closes the door behind him. Quentin cleans up his face, pulls his clothes back on then opens the door to find Jade is waiting there for him.

“He treat you ok?” She asks while handing him an envelope with what Quentin assumes is cash.

“Yeah, he was fine. Nothing weird or whatever.” Quentin tells her.

“Good,” Jade claps a hand on his shoulder and he unconsciously flinches away. He's always a little flighty after sex, especially sex where he can't get high or get off on pain. She slowly takes her hand away. She doesn't make anything of it and he's grateful.

“Cam wants you again next weekend, you okay with that?”

“Yeah, that's fine. I could tell I was his type.”

“That's for shit sure.” Jade laughs. “Go rest up, tomorrow we'll go over a few more things.”

She leaves him in the hallway leaning against the wall for a few minutes before he is able to drag himself to the magic elevator and up to his room. Kat is sitting in the living room watching TV in Russian when he comes in. He disappears into the bathroom where he showers then brushes his teeth for six minutes. He changes and stares at the door that separates him from Kat. He could stay in his room, she would probably prefer that, but something is telling him to go out there. Maybe he craves human interaction more so than he thought. He braces himself and opens the door. He sits down next to her on the couch and watches a Russian drama.

“What are we watching?” He asks. Kat doesn't answer but he doesn't expect one. They sit quietly with the drone of the TV washing over them. It's almost like they've done this before. It's almost like having a friend.
Chapter 3

A balance returns to his life. It’s a fucked-up balance but it gives Quentin something to look forward to, the consistency. Thursdays and Fridays he has off and can do what he likes. Mondays and Tuesdays he sees regulars, Wednesdays he takes whoever Jade gives him. Saturdays and Sundays he still works at the bookstore from the morning to the afternoon, then when the sun sets he finds his way into someone’s bed. When Thursday rolls around he buys some coke and whatever else his dealer recommends that day. Then on Friday, he gets high. He locks himself in his room and drifts off into a haze where he doesn’t need to think anymore.

The days he runs out of drug money he settles for cutting.

On Wednesday night Quentin starts feeling antsy at three in the morning. He stays up all night then calls Johnny, his dealer, and sets up a meeting. He gets his drugs and hurries back to the apartment to take them, even though it is only Thursday.

As he gets the apartment in sight he can feel magic all around him. Quentin could always feel when the Hedges were doing a spell. They were typically little ones, making sparks and such. Every now and then he could feel a bigger one, ones he imagined Jade performed. He's not sure why he can feel the spells. He wasn't able to sense these types of things when he was at Brakebills, but maybe he wasn't paying attention.

This spell feels different than all the others. There is something soft about the air around the Hedges, something that makes Quentin feel dreamy. His fingers twitch at the thought of doing magic. He has missed it. It strikes him suddenly that he hasn’t done much magic since he cast the spell to kill the Monster. He has done little things here and there, but nothing like he used to, nothing like they used to. He feels like his body is singing for him to cast something. He has missed magic so much. He also feels terribly guilty for missing it. He wants and hates and fears all at the same time. Quentin pushes away those feelings as much as he can as he enters the building. He crosses the lobby and exits out into the courtyard where the magic is calling to him.

Jade is walking around a small group of Hedges. They are positioned around a chalk-drawn sigil. Quentin can make out a few of the symbols. They are all practicing the same hand motions. Jade is coaching the Hedges with the proper hand placement when she catches sight of him. She doesn't react more so than nodding hello to him, then watch as he slowly walks around the group. He thinks that she should be more concerned about an outsider finding them. Quentin nods back and walks over to Maggie who has her thumbs and pinkies touching.

He says hello to her then touches her pinkies gently pushing them down towards her palm. “Your fingers have to be closer together before you move to the next motion. When you push into the next move you should almost feel like you’re snapping your fingers.”

Jade inclines her attention to him.

“All right,” Jade sets her jaw in a challenge. “Show me.”

Quentin looks over to her suddenly hyper-aware that everyone around the sigil is now looking at him.

“Show you what?” He hides behind his hair and cracks his knuckles. He's not sure if she wants him to show her a spell or if she wants him to roll up his sleeve and show her the tattoos that he does not have. All she is going to see on his arms are cuts and scabs.
“What can you do?” Jade says.

“Parlor tricks,” Quentin admits. “Nothing special.”

“All right,” Jade compromises. “Show us anything.”

He thinks about sparks. About Julia showing him what she could do once she discovered magic. He could make those. Or he could do a card trick. Those he knows well enough. He stretches out his fingers and thinks about conjuring a deck of cards when he remembers the game of Push. He had made it snow. It was the middle of summer in New York and you could taste the heat. A little snowfall might be nice.

Quentin goes through the motions and is halfway done when the first flurries appear. He finishes and it's not just a light snowfall, it's cold, it's biting cold. The wind picks up and blasts the snowflakes all around the yard.

He's never done that before.

“Well, that's not true.” Jade interrupts. “You made it snow just fine out there. No bloodshed or anything.” There is a smile in her voice.

“I guess,” Quentin presses down hard on his arm and feels one of the fresher cuts split. “That was an easy one. I know how to do that one.” He takes a deep breath and looks down at his arm. The cut bleeds into the fabric in the shape of a soft crescent moon. It makes him think of the courtyard.
“What was that sigil you made?”

“When magic went away for the first time myself and some friends looked into ways to bring it back and whatever. We weren’t the ones who did it but we did find a few spells that encourage magic to come back.” Quentin’s eyes narrow with disbelief. He has never heard of a spell like this. Although, he and his friends never set out to find a spell like that. They hadn’t needed to, they knew the reason magic was gone. “The sigil is like a hive of sorts and anyone who performs spells around it feeds it. We mostly do small spells, since that's what many of the Hedges here know. But every now and then I call for a couple of friends and we do something a little bigger. I imagine you know some big ones right?”

“Sure.”

“What else do you know how to do?” She stands up and goes around her desk and takes a seat. She opens a filing cabinet and pulls out a small notebook. She clicks a ballpoint pen and looks at him with anticipation.

“What do you want to know?” Quentin almost feels like he is betraying something in willingly giving her information. Like he had been sworn to secrecy with what he knows. Quentin looks at Jade and wants to tell her. He wants to give her and Maggie and all the others standing around the sigil all the magic he knows. He wishes that he could give it all to them then he wouldn’t need to feel like this anymore.

“Everything.”

“I’m not much of a teacher,” Quentin admits. “But I’ll do what I can if you really want.”

He shouldn’t do this. He knows he doesn’t deserve to be around magic like this anymore, not when he is the reason it has flicked in and out of existence like turning off a light. He can’t help it though. Just being here, in the apartment with Jade and her Hedges feels like where he belongs, at least he can pretend this is where he belongs.

“Let’s go back out there,” Jade says, taking her note pad with her as she stands. “I know they have some ideas about what kind of spells they want to learn.”

“You really aren't like the other Hedges I know.” Quentin stands and follows Jade out the door.

“You know many? Coming from your fancy school?” She teases.


Jade makes a non-committal noise as if to say she understands but doesn’t want to head about it.

When they arrive back at sigil Maggie and a few others are pushing little snowdrifts together. Quentin is stunned that it is still snowing. That spell should have dissipated shortly after he cast it. Maybe it has to do with the sigil and its own magic.

Maggie catches his eyes and heads his way. He suddenly feels nervous.

“Can you teach me how to do that?” She asks.

“Or what about how to make flowers grow?” Another girl asks, Heather, he thinks.

“Forget that,” Davy says. “Time travel, is that possible?”
“No, no, no,” Willow waves a hand out in front of her. “Battle magic.” She says with such finality it takes Quentin aback. “We have a book somewhere that talks about Battle magic but didn't give any spells or instructions. Can you teach us that?”

They all look eager and Quentin wants to go to his room and take a hit more than anything. His fingers itch so he gives them something to do. He reaches in his back pocket and pulls out his pack of cigarettes. He takes one and lights it with a flourish of his hand. It's showy but he wants desperately to be accepted here.

“I'm not teaching Battle magic. And not just because I'm bad at it, but because it's difficult. It's really difficult even for the best magicians,” Quentin tells them. “Flowers I can show you a few things. And time travel is too far out of my realm to even start talking about.”

“So it can be done?” Davy questions.

“Yeah,” Quentin takes a long drag. “Yeah, I mean it's possible. Not recommended, but possible.”

"It's complicated, is what you're trying to say," Maggie says. Quentin huffs a laugh.

"Complicated doesn't even begin to cover it."

Quentin ends up talking more than he had in months. He talks about magic and the spells he knows with an eager audience. He starts with the little things, the things he is sure they all know how to do. He goes through the motions and it all comes back to him with an ease that he's never had with magic. It's almost like learning to breathe again. He's always known how to do it but once he makes the effort, he can taste the spells in the air before he casts them.

He talks so much his voice is sore. It feels so good to do magic again. It's the first thing in a long time that feels good that's not drugs, sex, or cutting.

After he has taught them how you cast a flame in hand Jade ends the session. Many of them have clients or they have another job to go to. Jade starts cleaning up the sigil, blowing out particularly placed candles and bundles of sage.

"If you draw this in charcoal it holds your spells longer. But use bone, not vine or pressed, they won't give you the same."

Jade gives him a long hard look. Long enough for Quentin to get uncomfortable and to evade any type of confrontation he starts to help her clean up.

"You sure they aren't missing you at that fancy school?"

"I'm sure," Quentin says without looking up. "I'm sure no one is missing me." He says to himself.

"What you can do-"

"What I can do is nothing." Quentin stops her. "I'm a mediocre magician at best. At best. It's just a different world out there with magic. God, I've seen impossible things and I'm sure it's just the tip of the iceberg."

"So why did you leave?" Jade is steel in her gaze.

He wants to spit out the truth. Magic doesn't want him nor do his friends or anything in his old life. Instead, he bits the inside of his cheek and shrugs.
"Well then," Jade wipes the chalk off her hands onto her pants. "If you're not a magician, be a Hedge."

The offer is almost too good to be true. It's too easy to just say yes.

_Wasn't it?_

Quentin could only think of Julia at this moment. Wondering if this was how she felt when Marina gave her the same offer. As if she had been treading water far below where light could pass then given a quick tug towards the surface. Only to swim up and gasp lungfuls, not of air, but of clear water instead. Better than what was beneath sure, but not anywhere close to what was needed. So close, so fucking close.

“Okay.” He gives in. It's not what he needs and probably never will be, but he allows himself to take something back from his old life.

Jade sweeps away the last of the sigil into a small pile of snowflakes still frozen on the ground.

He starts by teaching them once a week. Jade also takes his lessons which makes him feel weird about their other relationship. She offers to pay him and he considers it briefly. He decides to turn her down, he only asks not to have Cam fuck him anymore. She is quick to ask if he's been doing something wrong. Quentin laughs and shakes his head, telling her he can not stand the sound of his voice. That makes her laugh out loud and agree.

Later when he and Jade finish up a lesson she takes him back to her office. Quentin's stomach drops. He feels like he's in elementary school and he is being called in to see the principal.

Jade leaves the door open and rummages through a cabinet next to the desk.

“So I've been thinking,” she says and sets a small jar of what looks like black ink on the desk. “Let's make it official.” She jokes and pulls out a tattoo gun to show him.

Unconsciously Quentin grasps his arms. He doesn't want to show her his cuts. But he also kinda wants this. He wants to be a part of something again.

Slowly he relaxes his grip.

“You'll see my arms and I don't want you to freak out about them.”

She gives him a quizzical look.

“I'm not very nice to myself.” Quentin tries to explain. Her lips part slightly and she lets out a soft 'oh.'

“Honey, not many people here are nice to themselves.” She says gently.

Quentin nods and takes a deep breath. They stay frozen in place for two long minutes before the courage has settled within him and he rolls up his sleeve. He expects to hear a hiss of sympathy, but it never comes. Instead, Jade plugs in the small machine and sets out her tools. She gestures for him to take a seat. He does so and props his elbows on the desk.

The left arm is worse than his right so he extends it to her when she is ready. He lays it palm up letting the fluorescent light bounce off the mountain ranges of self-inflicted wounds.
“Why don't we do them here,” she holds up her own arm and taps the back of her forearm.

“Right.” Quentin flips his arm over hiding the cuts.

The jab if the needle is not the same kind of pain that he was hoping for. It's duller and never spikes the way a deep cut will.

Jade gives him two tattoos. Dark black seven-pointed stars with a number inside them. They bleed just a little. Quentin cleans it up with a quick spell. The blood vanishes and leaves behind irritated raised skin. These marks aren't at all like the Cacodemon tattoo that still mars his back. These give him something else, something he can’t quite put his finger on.

“Come do a spell with me,” Jade says once he has wrapped up his arm.

“What kind?”

“There’s one I do with some other high-level Hedges that I can’t perform by myself and I don’t think anyone else here has the power you do.” She winks at him. Quentin blushes then feels weird for blushing so he blushes harder. “It’s basically an abundance spell. We’ve found it feeds the hive better than others.”

“Sure.” Quentin agrees and walks with her to the courtyard. The sigil is still up from earlier and there are a few Hedges hanging around talking and smoking. Jade shows him the motions first then positions them on either end of the sigil. Quentin closes his eyes and goes through the motions feeling magic as it starts at his fingertips and radiates up. It almost feels like praying. When they are done the air feels different, thicker somehow. As if their spell had flavored the air with more magic than it could hold.

“It’s never been like that before,” Jade says as things start to settle.

“I bet you say that to all the boys.” Quentin chides. Jade laughs aloud.

“You bet I do.” She grabs the nearby broom and starts sweeping. Quentin goes around and collects the little white candles from their positions on the sigil. “But really, magic feels different when you're doing it around me.”

Quentin fumbles the last candle.

“What do you mean?” He asks not looking at her.

“I don’t know. It just feels bigger? I’m not sure how to describe it. Your magician friends ever say anything like that to you?”

It’s Quentin’s turn to laugh. “No. Like I said before, I’m not much of a magician.”

Jade gives him a look that he can't quite place. There's a smile that doesn't meet her eyes. She blinks slowly like she has just said a sarcastic remark, but the only this she says is;

"You say that like it's been told to you your entire life. I'll be the first to say it then, you're a good magician. Not the best, sure, but you're good Q, you're really good."

Hours later, even when he gets into bed her words are ringing in his ear. He wants to be good at this, he has always wanted to be good at magic. He wants to just be good at something. Anything. He couldn't be a good friend, boyfriend, king, or son. Maybe someday he'll just be good and that will have to be enough.
It's mid-November, the months have made his hair longer and Jade has given him three more tattoos. He walks into the courtyard to start drawing out the sigils for their spell for the night when Maggie intercepts him.

"Jade's talking with some girl in her office," she tells him. "She's a Hedge but Jade wants us staying away till she's gone."

"Okay," Quentin nods. It's not unusual for Jade to want to keep outsiders away from their magic. "She fine with us setting up though?"

"Yeah, just wants us to keep our heads down, you know."

Quentin knows. Together they draw out the circle sigil and Quentin shows Maggie how to light all the candles at once. They practice the spell standing side by side. One hand up, the other down. A snap of the right wrist that brings up the fingers and the flame. Once she thinks she had it Quentin lets her at it. Her movements are stilted but precise. She doesn't get it on the first try, nor the second.

Quentin adjusts her hand and steps back to let her try again when two sets of footfalls draw his attention away. He is calm for all of two seconds before he feels familiar magic in the air. It’s light and sweet, like white summer wine. He hears the rumble of her voice before she even steps into the courtyard. Panic rises fierce and fast in his chest.

Maggie finishes the motions of the spell and all the candles come to life all at once. She turns with a wide smile on her lips only to let it fall when she sees his face.

“Q?”

Quentin clenches his fist and without either of them noticing, douses all the flames.

“Come sit down.” Maggie touches his arm gently making him look at her. “You’re freaking me out. You gonna pass out? You’re breathing like you’re gonna pass out.”

He feels lightheaded, but he’s not sure if it’s the hyperventilation or if it’s the fear. He lets Maggie lead him over to a bench at the back of the yard and drops his head onto her shoulder.

“Did you take something?” Maggie asks as she holds his hand. Quentin shakes his head. “Flashback?” Quentin shakes his head again.

“The woman Jade is talking to,” Quentin has to squeeze his eyes shut and force his lungs to cooperate. “Don’t let her know who I am. Please.”

“Ohkay.” Maggie agrees without further questions. She tightens her grip on his hand and he is so grateful for her. She starts talking about her cosmetology school and the things that she’s learning. She offers to braid Quentin’s hair later, which elicits a soft laugh from him.

Jade and Julia are about to walk into the courtyard. Quentin holds his breath. They are in the hallway, voices echoing around the tight space.

_Please, please, please. Don’t notice me._
“Please,” Julia is saying. Hearing her soft thunder like voice sends a shiver down his spine. He aches to look up and see how she is, but he can’t risk her seeing him, not like this. “I’ll take anything. Even just a passing word is good enough for us. Honestly, I never thought he would be so good at disappearing, but that’s the thing that scares me the most.”

“I’ll keep an eye out for you.” Jade says.

“Thank you,” Julia says as she steps into the courtyard. “And if you have any questions about the spells let me know. I’m happy to help.”

“Yeah-” Jade starts then catches sight of him and Maggie holding on to each other. “You two all right?”

“He’s just having a bad trip,” Maggie says. “I’ll get him up to his room in a bit.”

“I know a spell if you’d like?” Julia offers. It’s done with kindness but Quentin can’t help but let out a little wine of despair. It hurts to hear her voice. It hurts more than the tattoos, more than the clients that rough him up and even more than the little cuts he gives himself. It hurts somewhere deep within his chest, something that stabs and claws at his heart.

“No,” Maggie says for him. “We’re kosher.”

Quentin relaxes in Maggie’s arms at that word. After he decided to stay Jade offered him the code word for clients that he did not feel comfortable with. ‘Kosher’ was easy enough to integrate into a conversation and if any other worker heard it they would alert Jade and she would get them out of the situation. Quentin had yet to use it, though had heard it be used a few times before.

Jade stiffens before nodding and ushering Julia out of the yard.

"Thanks for coming and all. I'll keep your number on hand."

"Thank you," Julia says. It’s nice and sweet but Quentin can’t help but hear a tone of sorrow, of regret.

Their footsteps fade as they exit the yard. Quentin has nearly shaken out of his skin. He feels nauseous. Saliva fills his mouth and he pushes Maggie away to lean over the side of the bench and empty his stomach. Maggie rubs a comforting hand on his back and he gags and heaves. He coughs until the only thing left in him is the tears that cascade down his face.

"Thank you," Quentin says and tries to clean himself up as best he can, which is not much.

"Let me get you a drink," Maggie says. "You okay for a few minutes?"

Quentin nods instead of speaking, his stomach lurches again and he heaves spit to the ground. Maggie's hand leaves him and he feels like his tether has been cut. He feels like he's floating a little off the ground. He didn’t want this to be real, but it was painfully real. God, it even smelled like her. He is washed over with memories and regrets until he is brought back to earth when Jade storms into the yard. She kneels down next to Quentin with worry in her eyes.

"Sorry, sorry," He can’t look at her. "I'm sorry."

"Nonsense." Jade quiets him. "What did she do to you?"

Quentin doesn't want to tell her the truth nor does he want to lie, she deserves better than a lie.
“She used to be my best friend.” He says, Maggie is suddenly there pressing a cold bottle of water into his hands. He gratefully accepts it and lightly takes a few sips. “We parted ways a while back. Shit, I guess it’s almost been half a year? It wasn’t on the best of terms. Why was she here?”

“She felt our spells,” Jade tells him. “She has other spells she thinks will help in bringing magic back to what it once was.”

“Take her offer.” Quentin blurts out.

“Q?”

“Jules is, well was, Goddess-like, maybe she still is. I’m not sure.” He takes another gulp of water. He doesn’t notice his hands are shaking until Maggie puts a quiet hand over his. “She’s the one you want to work with if you want magic back.”

“She was also looking for you.”

The world dips out of sight. Quentin blinks himself back into it when Jade gives him a little shake.

“Me?”

“Yeah,” She runs a hand over her head and looks worried? Quentin hasn’t seen this emotion on her face before. “She felt the magic and she somehow knew you had been here. I told her I didn’t know you. Told her that you could have been a client or a random Hedge that showed to do a spell. Don’t know how she didn’t know you were in the room though. That makes no sense.”

“Don’t know,” he shrugs. “You should still take her offer. She’ll help.”

“Will you be all right with her around?”

“Just let me know when she’s coming and I’ll get out of your hair.”

"Q, you were here first, I play favorites." Jade gives him a small tight smile.

"It’s fine." He says and it almost sounds confident.

It's not fine. After they all leave the courtyard Quentin goes to his room and locks the door. He paces for hours until his legs hurt. He collapses on the bed exhausted but he can't sleep. He can't sleep for days. Every time he closes his eyes he sees the disappointment in Julia's eyes. He sees her telling him over and over that it is his fault. It's his fault that magic is the way it is, it's his fault that he is living this way and it's his fault that all these terrible things have happened to Eliot. And he agrees with her. Every time, he agrees with her.

He stays up researching new spells and when he gets tired of that he gets high. When he runs out of drugs he cuts a little more. When he gets a little too close to the edge he asks Jade for a client. When the client leaves and he is still left with an unyielding sense of desperation he goes to see Johnny.

He meets Johnny at a coffee shop that tended to look the other way when a particular type of clientele walk in. Quentin gets a latte so that he doesn't feel so out of place as he waits. Johnny has been supplying him for the last six months with pot and coke, but today he wants something stronger, something more.

When Johnny comes in he talks with the barista for a minute before sitting down across from Quentin.
"What's up, man?" Johnny slaps Quentin's hand. "You need a refill?"

"Yeah," Quentin keeps his voice low. "And something stronger?"

"How strong we talkin'?" He raises an eyebrow. "You don't seem like an H man to me. What kind of high you chasing?"

"I wanna disappear for a while," Quentin admits.

He nods understanding. "Okay, you ever try shrooms or special k?" Johnny asks and there is no judgment in his voice, this is what drew Quentin to him in the first place. Quentin shakes his head. "Do you got like depression or whatever?"

Quentin agrees and pays him. Johnny takes off but not before talking to the barista again and slapping a little plastic bag filled with white powder into their hand.

Quentin finishes his latte then heads back to the apartment. Before he even steps inside he knows she's there. He freezes at the front entrance. He reaches out to touch the handle then pulls back like he's been burned. He moves away from the door and leans against the wall. He lights a cigarette and inhales deeply. He checks his phone and sure enough, there is a text from Jade telling him that Julia is there.

He lies to himself and pretends that she wouldn't even recognize him. Not like this. His hair is longer now than he's ever had it. Maggie did make good on her offer to braid his hair. She crafted some Game of Thrones braid last night and the remnants are still twisted into his hair. He wraps the end of the braid around his fingers and twirls it around his thumb over and over. He thinks about letting her cut it.

He smokes two cigarettes then pushes himself off the wall and into the building. He's sure that Julia would be with Jade so he goes out of his way to avoid the office and courtyard. He makes it to his room with no trouble. The only indication that something is wrong is his shaking hands.

Kat is in their kitchenette microwaving something. He only thinks about it for a second before blurting out a question.

"Have you ever hallucinated?"

She looks blankly at him as the microwave dings behind her.

"I'm gonna take some ketamine," he quickly explains. "And well, I might hallucinate. Or I might not, I don't know. I'm not really clear on what it's gonna do. I mean I've hallucinated before, but it was a spell and not really my choice. So I just wanted to check? Or, could you check on me? In a little while, make sure I don't do anything stupid. If you're not busy that is."

Kat turns and takes the frozen, not frozen anymore, tray out of the microwave.
"Okay." She peels back the plastic covering.

"Thanks."

Quentin goes into his room and shuts the door. Keeping it unlocked. He takes out the little bottle Johnny has given him and sets it on his bedside table. He realizes that he needs a syringe so he transfigures one out of a nearby pen. He carefully draws out the liquid to the amount Johnny recommended. Then he flexes his arm a few times, balling his hand into a fist then releasing. He slips the needle into the crook of his elbow, right above a cut, and presses the plunger down.

He lays back in his bed and waits. Whatever happens, he hopes it's better than this constant stream of misguided thoughts and self-hatred.

It only takes twenty minutes for him to start feeling the effects. Slowly the world starts to fall away. His room first, then the building, then the city itself. Layer by layer is stripped away and he is left floating in the nothing in between.

He looks down and sees skies so blue. He reaches out to wade a hand through a soft cloud when he sees his arm. He turns it over and over waiting for the scars and tattoos to reappear, but they don't. Here he is good and happy. God, he wants to stay.

Somewhere in the back of his mind, he knows none of this is real. He knows it's the drugs and that when they wear off he will be back to normal. He doesn't listen to that voice, instead, he lets it go. He drops all his worries and dissociates for as long as it will last.

He starts to feel the blanket beneath his fingers and knows this is coming to an end. He runs a finger over the threadbare edges and anchors himself.

A hand reaches out and rests gently on top of his. It's warm and large and there is something familiar about it. Quentin struggles to open his eyes. He forces them to open just a little and sees someone sitting next to him.

He knows that profile.

Soft brown curls and regal features. He turns to look at Quentin and there is the saddest and sweetest smile held just for him. He opens his mouth and his lips form his name but Quentin can't hear him. He can't hear anything. Quentin yells for him but his voice is smothered in a haze.

Eliot squeezes his hand and Quentin swears it's real. It has to be real.

Stay with me. Stay. He begs the hallucination. But he is slipping back into reality.

The drugs slow and the blanket is like sandpaper on his skin. He squeezes his eyes tight, trying desperately to bring back the fantasy. He wills it to take him back. But just like Martin being shut out if Fillory, his drug hallucinations don't want him back.

He lays on the bed and let's tear after tear soak then dry into the blankets below him.

He wants to take another hit right away, to dive back into the fantasy he created. But knows how dangerous that would be. It may kill him.

He shifts his head and stares at the little bottle on the nightstand. It may kill him.

Would it really be so bad?
Turning away from the drugs he tells himself to sleep it off. He won't feel the same way about it in the morning. He won't want to kill himself tomorrow.

But if he does.

If he does, dying with Eliot there would be the way he would choose.

Even Eliot who is a figment of his imagination. It's better than dying alone.
Late November sun wakes him in the afternoon. That and Kat, who is by his side shaking him awake.

"You've been sleeping all day." She says. "You not still high, yes?"

"I'm not high. Just tired I guess. Thanks for waking me."

Kat makes an agreeing sound and leaves his room without another word.

He rolls over and sees the bottle.

The thoughts from the night before come scrambling back to the forefront of his mind. He scares himself. That little bottle and all the fantasies it holds scares him. Quentin knows he shouldn't take it again, that he may have the same inclinations to hurt himself. He should throw it away. Stick to weed and coke. But, Quentin is weak. He is so weak and desperate for any semblance of his past life that his own safety is brushed aside.

He reaches for the ketamine and knocks it off the table and rolls under the bed.

Quentin should take this as a sign. His fingers twitch. He has to sit for long moments breathing before he can compose himself. He opens up the nightstand and pulls out a joint, lights up and forces himself to calm down.

Once the high has settled he stubs out the end of the joint and gets out of bed. He showers and dresses and tries to be presentable. He hasn't taken a client in a while and he knows he owns Jade, even though she says they're even with him teaching her Hedges. He knows he got the better end of that deal. He makes his way to her office but she's not there. He goes to the courtyard and finds her with Willow. Willow waves to him and he waves back. She excuses herself as he approaches.

"Good to see you up," Jade says. "Kat said you were pretty gone. What did you take?"

"K. Johnny had a blend for Hedges." Quentin tells her. Her mouth twitches.

"You feeling okay?"

"I'm fine." Quentin lies then clears his throat. "I know I haven't had a client in a while so I figured I'd ask if you have anyone for me."

A soft frown graces her face before she turns it into a smile. "I thought we agreed that you teaching made up for taking some clients."

"Yeah, but it's been a while. And..." Quentin isn’t sure what else to add. He pushes his hair back then feels too exposed so he brushes it forward.

Jade nods then considers him for a moment. "You still high?"

"Just a little, pot though, nothing else."

"All right." Jade agrees. "I can swap you out with Micah, he’s booked with Tom and you know how much he hates that guy. That sound good?"

"Yeah, of course."
“Right.” There is something in her voice that makes him want to ask her to stop. But, he’s not sure what she needs to stop doing. “I’ll let him know it’s you, not Micah. He’ll be expecting you around ten, usual motel. When you get back though I wanna show you these new spells and see what you make of them.”

Quentin agrees. Talking about magic was safe enough, it didn’t always make him want to spontaneously combust.

He heads back up to his room to get supplies for the evening. Tom was a pretty vanilla guy. Quentin had serviced him a few times and one night he didn't even want to have sex, he just wanted to be held. While Quentin would have much rather fucked, it hadn't been his worst night.

Once everything was in place he made his way to the door only to pause and look back to his bed. He steps closer then slides to his knees and reaches a hand under the bed, grasping for the little vial of illusions. His fingers close over the cool glass and something catches in his chest.

Before he can dwell on feelings for too long he practically runs out of his room and out of the building.

Tom's usual spot is a shoddy motel just outside the city limits. He checks his phone for the room number then scales the stairs to the second floor. He knocks three times and is greeted by Tom's smiling face.

The sex is fine. Tom is never rough with him, nor is he too gentle. He's just fine.

They finish and as Tom is trying and failing to smoke without coughing, Quentin is staring at his bag. He wants to take a hit so bad.

"Tom," Quentin says without looking at him. "Did you pay for just one night?"

"Yeah." He coughs. "I need to get back into the city in the morning."

"Could I do anything for you that would make you buy another night?" Quentin still can't look at him.

"What are you offering?" He takes a drag without a cough.

"Anything." Quentin rolls over and finally looks at him. “I just need somewhere to stay for the night.”

Tom studies him fondly. He pushes a hand through Quentin's hair. It's such a small gesture that makes Quentin feel unbalanced.

"Let me get something to eat, then we'll go again. Then I'll buy you a night."

"Okay."

Quentin lays his head down and watches Tom finally finish his cigarette, dress and leave. Quentin naps lightly for an hour while he is gone. When he comes back he pulls Quentin on top of him and tells him to ride him. Quentin lubes him back up then slowly sinks down onto him.

"Good boy." Tom's hands tighten on his hips. He jacks up into Quentin in quick succession. "Good boy." He says again. Quentin lets out a moan for show. He sees Tom's eyes light up. "Call me
Quentin nearly laughs aloud. Nearly. Tom never struck him as having a kink like this, but to each their own. Quentin calls him daddy and begs for his cock. It's a better fuck than the first one.

Afterward, Tom pays him and lets him have the room. Quentin showers the moment he is gone. He uses most of the little bar of soap the motel offered. He combs through his hair and braids it back like Maggie has taught him, dresses in pajamas then decides to get something from the vending machine. He goes to the end of the hall and picks up a bottle of soda and a bag of chips. As he is walking back a stranger comes out of his room and looks him over as they pass. Quentin pays him no mind until his free hand is grabbed.

"How much?" The stranger asks.

Quentin yanks his hand away.

"Not selling anything." Quentin hisses at him. "Fuck off."

Quentin turns away then is forced back as the stranger grabs his hair. The stranger tugs him into his grasp then pushes him up against the wall

"I said; how much?" He growls into Quentin's ear.

Quentin drops his snacks and shoves the stranger off. He spits in his face and sprints to his room. He locks the door then casts a protection spell on the doorway. It's not the first time a guy had overstepped around him, and he's sure it won't be the last.

He's a little hungry. He thinks about ducking out and grabbing the discarded snack food but ultimately decides against it. He gets high instead.

Quentin takes out the bottle of K and sets it on the bed. He then unpacks a fresh needle. His mouth waters with anticipation. His needs and desires to get high are almost level with his want to hurt himself.

Or maybe they are the same thing.

When the needle enters his arm he feels like he has taken his first breath in days. Before the drugs take over he puts away the bottle and needles then lays face down on the bed. He hears the person in the room next to him rustling around then the drone of the TV. A car alarm goes off outside. Someone slams a door. The air conditioning flicks to life. And Quentin fades away.

Eliot comes back to him faster this time. Quentin has been enjoying the quiet of his mind when Eliot comes to sit next to him. He looks over and when he sees Eliot he realizes where they are. The cottage.

The mosaic is splayed out before them with a pattern that could be a star. Winter snow has been shoveled off the mosaic and piled high next to the cottage. Winter in Fillory was never harsh like winter in New York. It was tepid. The winds never picked up too much, nor did it hail down rocks the size of tennis balls. The passing of rainstorms came and went without so much as drowning the daisies planted behind the shed. It was like a fantasy of winter, written by someone who had never really experienced one.

Eliot has snowflakes in his hair. His cheeks and nose are red from the cold. His lips are chapped and when Quentin reaches for his hands they're dry. They’re dry, but they are so warm. Quentin
lifts El’s dry warm hand to his face and presses his cheek into it.

God, he wants to stay here forever. Eliot leans back and Quentin follows him. He presses his head against Eliot's chest and listens to his heartbeat.

The Monster didn't have a heartbeat like this. It was too slow and too loud. El's heart beats in time with Quentin's.

*Let this be real.*

He notices when the hallucination starts to fade when the colors on the mosaic begin to blend. Eliot's heartbeat gets off tempo with his and he desperately tries to claw onto the smoke of the illusion he cast for himself. When Eliot vanishes from sight Quentin panics. The real world comes crashing down around him. The TV next door is like a banshee in his ear. A car door slammed outside makes him jump as though he had been hit.

Quentin rolls off the bed and crawls to his bag. He fumbles with the needle and lets out a frustrated scream. When he finally gets the needle in the vial he cries. He calms down enough to get the drug into his system without too much trouble. He stays on the floor. Instead of slowly edging into the high like turning pages in a book. He flies into it like being pushed down a flight of stairs. He knows it's not going to be good. He knows what he's done is borderline an attempt on his own safety. But he can't bring himself to care.

Eliot is there. It's fake. He knows it's fake. But it's the only time he can pretend he's happy.
Chapter 6

The bathroom tap is running. Rushing water is flooding over his ears and forcing him to an unwanted consciousness. Quentin rubs his face deeply into the bed before turning to one side. His head is swimming with so much haze that his vision doubles. He tries to blink back into a single reality but all that does is make the world spin a little more.

The tap turns off. Footsteps pad from the bathroom only to end up next to the bed and then dip the mattress as someone kneels onto it. A hand touches his thigh and Quentin realizes he’s not wearing anything.

His first thought is that Tom has come back. His second is that Tom doesn't smoke pot and the room is filled with the lingering scent of bad weed. The hand pushes up from his thighs to his back, squeezing his ass as it passes by. There is a deep throaty groan that is emitted from the person. It's so low that Quentin can feel it reverberate in his chest. Lips touch his shoulder and he shudders. Something feels wrong.

"Thanks for the fuck." The stranger whispers into his ear then pushes off of him and gives his ass a slap. Quentin has only enough strength to lift and turn his head to watch the man who pinned him out in the hallway walk through the door.

He leaves it open behind him. Quentin sees soft early morning light reflecting on the building across the street. He doesn't remember falling asleep.

With a groan, Quentin pushes himself up only to falter and crash back down to the bed. He hurts all over. Bracing himself, he stumbles to the door and collapses against it, snapping it closed.

He looks down at his bare knees on the old green carpet and feels sick. He can't remember letting the stranger in. He can't remember fucking him. He can't remember anything about it. Bile rises in his mouth but he is able to bite it back. He pulls himself up and stumbles his way to the bathroom. He pushes the shower curtain aside and slips into the tub and turns on the faucet. The roar of water fills the room. Quentin looks down and watches as the water rises around his legs then watches with morbid curiosity as the water tinges pink when it hits his backside. He puts a hand between his legs and winces. He takes his hand back and sees a little blood and cum.

Did the stranger fuck him without a condom?
Did he let him?

He looks down at his body and sees new bruises on his hips and legs. He tries to convince himself that Tom left them, but it doesn't really quell the thought. His entire body aches and he's not sure if it's from the drugs or sex or both.

There's no more soap left.

Water spills over the edge of the tub, pooling on the stained linoleum floor but Quentin doesn't turn it off. He stays in the tub until the water coming out of the tap runs cold. By then he is feeling a little more like himself. He’s more awake and the fear and confusion has settled. They are still straining to get a starting role in his destruction, however they will have to wait until he is done dissociating.

He shuts off the faucet and pulls the plug. He carefully and slowly gets out of the water. He's able
to stand, although his legs feel like they are about to give out from underneath him. He makes it to the sink where he grabs the towel off the rack and wraps it around his waist. As he does he sees a bruise forming on his right wrist. He looks at his left and sees another.

Had someone been holding him down?

Quentin wipes a hand across the fogged up mirror revealing even more bruises. He lightly touches his neck where the dark red marks take the shape of a hand. The thumbprint is already turning a soft purple right under his jawline.

Suddenly it is much harder to breathe.

He wants to get high again. He doesn't want to be here anymore.

Quentin clumsily makes his way back to the bed and frantically looks for the drugs. He pulls everything out of his bag, throwing it around the room and ending up with nothing. He yanks the blankets and sheets off the bed hoping the bottle will reveal itself. All that is revealed are brown stains on the mattress.

Quentin starts to shake apart. He sinks down onto the edge of the bed and starts picking at his arm. He peels up new scabs and lets them bleed freely. In one clean patch of skin he rocks his nail back and forth until the skin breaks. When his arm is steadily bleeding he has a clear enough headspace to realize he should put on some clothes. He steps into his pants and winces.

He sits on the bed staring at the wall, thoughts bombarding him coupled with static until he is jerked back to earth by a sharp knocking at the door.

“If you aren’t out of there in an hour I’m calling the cops!” A voice shouts at him.

He gathered himself together enough to try and look for his phone. As he shoved piece by piece of his belongings back into his bag he realizes that there is no phone, no wallet, no cigarettes, no drugs. The stranger fucked him and stole all his shit. Quentin lets out a frustrated scream. He pulls on his shirt and tries not to look at the sleeves as they soak up dots of blood.

When he unlocks the door and sees that his protection spell had been broken. Someone had cut right through it, almost burned right through it. He leaves the door open when he goes.

Quentin only makes it two blocks before stumbling hard against a wall and vomiting. He’s not sure what is causing the nausea. Could be the drugs, or it could also be a few terrifying thoughts that he keeps pushing away. He hopes it’s the drugs. He can’t seem to get up after emptying his already empty stomach. He props himself up on the wall and tells himself he’ll stay until the world stops spinning. The spinning and nausea stay for what seems like hours, Quentin’s not sure. What he does know is that when he had his eyes open it was daylight, then he closed them, now it’s night. The cold has seeped into his skin while he slept. His teeth chatter and he can’t really feel his fingers. He casts a warming spell on his clothes and one for his hair.

He needs to get back to the apartment. He needs to take something, anything, that will stop him from thinking.

Without money for a cab or even the subway, it takes Quentin hours to get back. The sun is rising when he gets a few blocks away. He’s so close but his body can’t take it anymore. He sits on the snow-covered curb and puts his head between his knees. His lips tremble and he feels himself about to cry. His chest gets tight and his jaw clenches in desperation to put off what he knows is coming. The first tear to drop hits the fresh snow beneath him in such a dramatic flourish that the
others can’t help but follow. He sobs silently. The only noises he makes are little choked gasps that hurt his throat. Quentin sobs until he has nothing left. When the tears dry up it leaves his face raw and his eyes burning. He rubs his face hard trying to rid himself of the remnants, but he knows it doesn’t do much.

He doesn’t want to be here anymore. Gods he doesn't want to be here.

But, with nowhere else to go he gets up and makes it the rest of the way to the apartment. When he gets through the front door, he hears them. They are in the lobby area and if he inches forward a little he can make out the back of Margo’s head.

"Look, I get you have a confidential agreement with clients and shit, but this was our business before it was yours." Margo's voice is harsh and demanding.

"Q is our friend, we just need to know where he is." Julia's voice is lighter and kinder.

Margo and Julia? Why would they be together? Why would they be looking for him, together?

"I know he was here," Julia says. "The first time I was here I could sense something. And then the last time I knew what I was looking for. I could feel his magic here. So please, just tell us the last time you saw him."

"We don't care why he was here. He can pay to have sex with whoever he pleases." Margo says. "Hell, I'm just surprised he had the balls to actually go through with it."

Quentin has a feeling that even if he was standing in front of Margo she would tell him the same thing. He then softly laughs to himself. The thought of him paying for sex is a laughable scenario.

"I ain't telling you if I've seen him or not." Jade's tone is one that could challenge Margo. "You should leave. And I appreciate you coming in and giving us those spells, but that ends now."

"Listen here, miss-" Margo starts but is cut off by Julia.

"We made a mistake a while back and Q was the one we took it out on. I need - We need to make amends.” She says and Quentin can hear her voice get tinny, the way it always does when she is about to cry. "Please, anything. I’ll take any lead you can give us."

“No.” Jade’s answer is firm, making it clear there is no room for bargaining.

“Well, then.” Margo huffs. “Can you at least tell him we are looking for him if you see him again?”

Jade says nothing although she must convey something with a look for the response she gets.

“Okay, fuck you lady!”

Quentin can feel the air around him swirl with magic. Familiar. He closes his eyes and soaks it in. The heat of Margo’s magic. The somewhat metallic and honey taste it left in the mouth.

“Margo!” Julia yells but it is too late because he can feel Jade’s magic pushing against Margo’s.

“You crazy bitch!” Jade snarls. “No wonder he wants nothing to do with you.”

Does he? Quentin mulls over the question. Does he want nothing to do with them?

They wanted nothing to do with you. The voice of the Abyss hisses at him. He tries to smother it,
but it’s a grease fire, burning hot and fast. The thought stampedes through him and he is back to wanting to disappear again.

Quentin doesn’t stick around to hear Margo’s quick-witted response. He feels even worse than he did before. The sickness in his stomach is doubled just by hearing their voices. He feels the small world that he built up around himself crumble away. That small wall of protection is now gone.

He gets to his room and breezes by Kat to lock himself in his room. He presses his back against the door to prevent any unwanted visitors from trying to get in. He should throw up a spell too, but that went over so well the last time. He covers his ears with his hands, trying to block out the ghost of his friends’ voices. He knows he can’t really hear them but what they said to him all those months ago come back in surround sound. He can’t stand to go through that again.

Something is wrong with him. He feels like his blood is boiling, like he is being burned up from the inside out. He takes his hands away from his ears and sees the bruises on his wrists again. Blue and red and purple. Suddenly, he knows that if he looks at his back he will see a bite mark on his left shoulder blade.

He scrambles away from the door and dives under his bed. He pulls out his box of razors. Leaning against the bed he unwraps a new blade with shaking hands.

He doesn’t want to be here anymore.

He starts cutting small measured lines into his arm. They take away some of the panic and make it a little easier to think. He presses harder and longer until the blood is dripping off his arm and the world feels a little further away. Finally, something that feels good. He switches arms before he loses too much feeling. Cut after cut he hopes that the next one will be the one to stop him from thinking too much. To stop him from thinking about his friends, or the stranger, or how his body doesn’t feel like his anymore, or the way Eliot looks in his drug induced fantasy and how he’s never going to really see him again.

The razor slips and he slices too deep on his left arm. He can’t hold it in that hand anymore. He grips it in his right and drags it across already marked skin.

There is a banging on his door.

Quentin cuts instead of answering it.

Kat kneels down in front of him and tenderly takes the razor out of his hands. She puts it just out of reach. Quentin watches it glinting in the low fluorescent lights. Kat is saying something to him but he can’t make it out. He feels light-headed and as if he is going to throw up, but he’s got nothing left to throw up. The floor looks so inviting he wants to lie down. Kat holds him up. He catches her eye as he sways and there is a concern there. Not pity or disgust, just concern. It’s something he misses. It’s something he wants.

"Stay with me?" He says, He’s not sure how articulate it sounds but he says it again and again until the world slips away.
Waking up is easy. Realizing he is awake is harder. The events of the night before, or was it day, wash over him in crashing waves. He's in his own bed and the blankets have been bunched up and pushed to the edge of the mattress. Quentin, as gently as he can, rolls to his side and sits up. Looking down and seeing the white bandages wrapped tightly around both arms. He lightly peels back a few layers to see the new scars he created. Seeing the angry red mark and thinks to himself that it wasn’t deep enough as someone comes in. Quentin looks up to see Jade, who appears a little worse for wear.

"Scared the shit out of me Q," Jade says with a tremble in her voice, which she doesn’t try to hide. "I wanna yell at ya' but I don't think that'll do any good. So I'll just ask you flat out; were you trying to kill yourself?"

"Probably," Quentin answers bitterly. "I don’t know."

"If I take you to a hospital would you stay?"

"No." The thought of going to a hospital, being committed, sets his teeth on edge. He would rather, truly, kill himself before going back.

"Okay." She is usually so good at hiding her emotions, so much so that Quentin realizes he must have actually frightened her. That makes him feel worse. She sits next to him on the bed. He feels like he should comfort her. His hand twitches but refuses to move. There’s a thought in the back of his mind that tells him to lay his head on her shoulder, to take comfort from her. It’s something he would have done with Julia, rest on her and let her carry a little bit of the weight. But, Jade is not Julia and he’s not the person he used to be.

"You had some people looking for you." She says after a long silence.

"I know," Quentin nods. “I saw them. Thanks for turning them away."

"Is that what brought this on?"

"A little? I don't know. It wasn't just that." He runs a finger over the bandages and pokes at a red mark that has bloomed on his left arm. “Something’s wrong with me.”

“Hey,” Jade puts an arm around his shoulders. “You’re gonna be okay.”

“Sure,” Quentin rubs at his eyes to stem the tears from falling.

"So, where have you been?"

“What do you mean?"

"You've been gone for three days,” she explains. “You went to take care of Tom on Thursday. It's Monday."

“Oh,” Quentin stares hard at the ground and tries to catalog the past few days. "I had Tom buy me a night."

"Then?" She prompts

"Then I got high, came down, got high again, then-" Quentin stops, he can't remember exactly what
happened next. All he knows is that the stranger was there. Maybe it was better if he didn’t remember it at all.

"Did Tom give you those bruises on your neck and wrists?" Jade asks as gently as she can.

"No." He says and it’s barely a word.

"Who did, Q?"

"I don't know. I woke up and he was in the room." He says with shaky shallow breath. His mind races and races before settling on a terrifying thought. After a few false starts, he is able to say what he needs to say. "I think...I think I need to get tested."

Jade stiffens beside him. “Shit. Shit. Shit.” She gets up and paces the floor. “Okay, here’s what we are gonna do; we did what we could for your arms, but you are gonna need a real healer to fix them up. We’ll go to the clinic and have them stitch you up and make an appointment to get you tested. Are there any other injuries I don’t know about?"

"I don’t think so,” Quentin shakes his head. “I could use something to eat?"

“When was the last time you ate?"

“I guess Thursday,” He doesn’t sound convincing even to himself.

“Jesus, Q.” She runs a hand over her head. “Okay, yeah, let’s get you some food.” She waves him to the door. Together they go out to his kitchen where Kat is leaning against the counter looking at her phone. She glances up when they walk in and gives Jade a curt nod before ducking out.

“You should thank her when you get the chance. She’s the one who got the bleeding to stop.”

“I remember her being there,” he says and wraps his arms around his middle. He feels sick. He can remember seeing Kat’s pale hands covered in his blood. And there’s a memory of her voice too, but he’s not sure what she was saying

Jade sets a glass of water in front of him as she turns to pull crackers out of a cabinet. She makes him eat an entire sleeve before getting him his heaviest coat and walking them out the door.

The clinic is local and one Jade has brought many of her workers to when needed. It’s not just a normal medical clinic, it’s one that caters to Hedges. She is a familiar face here. They sit in the waiting room quietly. Quentin fiddles with some of the loose bandaging as Jade texts on her phone. It’s not very busy, just two other people in the room and the check-in nurse. Quentin almost wishes it was busier, that way he could hide away a little more.

Someone calls the fake name he has given and he looks up to see a familiar face of his own.

Kady.

Recognition flashes in her eyes and the world drops out from underneath him. He had been able to conceal himself from Julia and Margo, but Kady is staring right at him. There is no wall to duck behind, no Maggie to hide behind. However, he still may be able to run.

Quentin abruptly stands and turns towards the door. He has his hand on the handle, ready to push
but Jade is too fast. She grabs him by the shoulder to stop him. Maybe she had been expecting him to take off at some point. She should have grabbed him by the arm though, the pain might have made him stop in his tracks. He jerks out of her grasp and takes another step.

"You have to stay." Her voice is soft and yet there is such a demanding undertone that it makes Quentin hesitate. "Come on." Jade pulls on his shirt to get him to turn around.

He can't look at Kady. He keeps his eyes firmly on the ground.

"Q," Kady breathes.

"You know him?" Jade asks and positions herself between the two.

"We’re...friends" It sounds like a question. One she wants the answer to.

"Q, you okay with this? We can ask for someone else." Jade tells him. He wants to leave. But, even if he does Kady will tell the others that she has seen him, it’s only a matter of time.

"It’s fine," Quentin says to his feet.

"You still wanna use the fake name?" Kady tries to keep her voice professional, but there is a slight wilt to it. Quentin peaks out from behind his hair to look at her.

She looks good. Maybe has a little more color to her skin. What Quentin can't decipher is the look in her eyes. He thinks it's mostly confusion and maybe a bit of pity.

"We'll use the fake name," Jade says for him.

Kady nods. "Follow me."

She leads them back to an examination room and closes the door behind them. Quentin can't sit. He's too jumpy. He sees Kady reach out a hand to him and he flinches away. The hand drops.

"Q, you have confidentiality here," Kady says. "I want you to know that. No matter what. I’m not going to say anything to anyone if you don’t want me to."

"Okay." He says it just to say something, but he doesn't trust her. He knows he should, but he can't. He can see Jade in the corner of his eye putting together the pieces.

"Right, so how can we help?" She has a clipboard and pen ready to write down his issues. She's going to need more paper.

"I need my arms looked at," Quentin says staring down at his covered arms "And I need to be tested."

"Tested for what?"

"STDs." It's a near whisper but he gets it out. Kady writes something down and Quentin can see her grip the pen tighter.

"All right," she moves on. "And your arms? What happened to them?"

Quentin opens and closes his mouth without getting anything out. He can see Kady through his hair watching him grapple with what to say.

"He's cut up pretty bad." Jade answers for him.
"Oh," Kady blinks rapidly to clear tears and writes something down.

Shame settles right on his surface, it’s burning bright around him. God, he wants to take a hit.

"Can you show me?" Kady asks slowly like she doesn’t really want to see.

"Why?" Jade asks.

"I need to see if they require stitches."

"They do," Jade says.

Kady pales. Quentin's not surprised. Kady gathers herself together and writes something else down.

"Okay, and when was the last time you had unprotected sex?"

"I don't really know," Quentin says after some inner deliberations. "Friday or Saturday? Maybe?"

She stares at him until he can’t handle it anymore and looks back at her. She just looks so god damned sad. And he feels so fucking sad too. He wishes for half a moment that they could hug. That she would hold him and things would be okay. That she would say they all forgive him and that Eliot was okay and that they could be a family again.

“You don’t know?” Her voice breaks.

“No,” Quentin shakes his head. “It could have been Friday or Saturday. I know it wasn’t Sunday though.”

“Okay,” Kady’s voice quivers. “I’ll make you an appointment to come back in a few weeks to get those tests done. Your partner should get tested too.”

“Wasn’t my partner,” Quentin says dully then regrets it a second later when the pen stills on the page.

“It wasn’t…” She looks to Jade who clenches her jaw. Kady gleans all the information she needs from that motion. “Q do we, I mean, are we filing a report?”

“No,” he shakes his head again. “No, I don’t want to.”

“I, um, well.” She stammers her way through words before clearing her throat. “Just know you can okay? Any time. Anytime you need, I’m here.”

“Sure.” He focuses on the floor. The floor is safe.

“I’m gonna get the doc to stitch up your arms. Can you take off the jacket and roll up your sleeves if you have any?”


Quentin slips out of the jacket and folds it neatly on an empty chair. Kady looks at Quentin as if his face would give her all the answers she was looking for. He thinks, depressingly, that if she really wanted some answers all she would need to do is look at his arms. She gives him a pained smile and leaves the room. Quentin secretly hopes she doesn’t come back with the doctor. That she will forget that Quentin is waiting in one of the rooms and move on with her day. Wishful, wishful, thinking.
“She’s an old friend?” Jade asks.

Quentin sighs. “It almost feels like a lifetime ago.”

“Is she friends with the two that came by?”

“Yeah, they are all friends.”

“Is she going to tell them?”

“I don’t know.” He plays with a lock of his hair. “Maybe?” He mumbles.

“Q, you gotta tell someone about that life. I’m not saying it has to be me, just saying it’s gonna eat you alive. The longer you sit on this the worse it’s gonna be.”

“I know,” Quentin says and looks at the ceiling. “It’s, it’s just a lot. I know you’re right. I’ll tell you. I will. Just don’t hate me too much after I tell you?”

“Deal,” Jade says with a clenched jaw and a touch of sadness.

There is a light knock on the door before the doctor and Kady let themselves in. The doctor is an older woman who looks nice enough. She introduces herself then asks him to hold out an arm. He obeys and watches her and Kady unwrap the makeshift bandage. As they peel away the last of it he hears Kady audibly gulp. He wonders if it’s the cuts or the Hedge tattoos that do it. The doctor says nothing about the wounds, just asks him to turn his arm every so often as she cleans. She ends up stitching up two cuts on his right arm and four on his left, then his left palm.

“I need to ask you some delicate questions,” the doctor says. “Would you like me to clear the room?”

It feels like a trap.

“I don’t want to answer any questions.” He feels his hands start to shake. There is a tremble in his voice too. “I won’t answer any.”

The doctor must see a lost cause because she drops the subject and instead hands him a prescription for antibiotics. He takes the piece of paper, folds it and slips it into his back pocket. He thanks her then heads for the door without looking back. Jade quickly follows after him.

They reach the street when Kady catches up with them.

"Q, wait!” She doesn't try to grab onto him, but he can tell she wants to. "We've been looking for you. We've all been looking for you. I didn't think you were still in New York, but Jules did, she was certain. I won't tell them I saw you here, but please don't disappear on us again."

"Disappear?" Quentin can't help the venom that laces his voice. "I didn't disappear, you did! I was left. And I get why, I really do, but don't come to me saying I disappeared when I had no choice in the matter."

"Okay, I could have said that better." She concedes. "Look, El-"

"I don't want to know!" Quentin shouts. He can feel the tears welling up. "I don't want to know."

“No, you need to know, he-”

“Don’t!” He screams and it echoes down the streets. Some pigeons leave their resting spot on
powerlines, making no sound as they take off. All Quentin can really hear is a ringing in his ears and a singing under his skin. “Don’t talk about him.”

“Okay, I won’t.” Kady looks like she could cry at any moment. "I won’t talk about him, but Q you shouldn't be alone right now."

"He's not alone." Jade steps forward to say.

“Good. I’m glad, really,” and she sounds like she’s telling the truth. "Q, Julia and I both know what you're going through. We can help."

"There's nothing to help." He turns away from her. "Tell the others to stop looking. They won't find anyone."

Quentin practically runs away from her. He only gets a block away before his legs give out. He leans against the wall of a drug store and puts his head in his hands. He starts crying. He feels disgusting. He doesn't know what he wants to do. He doesn’t know anything, not anymore.

That's a lie.

He knows he wants Eliot. He knows he wants his fantasies to become reality. He wants to go back to Fillory. To live with Eliot in their cottage. To make a million more mosaics. To grow old again. Although, Quentin has learned a long time ago that he will never get what he wants.

He gets himself back to the apartment where Jade is waiting for him outside the front door.

“Why didn’t you answer your phone?” Is the first thing she says to him.

“It was stolen. At the motel.” He answers with a shrug.

He follows Jade up the elevator to her private room. There she pulls out a bottle of whiskey and two shot glasses. She pours one for each of them and downs hers without raising for a toast. She sits on a barstool and Quentin does the same.

"Q, I don't have any siblings, but I have the inkling that this is what it feels like." She pours another shot.

"I hope not. This," he gestures between the two of them. "Feels like it's a lot worse, or easier depending on how you look at it."

Jade takes the second shot. “I’m going to say something that may sound harsh, but I want you to listen to me. Okay?”

“Okay.” He takes a sip of the whiskey. It burns and the sensation makes him feel a little more present.

“These girls who you know, who have come looking for you, they don’t seem like bad people.” She looks at him and it’s like she actually sees him. It’s a lot to think about, someone seeing him again. Someone caring, truly caring again.

“They’re not. Not really.” He puts the drink down. “They’re good people.”

“Then why are you so terrified of them?”

“I’m not scared of them,” Quentin says so quietly that he can barely hear himself. Jade considers
him. She tops off her glass again, nodding to herself.

“You’re scared of what they’re going to say,” Jade understands. “You’re scared that what they are going to say will be true.”

“No,” Q eyes his glass, the gold liquid and crystal catching all the light in the room. “Not exactly.”

“Then explain it to me Q!” Jade barks. “I can’t-"

"I broke magic!” He blurts out, high pitched and strangled. Realizing what he's done, what he’s admitted to, he takes the shot. It settles uncomfortably in his stomach. "It's my fault magic went away the first time and it's my fault it's as shitty as it is now. I fucked up. I know that. I know.” There are tears threatening to fall in his eyes. He blinks them away and continues talking, unable to stop. “You know what’s really fucked up? The shitty thing is that I love magic. I love it. It's all I had for a while. It’s what I had before I even knew it was real. But I got his stupid idea in my mind that I needed to be the one who makes it better. So when I tried to make it better I just made it worse. It's my fault. I’m sorry Jade.” He can’t hold back the tears any longer. They flood his eyes and come crashing down. His chest starts heaving with sobs as he tries his best to clear his face.

“You know what’s even worse?” He can’t stop himself from talking. Why can’t he just stop talking?

“I don’t care that I broke it. I don’t care. I did what I thought I had to do. It's my fault that the love of my life is...God, I don't even know if he's alive. God. Fuck. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry that-"

“I’m sorry.” He says again after clearing his throat. He gathers himself up a little and keeps fucking talking. “I’ll understand if you don’t want me here anymore. I never should have accepted your offer, that was selfish. I’ll leave. I’ll get out of your hair. I’m sorry. I-"

He can’t stop crying now. He wipes at his face roughly and tries to take a deep breath. It's not deep at all, it’s shallow and he feels like he is going to hyperventilate. He can't look at Jade. He doesn't want to see the way she will look at him. He doesn't what to hear what she is going to say.

Quentin moves to stand, knocking over his chair in his haste. All the while thinking don’t get up, don’t get up, don’t-.

She doesn’t. She doesn’t even move.

He leaves and goes up to his room. His first thought is that he needs to get out of here. He doesn’t think Jade will be mad, not exactly. But he knows that sticking around any longer will only bring more and more unwanted guests to Jade’s door. She has made a safe space for so many others that he can’t jeopardize them like that. It’s not fair. Julia and Margo will come back after Kady tells them and by then he’ll be gone. He’ll get out of New York, find somewhere else he can disappear into. He goes to his closet, pulls out a duffle bag and starts throwing clothes into it.

His second thought is that he wants to get high. In his bedside table he finds a bag of coke. He finds that, but also his stolen phone and wallet.

Not comprehending what he is seeing he reaches out to touch. Real. He replays the past few days and what he remembers and he knows he remembers looking for his things in the motel room, and finding them gone. Had he not taken them at all when he left on Thursday? He puts both of them in the duffle bag staring for a long time before zipping it shut.

He turns his attention back to the coke and tips some out onto the back of his hand and snorts it. A knock on the door frame spooks him. He whirls around and drops the baggie, allowing a soft puff of dust to erupt from it. Kat is standing there. Her usual face of disinterest is replaced with slight
curiosity.

"You are leaving?" she tilts her head to one side.

"Yeah, I gotta get out of here." He swallows thickly.

"Where are you going?"

"I don't know. Far away." He can't even think about where he is running off to now. His mind is too full and too loud. He can’t wait for the high to kick in.

Kat turns and walks away. Quentin isn't surprised, but when she comes back a mere moment later, he is. She hands him a slip of paper with an address written on it.

"If you make it out there, they will give you a place to stay."

It's the longest sentence Kat has ever said to him. He pockets the address and thanks her. She says nothing back. She leaves him to pack and when he hesitates at the door she has already locked herself away.

He knows he shouldn’t do this. Jade has been nothing but good to him. Running is the coward's way out, but he can’t help the feeling that it is somehow the right thing to do.

Quentin practically flies out of the building. He sees Maggie briefly in the lobby and feels his stomach drop in regret, but he can't stop. Everything inside him is screaming to get out, get out now. There is the overwhelming feeling that if he doesn't he will crumple the world around him.

Getting out on the street he takes off in the direction of the cafe where he and Johnny usually meet up. He’s lucky. He catches Johnny as he is leaving the cafe and asks to but all the K that he has on him.

“Sure man,” Johnny says, like Quentin has just asked to borrow five bucks, not buy out his stock. “I’m letting you know though, not all of it has the magic in it. Some is just regula degula.”

“What do you do to the magic one?” He takes the bottles and puts them away. He’s not expecting Johnny to actually answer him.

“Yeah, man, I add some Ayahuasca and then spell them together with the Parr tut.”

“Oh, uh, thanks.” Quentin pays him and heads off in the direction of the nearest bus stop. As he waits he lights up a cigarette and tries to enjoy the high that is finally settling in over him.

He gets halfway through the cigarette when the bus comes. He drops it and crushes it under his shoe. His phone starts ringing as he boards. Checking it he sees Jade’s name. He hangs up. It rings again. He turns it off.

As he sits down he feels two pieces of paper crinkle in his pocket. One prescription and one address. He folds the prescription back up and looks at the address. 3401 Washington Street. San Francisco. The other side of the country.

That might be far enough.
Winter has swallowed the city. Fog clings low to the streets making it impossible to see more than thirty feet in front of him. There is no snow like New York, but it's biting cold. Quentin makes his way out to the beach after being dropped off by some lake. The wind whips his hair into his face, stinging and slashing. Once he gets to the shoreline it's worse. Sand cuts into his cheeks and flies into his eyes. Wrapping his arms around himself he hunkers down and steps heavily onto the sand.

His shoes are filled by the time he makes it to the shore. The closer he gets to the water the colder it gets. The wet sand sucks at his shoes, trying to pull him down. He complies, sitting down and removing his shoes, then tucking his socks away and rolling up his pants to the knee.

Salt fills his senses, clogging his nose and burning his eyes. It tastes good. The Pacific is nearly freezing when he steps in. Goosebumps erupt all over his skin and shockwaves of chill ripple throughout his body. He wades forward, stopping before the icy tides touch his knees.

It's so cold it hurts. And that feels good. Quentin closes his eyes and let's the cold and all the sensations wash over him.

There are a few people on the beach. People bundled up in heavy coats and gloves, runners who sprint by him, a family flying a kite and surfers clad in wetsuits catching the waves that break far before the shore. It's overwhelming.

As the tide ebbs and flows he sinks into the beach. Each tide digging him deeper.

*Maybe I'll just sink away.* He thinks. *Sink into the sea and finally disappear.*

When his teeth start chattering he pulls his feet from the ocean and backs up until the only thing that can touch him is seafoam. He keeps backing away and when he hits dry sand he slumps to the ground. While waiting for his legs to dry Quentin drags his fingers through the silky sand. He does this over and over his hands go numb.

He wishes he had a cigarette or a bump to warm him up. The sun is setting, casting gold light across the sky. The water glimmers until the sun dips behind the horizon. Once darkness settles around the beach most people leave. There is a group of kids who have set up a bonfire and are huddled around it. It's tempting, but it's too much to try and talk to anyone right now.

Instead, he wipes off the sand from his hands and rubs them together to warm them up. He moves his hands through the air, clumsy and full of tremors, casting a warming spell. It shouldn’t work with how shaky his hands are, but before he has even completed the last motion he can feel the warmth spreading throughout his chest.

The kids leave their bonfire, kicking sand over it to smother any lingering embers. Quentin listens to them laugh and talk as they disappear into the night.

He hugs his knees to his chest and tries to collect his thoughts. He knows a few things.

One: he needs a place to stay. The note Kat had given him acted like a beacon dragging him across the country, although, now that he was here it sat stagnant in his bag. He figures he will go to the address eventually, that something will make him, but until then…

Two: he needs to get tested.
Three: he doesn't want to think about that.

Four: sleep.

Step four seems the most reasonable and the most unrealistic. He hasn’t been able to sleep for days. His body gave out on him when he made it into Colorado. He had stepped out of the train station and collapsed into an alley. He’s not sure how long he slept for, the only thing he knew was that he ached from being in one position for so long. He’s exhausted but can’t sleep. Every time he nods off he is suddenly in a hotel room. The sink is running, his senses are fogged, there is something wet between his legs and he hurts. He hurts, he hurts, he hurts. Then he wakes up. Not sleeping is better than going through that every night.

He stares out at the horizon until the sun begins to light up the sky once more. He closes his eyes as he hears footsteps approaching him. Mentally preparing to turn and see a cop or someone who is going to tell him he needs to leave, Quentin braces.

“You been out here all night?” It’s not an accusatory tone, nor one that sets Quentin on edge. It’s just curious.

Quentin lets his head lull back to catch sight of the man behind him. No, not a man, kid really, he couldn’t be more than eighteen or nineteen.

“You got hypothermia or some shit? I ain’t got a car to take you to ER.”

“No,” Quentin shakes his head.

“Oh, good.” He pulls out a phone from the pocket of his hoodie and starts taking photos of the sand around them. “So, where’d you learn to do this?”

Quentin looks down and sees what drew the kid over. Circling him, carved into the sand, is a large drawn out spell. It spirals out from him as the epicenter then flourishes into ribbons of spell work. He stumbles to his feet and carefully walks around one tendril that has a warming incantation woven into one for relaxation. He didn’t realize he knew how to do that. He cuts a line through it with his foot and feels warmth leave his body.

“No, hey, wait!” The kid hurries over and snaps a few shots. “I gotta get all this.”

“Why?” Quentin asks and steps right through what he thinks was a spell to cure hangovers. Weird.

“My man Murphy got word that there was someone out here drawing spells. I thought you were just gonna be an artist that got lucky, but no artist can get that lucky.”

Quentin looks down fully at the spell. He doesn't remember doing this, hell, he’s not sure if he can do something like this. Walking around the edge of the circle he gets a better look at the types of spells drawn into the beach. Part of it, he realizes with a quick intake of breath, is the spell Julia gave Jade. The one to help encourage magic to make a comeback. There are so many more markings and sigils that he can’t decipher, spells he doesn’t know how to do, but there they are.

"So, what is it?" The guy asks.

"I don't know," Quentin answers honestly.

"But you made it right?"

"I guess." Quentin drags his foot through another part of the spell. "Who are you?"
"I'm Vinny."

"Vinny." Quentin deadpans. He walks through his spell work and just to be an asshole, drags his feet. Vinny jumps into taking more photos.

"Look man, Murphy said if you're friendly like to send you his way."

"Why doesn't he just come himself?" Quentin rubs his temples. He's getting a headache.

"Nah man, Murphy don't do shit like that."

“Oh.” Quentin isn’t sure what to say to that.

"If he likes what he sees he'll wanna talk to you." Vinny swipes through his photos absent-mindedly as he talks.

"And if he doesn't?" Quentin asks, looking down again at the spell and marveling at the absurdity of it.

"Then he won't talk to ya," Vinny says simply.

"Okay," Quentin says and ends the conversation. He walks away and Vinny doesn't try to stop him. He's not sure how Vinny or Murphy will find him, but he also doesn't care.

His fingers are stiff and cold, and there is sand under his nails. He flexes his hand trying to warm up and succeeds in just making them hurt a little more. Quentin wants a shower more than anything else right now, he wants a stupidly hot shower and a hit like he's never wanted one.

He finds a target to pickpocket a few blocks from the beach. He bumps into the well-dressed man, says sorry, then flips through his wallet. He takes the cash and a credit card then quickly ducks into the nearest motel and pays for a few nights. He drops the wallet into a bin on the way to his room.

As he runs the shower as hot as it will go he slowly takes off his clothes. His jacket and pants are stiff with salt and sand. Shaking them out leaves little sand dunes on the linoleum floor. He peels off his long sleeve shirt and reveals dirty white bandages that he has refused to change. When he tries to pry them up it pulls at the delicate skin beneath. He steps into the hot spray of water and lets it soak the bandages. Once they are soft and pliable he gingerly unravels them.

For the first time in weeks, he sees what he has done to himself. If someone were to ask he'd say it looks worse than it is. That would be a lie. The cuts are red and angry. There is an especially deep one in his left arm that has twice the number of stitches than the ones on his right. Another slices a star tattoo perfectly in half. He lightly picks at one of the more healed cuts and hisses as he pulls on the sensitive skin.

Quentin stops touching his arms before he does something worse and focuses on letting the water wash the beach off of his body. He uses all of the motel shampoo and conditioner working it into his hair and suddenly wishes Maggie was here to braid it again. Wanting hurts. Then again, everything seems to hurt.

He looks down at his body, which really doesn't feel like his anymore. He has ribs and hip bones showing, something his old body in his old life never had. The bruises that the stranger gave him are finally starting to fade. The one around his right wrist still has a bit of purple to it. He's not sure about the one on his neck. He reaches up to touch right under his jaw and it's tender. He sucks in a
quick breath when his thumb slots over the fingerprint. He looks down between his legs expecting to see the remnants of the stranger.

_Fuck._

He presses his hands to his eyes until he is sure he won’t cry and the feeling of nausea leaves him. Quentin scrubs at his body with the soap. Rubbing hard over the bruises as if that would make them disappear. He breaks a few stitches on his left arm and watches the blood drip off his fingers and onto the white tiled floor.

When he gets out of the shower he presses a towel to his arm and waits for it to clot before dressing. He makes a mental note to go to a drug store and get gauze and plasters, as he has nothing with him to wrap his arms with.

He sits on the edge of the bed and bigs in his bag until he finds his phone and charger. He has been without it for weeks as he never really cared to see what messages awaited him. He thinks, briefly, that he should go get some drugs before he looks through it, but he doesn’t want to leave the warmth of the motel room just yet.

The phone blips back to life after fifteen minutes. A flurry of messages blinks onto the screen one after another. There are thirty-six texts and nineteen calls from Jade, twenty-nine texts from Maggie then dozens of texts and calls from unknown numbers. Quentin reads through Jade’s texts first, not able to bring himself to listen to her voice right now.

December 2nd

-Call me back-

-Call me you asshole-

-Look I don’t care about what you did-

-It’s in the past. I’m a big proponent of the past is the past-

-You know that-

-I’ll give you some time to cool off, but call me back-

December 4th

-Ok, times up-

-Where are you?-

-Q please-

-Please don’t kill yourself-

-Please-

-Just call me, alright?-

-Call anyone-

December 5th
I don’t care that you fucked up magic, you are trying to fix it that’s all that matters

Call me
Call me
Call me

December 8th

You made Maggie cry

December 9th

Don’t kill yourself

December 11th

Please don’t be dead

December 13th

I went back to the clinic and talked to Kady
Don’t hate me for that
I told her you were missing
Don’t hate me for that either
She’s worried about you
We all are

December 18th

Your friends came back
I told them you were here
I gave them this number
I hope you still have it
I hope you answer them
Please answer them

December 22nd

Please be alive

December 25th

Please be alive

December 29th
Yesterday

Without realizing it, he has started to cry. The tears hit the screen of the phone and he wipes them away quickly. He takes long deep breaths before tapping back a screen and opening the messages from Maggie.

December 2nd

-Where did you go?-
-Where are you?-
-Jade is flipping-
-What the fuck Q-

December 9th

-I’m not good at this-
-I mean it’s happened before. People leaving when I don’t want them too-
-I’ve dealt with it before-
-Doesn’t mean I like it-

December 10th

-Jade told me about what you told her-
-I don’t blame you-
-I know you blame yourself though-

He can’t read anymore. Wrapping himself in the blanket he tucks himself into the bed. It’s still early in the day but he tries to sleep. Closing his eyes he pretends he is back in Fillory with Eliot at their cottage, a million years ago. He does end up falling asleep and he ends up dreaming again. He is shocked back to life when his dreams become too terrifying to exist in any longer. He grabs his phone to check the time. 11:24pm. He had slept a lot longer than he typically did.

The phone dings with a new message from an unknown number.

-I’m thinking about you. But I’m always thinking about you.-

He doesn’t know who has sent the text, but it sends dread into his mouth, filling it and making him dizzy. He wraps the blankets tighter around himself and turns the phone over on the nightstand. Tonight he will avoid the real world and tomorrow he will find more drugs and things will get better.

He lies and lies and lies until it’s all he knows.

Then the world around him is filled with explosions.
Quentin lurches up in bed and stares at the curtain covered window. There is crackling and whistling and the screams and shouts of people down the street. He looks at his phone again and understands why.

It’s New Year's eve.

“Happy fucking New Year.”
When he wakes it's nearing four in the morning and there is a fine layer of sweat on his skin. He feels a little nauseous, from the nightmares or the lack of drugs it is uncertain. He wants a hit so bad. Rolling out of the bed, he digs through his bag for the ninetieth time and, surprise suprise, comes up empty. Disappointed and exhausted he crawls back into bed and stares at the ceiling. Unable to fall asleep again he counts, then recounts, the cracks holding the roof together.

Sixty-four.

He leaves the motel without checking out and heads downtown to wait and watch for someone to slap a little white baggie into the hand of a friend. It takes a few hours, but he finds him. The dealer can't be more than seventeen. Quentin approaches quickly and tries not to scare him off. He’s a little flighty but as soon as Quentin flashes the cash he stole the kid relaxes. He buys everything he can get his hands on. Two bags of coke, six pills of ecstasy and a dose of LSD.

Tucking himself into the next closest alley Quentin gets high. The relief that extends to every inch of his body is Godly. He finally feels a little good, breathing easier as the world loses some of its sharpness.

He spends the rest of the day walking around and pickpocketing anyone who is an open target. He ends up off the Embarcadero watching the tides of people sail by. When he takes out the cash to finally count it the slip of paper Kat gave him goes fluttering to the ground. His high is wearing off and Quentin knows he'll crash soon. He'd be better off with Hedges, that is if they let him in. He picks up the paper and types the address into his phone.

The walk to the house takes him a good hour. He has to reread the address a few times as he walks into a nice neighborhood. A really nice neighborhood.

He stops at a corner house, well mansion really. There are large leafless trees outside and a stone wall looming high above him. The iron gate is latched but on it there is the Hedge symbol carved into the handle. There is a nervousness that dances on his skin. A hesitation that makes him take a step back. He weighs the pros and cons of opening the gate. Pros; somewhere to stay? Maybe. There might be a free meal or two? Maybe. The chance to do more magic? Maybe. It's probably warm inside. Cons; They might know what he did.

The cons outweigh the pros as far as he can see. Quentin steps away from the gate and leaves.

He walks down a few blocks and comes to a low stone wall that looks out onto a line of trees so thick he can’t see color through them. He touches the second bag of coke in his pocket and is tempted. He could take it now, then go see the Hedge, then he won’t feel so bad about it. But...if the Hedge is anything like Jade then he doesn't want to make a fool of himself by being too high to function. He has a cigarette instead. He reasons that if they do know what he has done then they won’t want him there. Then he can get as high as he wants, for as long as he wants.

Quentin goes back and pulls on the gate, it gives right away. Stepping into the front yard is like stepping back into Fillory. The garden has an almost magical appearance to it, maybe it is magic. There is a stone path that widens in the middle of the yard only to narrow once it reaches the entryway. By the door, there is a bush of winter roses blooming and viridian vines of ivy that creep up and over the walls. Flanking the path are newly sprouted paperwhites, almost ready to bloom. The garden also feels still, for lack of better words. The wind, nor the rumble of a passing truck seems to quake it. Quentin softly touches a green and red bush and feels it rustle under his
fingertips. He takes a step towards the door and stops. There is something magical about this garden.

The stone path he stands on is swirled in a concise pattern made of pebbles that Quentin recognizes after staring for a moment. It's Zif's Constellation. A spell for unwanted guests that makes them forget why they had once entered the spelled area to begin with. Like walking into a room and forgetting why you needed to be there in the first place. There is a counterspell for the Constellation, which is complex and way out of Quentin's range, but he has to try something.

Stepping back he plucks three leaves off a nearby plum tree. He rests them in his upturned open palm and with a word sets them on fire. It's a low yellow light that never burns to orange or red. He says a few words in Latin then drops the leaves to the center of the Constellation. Slipping to his knees he waits for the fire to burn itself out. When it is just embers he smashes the leaves with the palm of his hand, compressing them to black soot. Then he wipes his hand across the ground leaving a jet streak, like a comet that has already been extinguished.

He draws two consecutive circles with the ash then rubs his hands together. He goes through what he thinks are the motions of Keller Fube three. As he moves his hands he feels like he is in water. His movements are slow like he is doing them in a dream. Time feels different here. The slightly salty taste in the air from the ocean dissipates. As does the rumble of cars and people. The world is still and quiet and Quentin finishes his spell.

The sounds and smells come rushing back in full force. He is flung forward onto the ash-covered ground, the wind knocked out of him. He gasps in lungfuls of salty air as he gathers himself. He is staring at the ground when a pair of very nice high heels come into view.

"Impressive." A voice says above him. "Keller Fude three is not the easiest of spells to master. I've seen it done six times in this yard and I have to say, young man, that none of them made the ocean lose its salt."

Quentin doesn't know what that means. He rolls over and sees a woman who matches the sophistication of the pumps in his face. She is in her late sixties with pointed features, framed by ice white hair cut into a clean bob. She looks like she could have been a movie star at some point.

"Get up dear," she says. "I shan't have you blocking the entryway."

Quentin stumbles to his feet and before he can say anything she has turned and gone inside, leaving the door open for him to follow. It's the nicest place Quentin has ever stepped foot in. The parquet hardwood floors gleam and there is a satisfying sound when the woman walks across them. There is art on the walls that Quentin is sure is worth more than the penthouse back in New York. He follows with his mouth open. Kat knew about this place and she wasn't staying here?

"Excuse me," Quentin speaks up after she turns a corner. "Am I in the right place?"

"Is this the same address on the piece of paper in your pocket?" She says without looking at him.

"Well, yeah," he says with a huff.

"It's 'yes' darling. Were you raised in a barn?" She scoffs, but Quentin can hear a tinge of humor in her voice. "You are in the right place. If you weren't I wouldn't have let you in."

She brings him into a lounge area with a full bar and a fireplace that is cracking with life.
"Would you like a drink?" She offers as she pulls down a martini glass.

"No. No thank you."

"Then have a seat Quentin dear." She points over to the sofa.

"How do you know who I am? Who even are you?" He raises his voice slightly, then realizing what he is doing drops it quickly.

"My name is Farah. I got your name from Katarina. She said we would be seeing you soon. Though I was expecting much sooner. You arrived in the city days ago, yes?"

"Yeah. Yes."

Farah smiles. "No matter, you are here now." She makes herself a drink then sips it lightly. "Again your spell work outside was wonderful. I know that no one at Breakbills has taught you this. Unless you trained with Sybil. Though I think she was gone by the time you arrived." She says thoughtfully. "Katarina says that you helped with magical healing spells. Says that you have helped bring some magic back into this world. We have had some luck in that department here, but I welcome all and any other opportunities."

"It's a spell a friend made for us. She's somewhat of an anomaly in magic." Quentin says, then feels weird about calling Julia a friend. Does she still think of him that way? Unconsciously he rocks his thumbnail into the groove of an old scar. "I can show it to you."

"That would be grand." Farah smiles again. "I'd like to bring you to meet my coven, especially Decker. He would then most likely want to take you to Hillhollow."

"What's Hillhollow?" Quentin asks, though he really wants to ask how she became a Hedge. She doesn't look the part.

"Hillhollow is a school, in many ways like Breakbills and in many ways not."

"Okay." Quentin agrees just to say something. He digs his nail deeper. "Are you Murphy by chance? I had someone tell me Murphy is gonna want to see me."

"Coriander Murphy? That fraud?" Farah laughs into her drink.

"Coriander?" Quentin asks in puzzlement. "Like the plant?"

"Quite right. He has been trying to get into my good graces for years now. The man has no talent dear. He wants to be a magician, but there is no magic there. It's all desire and no skill. He relies on party tricks to sway people to his side. Don't be fooled Quentin dear."

"Sure, okay." He breaks the skin and lets out a little hiss. Farah seems to not notice, or if she does she plays it off nicely.

"Care to join me for dinner?" She offers. "Or if you prefer I can set you up in a room for the night."

"Yeah, sure. I mean. Yes." Quentin corrects himself. "Dinner would be nice. Thank you."

She takes her drink with her as she leads Quentin deeper into the house. The dining room is just as luxurious as the rest of the house. A large crystal chandelier dapples the room with soft light. The table is already set for two. Farah takes her seat and motions for him to do the same. A server
comes out of a side door and sets a plate in front of him. The most wonderful aroma of cream and butter fills the room. He’s not exactly sure what has been placed before him but he can’t wait to dig in.

“Please enjoy,” Farah instructs and Quentin obeys. It’s hard not to.

He hadn’t realized how absurdly hungry he was until he took a bite. He hadn’t eaten much on the journey across the country nor had he eaten regularly since he arrived in San Francisco. He saved his money for drugs rather than food most days. This kind of food was a luxury he didn’t dare afford himself.

As he eats, Farah tells him about Hillhollow.

“It’s an old school, and like this city it’s history is tied with that of the gold rush. Santiago, who opened it, had made a small fortune and put it towards the school. Of course, it was not meant to hold both Hedges and Magicians, that changed after the 1906 earthquake. You know the one?” Quentin nodded. “Of course. After it everyone was struggling, the school was nearly destroyed and the loss of people was terrible. Santiago reached out to both Magicians and Hedges to help rebuild and in exchange offered them a place at Hillhollow.”

“Just like that?”

“Oh, heavens no,” she guffaws. “The doors were open for a good many years then closed shortly after the first world war. They were only recently reopened in the late eighties. After the Loma Prieta quake. There is something about this city that draws people together when things shift. Since then it has been open to both. And, I’ll admit that there are still issues, but it is a nice change of pace. Don’t you agree?”

Quentin nods and looks up as the server comes back with a second plate for him. Farah has her drink refilled and smiles at him. He looks down at the plate of food and can’t help but feel like he shouldn’t be here. Even though he was invited, he feels like he should leave.

“What...” he starts then stops himself. He chews over the thought for a second before continuing. “What did Kat tell you about me?”

“She did not need to say much,” Farah says after a thoughtful sip. “She told us your name, the types of spells you were practicing in New York and what your magic felt like. Then we did a little research of our own. A very busy man you are Mr. Coldwater.”

“So you know what I’ve done. What I did.” He takes a deep breath. “What I did to magic?”

“Not everything. We know that you are somehow connected to the depletion of magic, how and to what effect, is up to your discretion if you want to tell us.”

He’s not very hungry anymore. Farah must notice this for she stands and beckons him to follow her. He does so without really meaning to.

“I have a room set up for you. I’d like for you to stay the night, then tomorrow I can introduce you to Decker.”

“I don’t think I should be here.” He tells her.

“If you weren’t meant to be here then you wouldn’t be.” She says simply. “You would have never gotten past the gate.”
“All that, out there, in the yard,” he points, but he doesn’t know where the yard is in relation to where they are in the house. “That was just luck, really.”

“No amount of luck is going to allow you the power to complete a Keller Fube three that impeccably. I may not know what you have done to magic, but I do know that there is something about the magic you can do that is like no other I have felt. It’s captivating.”

“You're wrong.” He says with a tremble in his voice. He feels completely unbalanced. No one other than Jade had ever told him that his magic was something special. Something exceptional. He wants to believe it.

"I am rarely wrong dear." She pushes open an unlocked door and turns on the light. “Why don't you get some rest? If you need anything just call.”

She lays her hand gracefully on his upper arm and squeezes lightly, then disappears down the hall.

Quentin stares into the beautiful room, unblinking, for a long minute. It is really beautiful. He leaves the door open and lays on the king-size bed face down and arms spread out wide. The bedding smells clean and slightly like lavender. He wants to take a hit. He wants to cut. He wants to sleep. He wants to know what the fuck is going on. He doesn't end up doing anything he wants.

He can’t get high in a place like this. It just seems like bad etiquette.

He can’t cut in a place like this. Definitely bad etiquette.

He tries to fall asleep and can’t get his brain to shut up. It itches to take a hit, or draw a razor across his leg. He lies in the bed for hours before giving up on sleep altogether. He leaves the room and wanders.

The darkened halls feel endless like they themselves are made of magic. Quentin is just thankful there are more landscape paintings rather than portraits. The portraits tend to look like they are following him. He finds himself crossing through an archway and into a greenhouse. It is full of lush greens and brightly colored flowers. They are all labeled with tiny cursive writing.

*Hemlock*

*Foxgloves*

*Daphne*

*Wormwood*

*Lambs ear*

*Yarrow*

*Calendula*

Quentin brushes over the soft orange petals of Calendula. He knows he can’t stay here, but for one gleaming moment he wishes he could. He rubs mint leaves between his fingers and inhales deeply. The sweet menthol is calming and makes him think of Alice, which isn't all that calming.

A light knock on the glass wall makes him spin around.

"Restless?" Farah asks. She has changed into sleeping clothes and looks a lot softer in them.
"Yeah." Quentin agrees.

"Dear, you are a king. Let's speak like one." She moves a hand effortlessly through the air and lifts his lowered chin with the touch of her fingertips. "Let's act like one."

"I never really got to be a king.” He pulls his face away. “It was just a title for me. The others, they were the real royalty."

"Why weren't you?" She picks up a small blue watering can and lightly douses some Lantanas.

"Just didn't work out for me." He says with a shrug.

"Didn't you want to be one?"

"More than anything." Quentin follows her down the aisle watching as she waters every other plant. "I've believed in magic for a long time. Even before I got into Brakebills. I think I knew magic was real at some point. When I was much younger. Then I got older and things got...complicated. When I found out that magic was real. Really real. I thought; okay, this is when things get better. This is when I get to finally be good at something. I think that if I hadn't found magic at all things would have worked out better for everyone."

"There is still time for it to get better for you too," Farrah says as she hands him the watering can. "There is still time for growth."

Quentin wants to believe her. He wants to believe that he can get better. That things will get better for everyone. So he does. What more does he have to lose?

He waters the Lambs Ears and watches the water bead up on the leaves.

"Don't overwater them dear." Farrah tells him as she walks out of the greenhouse, leaving him alone with his thoughts.
Hey everyone,
Sorry for the very late chapter. I could not get this to a place where I liked it for ages, but it finally happened. The next few chapters are nearly done so expect them shortly! I also wanted to say thank you to all the amazing and kind reviews I have gotten here. They are truly so wonderful and give me so much joy to read and reread. Thanks again and enjoy!

The greenhouse is warm and quiet throughout the night. There is a low hiss of electric lights that permeates the air. Quentin closes his eyes and pretends he's somewhere else. He pretends he is back in Fillory, where magic was once thriving and alive. Somewhere in a field surrounded by late winter frost. In a place where arms are reaching out to touch and to hold.

A sprinkler system clicks on and fills the room with a light cool mist.

It’s almost too cold to stay. But he does.

Morning light creeps into the walls of the greenhouse, filling them with gold light glinting on green. Quentin lets it wash over him from his place on the ground. He had laid down sometime during the night and never got back up. He stayed on the floor staring up into the dark as if it would have all the answers to the questions he is too afraid to ask.

Once the sunlight spreads all around the room he pushes up into a sitting position and watches the daybreak in a comfortable silence.

Farah enters the greenhouse a few moments later with two cups of coffee in hand. She gives him one without a word and waits for him to drink before speaking.

“If you would like to freshen up you may. Then, I’ll take you to meet Decker.”

“And if I don’t want to?” Quentin asks from the floor.

“Freshen up?” She questions.

“Meet Decker.” He clarifies.

“That’s fine.” She gives a little shrug, though he can tell she would be upset if he didn’t go. “At least join me for breakfast before you leave.”

Quentin agrees to breakfast. He sits across from Farah at a long, beautiful table and tries to eat. He spreads jam over toast and it doesn’t taste like soot in his mouth. That’s a nice change. He manages two slices and a piece of sausage.

“I’ll go.” Quentin says as she clears the plates.
“I’m glad,” she says and sounds it.

He knows it’s the right thing to do. To go with her, to meet this Decker, to have them figure out what is wrong with him.

He knows. He knows. He knows.

But it still weighs on his shoulder like Atlas decided to take a break.

Farah hands him a thick coat before she packs him into her car and drives them to the shoreline. They park and he follows her down a few steep steps then onto the beach itself. They walk along the seawall before coming to a stop in front of a Hedge mark carved into the concrete. Farah uses her finger to draw a sigil around the star, casting what Quentin can only assume is the unlocking spell. The keyhole in the star glows white and Farah steps through the wall.

"This is some Harry Potter shit," Quentin mumbles under his breath as he follows after her. They descend another short flight of stairs and step into what looks like an old speakeasy. It’s dark and a little dank from the saltwater. There are a few people lounging and speaking softly and a few others casting a spell. The floors are covered with mismatching Oriental carpets and the curved walls are decorated with spell work shining in gold.

"What was this?" Quentin asks.

"In the Twenties, it was a pedestrian passage to get to the beach. In the Seventies, it was deemed too dangerous and it was sealed shut. Hedges got in here and supported the structure with spells." She points to the glimmering gold on the walls. "It's the perfect place for us. Out of sight, but we can draw some power from the ocean."

Quentin thinks of the first night he spent here, out on the beach. He was so close to this place and he didn’t even realize it. Farah takes him deeper into the tunnel, saying hello to a few people and setting a small pack of pressed flowers on a communal table.

“Over here, Dear,” Farah waves him over to the back of the tunnel where a man stands from his seat as they come closer. "Quentin Coldwater, I'd like you to meet Declan Decker."

“An unfortunate name I know.” A tall slight man holds out his hand to Quentin. "Please call me Deck if you like. It's nice to meet you."

Quentin nods and shakes his hand. Decker is maybe in his mid-thirties with a smattering of grey hairs above his ears and behind round-rimmed glasses are two different colored eyes. One green. One brown.

"Farah told me you completed a Keller Fude three, very impressive." He sounds eager and impressed, not what Quentin had expected. Though, he’s not sure what he was expecting.

"Oh, uh. Thank you?"

"Come sit." Decker takes him over to a round coffee table with mismatching chairs pulled up to it. "Would you like a drink? Or something to eat?"

“Do you take me for a bad host, Declan?” Farah acts displeased.

“Never.” Decker gives her a flirty smile and a wink.

"No, thank you." Quentin wants a cigarette, or better yet a line of coke, but he highly doubts that's
on the menu. He sits down and holds his left wrist in his right hand, twisting it tightly. Farah excuses herself and he can’t help but want to ask her to stay. Decker spells over a pitcher of water and pours himself a glass.

"You trained at Breakbills, yes?" He starts.

"Yeah, I don't know if you would really call it training. I never finished." Quentin fidgets in his seat. "I learned the most from my friends. I think I also learned a lot just out of necessity."

"I get that." Decker nods. "I’ve always found that students learn better from their peers than they do the actual staff. You can teach a room full of talented magicians how to cast Dodie’s bewitchment and none of them will be able to do it. But, have one of them figure out that Dodie’s bewitchment can be used to create the perfect bong and suddenly everyone is a master."

Quentin can’t help but crack a small smile. Dodie’s bewitchment does make the best bongs.

“Do you come from a family line of magic?” Decker asks.

“No. Not that I know of.” He shakes his head.

“Interesting.” Decker leans forward in his seat. “And your discipline?”

“I don’t know.” Quentin shakes his head sadly. “I never got one. I was put with the Physical kids and I got by I guess.”

“What do you think your discipline is?”

“I have no idea,” Quentin says honestly, and he really doesn’t care anymore. “What does it matter?” He says aloud without meaning to.

“It may not,” Decker shrugs. “Can you show me a spell? Anything. Any small spell is fine.”

"Why?"

"I have a theory and I want to test it." He sits back in his seat. “Only if you like though. No pressure.”

Quentin’s mouth twitches. He doesn’t want to do this, but he also doesn’t want it to look like he is hiding something. He squeezes his arm a little tighter, feels a cut split, then takes his hand away and lays it palm up. He moves his other hand in slow precise motions above it then touches his fingertips to his palm and draws upwards. In the wake of his fingers materializes a Monarch butterfly. It flutters softly in his hand before lifting off and flying around the room.

"Perfect," Decker says. "Thank you."

"What did you find out?" Quentin asks, keeping his eyes on the butterfly. The red and black wings against shimmering gold.

"As you know magic has been fickle with us recently." He begins and Quentin's stomach drops. "Since we got it back it hasn't been the same. It's been thin if that makes any sense. We have been helping it to grow with different types of spells, some I believe you did back in New York. And it has been working. Magic is slowly growing up to where it needs to be. But, you have been helping it more than you know. Even with that little spell, I could feel the magic in the air. It's like every spell you cast you are putting pieces of magic back into place."
“I don’t understand,” Quentin says nervously. “Why me?” He asks, but he knows why.

“Best guess?” Decker shrugs. “Your magic was connected to the blip that occurred and in magic’s way to right itself, it has created a type of defense mechanism. Every time you do a spell it replenishes a little bit more.”

“Connected?” Quentin hears himself whisper.

“Hmm,” Decker nods. “I imagine there is a reason why, but don’t feel like you need to tell me. Honestly, I’m just happy magic is back. I would have been without a job if it hadn’t come back.” He laughs and Quentin can tell there is no malice in it. “Was your magic always like this?”

“Like what?” Quentin asks.

Decker nods up to the ceiling where the butterfly has multiplied. Dozens of them are flying about and crawling across the curved room.

“No,” Quentin says honestly. His magic was never, well, magical.

“I’d like you to come to Hillhollow,” Decker tells him. “I have professors and students who could help with the spells you know, and together I think we can get magic closer to where it was.”

“If I knew how to give it to you I would,” Quentin says with desperation in his voice.

“What?” Decker says after a beat.

“My magic.” He keeps his eyes on the butterflies on the ceiling. “If there is a spell that can take it away I’ll do it.”

Decker is silent for a long moment. He picks up his glass then, as if thinking better of it, sets it down without drinking.

“I don’t want to take your magic, Quentin. Nobody at Hillhollow will, I promise you that much. I can’t promise that the spells we do will actually be the answer, but I think they will help nonetheless. This is your choice, Quentin. You can come or you can go. That is up to you.”

“I’ll go with you.” He says in one rushed breath, feeling as though if he didn’t say it fast he would never say it at all. “Of course I’ll go with you. Can I make a request though?”

“Certainly.”

“I’m kinda hiding from some people. They’re not dangerous or anything, but I really don’t want them finding me. I don’t think they will since I’m so far away now. Just, if someone comes looking for me don’t let them know where I am.”

“I can agree to those particularly unusual terms I suppose.” He says with a chuckle.

Decker holds out his hand. Quentin takes it and hopes for the best.

The next morning Farah sends him off from her immaculate home with a piece of toast and a handwritten note. He takes the bus out to the Haight-Ashbury area and makes his way to the address written on the slip of paper. It’s another beautiful house, not a campus. It is directly across from a park and has what looks like a gated garden next to it. He starts up the steps then pauses as the garden gate catches his eye. Woven into the ironwork of the gate a spell to ward off intruders
as well as the keyhole star of the Hedges. He stands in front of it and chews over what spells will open it. He stands there for so long that someone comes up from behind him and clears their throat. Quentin jumps and spins on his heel. A guy about his own age stands there with a backpack slung over a shoulder.

“You just push, man.” He says then forges ahead and pushes open the gate with ease.

Quentin lets his head fall back and heaves a heavy sigh.

*Of course.*

He follows the guy down a path that extends further than logic dictates it should. Quentin walks for five minutes before the path leads to a clearing. At the end of a green lawn is a large Victorian-style building. *Hillhollow* is stamped on a stone where the path splits. He takes the one that leads him to the front entrance. It smells like a school. Paper, ink, panic, sage, coffee and candle wax.

With it being early January there are not many students around. Quentin guesses that the ones he sees are taking a winter course or have stayed here for the holidays. He worms his way into the main building and glances down at the note he still has clutched in his hand. Decker’s office is on the third floor in room 33. He takes the stairs. Walking down the hallways makes him long for Breakbills. For the type of innocence he didn’t know he had back then.

He knocks lightly on Decker’s door then enters when he is told to. Decker is sitting behind his desk leafing through papers and spelling a pen to be taking notes for him. He beckons him in with a hand. Decker’s office is filled with books. Not bookshelves, just books piled on top of one another. Quentin sits down between two precarious towers, careful not to jostle anything.

“Find everything all right?” He asks as he stills the pen and moves his papers aside.

“Yeah, no problems,” Quentin shrugs.

“Great,” Decker pushes his glasses up his nose. “So, Spring semester starts in two weeks and if you are interested I would like you to help with the aptitude test.”

"I'm not sure if that's a good idea," Quentin tells him. "Like I said yesterday I never got a discipline, I don’t think I’ll be a good judge of them.”

"That's fine. I'll be doing most of the testing, but I want you there to gauge the amount of magic in the room. I think it will help you understand the type of magic you are giving off if you are on the other end of it.”

"Oh, okay." That sounds reasonable enough.

"The tests start on Monday afternoon. After the test we can meet back here and go over what you saw and felt. If you want to take notes during, it wouldn’t be a bad idea.”

“What are you expecting to find?”

“Honestly? I have no idea.” Decker laughs. “Your magic is weird Quentin. Don’t take that the wrong way. But, it is. It’s weird but it’s also fascinating.”

Quentin nods. It is *weird.* When he really thinks about it the spell he did shouldn’t have worked at all. Even when it did something, it shouldn’t have resulted in this kind of backlash. It wasn’t that type of spell.
He wants to tell Decker in this moment the spell he did, what he did to magic and how this was all his fault. Instead, all he says is;

“You can call me Q.”

Decker offers him a tour of the campus, which he can’t in all good faith turn down. He follows him around like a lost dog nodding and asking meaningless questions as they go. Decker points out the health center and a black hole opens in Quentin’s stomach. He still needs to get tested. He spends the rest of the tour spaced out. His mouth is dry when he asks another question and when Decker invites him to do a spell with a couple of his peers, Quentin nods mindlessly.

“Great! Let's go to the Library, Professor Yeh should be setting up about now.” Decker says so brightly that it snaps him back to the real world and to the reality of what he just agreed too.

The library is nothing like Breakbills and nothing like the rest of the style of Hillhollow. It's contemporary modern, with open spaces and walls made out of glass. It doesn't have the same warmth as Breakbills does, but it has its own personality. The doors are automatic.

They go up to the roof which must be charmed with a warming spell because Quentin feels the wind blow his hair off his shoulders, but feels none of the chill.

Professor Yeh is setting out candles with a simple wave of his hand. They fly to their spots on a sigil carved into stone. Decker makes introductions then tells Quentin about the spell they will be doing. It’s pretty similar to one he did with Jade, but a few new elements. Ones that are more attuned to magicians who have been studying magic for a while, rather than just Hedges. Decker and Professor Yeh show him the motions for the spell as others begin to arrive. In the end, there are ten people, some students, some teachers. They all say hello and don’t ask too many questions.

Quentin is exhausted. He doesn't really have the energy to do this kind of spell, or any spell for that matter. He wants to get high so badly he can feel it in his teeth. He bites the inside of his cheek until it bleeds to quell the feeling.

Decker situates everyone in their positions then leads them on.

The magic that this circle of magicians and Hedges exude feels so vastly different than the magic that Jade and her coven made. Back in New York those spells always left the taste of smoke on his tongue, like there was a fire miles away. Here, the fire was inside the building. The taste of smoke weighs heavily on his palate, bitter and deep. It’s a magic that’s more finely tuned. Still the same song but played in another key.

“Shit.” One of the students says once they finished the spell. He is looking at Quentin with an unbelieving stare. “That was not what I was expecting. Where the hell did you find this guy Deck?”

“Yeah man, your magic is hella crazy,” another pipes up. Quentin lowers his head and lets his hair cover part of his face.

“I have to agree,” one of the professors says. “This,” she waves a hand through the air as if she is dragging it through water, “is stunning.”

"It's not." Quentin mumbles. "It's a mistake that I even have it at all."

“Some mistake,” a student laughs.
"What spells have you been doing before?" Professor Yeh asks. 

With that, he starts telling them about the spells Julia gave them and the one's Jade and he had come up with. He spends the better half of his afternoon in the library doing spells and hoping that he is contributing to something and wishing he could just take a hit of anything.

By the time Decker dismisses them Quentin is completely worn out. He wants to say goodbye and bolt but he can’t bring himself to do that yet. He helps them clean up then finds himself following Decker again as he says he has a few things for him. They go to a back room in the Library where Decker makes him an ID card.

“This will also give you access to facilities and the restricted section of the library.”

“Are you sure you want me to have this?” Quentin asks him. He doesn't think he should have this.

“Absolutely. I have a feeling you’ll be helping out a few of the professors here and it’s easier to just give you access to everything rather than having to ask for it every time.” Decker explains with a half shrug.

Quentin chews on his next question for a solid two minutes before asking.

“Can I use the health center?”

Decker pauses and creases his brow. “Yes. Are you all right?”

He opens his mouth to answer, but can’t seem to form the words. Decker takes pity on him and shakes his head.

“Nevermind. You don’t need to tell me that. Yes, you may use the health center.”

“Thank you,” Quentin whispers.

Decker sets a date for another casting and Quentin agrees to it. They part ways and Quentin goes to the health center. He asks the med student working the desk that he’d like to be tested and has to say it three times because he can’t say it loud enough. They take him to a private room and run the tests.

The med student hands him a slip of paper with his results.

He reads them and finally feels like he isn’t breathing underwater.


He leaves Hillhollow and finds the nearest dealer he can. He buys all the special K he can then adds a bit of magic with the method Jonny told him about. He knows Farah is waiting for him, but he can’t go back there just yet. He gets a hotel room, locks the door and puts up a protective spell then takes out the drugs. He slips the needle into his skin and it feels like coming home.

Dipping back into the fantasy of himself and Eliot being together again brings him the kind of happiness that can't be found outside the inebriated illusions. Eliot looks over his shoulder at him, eyes wandering for a moment before finding him. When they land he smiles.

“Q,” he can hear his voice, a softly played melody on a finely tuned piano. Quentin goes to him. Eliot turns completely to him, opening his arms and pulling him in. He smells like grass and oak fire and like the little loaves of bread, they would buy at the markets in Fillory. This is where he
wants to be.

This is where he truly feels clean

Chapter End Notes

a/n I know std tests don't work like this, but, magic.
Chapter 11

He stays at Farah’s for three more days before getting his own place. She kindly offers for him to stay longer saying it’s no trouble, but he wants his own space. His own room where he can get high and cut and not have to worry about staining her hardwood floors.

The only place he can afford in the city is in the Tenderloin. When he tells Farah his address her face pales.

“Absolutely not, Quentin,” she puts her foot down.

“It’s all I can afford right now.” He shrugs.

Her mouth quirks to one side and he thinks he might get chewed out. Instead, she sighs and says, “I’ll tell Decker to give you a larger paycheck.”

“What? No, please.” Quentin shakes his head. “It’s generous enough that he’s paying me.”

“Nonsense;” she waves a hand at him.

Quentin wants to fight her but he can feel that that was the clear end of the conversation.

He packs his bag and leaves Farah’s and goes to his tiny studio apartment. He doesn't stay long, just enough time to set his things down, then he is off to Hillhollow for the aptitude tests.

He meets Decker in the library then follows him to a large room lined with empty desks. It’s all very familiar. The new applicants arrive and Quentin lets them all in, then passes out the quiz. He watches some fly through the exam with ease and other falter and stress. Once everyone has finished and exited the hall Decker has him collect the papers, then together they clear the room with a quick spell, leaving one desk at the top of the hall for Decker to use if needed.

“Are you ready?” Decker asks as he sorts through tests.

“Yeah, I guess.” Quentin shrugs.

“Good enough, yeah?” Decker sets the tests on his desk then takes the top one. “We’re starting with Janus Klepler. He scored well in the practical application section and magical theory. He’s a hedge so when he is performing the tuts, pay attention to the heat that is in the air, it’s different than someone from a magical family.”

“Right.”

Decker performs a small motion and the door opens.

Quentin watches from the back of the room. Janus does what Decker asks of him and Quentin tries to suss out what he is feeling in the air. He has to close his eyes to get a better hold on it. He can feel some of the heat that Decker mentioned, but there is something else there that he can’t place at first. Something familiar. Decker has the kid do three more renditions of the same spell and it clicks for Quentin on the last one. His magic reminded him of Maggie’s. Janus was well trained and had a better grasp on his, but the same feeling of something sugar sweet hitting the gums was there. Maggie had always been good at prediction spells. Anything that dealt with odds, she had won.
“Any thoughts, Q?” Decker says breaking his train of thought. He opens his eyes to see both of them looking at him expectantly.

“Circumstantial Prognostication,” he blurts out. The corner of Decker’s mouth tilts up.

The rest of the afternoon passes in a similar fashion. Quentin stays out of the way listening, feeling, tasting all the magic in the air. He gets most of the disciplines, sometimes only guessing the broader category and other times being able to narrow it down.

When the last student leaves Decker claps him on the shoulder.

“Well done,” he praises. “I should have had you take notes. That way we could have spoken in more detail about each one. Oh well, next time.”

“Sure,” Quentin nods.

“You feel anything that matches your own magic?” He says as he slips the tests under his arm then gestures for Quentin to follow him out the door.

“I guess the physical magic.” He says with a sigh. “But, it wasn’t quite the same. Like, none of their magic felt hot enough. Does that make sense?”

“Yeah,” Decker nods. “There is a lot of fire in your magic. I’d definitely say you were in the right discipline with physical. You remember, ah…” Decker looks back through the test until he finds the one he wants. “Alina Russo?”

“The girl who dressed like she was in the 1950s?” Quentin clarifies as they step out of the library and towards Decker's office.

“That’s the one. When she cast Philbert’s cloaking enchantment could you feel the little shockwave she created?”

“You think she does that with every spell she casts?”

“I hope not, it’s a lot of wasted magic that she emits. But, it’s similar to what you are doing.”

They go into Decker’s office and he opens an already stuffed full drawer and shoves the test into it. Quentin sits across from him and runs a finger over the spine of an old book as Decker continues.

“Instead of the magic bursting out and dissipating like Alina’s, your’s seems to roll out and kinda heat up the space around you. Like a space heater.”

Quentin can’t help but laugh at that. “Thanks.”

“You are very welcome,” Decker chuckles. “Next time we do a casting I want you to reach for that feeling. See if you can amplify it. Or, if not, just try to get a good grasp of what is being emitted. Maybe we can find out what spells are better than others.”

“Are we casting today?”

Quentin’s phone pings. He thinks it must be Farah.

“Not today, most are busy setting up for the first day of classes. Probably the day after tomorrow. Will that work for you?”

“Yeah, that’s fine.” Quentin stands. “Same time tomorrow, yeah?”
“See you then, space heater.” Decker waves a hand and Quentin takes his leave.

He’s nearly to the gates when his phone goes off again. He takes it out and sees two texts from an unknown number. He opens them.

-Where are you?-

-Please come home.-

He doesn’t know who it is, but the words make his stomach drop and his mouth go dry. He deletes the messages and takes off for his apartment. When he finally gets there he is itching for a hit so badly. He takes out the vial and needle and sets them on his little table. He rolls up his sleeve and…and…and…and.

And suddenly his brain is working a mile a second. And he sees all of his scars. And he feels dreadfully sick. And he doesn’t want to disappoint anyone anymore.

He rolls his sleeve back down and stares at the drugs in front of him. He’s sure Decker knows about the drugs, he’s sure of it. But... He hadn’t asked him to stop. Quentin sighs and leaves the ketamine on the table as he digs in his bag for some pot instead. He sits on the floor with his back against the door smoking and looking at the tiny vial.

Everything is so tempting to him. To get high, to go find someone to fuck, to cut. It’s everything at once. A group of miseries dead set on him ruining himself.

He finishes his joint and makes himself a deal. He’ll stop getting high all the time. He’s not going to stop full out, because Gods knows he can’t, but he can let up a little. At least for a while. He decides that during the week he will try to stick to just pot and some normal K. Then on the weekends he can throw himself a coke party and get lost in a daydream.

As for selling his body, he can’t give that up. The apartment cost so much that the little amount that Decker is paying him is not even half of the rent. He can’t afford not to.

And the cutting, well, what’s a little more blood?

Routine finds Quentin once again. He works at Hillhollow almost every day doing spells and helping him create new ones. Decker, Quentin decides, is an absolute genius. He could rival Alice with his knowledge and ineptitude. However, Decker has a much softer approach to handling him than she ever did. He likes him and he thinks Decker likes him too. He hopes he does.

The days he doesn’t work with Decker he still works at Hillhollow. It is a vastly different setting than Breakbills. The inclusion of Hedges gives the school a less structured standard and more of a stylized one. Lesson plans are flexed to accommodate both ends. Quentin has been flexing too. He goes from class to class assisting as needed. Professor Luna needs another body to show off the Schultz maneuver, he’s there. Professor Ribs needs help grading papers, he's there. Professor Callahan needs an ear to listen to her go on and on about her divorce, and how she really should get the penthouse apartment in Chicago because it was her idea to put in the granite countertops instead of the marble, he’s there.

He keeps his deal with drugs the best he can. He breaks every now and then and takes a hit when his hands are too unsteady to hold a razor. Every weekend he gets high. He locks himself in his room and disappears for a while. When he runs out of money he heads downtown and sells himself to whoever wants him. Sometimes he’ll trades sex for drugs. He'll get high with the guy then let
him fuck him. What he feels afterward is an emotion he can’t name. There is a deep hollowing sensation that comes after the high is gone. It makes his stomach hurt. If he had to guess it’s something like regret.

After two months of working at Hillhollow, he meets Coriander Murphy.

Quentin is leaving his casting session when he is approached by a stranger. He’s a little shorter than Quentin but stocky and well-muscled. His dark hair is neatly trimmed and styled. He’s not bad looking, but there is something in his watery eyes that makes Quentin uneasy.

"You're Quentin, right?" He doesn't say it like a question. "My boy Vinny told me about you a while back. I suspected I would find you here eventually. I'm Cori."

He sticks out a hand and smiles in a way that may be warm for a serial killer. Quentin hesitates before taking the offered hand.

"Nice to meet you." He says blandly. He makes to move past him, but Cori steps in his way.

“You been here long?” Cori asks as he steps from side to side, in an almost nervous motion.

“I guess,” Quentin says. He stops trying to walk around him when he realizes that there is going to be an unwanted conversation.

“You weren’t studying here before though, right?” He asks. “I mean Vin, he goes here, you seen him around? He said he’d never seen you before a few months ago. But, now you’re teaching? How’d you swing that?”

“I’m not teaching,” Quentin says. He doesn't want to be here anymore. He wants to go back to his place and light up a joint and pass the fuck out in his bed.

“But, you’re working with Decker,” Cori says. “If you got him on your good side that says a lot, yeah?”

“Sure,” Quentin says without looking at the other man. “Decker’s great.”

"So, I gotta be honest. I don't wanna talk about Decker." He drawls. "I've been watching you for a while now and…" He looks Quentin up and down. "I like what I see."

"Sorry, I'm not interested." Quentin moves away again and is once more stopped by the other man.

"Look, I saw you picking up guys off Eddy street." Cori puts a hand on Quentin's waist. "I've got cash. I can pay you."

He should say no. Everything in his body and mind is screaming; no, don't do this. This is wrong. Something is wrong here. Walk away. Runaway. Say no. Say no. Say no.

When has he ever listened to his own advice?

So he says yes.

Cori takes him to his own place, an apartment on Taraval and 41st. It's so bitterly normal that Quentin feels bad for thinking the other man was off. He takes Quentin to the bedroom and tells him to get undressed. Cori takes a seat on the bed and watches as Quentin pulls off his shirt, his hand tightens on the blanket as the shirt slumps to the floor. Quentin tries not to look at the other
man as he pulls at his belt. Cori holds out a hand to stop him before he can slide it through the loops.

"Get on your knees." He points to the floor in front of him.

Quentin slips to the ground and wishes he had smoked a little before he had agreed to this. He doesn't touch Quentin for a few long moments, he just looks him over. Inspecting him. Cori then brings his hand to Quentin's mouth and pushes two fingers in. Quentin sucks and licks them. Cori’s other hand comes up and cradles his jaw. The touch is like fire on his skin.

"Don't touch me there," Quentin says pulling away and moving his hand to his hair.

Cori doesn't say anything, but his eyes flicker for a half-second. He digs his hand into Quentin's hair and pulls his face to his crotch. He presses Quentin's nose to his hard-on as if to say 'get to work.' So, he does. He opens Cori's pants and tries to get him off as fast as possible. A hand stays locked in his hair, twisting every so often. When he finally comes he pulls Quentin's face in tight and groans. He keeps him in place until there are tears sliding down his cheeks as he gags. Cori pushes him off and falls back onto the bed. Quentin spits onto the floor and wipes at his face with the back of his hand.

Quentin stumbles to his feet and reaches for his shirt.

"What are you doing?" Cori asks, lifting his head a little. Quentin gestures to the shirt.

"Leaving." He says then pauses. "Well, after you pay."

"Baby," Cori sighs. The way he says baby sets Quentin’s skin alight like he has been doused in hot oil. Goosebumps fly across his skin. "Come on. Come here." He pats the space in the bed next to him.

The same feeling of dread comes rushing back, filling his mouth with bile.

Run, run, run, run.

Quentin shakes his head. Cori heaves a sigh and sits up. He quickly grabs Quentin by the arms and yanks him into bed, landing next to Cori. Quentin tries to pull away but hands are wrapped too tightly around his wrists.

"What's this?" Cori says with false curiosity in his voice. He looks down at Quentin's arms and rubs a thumb over the scars. "Oh, baby." There is a bubble of laughter in the back of his throat.

"Don't." Quentin pulls away. Cori yanks him back and kisses him. Quentin can't remember the last time someone had kissed him. He doesn't like it. "Stop. I don't do that."

"You don't kiss?" Cori did laugh at him this time. "Very funny."

Cori all but lunges at his mouth and takes a lip between his teeth. He bites lightly and when Quentin opens his mouth to protest he pushes his tongue in. Quentin doesn’t bite lightly. Cori wrenches back and retaliates with a fast slap across his face. Quentin’s eyes water and cheek stings, and oh god it feels good.

Quentin rolls away and off the bed before Cori can get his hands back on him.

“Just give me my money.” He moves away from the bed and shucks on his shirt.
“All right, all right.” Cori holds up his hands in mock surrender.

He pays Quentin and he is out the door the second the cash is in his pocket. He can’t uphold his own deal today. He needs to take the edge off somehow and he knows if he goes for the razor in this state of mind it won’t turn out well. He takes the cash and buys some coke. He snorts it then goes to find someone else to fuck before the high sets in.

When he gets back to his place it’s nearly daybreak. He stumbles into his room then into the shower. He can’t really remember the guy he picked up after Cori but he does remember the slap. Quentin runs his fingers over his cheek as the water washes away all other touches. It has been a while since someone had actually hit him. The sting of it had made him feel alive for the first time in ages. The cutting would quell an oncoming storm for a bit, but this would turn it around and send it back into the sky.

It made him feel sick, to think like this, to crave attention and touch so much that he would be willing to take it in any form he could. He wanted to see Cori again and in the same thought, he knew that if he did, he would never be able to step away gracefully. He just wanted to be good. He wanted to take the opportunity Decker has given him and do something good. He promised himself to try.

Checking his phone he takes the chance to lie down for an hour. It’s seven in the morning and Decker wants him in the library at nine for casting. He sleeps restlessly, turning over and over trying to find a good spot, not just for his body but for his mind to rest. He rolls out of bed at 8:27 giving himself three minutes to dress then thirty to get to campus. He puts a new cut on his thigh and is late in the end.

Decker has finished setting up with Professor Luna and when he sees Quentin he smiles. With that smile, he knows instantly that something is wrong. With a jerk of his head Decker motions for them to take a study room adjacent to the casting area.

“Is everything all right?” Decker asks after he shuts the door.

“Yeah, everything’s fine.” Quentin wants to pretend that his voice does not betray him, but that would be a lie. Something in Decker’s face twitches. Shame flares warm and ripe in his chest.

“Oh, I’ll be blunt.” Decker crosses his arms, tapping a nervous finger on his forearm. “Are you seeing Coriander Murphy?”

“I-I, I don’t.” Quentin stutters. He’s suddenly looking around the room for the exits.

“I know it shouldn’t be any concern of mine who you date, it’s your choice, of course, it is. But, I am concerned. And maybe I’m just being neurotic and overprotective, but I have to speak my mind. If you wanna tell me to fuck off after that’s fine. I’ll understand.” Decker draws in a deep breath and the finger spasms on his arm. “Coriander Murphy isn’t the best sort. He’s not a magician and he’s not a Hedge. He comes from an old family of magic and they paid his way in here. Ever since he has been, I guess the best way to put it is a nuisance. He has been trying to take magic wherever he can find it. And it never ends up good. I’ve seen him burn through people before, use them until there is nothing left and Quentin, I don’t want to see that happen to you.”

Decker drops his arms and puts a big hand on his shoulder and squeezes. It’s small and big all at once. This kind of kindness.

“How did-?”
“I saw you two yesterday leaving campus together. Doesn't take a genius. He was all over you.” He shrugs then gives him a once over. “Are you all right?”

“It’s fine.” Quentin lies quickly. “We’re sleeping together.” Lie “That’s all. Friends with benefits, yeah?” Lie. “Kinda without the friends though.” Lie

This time Decker’s smile reaches his eyes. “Do you want me to fuck off?”

“Yeah, sort of, actually.” Quentin is not sure if he can physically lie to him anymore.

“Okay,” he nods and drops his hand. “I think you’ve heard this before but I’ll say it again. I’m here if you need anything. Anything at all. A place to crash, an ear, drinking buddy.” He laughs. “Open door policy and all.”

“Okay.” Quentin nods and silently screams at himself to take the freely offered hand. Stop being a coward and take it. Instead, he says thank you.

“You good to do the spell?” Decker asks as he brings them out of the study room.

“Yeah, I can do it.”

The spell goes fine. Better than Quentin actually expects it to go, given he keeps shaking and his mind is on a one-way track racing down the freeway, breaks cut. He doesn’t let himself go back to his apartment. He knows that if he does the only thing he will want to do is pack up all his shit and take off again, and he can’t do that to Decker, not after all he has done for him. Instead, Quentin takes himself back to the beach.

He feels the most like himself by the ocean. Which is a weird thing to think about since he didn’t grow up near, or even going to the beach at all. He likes that it’s quiet and loud at the same time.

There are ruins on the beach. Not something he ever expected to find in San Francisco, but there they were. The mid-day warmth has brought out small groups of people, who hike by him taking photos and laughing with their friends. Quentin wanders through the water-worn concrete, not really worrying when his shoes get wet. His hair is whipping around his face, obscuring his path. He stays out until the sun sets and the warm spring day turns cold. He starts walking to the bus stop and then regrets wading through the water. He wishes his shoes were dry.

And then, they were.

Quentin stops walking and stares down at his feet. Dry. No hand motions, no words, just a wish. A thought.

That’s not how magic works.

At least that’s not how the magic he has ever been taught works. This type of magic was reserved for things like the Monster, or even Ember and Umber. Things that are just magic. Made of magic. Not for someone like him.

This is what Decker has been going on about, and Quentin has just seemed to put a few puzzle pieces together. Realizing, with a start, that the magic inside of him is screaming to get out.

He doesn’t like the sound.

It’s too much to think about. He’ll talk to Decker about it later when his thoughts are clear. Now, all he wants to do is get high again and forget that he ever had this moment of clarity.
He makes it back to his apartment and paces the small floor plan for an hour, debating with himself if he deserved to get high again in such a short time frame. He wants it so badly. To disappear into the drugs. Things are always easier to think about when he can see Eliot again. He doesn’t need to think about magic or drugs or cutting or anything at all. All he needs to do is look over to the other man, see his smile and he'll feel okay. Even if it’s just for a little while, even if it’s all make-believe.

Quentin screams into his pillow then goes to the bathroom and adds to his ever growing collection of scars.

He doesn’t tell Decker the next day, or the one after that. He can’t pinpoint the reason he is keeping it all back. He should want to barge in and spill everything. Decker is smart and most of all, nice. He would help him.

The weekend hits and Decker leaves for a conference in Long Beach. Quentin lets him go without saying anything.
Chapter Notes

Hey again,
Y’all remember when I said that the next two chaps were nearly done? Welllllllll, they were then I re-wrote everything. So sorry for the delay.
This is not a very happy chapter, please be mindful of that. Check the tags out.
Things get worse before they get better.

Thanks for reading! <3

Cori is waiting by the gates on Monday. He is scrolling through his phone and looks up when Quentin steps closer. The other man lights up like Christmas has come early when he sees him.

“Hey,” he says. Quentin doesn’t stop walking. Cori keeps up, hands deep in his coat pockets.

“I’ve got a class to get to,” Quentin tells him without looking at him, trying to shake him off.

“Me too, but I have something important to do.” He says as if that will slow Quentin down.

“Okay.” He does not slow down.

“I wanna ask you out.”

“I’m not interested,” Quentin persists.

“I think we can be good together.” Cori gets in front of him and stops Quentin in his tracks. He closes his eyes and takes a deep breath.

“Take a hint.” He bites out.

“Take a chance.” Cori laughs. “See, I’m romantic.” He grabs Quentin’s hand and links their fingers together. It’s almost something that could be a nice gesture. But he ruins it a half second later.

“You’re never gonna do better than me.”

It is said with an air of confidence and keen knowledge that he is right. And somewhere inside Quentin’s mind he knows he is right. Quentin rips his hand away and shoves past Cori.

“I’ll see you tomorrow baby!” Cori shouts after him.

Unfortunately, he does see Cori the next day. He is waiting for Quentin in the same spot as the day before. Quentin sees him before stepping off the bus and thinks about turning around and going right back in. He tries to be brave and presses forward. Cori sidles up next to him and walks with him to campus. He talks non-stop and tries to take Quentin’s hand multiple times. Quentin pulls away each time and tells him to fuck off. When he turns to go into the administration building Cori pulls him close and kisses him swiftly on the mouth. He pulls back before Quentin can retaliate. Loping away he tells him he will see him later. Quentin wipes roughly at his mouth.

Cori is there the next day too. Then the one after that.
By the fourth day Quentin stops pulling his hand away when Cori takes it.

By the fifth day he pauses to let Cori kiss him.

The sixth day he says good morning to him.

The seventh, Quentin wakes early, so when he gets to the gates and Cori is not there he waits for him to show up.

On the eighth day Cori asks him to have sex again.

The ninth day Quentin says yes.

He pretends and pretends and pretends that he and Cori are friends with benefits, just like he told Decker they were. They go back to Cori’s bland and basic apartment where he insists on undressing Quentin. Cori’s hands work on opening his fly then abandons that in favor of slipping off his shirt. Quentin looks at the ground the entire time, not risking a glance up to see the other man’s face. He doesn’t want to see the expression there. They get into the bed and Cori fucks him this time, not wasting any time with foreplay. To make everything even worse, Cori kisses him the entire time.

Quentin leaves with the knowledge that Cori will be waiting for him at the gates the next morning.

When he gets back to his, let’s face it, also bland and boring apartment, he can’t resist the call of the drugs. He measures out his dose and shoots up before he can have any second thoughts.

He’s laying on the mosaic with Eliot by his side. He rolls over and curls into the space between them, trying to make it nonexistent. Eliot’s hand soothes over Quentin’s hair, pushing down the mess he’s made of it.

“I love you.” Quentin murmurs. Eliot hums in response, then wraps his arm around Quentin’s back. “I’m sorry.” He whimpers. He is so sorry for everything he has done. He regrets so many things, but nothing more than the life he could have had with Eliot if he had just been a little braver.

The night around them gets darker and darker as they lay there. Dawn never comes. Quentin never pulls away, just draws little patterns into Eliot’s side. At one moment he thinks he smells fire. He lifts his head to look for smoke and tastes something bitter on his tongue, something familiar. Sitting up completely, looking for fire in the distance. There is nothing but dark clear skies before and behind him. He looks down at Eliot and wonders if they are happy in another timeline. Maybe somewhere the two of them get to be together and are allowed to be together. Maybe.

Eliot’s hand suddenly juts out and grabs Quentin by the wrist. He holds it so tightly that it hurts. Eliot is not looking at him, just up at the sky.

“Do you feel it?” He asks.

“What?” Quentin asks back.

“The tide.”

Quentin wakes with his face a mess of tears and his heart thumping nearly out of his chest. When he finally calms down enough to go to sleep it’s with a restless mind and salt on his lips.
Cori is waiting for him when he gets to the gates the next morning.

Over the next week Cori moves himself right into Quentin’s life. He carves out a space for himself that Quentin can’t seem to close up fast enough. He brings Quentin over nearly every other day. He puts a second toothbrush in the bathroom for him. He tries to move Quentin into his life like he belongs there.

Quentin tries his hardest not to stay the night, always making excuses that he needed to be up early or that he forgot a change of clothes. Cori soon remedies that by giving him space in a drawer and filling it with a few t-shirts and pairs of trousers. He ends up staying the night more than he wants to.

He can’t give a reasonable excuse on Friday evening to leave, so he stays. Cori orders some food and makes them sit together on the sofa while they eat. The plate get left on the floor when they are done. Cori then pulls Quentin to his side and tucks him under his arm.

Sitting there watching some shit reality show Quentin can almost pretend that this is nice. That he is just a normal guy watching tv with a friend. That his entire world isn’t always dangling by a hair.

He sits there for at least an hour before the build-up of dread becomes too much.

He excuses himself from the sofa and ducks into the bathroom. He takes severely deep breaths and wishes desperately for some pot to smoke. He’s got nothing on him, and even if he did, he wouldn’t dare smoke with Cori in the other room. What he does have is a pocket knife. It’s not one he uses to cut, it’s one he uses for spells, but right now he is well beyond caring.

He stands in the bathroom and draws the pocket knife across his forearm until the blood wells up and drips into the sink. He only gets one good cut in before Cori is turning the knob.

“I’ll be out in a sec,” Quentin tells him.

“Why is the door locked?” Cori asks from the other side.

“Um, I’m just using the toilet?” He says with confusion evident in his voice.

“Unlock the door, Quentin.” Cori’s voice is firm and commanding. Quentin doesn't want to open the door, not while his arm is still bleeding, but he also doesn't want to make Cori angry. He flips the lock and waits.

Cori enters the small bathroom and instantly looks down at Quentin’s arm. He smirks as if he knew this was happening and he is the cat who caught the canary.

“What a nasty habit,” Cori laughs. “It is literally disgusting.”

“I know,” Quentin murmurs. He suddenly feels so guilty for doing this. He has always been ashamed by his cutting, but at least the people who knew about it never made him feel quite like this.

“I don’t want you to do that when you’re here anymore,” Cori says without looking at him.

“Okay,” he agrees. Quentin runs his arm under the faucet and lets the blood be washed away by the water.
“What are you doing?” Cori asks, sounding absolutely appalled.

“Cleaning up?”

“You’re going to stain the sink.” Cori snaps the tap off. “Just put a bandage on.”

“I need to clean it, or it will get infected.” Quentin can’t help the scant bit of desperation in his voice.

“That’s not my problem.” Cori turns away from him. “You should have thought of that before you cut yourself.”

“Right.”

“If I find you doing it here again you’ll be sorry.” Cori threatens.

“Yeah, okay.” Quentin holds his arm tight, trying to stop the bleeding with pressure alone.

When they retire to the bedroom, Quentin can’t fall asleep. He’s too worried about bleeding in the bed. He stays up all night with one hand wrapped around the cut. He listens to Cori breathe and waits for any changes.

The morning comes he says goodbye before Cori can object. He takes off to his tiny apartment and cleans the cut as thoroughly as he can.

When the call from Cori comes not two hours later he’s not surprised.

Cori wants to see his place so Quentin begrudgingly agrees, even though he tells him his place is nothing special and that he’s not missing anything. Cori tells him that he will decide that for himself. He texts the address then spends the next few hours waiting in turmoil for him to show up. When he does he brings take away with him.

Quentin sets a simple table while Cori walks around the space.

It’s not a long walk.

He plates the food and waits for Cori to be done inspecting the place before they both take a seat. They eat in silence for a few minutes before Cori breaks it.

“This place is a shithole, baby,” Cori says around a fork full of yellow curry.

“Well, this shithole is the only thing I can afford.” He says into his bowl of soup.

“Just move in with me.”

“Why would I do that?”

“It’s what boyfriends do,” Cori says with a laugh.

“We’re not boyfriends.”

Cori laughs so darkly that it makes the hairs on Quentin’s arm stand up.

“You’re so fucking stupid sometimes.”

Suddenly Quentin is not hungry anymore.
“I can’t just leave,” he tries to placate. “I’ve already paid the rent.”

“So?”

Quentin can’t look at him while he struggles to find a reason to refuse his offer.

“I like my place,” he says quietly, almost as if he was trying to reassure himself that it is true.

“It’s shit,” Cori says again. “And it’s in a bad neighborhood. You never know what you’re going to run into out there.”

Once they finish dinner Quentin feels like he is walking on eggshells. He is not sure what the next best move is. He tries to start washing up but Cori wraps his arms around his waist and kisses his neck.

“Let me take you to bed,” Cori says into another kiss.

Quentin lets himself be brought to the bedroom and lets Cori undress him and lets him and lets him and lets him.

After, Quentin leaves him there while he goes to the kitchen to clean up. Cori doesn’t offer to help, but Quentin doesn’t ask him either.

_Are they dating?_

Quentin pauses in drying a plate when the thought crosses his mind. Cori certainly seems to think so. And they did eat dinners together. And sleep together. And Cori walks him to and from campus. And Quentin waits for him in the mornings. Hadn’t these been things he and Alice had done together? He and Eliot?

He drops the plate. It shatters into seven uneven pieces, one skittering across the floor to hide under the table.

“What was that?” Cori shouts from the bedroom.

“I dropped a plate,” Quentin yells back. He hears Cori snort in answer. He supposes it better than Cori calling him names, but he still flinches in response.

Looking down at the pieces he wonders if he can magic it whole again just by thinking about it. Just like he had done to his shoes. He figures he might as well try it out. Maybe he can discover a little more about how it all works before he tells Decker. Taking a slow deep breath Quentin closes his eyes and wills the plate back together. He can feel the magic pulling at him. It’s not the same as doing a spell for mending. This magic feels like it is coming from somewhere deep inside himself. He holds out a hand for the plate and feels the cool ceramic hit his palm within seconds.

“What the fuck was that?”

His eyes flick open to see Cori standing in front of him, staring at the now fixed plate. Quentin almost drops it again.

“Nothing. Just a spell to repair things.” He lies.

“That wasn’t a spell. That wasn’t anything. That was wordless and motionless.” Cori steps closer and Quentin steps back. “That’s not like any kind of magic I’ve ever seen.”

“It’s nothing really.” He lies again. “Just a simple spell a friend taught me years ago.”
Quentin can tell Cori does not believe him. His eyes narrow and he squares his stance. When he finally backs down it’s with an unsatisfied ‘hum’. He then crosses the distance between them, kisses Quentin on the mouth, takes the plate from him then drops it. It shatters once more, this time the pieces stay relatively close together.

“Oops,” Cori smirks then kisses him again. “I’ll see you later baby.”

He leaves Quentin standing by the sink, chest heaving in manic anticipation of something terrible.

The moment he hears Cori’s car turn on Quentin is stepping over the broken glass and diving for the bottle of special K. He makes quick work of getting the needle ready then swiftly finds a vein and waits. The high comes on slowly, creeping up on him piece by piece. When it finally overwhelms him, he welcomes it graciously.

He's not at their cottage in Fillory this time. He's in the castle. In the empty library. Eliot is sitting next to a shelf leafing through one of the few books left. He doesn't look up when Quentin walks in. He doesn't even react when Quentin sits next to him. It's not like the Eliot in his dreams at all. He freaks for a second, thinking that he took too much, or maybe not enough.

"El?" Quentin prompts. "You okay?"

The other man still makes no acknowledgment of Quentin. He turns another page in the book and sucks his bottom lip into his mouth. Quentin watches silently by his side. He wants more of a reaction, but he'll take Eliot any way he can get him. He resigns himself to leaning his shoulder to the taller man's, closing his eyes and listening to him breathe.

They sit like that for ages before Quentin hears the book snap shut. He opens his eyes and sees the book held out in front of him. For some reason, he can't make out the title. He takes it then pulls away a little.

Eliot is staring right at him, or rather, staring right through him. He doesn't blink as he looks and looks and looks. It sets Quentin's nerves on fire.

"El?" He says in a whisper.

Eliot suddenly shifts his gaze from somewhere inside Quentin's soul to the book in his hand.

"You know what to do." His voice is flat and terrible.

Quentin looks down at the book only to find a knife. He tries to drop it but can't. He shakes his hand hoping to dislodge it. He glances frantically back at Eliot.

"What's happening?" He begs his apparition. "What do I know?"

Eliot reaches out and covers Quentin's hand with his own. He pushes the knife toward the younger man's body.

"You know what to do." He repeats.

There is blood in his mouth. He coughs and sprays it in Eliot’s face, speckling him with pinpricks of blood. Quentin covers his mouth with his hands and ends up drowning them in blood. It flows over his fingers and drips down his neck. The blood is so warm and wet and Quentin is so cold.

“You know what to do.”
Quentin wakes from the drug-induced dream with a cough and a metallic taste on his teeth. He throws himself into the bathroom and vomits until there is nothing left. He ends up sitting on the bathroom tiles until he starts shivering from the chill. He hears his phone go off in the other room.

Slowly he crawls over to it. Cori is calling him. Quentin looks from the phone to the bottle of drugs on his bedside table.

He answers the call.

A month into the relationship Quentin lets himself cut again. He has stayed away from the ketamine ever since his last hallucination. He doesn't want to end up back there, with blood in his mouth, and Eliot not looking at him. He hates that the one thing that has given him a semblance of love has now turned sour.

It's early morning when he sneaks into the bathroom. He doesn't turn on the light, he can't stand to see himself in the mirror nor can he risk waking up Cori. The sun has just risen and lets in enough light for Quentin to see what he is doing. He fumbles with the bottom drawer then reaches up underneath it to the drawer above. Taped down is a plastic bag with razors, cotton pads, alcohol wipes, and band-aids. Cori moved him in weeks ago and the first thing Quentin did was make up his little bag of miseries. He had it taped into place before anything else was set out.

Quentin plugs the sink and runs warm water. Once he has a little pool he makes the first cut. He likes the way it drips and spills out into the water. He can focus on the red against white and the way the blood dissipates in the liquid for a long time. Long enough so that the next cut he makes is five minutes or so later.

Cori’s alarm sounds off in the other room, startling Quentin momentarily. He hears him grumble and silences the ringing. Quentin pulls the plug and watches the water and blood swirl down the drain together. He cleans the razor then puts everything back in the bag and replaces it under the drawer. He wraps up his arm and opens the door. Cori is sitting on the bed, phone in his hand, scrolling through who knows what. Quentin just looks at him for a moment. Really looks at him.

_Could this be someone he could love?_

The other man glances up at him and raises an eyebrow.

“What?” He challenges.

“Nothing.” Quentin concedes. Cori rolls his eyes and stands. He moves into Quentin’s space and kisses him on the mouth. It’s still weird for him to kiss. It feels weird, it tastes weird. He feels weird doing it, like he’s doing it wrong. Maybe he’s doing it wrong.

Cori pulls away and moves Quentin out of the doorway. “You wanna pick up some Dim Sum on your way home.” It’s not really a question.

“Okay.”

He shuts the door between them. Quentin listens as the shower turns on, clothes slump to the floor and the smell of spearmint soap washes over him. His arm is still bleeding. He squeezes it and the blood staunches until he releases. He hears Cori gasp through the door then a rush of cold air comes breezing through the cracks.
It’s been well over a month since Quentin realized that something was wrong with his magic, and in that time he has still said nothing to Decker. Instead, he has just gotten himself into a relationship with someone he shouldn’t have.

He has been keeping up at Hillhollow, but it hasn’t been easy. He stresses every day that Cori will show up and say something, or say something, and Decker will realize that he has been lying to him for weeks. Above all else, he doesn’t want to disappoint Decker.

When he finally has bundled up the courage to tell him it's well into the afternoon. Most classes are over and Decker has returned to his office. Quentin stays behind in the empty classroom putting around, organizing then reorganizing things. He spends the next few minutes pumping himself up to walk the twenty yards to his office. He stares at the open door and wishes he was already there.

And then he was.

Quentin blinks and he is standing before Decker's office door. He shakes himself briefly, not truly believing that he has just magicked himself two buildings over.

But there he was.

Before he loses what little courage he has left he knocks.

"Come in," Decker says from within.

Quentin lets himself in and offers the older man a smile as he does.

"Hey Q, what's up?" He is scribbling in a notebook and doesn't stop on Quentin's account. The younger man takes a seat between the towers of books and can't help but feel a little soothed by the almost claustrophobic atmosphere.

"Can we talk for a sec?" Quentin says. He has to force each word out and it seems to take years.

"Of course." Decker puts the pen down. "What's on your mind?"

“I wanted you to know. Well, I think you should know. Not that you'll care. Not that you don’t care. I’m not saying that. I just - you know- it’s -.” He takes a deep breath. “I’m seeing Coriander Murphy. Like really seeing him, not just friends with benefits. Though when I told you that before, it was kinda a lie, not that I lie to you all the time. I-. I just… I. I just wanted you to know.” He stumbles through saying it and on the other side he wishes he had said it differently.

“Okay.” Decker blinks. “Are you telling me because you want me to tell you it’s a bad idea or because you want me to tell you it’s a good idea?”

“I’m telling you…I’m telling you.” Quentin wants to say; I’m telling you because I have the feeling that one day I’m not gonna be able to walk away and I need someone to know that he will be the reason I don’t come back one day. But, he can’t say that. He can’t say any of that.

“All right.” Decker nods and gives Quentin a reassuring smile. “I get it.”

"Thank you," Quentin sighs. "I mean it."

Decker looks like he is about to say something, but must think better of it. Instead, he asks Quentin to come in tomorrow around three to set up for the casting. Quentin agrees and it's the easiest thing he has done all day. And because Quentin can never let anything be easy for himself he blurts out the secret that has been gnawing at him for the past month.
“Something is wrong with my magic.” He says all in one breath.

Decker adjusts his glasses and simply says; "I know."

"You know? You...what?” Quentin is taken aback by the bluntness of the statement.

"Q, you told me yourself that your magic has changed. Some wires got crossed somewhere along the line.” He folds his hands on the table. “But, I’ve also seen it. There are some spells that you start to cast then are already done before you have even finished the motion or the incantation. Though, lately not so much. Have you been doing something different?"

"I don’t think so?” Quentin chews on his lip and tries to think if he has been doing anything new with his spell work. Nothing is coming to mind. The only thing he can really focus on is if Decker can help him. “Do you know how to fix it?"

“Is it something you want to fix?” Decker asks. “It's only power. What you do with it is your choice and I think you are more than capable of making the right decisions.”

“T’m not.” Quentin shakes his head. “T’m not someone who should have this power. Can you get it out of me?"

"I don't know." He says honestly and with a shrug. "I've never dealt with something like this, but the more you tell me the more I might be able to help. When was the last time you felt that your magic was right? When you had your original magic?"

“T don’t know. Never?” Quentin shrugs. “When I first got to Breakbills the magic I had felt so inferior to everyone else. I found out later on that what I had was pretty standard. I just happened to surround myself with the most powerful people.

“And I loved magic, you know? Like really loved it. I grew up with all these fantasies of who I would be if I had magical powers, what I would do. How I would be the one to save the world. The chosen one. You know, those kid ideas, that escapism. Years ago I would have wished for this. Now that I have it, I have no fucking clue what to do with it. It’s boiling under my skin, itching, screaming to get out. I want it out. I don’t want to feel like this anymore. It's too much. It’s all too much.”

“Feeling like the magic is too much?” Decker tries to clarify.

“It feels like I’m gonna explode right out of my skin. I feel like if I don’t do something then it’s just gonna burst through.”

“I’m going to help you Q.” Decker promises. “As much as I can.”

“You know another fucked up thing?” Quentin laughs darkly.

“Tell me.”

“You say that and I wanna believe you. I have wanted to believe so many people when they say they want to help me. But, I know, when I reach out my hand I am just going to be disappointed. Always. I don’t want to be disappointed again.”

There is a long pregnant pause where all Quentin can do is look down at the desk and rub his thumbnail into a groove on his arm over and over. Decker is quiet beside him. He’s quiet for so long that Quentin has to peek through his hair to check and make sure he is still there. The older man is staring off to one side, his hands are now loosely held in his lap and he looks like he might
start crying at any moment. He clears his throat suddenly making Quentin jerks his gaze away.

“I can’t promise you that you won’t be disappointed,” Decker sighs. “You might be. You might not get the answers you want. You might get answers you don’t like, answers you never wanted to hear. But, Q I’ll do what I can. We’ll start small, yeah? I’m not going to promise to fix you flat out. I’m just offering help.”

“Why?” Quentin asks hoarsely.

“Because you asked,” Decker says. And it sounds like it’s the easiest thing in the world.

Decker begins private lessons every Thursday afternoon with Quentin. They use their typical casting spot, but it’s just the two of them. They do, as Decker told him, start small. Quentin tells him about fixing the plate with his magic so they start there. There are days where he can put an entire shattered vase back together with just a thought and other days where he can’t even lift a sliver off the ground.

He feels useless. Decker has put in all this time and effort with him and Quentin has given him nothing in return. He can’t even get his own stupid magic right. He has tried over and over to reach out for that aching fire inside him, but nothing has happened in the last two lessons. All he accomplishes is making himself exhausted.

“We should stop,” Quentin tells him. Decker nods and puts down his notebook.

“All right,” he agrees. “We will pick up here next week.”

“No,” Quentin corrects him. “We should just stop doing this. We aren’t getting anywhere and I don’t...You shouldn’t be wasting your time with me.”

“It’s not wasted if you are learning how to control your magic.”

“I don’t think it’s going to work.” He looks down at the floor and shakes his head. “I’m sorry.”

“You don’t have to be sorry.” Decker runs a hand through his hair. “I won’t lie and say I’m not frustrated. Because I am. Not at you of course. But I’m frustrated that nothing we are doing seems to be having an effect. I promised I would help you Q, so let me. It’s not the kind of help that happens overnight. This will probably take a while to figure out. I’m just asking that you stick with me. A little longer. As long as you can.”

“And what do you get out of it in the end?”

“I get to help a friend.” He says seriously, then brightens his tone. “And maybe get a research paper or two out of it.”

“Nerd.” Quentin scoffs.

“Obviously.”

So Quentin agrees, again, to try.

The more Quentin tries the more he feels himself wearing thin. Between casting with Decker, lessons with Decker, and living with Cori, Quentin has hardly enough time to let himself relax. He
tries to read or nap in the moments between but it’s never enough to quiet his mind. He finds himself being called back to the drugs.

He starts with smoking a joint on the administration building rooftop at Hillhollow after his classes are done. It helps a little.

He doesn’t want to use ketamine again. He really doesn’t want to get stuck in another nightmare. But…

Quentin really wants to feel something good.

He settles that it is worth the risk. That he will take a tiny moment of time in a dream in exchange for the chance that it may turn into his own mind tormenting him.

It’s Saturday and Cori has some family thing he goes to every Saturday. Quentin has never asked and Cori has never told him. He pretends to be sleeping while Cori gets dressed and heads out.

He waits an entire hour before getting the ketamine out. Even as he is filling his needle he is keeping one ear out for keys in the hall and the sound of footfall. He puts the bottle away then braces himself as he finds a vein and injects the drugs. He quickly hides the needle then heads to the bathroom. There he locks the door then lays down in the tub. He feels a little safer here. Behind a door with a lock. It will give him a little bit of time to suss things out if Cori comes home earlier than expected.

Quentin’s head tilts back as he starts to feel the drugs overtake him. He closes his eyes and dives in deep. Hoping to find something good at the bottom of that tiny clear liquid.

When he arrives in the hallucination he’s not at the cottage, nor the library. He’s not really sure where he is. The room is empty and endless. He starts down one hallway and re-enters the same empty room as before. He loops over and over, at least six times before the room is no longer empty.

Eliot is there to greet him with the knife in his hand. He is also soaking wet. His hair drips with water and his clothes are sodden. He gives the wet knife to Quentin and says the same thing as before.

“You know what to do.”

There is blood in his mouth again.

Instead of waking up in a panic, he blinks and suddenly Julia is standing before him. She presses the knife into his hand.

“You know what to do.”

He blinks.

Margo walks up to him. She puts the knife in his hand.

“You know what to do.”

He blinks.

Penny blips into existence next to him. He thrusts the knife into his hand.

“You know what to do.”
He blinks.

Kady stands beside him. She slips the knife into his hand.

“You know what to do.”

He blinks.

Alice stands behind him. She throws the knife to the floor in front of him.

“You know what to do.”

Quentin bends down and picks it up. Then his mouth is flooded with blood. He lets it weep down onto the wet ground below him, splashing it with red. Oceans of red on red on red.

When he wakes he’s not sure if it’s the rush of his own blood he’s hearing or if it’s the roar of waves that have reached him so far from shore.

Quentin stays in the tub for another hour, just focusing on his breathing and trying, desperately, to forget everything he has just seen in his drug-induced dream.

He looks at the drawer where his hidden razors are and thinks about cutting again and how good that would feel. But, he’s not really sure when Cori plans to be back, and he doesn't want him to catch him. So instead he goes out to the beach.

He sits far away from the water, upon the concrete sea wall, and watches as people pass by. Spring hasn’t warmed the air here. It’s still just as cold as when he had arrived in the city. But Quentin likes the cold. He likes the way it hurts. It’s almost as good as a blade against his skin.

He stays at the beach until he can’t feel his fingers anymore. He should get back soon. It’s late in the afternoon and Cori will want him to cook dinner tonight. He starts back and thinks about stopping at the grocery store to pick up a few things. He checks the time and decides against it. Cori would rather him be home than shopping right now.

Cori’s car is parked outside the apartment complex by the time he arrives. He hopes he hasn’t been waiting for him for too long.

Quentin unlocks the door and sees Cori sitting on the sofa, facing the door. Waiting. He closes the door behind him then takes off his shoes. Cori makes a low rumbling sound that Quentin doesn't know how to describe.

“Did you want pasta for dinner?” Quentin asks gently.

“Where were you?” Cori asks sharply as he gets up and stomps over to Quentin.

“I-I just went out.”

“Were you out whoring yourself again?” Cori seethes.

“No,” Quentin tells him honestly. “I was just at the beach. I just wanted some fresh air.”

“Are you lying to me, baby?”

“No.”

“Then why are you shaking?”
Quentin can feel the tremors throughout his entire body. He clenches his hands to try and make it stop. Cori steps into his space then shoves Quentin in the shoulder.

“I think you should stop fucking around behind my back,” Cori says darkly.

“You told me you didn’t care!” Quentin fights back. “You told me it was fine.”

“Well, it’s not fine anymore!” The dark-haired man shouts.

“What else isn’t fine anymore? What else am I not allowed to do?” Quentin throws his hands up in the air.

“I don’t want you talking to Decker anymore.”

“Tough.” Quentin spits.

The slap comes sharp and fast and honestly, Quentin should have been expecting it. He holds his red cheek in one hand and glares daggers at Cori. He pushes past him only to be stopped by a meaty hand on his arm.

“Where the fuck do you think you’re going?”

“Away.” Quentin tries to hold some bravery in his voice, but he can feel it leaving him. He needs to get out now. He pulls against the hand on him and tries again for the door.

“Wait, wait, wait.” Cori's voice has toned down. He sounds softer and sorry. “Look, don’t go. Let’s talk.”

“I don’t want to talk,” Quentin whispers. “I want to go.”

“Not yet. Come on baby, come here.” He gently tugs on Quentin’s arm and pulls him closer. He wraps his other arm around his back and drags him into a hug. Quentin doesn’t return it.

“I’m sorry I yelled at you. You just make me crazy sometimes baby. You know that.” He rubs small circles on Quentin’s back. “I just love you so much.”

“You don’t love me,” Quentin says into his shoulder. Cori pulls away then moves both hands to hold Quentin’s face between them.

“I love you, baby,” Cori tells him then kisses him. Quentin turns his face as much as possible so that his kiss lands just off mark. Cori makes an unhappy sound. “Now you tell me you love me back.”

“No,” Quentin says so quietly that he almost doesn't hear himself. His face is then suddenly jerked back to look at Cori.

“I love you and you love me. Say it, baby.”

“No,” Quentin says louder this time.

"You love me Q," Cori says. His hands are cupping Quentin's face almost too tightly. Quentin can't look him in the eye. "I know you do. You are always making these cute little noises when I fuck you like you can't get enough. You are always looking at my hands. And you never seem to want to get out of bed. You make me dinner and like to do the washing up after. You spend so much of your time just looking at me, I know you love me."
"That's-" Quentin starts then has to take a deep quivering breath. "That's not love." He is able to shake out.

"Baby," Cori moves his hands from his face to his waist. "I know you got some issues with depression and whatever, but I know what's best for you. Trust me. You love me."

"No. I don't-" Quentin stops as the air is knocked out of him. He doubles over holding his middle where Cori just punched him. Punched him. Quentin gasps and flinches back when Cori pushes him upright.

"You love me." He grits out. He takes Quentin’s jaw in hand and forces their eyes to meet. "Let me hear you say it."

Quentin opens his mouth but can't get the words out. Cori's eyes are dark and angry.

Say it. He tells himself. Say it. Just say it and give up.

When he still says nothing Cori growls and pushes Quentin back against the wall. His right hand is still clutching Quentin’s jaw as he presses into his entire body weight against the smaller man. Cori shifts and in that movement Quentin can feel that he is hard. He is getting off on this. He feels sick.

"Say it." Cori lifts his left hand and presses a knuckle against Quentin's sternum. A deep radiating pain makes him gasp and try to pull away.

"Stop," Quentin begs.

"Tell me you love me." Cori spits.

"No." Quentin shakes his head.

The hand moves from his chest up to thread into his hair. Cori pulls then slams his head against the wall with a sickening crack. The world spins and when it rights itself he is face down on the bed.

"Tell me," Cori demands.

"No."

Cori hits his back with his fist. Quentin's chest rattles with the force. Quentin can hardly breathe but he can feel Cori taking off his clothes and his hard-on against his backside.

"Stop." Quentin wheezes out.

"Tell me you love me and I'll stop." His fist is on his back again, kicking the air out of him. Quentin says nothing and gets his face pushed into the mattress. He struggles to breathe through the material. When his breathing becomes soft wheezes Cori lets up.

"I love you."

It makes his mouth taste sour and his stomach flip to say it. It's oceans of saltwater burning down his throat. It’s falling up a stairway, realizing you’ve added another phantom step and start tumbling through the floor. He wants to pick up a razor and slash Cori to ribbons then to turn the blade on himself.

"Good." Cori smiles and Quentin can hear a tone of pride in his voice. He stops putting pressure on Quentin's back. Quentin listens to the sound of clothes rustling. He hopes it's Cori putting his pants
back on, but he then leans over Quentin's back and it's skin touching skin. One hand moves between their bodies while the other pushes Quentin's head back down.

And Quentin doesn't do anything.

Doesn't ask to stop. Doesn't say I love you. Doesn't fight. Just peaks out behind his hair to stare at closed blinds on the window. The slits of light beaming between them. The boring beige color. The ocean behind them. The blinds with dust resting on the bowed side. The ocean and the blinds. The ocean and the dust-covered blinds. The beige color. The light. The ocean behind. The blinds. The dust. The ocean. The blinds. The dust. The ocean. The blinds. The dust. The ocean. The ocean.

When Cori is done he pulls Quentin to his side and makes them spoon. He pets down his chest, moving his fingers over ribs again and again. He puts little kisses on his shoulder and neck. He whispers about how good it was and how much he loves him.

Quentin stays awake all night. Cori drifts into sleep not long after his afterglow. Quentin can't seem to pull himself away. The light between the blinds has gone dark. He wants to tear them apart, to wrench open the window and let the cool ocean breeze wash in. But he can't get up. He can't even cry. The only thing he can do is drag his nails over his arm and open old wounds.

In the morning Cori complains about blood in the bed. Quentin says sorry. Cori doesn't say he forgives him.
Chapter 13

Quentin stays in bed while Cori gets into the shower. He looks at the blinds now teeming with light behind them until it hurts his eyes to stare any longer. His gaze shifts to the bedside table where he has left his drugs out from the day before. His little vial of dreams sits there with all the nonchalance in the world.

He should just shoot up the whole bottle.

Get it all over with.

He could do it all before Cori gets out of the shower. He could take all of it, disappear into a dream. Or would it be nothing at all? Would he just drift off into the drugs and not even know he’s leaving? That sounds nice. It sounds like the nicest thing he could ever give to himself.

With more effort than he should need to exert, he lifts his hand to reach out for the bottle.

He pauses when he sees the label.

It’s just ketamine.

It’s not the one laced with magic. He knows it's not because he marks the magic ones with a red pen, coloring in the hole in the a.

It’s not the one that will bring him visions of his past love.

It’s just normal ketamine.

An emotion almost like terror floods through him. Has he just been hallucinating on his own? Has his mind finally given up on him?

He rolls out of the bed and digs through the bedside table drawer, picking up each bottle and carefully reading the labels. None of them are the magical ones. They are all just run of the mill ketamine. He starts to get shaky, so he lights up a joint.

Sitting on the bed and smoking he tries to suss out when he had run out of the special special K. He remembers doing the spell over five bottles and they each last him at least three or four doses, if not more. And he remembers sitting on the floor and carefully coloring in all the a's.

He’s not really sure what this all means though.

Is he just hallucinating from the regular stuff now? Does that mean he’s losing his mind?

The tap turns off in the bathroom and Quentin is quick to cast a spell to rid the room of smoke and any lingering smell before Cori can catch him. He’s not sure what Cori would think of him smoking in the bed, but he doesn't truly care to find out.

He dresses and has his bag ready to go as Cori steps out of the bathroom. He throws a goodbye over his shoulder and leaves before another word can be spoken between them.

Halfway down the block Cori calls him. His fingers twitch to answer. He pushes that thought and want away and pockets the phone. When he gets on his usual bus there is a flood of text messages from him. Scrolling through them, they are what he had expected them to be. Mostly threats to come back, not one is asking if he’s okay, then again, he’s not surprised.
Quentin looks down at his phone and contemplates calling or texting Decker. He’s not exactly sure what he wants to say to him, but he wants to say something.

There are only two people Quentin has texted listed on his phone. Decker and Cori. There had been a few texts and a few random phone calls from numbers with New York area codes. They had all been deleted before he could even give himself the chance to read them.

He hasn’t received many new texts or calls from unknown numbers in a while, not for at least a month. And there is something relaxing in that thought. Some part of him is glad that they have stopped trying. Another part is a little sad about it. Not that he would ever reach back out. No, that would be absurd.

But there is something about the release. The satisfying release of being forgotten.

Later, when Quentin has resolved himself to not bother Decker with even more of his problems, Decker shoots him a text to meet in his office. There are moments when Quentin thinks the older man can read his mind.

When he arrives the office door is open and Decker is holding a single sheet of paper in one hand. Quentin can tell he is reading and rereading it by the way his eyes backtrack.

“Deck?” Quentin knocks on the doorframe. Decker’s head pops up and his face is pale. Instantly Quentin knows something has happened. “What’s wrong?”

“Come in, Q. Close the door.” He sets the paper down.

There are about forty-seven million terrible ideas that bombard through his mind as he enters the small office and shuts the door behind him. He eyes the piece of paper between them and with a genuine start recognizes the handwriting.

*Julia.*

Quentin wastes no time in imagining what she has written about. He knows it’s about him, it has to be. He knows it must be about how he has broken magic, how all of this was his fault. Panic builds and he contemplates bolting out the door. He could run again. Maybe not back to New York but somewhere in middle America. Somewhere that’s nowhere.

Instead, he puts a little trust in Decker and stays put. For the moment.

“W-who was that letter for?” He hears himself ask.

“It was addressed to the headmistress and when she read it she thought it would be a good idea for me to give it to you,” Decker speaks slowly.

“And you read it?” Quentin bites out harshly, then regrets it.

“Yes.”

“Was it for me though? Did she write it for me?”

“No. It was written to the headmistress only.” He dismisses.

“Then why bother giving it to you at all?” Quentin questions.
“Because she believed I would know what best to do.” Decker sighs as he brings a hand to rub the back of his head.

“And what are you going to do?”

Decker hands over the letter without another word. Quentin trembles as he takes it and has to blink a few times to get the words to focus. When he can make sense of the letters the familiar script comes to life and it’s like he can almost smell her. Jasmine and lemon thyme.

“Would you like some privacy?”

The letter is only a few paragraphs long, there is no way she could have written down all the terrible things he has done in just a few paragraphs.

“No,” Quentin shakes his head. “No, it’s fine.”

Decker stays quite as Quentin begins to read.

To Headmaster Marjorie Lepetit,

I hope this letter finds you well. My name is Julia Wicker and I am writing to you on behalf of myself and a close group of friends in a desperate attempt to find someone.

In May of last year, my best friend disappeared from New York. His name is Quentin Coldwater. I’ve included a photo for you to reference and to share with the rest of your staff.

We have tried numerous spells and incantations to try and locate him, none of which had gotten us any traction. We are not sure if he has shielded himself from us, or if the amount of magic left in the world is not enough to track him over greater distances. We are working with the staff at Breakbills every day to try something new that might work. If you know of any tracking or tracing spells please forward them to us.

We are worried about his safety. He has had a history of mental illness and I fear that he may have been harmful to himself. Quentin is a gentle soul so please do not expect him to be violent if you are to approach him. If you know him or if a colleague knows of him, please call me. I have been writing letters all day to each and every headmaster in the United States as well as many overseas, in the hope that someone has seen or heard from him.

If by some miracle you do know him and can speak with him please let him know that we are all so sorry. That we regret everything we have said and done. Please let him know that we just want to make sure he is all right. He need not return to New York if he doesn’t want to. All we ask is that he lets us know that he is alive and that he is safe.

It’s a long shot in asking this of you, but I refuse to give up on him.

Sincerely,

Julia Wicker

(XXX)XXX-XXXX

Quentin can’t look away from the letter even after he has read it three times.

“I don’t understand,” he whispers. “I don’t understand. Why? Why is she doing this?”
"She is looking for her friend, Q. She wants you back in her life."

"And if I don't want to be wanted?"

Decker pauses and hits Quentin with the saddest eyes he has ever seen.

"Everybody wants to be wanted, Q. Even if it's under the surface. I know you want it. That's why you're with Coriander Murphy."

That strikes deep. Decker has always been so good about not mentioning Cori around Quentin and now that he's done it, Quentin understands why. He can see clear as day Decker's distaste of Cori.

"Please reach out to her." Decker pleads. "Do this kindness for yourself"

"But what if it's all a lie?"

"Why would it be a lie? Why would she write such a letter only to betray you?"

"I don't know! That's just how my fucked up brain works! And since she threw me away once, what is stopping her from doing it again?" Fury is blazing through him. He hasn't realized it yet, but this is the first time he has let himself be angry about what happened to him. He's been sad and depressed and a little upset about it, but he hasn't been this angry before.

"This letter is telling you that she regrets it," Decker says softly. He takes the letter out of Quentin's hands before he can tear it to shreds. "However, even if she regrets what she has done, that doesn't mean that you have to forgive her. All I'm saying is that you should give her a chance to explain it to you in person. You may not hear anything you like, or you may find that you are not able to forgive her, but at least you can say that you tried."

"You think I'll do it though. You wouldn't be saying this if you didn't think I would forgive her."

"I don't know what you will do. But, I know who you are. You are kind and deserving of good things. Even if you don't believe it yet."

Decker is right. He doesn't believe it.

"I'm gonna go." Quentin stands and feels his whole body tense. "I don't think I'll be any help to you today."

"Okay," Decker nods. "But take this with you."

Standing he folds up the letter and slips it into the envelope. Then comes around his desk to press it into Quentin's hand. The paper may as well weigh forty pounds for how heavy it feels in his palm. He flicks his eyes from the letter then back up to Decker. He can feel that the older man wants to say something more. Instead, Decker stares him down for a moment before taking his hand away and stepping back giving Quentin the space he needs to flee.

He walks out of Hillhollow with his eyes on the ground and the letter clutched tightly. Julia's words seem to lift off the paper and sink their way into his skin. Mocking him.

Before he knows it he is back at the beach. The tide is low so Quentin walks along the water's edge and steps over washed up sand dollars, crabs, bits of seaweed, and the occasional piece of trash.

He walks until he reaches a quiet place where no one else is. Slumping to the ground he pulls off his sand filled shoes and socks. Feeling the sand beneath his feet grounds him a little. He watches
the ocean as it crashes and swells. White and grey green melding and contrasting.

Slowly he unclenches his hand holding the letter. The paper is now wrinkled and twisted. As gingerly as he can he reopens the envelope and edges out the piece of paper.

For a half of a moment, he contemplates letting the waves take it away. To let it dissolve in the saltwater.

Instead, he rereads it.

The words don't mean much after the second and third time he reads it. What really makes his hands shake is the way she slopes an r and how she crosses her t’s so low down. The letter is so utterly Julia in all the ways Quentin can and cannot see.

He wants her back.

Just thinking about seeing her again makes his chest ache. But, God that is something he wants. He wants his best friend back in his life. He wants to be good and happy again. Is that too much to ask?

He folds the letter back up and tucks it away. Then he pulls out his phone.

He has deleted so many texts from unknown numbers in the past months. How many of them were Julia trying to reach out? He wants the messages back now. To look through and see that she was trying to bring him back into her life.

Quentin stares at the phone and summons his magic. If he can do other things just by wishing, then this should be easy.

As he feels his magic grow the screen flickers and glitches out. Then he gets a text.

From Cori.

He doesn't read it. He closes the phone and lets it drop to the sand. From there it starts dinging in rapid succession, alerting him to incoming messages. He doesn't want to know what Cori wants right now.

The cold waves are getting further and further away. The sun is setting, spreading out cascades of orange and pink across the sky. It should be beautiful, but somehow it feels ominous.

Quentin collects his sandy phone and leaves the beach without checking his new messages.

Something literally doesn't smell right when he gets back to Cori’s apartment. There is the scent of candle wax and lavender somewhere, but it’s nearly covered by the pungent smell of sulfur and ash. He takes off his shoes by the door then heads to the living room to investigate.

The furniture has been pushed to the far corners of the room and in the clearing sits Cori. He has drawn strange symbols, in what looks like blood, on the carpet. There is an open book in his lap which is quivering slightly. Quentin’s stomach drops at the sight. Cori’s lips are moving, saying the same words over and over. He has never seen Cori doing magic like this. His magic was typically pretty normal stuff, nothing extreme and nothing exciting.

This is not normal magic. Not by a long shot.
It feels like a black hole has opened up in the apartment, not letting any light or air escape. Hesitantly he takes a step towards Cori.

The other man’s eyes flick open and catch sight of Quentin coming towards him. His eyes are nearly black.

“What are you doing?” Cori hisses at him. Quentin freezes.

“I could ask the same of you.” He’s pleased that his voice doesn't shake as much as he thought it would. “This doesn’t look safe.”

“Safe,” he laughs. “What do you know about safe?”

The book in his lap snaps shut on its own accord. Cori stands, letting it tumble to the ground. He reaches out for Quentin’s hand and when they touch he can’t help the shudder that flies through him. Cori frowns and tightens his grip, his meaty fingers digging deep into Quentin’s skin.

"I told you not to come home," Cori says, low and gravely.

"What? When?" Quentin lies as he tries to pull away from the hand on him.

"I texted you like an hour ago telling you not to come back here "

"Why? Did you not want me to see your pathetic attempt at dark magic?" He feels brave for the first time in a long time. "It's laughable."

He's lying. This magic is dangerous, he can feel it in his teeth like a cavity.

He should have expected the slap.

It comes fast and hard across his face. His lip burst with the force of Cori’s knuckle against it.

The bravery he has melts into anger. With a single breath he banishes the smell of sulfur out of the windows. In the next breath the symbols sink into the floor, sizzling and cracking as it goes. The book Cori left on the ground lights itself on fire, then flickers out into ash.

Quentin finally is able to get rid himself of Cori’s hand, but it's only for a mere second. The meaty hands are reaching back for him and latching on to Quentin's forearms.

"What the fuck did you do?" He snarls.

"I don't know!"

"Liar."

"I didn't cast anything!"

"And yet you're still doing magic." Cori yanks him in close, so much so that they are nearly nose to nose.

"I don't know how it works." Quentin begins to bargain. "Please, I just do it. I don't know what I'm doing."

"You don't deserve this!" Cori screams at him suddenly. His hands are like solid steel pinching into his arms. Tightly, tightly, tightly.
"You think I want this? I don't! I don't want it! If I could get rid of it, give it to you, I would." He starts off yelling back, but his voice fades and flickers out like a flame.

"Then I'll figure out how to get it out of you," Cori promises. And maybe if it had been someone else saying those words to him he would feel some sort of relief. But as it stands, there is no comfort in the words.

Quentin is about to ask how Cori proposes they get the magic out of him when one hand lets go of his arm only to make a fist and barrel its way into Quentin's side. Air leaves him with sudden force. Just as he sucks in a gasp of air it is wooshed out of him with another swift punch. His knees buckle and he hits the floor. A flash of greyed out heat and pain snakes its way up his spine as Cori's foot collides with it. He sees the next punch coming and makes a grab at it. Using Cori’s own force against him he pulls and sends him crashing into the side of the sofa.

“You fucking whore!” Cori spits. He gets up and snags Quentin by the arm as he tries to make a break for it. He pulls him up to his chest and yells in his face. “Why does a whore like you get all this magic? Huh? You fuck some magical creature? Make a deal? What did you do?”

He shakes Quentin after every question, giving him no time to answer. His teeth clack together painfully with every shake. He feels something in his right arm twinge painfully. Then a crack lights up the nerve ending in his entire body.

“Cori stop!” Quentin cries. His arm hurts so much it’s making him dizzy.

“Tell me!”

“Please! I think you broke my arm,” he begs as he breaks out in a cold sweat.

“I don’t care! Tell me!” He roars.

“I did a spell!” Quentin sobs. Cori stops shaking him.

“What spell?”

“It was a love spell!”

“What?”

“I cast a love spell and this happened.”

“What spell?” He grits his teeth like he doesn't believe him.

“Amoris Juramento with Prims incantation and an Edlibands stone.” Quentin pants. He's seeing double and he's pretty sure that's not a good sign.

“Amoris...That would never work.” Cori finally lets him go.

“Not for you.” Quentin hisses. “Not for someone who can’t love.”

Cori makes an inhuman sound and throws both of them to the ground. He grabs Quentin by the head and slams it into the floor over and over until Quentin feels wet slick blood slipping down the back of his neck. The room fades in and out and for a moment he thinks he can hear Eliot calling to him.

“Stay awake.” The ghost of a voice says. And he wants to obey it. He wants to do what it says. “Go, honey, you need to go.”
So he does.

When he gains a soft grip on reality Quentin realizes he is walking down the center of a street with no shoes on. He doesn't remember leaving Cori's place, nor does he remember how he got... wherever he is. It's late at night and the streets are low and quiet. The air is filling with fog, cooling the blood on Quentin's face. He pulls over to the sidewalk and leans against the nearest building. His head hurts so badly he can hardly see. His right arm is clutched loosely to his chest as it pulses with pain. He blinks for what feels like hours trying to read the next street sign he comes across. It comes into view and Quentin knows where he is.

Upper Terrace.

He stumbles further down the street looking for the right address. He has to stop after three houses when the world spins out of control. When he can confidently walk again he finds the address he's searching for. 263 Upper Terrace, Decker’s place.

Quentin doesn't even knock. The door opens and with it, warm yellow light spills out onto the black and grey cracked streets. It lights up the blood running down Quentin’s face with a kind of glass-like shine. Blocking out some of the light is Decker. Even though it's late at night he looks awake. His glasses low on the bridge of his nose he has one arm through a jacket sleeve the other is holding a shoe. Quentin looks down to his feet and sees one house shoe and one running shoe. It looks like he was going somewhere. Quentin has never had a pair of house shoes. They look nice.


Maybe he should buy a pair. Red with brown trim and little laces.

“Quentin?”

They can’t be that expensive. He could go back to Eddy St. and blow Kieran again to pay for them. Would Decker let him try on his pair? Just to make sure he really liked them.

“Q, look at me kid.” He hears Decker talking to him, but nothing is really making sense. "Come on, Q. Eyes up here, okay? Quentin?"

His hand touches Quentin’s shoulder and fear takes its rightful place back on the surface. Quentin’s eyes dart around Decker’s face looking and not seeing.

“You with me?”

“Not really.” Quentin trembles out.

“Good enough, yeah?” Decker drops the shoe and steps aside and with that more yellow light comes rushing out of the house. “Come inside, please.”

This is what it must feel like. Quentin thinks. Walking into the sun.

Decker guides him through the living room, then into the kitchen. He pulls out a chair for Quentin and asks him to sit. Quentin doesn't need to be told twice. He folds into the chair, curling around his throbbing ribs and arm. Decker steps away then disappears to another room. When he comes back he's holding a first aid kit and a throw pillow. He nudges Quentin with the pillow.

“Put this against your stomach and wrap your arms around it.” He instructs.

Quentin does as he is told and just holding it feels better. He rubs the pilled fabric beneath his
fingers, being gentle in the places where the thread is bare. Decker drops the first aid kit on the table then opens the pantry and pulls out a few potions. He sets them out in a particular order then rips open the first aid kit and digs out some cotton pads.

“Did he break anything?” Decker kneels down in front of Quentin with cotton doused in alcohol. He gently turns Quentin's head to get a better look at the gash. Gently, he starts wiping away the blood.

“My arm.” He says, hearing the way his voice trembles.

“Anything else?” Decker pulls the cotton away and looks at him.

“Ribs. And head.” Suddenly his mouth is full of saliva. “I’m gonna throw up.”

Acting fast Decker reaches for a nearby trash bin and thrusts it into Quentin’s hands. As Quentin empties his stomach Decker pulls out his phone and calls Yeh, the Healing professor.

“No, Deck, I don’t-” Quentin starts to say then is hit by another wave of nausea sending him back to the bin. Decker has a short conversation then hangs up without a goodbye.

“You are going to need a real healer, Q. I’m pretty sure you’ve got a concussion on top of the broken bones. If it was just the cut I could fix you up, but...it’s not.”

Quentin thinks that he should be worried about something. That something about getting fixed up is wrong and bad, but he can’t quite figure that out.

“I knew he had done something worse this time,” Decker says softly and continues to clean the blood off Quentin's neck.

“What?” Quentin is confused, and not just from the head injury. Decker pulls the blood-soaked cotton pad away and drops it into a glass jar.

“Did you know that there are about 50 earthquakes every day? 20,000 a year.” Decker says seemingly out of the blue and Quentin is so, so, confused. “Bear with me, I’m about to make an analogy.”

Quentin coughs out a laugh. Decker leaves him for a moment, only to return with a glass of water. Quentin sips slowly and thankfully.

“Most earthquakes we don’t even notice, too small on the Richter scale. But, they happen all the time. These are the things you need to know about when you are living in San Francisco. These little ones are good. They are slowly releasing the tension the earth is putting on itself. A lot of little ones mean the big one won’t be as big. We’re gonna have a big one soon, probably in the next ten years or so.”

“Deck, what the fuck are you talking about?”

“You are the earth. This,” he holds up the cotton pad soaked with blood. “Is the earthquake.”

“I’m still lost,” Quentin says, shaking his head, then stops because it makes him more nauseous. “Or maybe it’s the blood loss.”

“It is the blood loss.” Decker stresses. “All this blood down your shirt, stuck in your hair, that’s a 5.6 at least. I could feel it. Hell, everyone at Hillhollow could probably feel it. The magic you have is bursting out from you, from your blood. I’m not sure how the two got entangled, but every
time you bleed you are sending out shockwaves of magic.”

It’s a sick joke. One that Quentin says to new acquaintances because he is nervous and awkward then he will say it over and over since he can’t fathom getting new material until it burns on his tongue.

“Something happened to you at the end of November last year. Something where you lost a lot of blood.” Decker decidedly does not look down at Quentin’s arms. “Magic was everywhere for weeks. Aftershocks. Everyone at Hillhollow was basking in it. It almost felt like things were going back to normal. But it didn't last. The magic dissipated after a month or so.

"I only put it together last week. You came in and before we did our spell you got a nosebleed. I don’t think anyone else made the connection yet. There was already a lot of magic in the air at the time. People were warming up and casting around you. But, I’ve lived here all my life. I know what I’m feeling for."

“So what do we do?” Quentin chokes out. Tears are freely making their way down his face.

"First, we are going to get you fixed up." Decker puts a hand on Quentin's leg, soft and reassuring. "I'll make up the guest bedroom for you. You can stay here as long as you need. Or you can go to Farrah's if you're more comfortable. I'm sure she won't mind."

Quentin nods as he stares at the hand on his leg. He must stare for a long time because when Decker snaps his fingers in front of his face to get his attention Professor Yeh is standing there next to him.

His head feels heavy. He list to one side and is caught by Yeh before he slips off the chair. The two of them are talking to him, he knows because he can see their mouths moving. However, all sound has melded together to a fine humming noise. The sound progressively gets louder and louder until he has to shut his eyes to try and evade it.

A hand grips his shoulder and shakes him.

He hates when Cori shakes him

When he opens his eyes again he is in an unfamiliar bed. The sheets are a cornflower blue and the blanket he's wrapped in is pale grey. It smells like summer. Sweet and hot, like lemongrass wilting in the heat. Looking around he sees a large bookcase across the room from the bed, with many more piles of books stacked on the ground. Seems that not just Decker's office was a hoarding ground for books.

He sits up slowly, his body is aching, but he doesn't feel like he's going to throw up anymore. His arm is wrapped in a soft splint and he can't really feel his hand. He tries to make a fist, but the best he can do is twitch his fingers. Panic burns in his chest.

"We think you're cursed."

Quentin jumps at Decker's voice. Looking up he finds him in the doorway, arms crossed over his chest.

"What?" Quentin says in a short breath.

"We couldn't heal you fully. Yeh's spells could only do so much. He set your arm and got it nearly
healed, you'll need to wear the splint for a few weeks. Ribs are the same, you might have some trouble breathing, so don't work yourself up too much." He steps into the room. "How's your head feeling?"

"It's okay." Quentin answers honestly. "I've got a headache, but it's not bad."

"Good," Decker nods. "Anything else hurting?"

"I can't really feel my hand." His index finger twitches as he tries again to move it.

"Hmm?" Decker frowns and holds out his hand to Quentin, who has to use his left arm to lift his right. Decker inspects his hand, pressing down on the palm and stretching out a few fingers. "Any pain?"

"No."

"All right," Decker sets Quentin's hand back in his lap. "I'll call Yeh and let him know. Think you can stomach anything?"

"Maybe." Quentin shrugs with only his left shoulder.

Decker leaves for a few minutes, then returns with a small plate of fruit and cheese. He sets it in Quentin's lap and patiently waits for him to start eating before sitting down at the end of the bed. Quentin picks at the fruit with his left hand as his right lays useless in his lap.

"What happened?" Decker asks after he has polished off half an apple. "Why did he do this to you? How did he do this to you?"

"What do you mean?"

"How did Coriander Murphy, of all people, curse you?"

"I don't think he meant to," Quentin says after some contemplation. He remembers the blood written symbols and the smell of something rotten. "He was doing a spell when I got in yesterday. It was dark magic, like really dark. I don't think he knew what he was doing. When he started yelling at me I made all his spell work disappear. Then he got angrier. What kind of curse is it?"

"We don't know." Decker sighs. "The only side effect we can see is that it's not letting us heal you completely. The cut on the back of your head keeps reopening."

Quentin reaches up and touches the bandages wrapped around his head for the first time. He finds the wound and feels warm blood soaking through the gauze there. He pulls his hand away and both he and Decker stare at the muddy red blood on his fingertips.

"I'll get more supplies," Decker says as he gets up, leaving Quentin alone with his thoughts.

What a dangerous thing.

He stares down at his broken arm and watches his fingers twitch. He'll need to go back to Cori's apartment at some point to get his things, and more importantly his drugs. That is if Cori hasn't disposed of them by now.

God, he wants to get high so badly right now. He doesn't want to think anymore about Cori, about his magic, about Julia's letter, about the kindness he can't repay to Decker, about everything that reminds him of Eliot. And now to top it all off he's got this curse to worry about.
Quentin curls in on himself, resting his head on his knees. He lets himself cry silently.

Decker returns and heaves a heavy sigh.

"It's going to be okay, Q." He promises as he sits next to him on the bed. "May I touch you?"

Quentin shakes his head. He doesn't want anyone to touch him ever again. He's cursed and he's been cursed for a very long time. But under all that, he is desperate for affection that he has been deprived of for so long.

"Okay," he chokes out.

Decker takes permission and slowly wraps his arms around Quentin. He pulls him to his chest and keeps his grasp just loose enough so that Quentin could get away when he needs to.

He listens to Decker's heartbeat thumping along, consistent and strong. Quentin sinks into the embrace, being greedy as he relishes in the comfort he has so desperately wanted and needed.

When his tears subsides Decker leans back against the headboard, taking Quentin with him.

"This okay?" He asks.

"Yeah," Quentin whispers.

"Let me know when it's not."

Those words alone are enough to make him start crying again. He sobs until he has nothing left to give. He can't cry anymore, but he still feels like he's bawling. His chest hitches with every breath and his eyes sting.

Decker moves one of his arms and lightly touches the bandage on Quentin's head.

"We really do need to change this," Decker says.

Without replying Quentin shifts forward and lets the older man pull away. He doesn't go far though. He grabs the new gauze and a little tube of ointment. He closes his eyes as Decker unwraps the soiled bandages.

"Hey Deck?" Quentin asks as he picks at a loose thread on the blanket.

"Humm?"

"Do you believe in magic?"

"Is this a trick question?" Decker pauses in unwinding some gauze.

"No, not really." He half shrugs. "Do you believe in it? Not like you believe in it because you can do it and see it. But like you really believe in it."

"All right Q, tell me what you are after here."

"How much do you know about Fillory?"

"Enough I suppose." Decker admits as he cleans the cut. "Farrah has told me about your connection to it. Not a lot, but enough."
"Right. I knew she knew about it, but she never told me how. But honestly, at this point, I feel like everyone who knows about magic knows that there is a connection to Fillory. So we were there, my friends and I. We lived there for a while, in my case a very long while. You remember when magic went away for the first time?"

"Of course."

"That was us, well me in particular. And we got it back obviously, and then I broke it again."

"You can't blame yourself for things beyond your control." Decker tells him as he ties off the new bandages.

"It wasn't beyond my control." Quentin pushes. "I was in control, for once in my fucking life I was the one in control."

"Okay." Decker moves from behind him and sits across from him on the bed. "Tell me."

"In Fillory there was a monster." He takes a deep breath preparing himself to say everything else that follows. "My friends, we had a plan to kill it and in turn magic would come back. Honestly if the plan had gone the way I wanted it to none of this would have happened. I was supposed to stay with the monster in exchange for magic. But everyone else had other plans. Ends up the person I loved most got possessed by this monster and started killing for fun. We all knew we had to stop it, but finding out how was asking for an impossibility. No one wanted to be the one to accidentally kill him. And I...well. I sought out so many options and finally got to a point where I knew I had to act. I found a spell and I did it. Looking back it was really, and I mean really, foolish. But, I couldn't let him live like that any longer. I knew the spell would use a lot of magic and that it would take a lot out of me and him, but I had to do it. I had to. He would have done the same for me. At least I hope he would have."

"What was the spell?" Decker breaks his silence.

"Amoris Juramento with Prims incantation and an Edlibands stone."

"A love spell?" Decker creases his brow.

"Yeah, a love spell." Quentin sighs.

"How did you know that would work?"

"I didn't. I just...I was out of other options and desperate. You know. I was so desperate to do something, even if it meant that I gave up something else."

"A spell like that could have only worked if you were soulmates, like actual soulmates."

"Well, I knew what he meant to me." Quentin cringes as he thinks back to Fillory and Eliot telling him that he didn’t want to try to be together again. “Maybe that was enough?"

"It wouldn't have been." Decker shakes his head.

"You think that's why it went wrong? Why all the magic is fucked up again and I'm...like this?"

"No. That spell should have killed you. And your friend. I'm surprised you both aren't dead."

"I really don't know if he's alive." Quentin pulls hard at the loose thread and rips it clean out.

"He is," Decker says like a promise.
“How do you know?”

"Q, if he is really your soulmate and you did this spell, there would be no way he would be dead and you would not know about it. That's how soulmates work."

"That's a nice sentiment," Quentin scoffs. “That soulmates are real."

"It's not a sentiment."

"Deck, come on. Soulmates aren't real. I know we live in a world where magic and mystical creatures are real, but there has got to be a line."

"And I'm telling you soulmates fall well within those lines. You asked me if I believe in magic. I do, Q. I do."

"All right, so say I believe you, what does that even mean? Like can he feel what I feel? Read my mind?"

"No, nothing quite like that." Decker gets up and steps over to one of his many shelves of books. He runs a finger over a row of spines twice before pulling out the desired one. He turns to the index, locates his page then flips to it. "Here, Barn's has a good definition in their work on love spells."

Quentin takes the offered book and starts reading the paragraph under the bolded word: Soulmates.

*The first recorded mention of soulmates dates to around 1800 bc in ancient Mesopotamia. Of course the mention of such soulmates has been stripped from the stones themselves. However, if we are to look at Ugna Juska's research into -*

Quentin skips ahead.

Soulmates, for lack of better words, are people who are linked together on all levels of body, mind and soul.

Most soul bonds are made rather than born. Though, there are exceptions. Made soul bonds typically manifest after the first initial meeting. From there the longer the two people spend together the stronger the bond will be.

Quentin stops reading. He doesn't want to give himself that kind of hope.

“You don’t really think that— that he and I, that we-”

“Again, neither of you would be alive if you were not soulmates.”

“What if he doesn't want to be soulmates?”

“Are you worried he doesn't love you back the same way you love him?”

“Yes.” Quentin spits the word out like a curse.

“You can still be soulmates without being in love. Like the text says, it may just be friendship or even familial.”

“So I get to be in love with him forever and he just gets to be tethered to me? That sounds like something that soulmates shouldn't do.”
“Don’t say that about yourself.” Decker takes the book out of Quentin's shaky hand.

“Why?”

“It’s not very nice.”

“If you haven’t noticed, I’m not very nice to myself.” The words are familiar in his mouth.

"I know," Decker says in a low sad voice. He shelves the book then stands with his back to
Quentin for a minute. When he speaks again it is with his head slung a little lower than normal. "I
called Julia."

Betrayal is the first thing that comes to him. Then panic. Then fear.

Run.

His mind is screaming at him to get out, but his body won't listen.

"I'm sorry, Q." Decker turns to face him as he runs a hand through his hair. When he finally looks
up at Quentin his eyes are wet. "I hope one day you can forgive me."

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