# The Spoils of the Spoiled

**by not_poignant**

**Summary**

Highschool is a trying time for pretty much everyone. But it *definitely* is when you're dealing with an abusive family at home, an eating disorder, championships, and the Prefect of the House of Ravens is trying to emotionally blackmail you into...well, anything he damn well wants. (An Augus and Gwyn story that needs absolutely no understanding of previous canon/content to read).

**Notes**
Where is this highschool set? No one knows. It's a weird amalgamation of Australian and England practices, but really it's set in some mythical parallel human country where I can make up the rules (*lies down and contemplates laziness*). As for age, the age of consent in Australia (where I live) is sixteen - but that's pretty young for most of you readers, so I imagine the characters are 17, except for Augus, who is 18 - but had to repeat some highschool due to some seriously disadvantaged childhood situations. I've chosen not to use archive warnings so I can explain the situation here: legal for me, not legal for some of you - it's at your discretion if you want to read it.

As always, you can expect some violence, abuse, dark themes and consent violation. It will also look at pansexual erasure and transphobia (depending on how far the story gets), though *neither* of these things will be condoned as okay as the story progresses. You can also expect a whole lot of general highschool nastiness. And swearing. :D

Feedback is love, folks!
Gwyn

Gwyn stood, embarrassed, in his wrestling gear. He didn’t even have enough time to grab his sweats, and consequently he was standing – feeling pretty damned near naked – in nothing more than compression shorts which left nothing to the imagination, and wrestling shoes. He shifted from foot to foot in his Omniflex shoes and Ash snorted next to him. Well, it was all very well for him, he didn’t look like he was coming off just before the end of his stripper act.

The Principal stood before them, something like cold-hearted murder in his blue eyes. Heading on past sixty, having facial hair as neatly clipped and maintained as his suit, Principal Albion was terrifying most of the time; even when he appeared to be in a good mood.

But when they were pulled up side by side in front of him like this...

The last time Gwyn had gotten in so much trouble, a young boy had been expelled from the school and Gwyn had his heart broken.

‘Gwyn ap Nudd, you’re a star pupil, you’re not known for fighting. What were you thinking?’

Each line delivered with military precision.

Gwyn was used to that.

‘Sir,’ Gwyn said carefully, trying not to listen to the monologue of naked, naked, naked, naked, practically naked running through the back of his head. His compression shorts were a shiny dove grey, they really didn’t hide anything and Gwyn was pretty sure that Albion knew more about his dick than any Principal really had a right to. ‘He was the one who sabotaged Coach Davix’s car before the championships. I saw him. And I was going to-’

‘No, you fucking did not!’ Ash spat, sounding far more nasal than usual to the blood still oozing thick from his nose. Gwyn looked briefly down at his bloodied knuckles, then stared down at Ash.

‘Language,’ Albion reprimanded, and Ash made a hissing-whistling sound complicated by the fact that his nose was possibly broken.

Gwyn’s ribs were already starting to look like a Francis Bacon painting. He was lucky nothing had fractured. Probably because Ash had gone for his kidneys. Shit-kicking street rat.

‘Sir, I was going to go through the proper channels. I’d already reported it to Head of House. But-He was gloating about it in the change rooms, and I saw red.’

‘Glashtyn, is that true?’

‘Sir, come on, man. Look at me. Do I look like the kind of person who would-’

‘Do I need to get out your records?’

‘More like a rap sheet,’ Gwyn muttered.

‘Gwyn,’ Albion snapped, and Gwyn drew himself as straight as he could and wanted sweatpants, a
‘Gwyn’s a dick,’ Ash rumbled. ‘Sorry, sorry, language. I mean, what I really mean is that he just went at me. Like no provocation. I wasn’t gloating about anything. I just wanted to get changed and get back to dorm. My brother’s helping me study for a final. You know.’

‘Gwyn, you’re dismissed. I’m putting a note in your permanent file over this, but I won’t take any action until I’ve had a longer talk with Ash, here.’

‘Great,’ Ash muttered.

‘Do you want to be suspended again? I’m quite certain that losing that full scholarship will hurt your brother’s chances of a university education quite a lot.’

Ash said nothing at all, his whole body hunched in on itself.

Gwyn left, glad for the fact that it was late afternoon and most of his fellow students would be back in their dorms so that not many had to witness his—practically naked—walk back to the change rooms. Even so, as he made his way through the Murdock Academy of Excellence, he heard several wolf whistles from boys and girls alike, and looked up to see several hands and pointing fingers marking him out.

He glowered his way back into the now deserted change rooms and showered off quickly, barely wincing as the bruises shifted on his body. He’d dealt with far worse, though he could feel that it was going to dog him for the rest of the week. The sucker punch to the kidneys had been the worst. He rubbed at his lower back carefully, then sighed. Rubbing it wasn’t going to do anything, he just had to wait it out.

He dressed into his school issue sweats and jumper—House of Doves put him in the school colours of black and blue, along with the highlights of the pale grey they were known for. He was shaking water out of his hair as he took his backpack out of his locker, shoving his phone into his pocket and toeing into his sneakers as he went.

It was dark when he headed back to his dorm, and no one pointed and shouted at him now. He walked down streets lit with yellow lights, canopies hanging over him, hardly noticing the picturesque school.

He took those sorts of things for granted, after all.

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Later that night, he stood in his private toilet, one hand resting on the wall and staring down into the bowl, grateful that he wasn’t pissing blood.

He’d dealt with that before too.

His phone rang at nine exactly, and he picked it up promptly, cancelling out the inane Hellogoodbye ringtone that Ondine had programmed into it—and refused to teach him how to change it again.
He’d tried googling, but he was too lazy to look thoroughly. Consequently, the bouncy words ‘everything is debatable’ met the grim face of his father when he picked up the phone.

Not entirely debatable.

‘Dad,’ Gwyn said, highlighting a passage in his text and hardly knowing if it was significant. He
closed his eyes and shook the remnants of rage out of his head. He’d wanted to destroy Ash. Really, Ash was lucky that Gwyn got dragged off him.

‘Is it true? Did you get in an altercation with Ash Glashtyn? Scum of the school?’

‘No- I mean, yes, but, Dad, I-’

‘If you can’t speak in an articulate sentence then you’d best not speak at all,’ his father snapped.

Gwyn slowly lowered his head until it rested on the highlighted text. It was just damp enough that he wondered if he’d have smears of yellow on his forehead.

Silence stretched, and Gwyn realised that this was not one of those ‘don’t speak unless you’re spoken to’ times, opened his mouth to respond.

‘Well?’ his father shouted.

Fuck.

‘He was the one who keyed Coach Davix’s car. He broke the windscreen and the windows. I reported it to Old Pete like I was supposed to, but he just kept going on about it in the change rooms.’

‘So you decided to act like some jumped up kid on steroids and take him out, did you?’

‘No, Dad, I swear, it was just- with the championships, I-’

‘You are very fortunate that you are not in front of me right now,’ his father said, his voice going quiet and deadly with promise. Gwyn snuck an arm around his torso and nodded, even though his father couldn’t see the response.

‘Yes, Dad,’ Gwyn managed finally, his voice as meek as it ever got.

‘I don’t want you to have anything to do with those boys, do you understand me?’

‘Dad, I don’t think me breaking Ash’s nose is-’

‘Nothing,’ his father said. ‘Your reputation is already on a knife’s edge as it is. You keep mis-stepping as you are, and I’ll ship you off to a military academy faster than you can say ‘but Dad.’’

Gwyn opened his mouth to say ‘but Dad-’ and realised that was…the point. Thoroughly ashamed, he pressed his thumb and index finger into his eyes and focused on his breathing. He was lucky that he wasn’t home. His father sounded like he was in a mood.

Because of you.

‘Why can’t you be more like your cousin?’ his father sighed.

‘I don’t know, Dad,’ Gwyn said, clearing his throat.

‘You’re not crying like some dick-sucking poof, are you? Jesus, I didn’t raise-’

‘Dad,’ Gwyn said, shaking his head. ‘Not crying.’

But he was a fag. Something his father knew very well, and kept trying to forget. Or beat out of him. Or berate him with insults until he magically became straight. None of it seemed to work. Though
Gwyn was pretty enthusiastically behind the idea of celibacy until he could move out of the country.

‘I want you home this weekend.’

Great. Re-education. Fucking great.

‘Dad, I have mocks, and I have-’

‘This attitude of yours is a problem,’ his father said, then hung up the phone.

Gwyn thumped his forehead against his book several times, dropping his phone beside him and grateful for the Otterbox that protected it as it hit the hardwood. He’d needed to get one of those after his last altercation with his father had caused his iPhone to fly out of his hand and smash against tile. A few moments later, he’d practically done the same.

He laughed to himself. Others might be more worried, sure. He’d been in health class. He’d seen all the documentaries about how domestic violence was wrong.

But try telling that to the well-respected An-Fnwy family who had their names on two of the buildings in the school, and owned a hospital wing.

There was nothing wrong about any sort of violence if you had enough money to smooth things over.

Gwyn decided to go to bed early. He skipped dinner. He didn’t have the energy to look through it all and make sure his food was safe to eat. He could catch some fruit for breakfast the next morning.

Even so, he rested his hands on his growling stomach as he fell asleep, only vaguely remembering that he’d skipped lunch and the previous night’s dinner as well.

He was going to fall out of his weight division if he kept doing that…

It was his last thought, before he slept, yellow smears on his forehead.
Ash lay on his back on his bed, a bag of frozen peas over his nose and eyes, dried blood sticking to the underside of his nostrils and tissues sticking out, making him look – all in all – not nearly as charming as he usually liked to appear. Augus paced their small room in frustration, hands in fists, wishing they were back at the pad, and knowing that Head of House wouldn’t let them go while Ash was in this state. He may have been far more lax than anyone realised about what Augus and Ash did with their time, but not while Ash looked like an abuse victim.

‘We’ve covered up a lot of things,’ Augus hissed. ‘Do you think murdering Gwyn could be one of them?’

‘It’s not even broken,’ Ash said from the bed. Though it sounded more like: I’d nod eben brogen.

‘After the way that Coach treated you when we saw him the other day, you should have set fire to his car. I would have helped!’

‘That’s saying something, coming from you.’

‘Shut up. Just…shut up. I know you, you dick, remember? I know how you gloat. Why’d you have to do it in front of the hulk? You know how he gets when he loses his temper.’

‘Normally he’s doing it on the mat! He doesn’t get involved in fights.’

‘He put his opponent in hospital in the last championships and he didn’t break any rules to do it!’

‘Urgh,’ Ash groaned, reaching behind him, grabbing his earphones and plugging them into his ears. A moment later, volume blasting, Augus could actually make out the sound of Taking Back Sunday playing through tinnily, mocking his rage. He stalked forwards and yanked them out of Ash’s ears. The headphones Ash had stolen. The phone he’d stolen. The clothes he’d stolen.

‘This is a big deal, you little twat,’ Augus hissed. ‘The Principal called me in and told me to keep a closer eye on you. You might be used to suspension and threats of expulsion, but it’s like you constantly forget that without this full scholarship, we’re back on the streets, living off food you filch every which way and me working jobs for shit pay. At least here things are a bit better, if you could just…’

‘What? Stop keying cars? Dude, didn’t you just say you’d help me to set fire to it? Come on, man. Give me a break. I didn’t know I was seen.’

‘You’re an idiot. He’s calling in the police. They’re going to dust the car for prints!’

‘Give me some credit,’ Ash groaned, nasal and sounding pained. ‘Haven’t been lifting cars for so long to leave some prints on the thing.’

‘With Gwyn ap Nudd as a witness, it won’t matter. That family has—’
‘F*ck Gwen and that fucking family. Fuck them all. And screw your lectures. Jesus, can you fucking knock it off? We’re fine! You’re fine! Your precious scholarship is fine, and you’re-’

‘Our scholarship,’ Augus snarled. ‘You’re living here too. You go to school here too. I may have done all the work on that application, but it applies to both of us.’

‘It’s all fine!’ Ash shouted, ripping the peas off his face and throwing them at Augus’ face so hard that Augus’ hands only came up in time because of years of fencing training. He clutched the bag between his fingers and saw the tears in Ash’s eyes, the quirk of his lips, realised with a shock of horror and disgust that Ash was dangerously close to crying. ‘It’s fine, isn’t it? I didn’t mean to get caught! I haven’t ruined it, have I? I can go straight and narrow for a few weeks. I promise. I promise, Augus.’

Augus raked a hand through his hair, forgot he was wearing a hair tie, and dragged that and several strands from his scalp, wincing as he did so. He shook the hair band to the floor and loosened the tie he wore – house colours of violet overlaying the black and dark blue of Academy. He folded the tie to give himself something to do, calming his breathing.

It wasn’t fair on Ash to take it out on him. He’d only spent his whole life getting by with theft, and even now that they had food and education and even shelter provided for them…

Well, a scholarship wasn’t clothing and footwear and smartphones and headphones and everything else they needed to not look like they were the lowest of the low in the school.

Augus made full use of his brother’s theft when it was convenient to him.

He sat down on his bed, opposite Ash, and rubbed the heel of his palm over his forehead.

‘I have essays due,’ Augus said tiredly. ‘I have to work this weekend. I’ve got assignments to write for the uni students that won’t write them themselves and pay through the nose for their sacred ‘non-plagiarised’ material. Ash, you just…’

Deep in his gut, a seething, twisting anger. Gwyn ap Nudd, again. He represented everything Augus hated about the stupid Academy. All the rich kids getting their privileged ride through the whole damned thing. Money falling out of their pockets and their wallets. Gwyn and his stupid cousin, Efnisien, wearing rage and cruelty on their sleeves and getting off every single charge pushed against them. Gwyn didn’t even get suspended for nearly breaking Ash’s nose.

It reminded him of a lifetime of looking at children with their birth parents, not in some shitty foster system, having no concept of what work or true independence or suffering was. Where their most pressing question was ‘What am I going to be when I grow up?’ and not ‘Can I get enough food to eat today?’

He tapped his fingers thoughtfully on the table, throwing the frozen peas back to Ash when he waggled his fingers for them.

Ash wasn’t the only one who did ‘terrible’ things.

He was just the one most likely to get caught.

Augus had his own games, his own pieces in play.

‘I could ruin him,’ Augus said quietly. ‘Something to do. Might be good to see one of them pushed off their pedestal.’
‘What?’ Ash said, pulling the peas off his nose again. He turned and faced Augus, and then groaned at what must have been a killer headache. ‘Don’t Augus. Don’t mess with that family. You can’t lecture me about it and then go after them yourself.’

‘The difference between you and I, brother, is that my methods are rather different.’


‘Gwyn’s had it out for you for some time,’ Augus mused, crossing his legs and leaning back against the wall, slumping so artfully that his lungs and sternum were practically crushed with the way his spine was curving. ‘If it wasn’t this, it would have been something else. People expect me to go after Efnisien, because he’s also Prefect. Efnisien’s also straight as a fucking board, which complicates things a tad.’

‘Augus, you can’t be serious,’ Ash said, and Augus couldn’t pick his tone – awe or disgust.

‘What?’ Augus said, smirking. ‘I’m bored. I could do with another project.’

‘Fuck that,’ Ash muttered. He reached for his headphones again, and soon the room was filled with tinny men screaming angrily about betrayal and bad relationships.

Augus ended up doing his essays in the common room; cheap black coffee making his stomach hurt and a packet of Pro Plus sitting next to pens and pencils and all other stationary that – if not provided by the school – had been thoughtfully provided by Ash’s thieving fingers.

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The next morning he was woken by Ash amongst the bustle of other students walking past the door in the corridor to their classes. He swore quietly as he packed up all his papers, his laptop, shoved them all in his case and was sure that one day the laptop was just going to croak. Thank goodness for Dropbox and the external hard-drive that Ash had…well…

Re-appropriated.

He hadn’t showered, though he’d done a fair amount of work and was ahead once more.

*For now.*

Ash handed him an apple, and Augus handed it back, wanting something savoury. But he’d made no sandwiches and couldn’t technically afford anything junky from the cafeteria.

Ash opened his rucksack and lifted out pre-made sandwiches, and winked a hazel eye at him.

‘You are a life saver,’ Augus said fervently.

He took in Ash’s face – two black eyes, though not as bad as some he’d sported in the past. Mostly just bruising in the bags beneath his eyes; he hadn’t slept well. Some delicate discolouration around the outsides of his nose. No more blood. His dark red hair was wet and springy, dripping onto his school jacket – not that he cared. His tie was askew, and if Augus went to fix it, Ash would slap his hands away and swear at him.

‘Augus,’ Mr. Prince said, leaning into the room. ‘Leaving it rather late again, aren’t you? Those all-nighters aren’t good for your training. I rather think you’re going to suffer for it today out on the piste.’
‘Fuck, is he not kidding,’ Ash said, as Mr. Prince walked away, prim steps stalking neatly from the room. ‘You’re gonna get thrashed, right?’

‘He’s angry,’ Augus said under his breath. ‘He doesn’t like it when I pull all-nighters, and I didn’t get the pills out of the way in time. He probably saw them, before. He wakes up before most of the other students.’

‘Raven Prince,’ Ash muttered, licking his lips nervously. ‘Raven Prince’ was the common nickname for the Head of Raven House. No one knew his first name. Augus had tried peeking at his mail before, and Mr. Prince had spotted him and sent him on his way, Augus’ heart skittering up in his throat and feeling far more nervous than usual.

Augus had most students and teachers wrapped around his little finger. But Mr. Prince was the opposite. He’d read far too much about law and war and strategy. He knew all of Augus’ games.

He probably even knew that Augus sold his essay-writing services to university students.

He might have a soft-spot for the brothers. But he wasn’t soft.

‘He makes me feel like a peasant,’ Augus griped, shoving sandwiches in his bag and yawning. No shower, coming off caffeine pills, more work to do.

They both looked up when Trow ran into the room. He was three years below them both, a math prodigy. He held printed papers in his hand.

‘I couldn’t find you!’ he said, his grey eyes wide with panic, pale mouse-brown hair spiked up every which way. ‘Here. For calc. I got your trig stuff coming, I promise! Don’t be mad.’

‘Why, I’m not mad,’ Augus said smoothly, ruffling Trow’s hair and taking the papers, looking over his shoulder to the corridor beyond. ‘Thank you for taking the time to find me. Now get along to your class.’

‘Yes, Sir! Prefect Augus!’

‘That’s a nice little racket you’ve got going,’ Ash grumbled, as Augus carefully folded the completed papers away.

‘We all know the importance of keeping up a grade point average,’ Augus said. ‘Besides, like I had time to attend most of my classes before we got here. Like you did.’

‘If he turns tail on you…’

‘He’s too scared to,’ Augus said quietly. ‘I know his mother has gotten almost three charges illegally overturned.’

Ash blinked at him.

Augus took out his phone, opened his app and scrolled through it hurriedly, and pressed play.

‘-totally. Oh yeah, no she totally got the Judge to do it. They were having an affair. It’s such shit. She should’ve gone to jail and maybe I wouldn’t have to put up with her anymore, I mean-’

Ash shook his head, a slow grin on his mouth, when Augus pressed stop and shoved his phone into his pocket.

‘It’s illegal to record people without their permission.’
‘Is it?’ Augus said, widening his eyes in mock innocence. ‘It hardly matters. Trow doesn’t know that. And he thinks hell on earth will rain down on him and his family if he doesn’t keep me in business.’

‘I thought you weren’t doing that anymore. Jesus, how many other students are you doing that to?’

‘Enough,’ Augus said, smiling. ‘And soon, one more.’

‘Don’t,’ Ash said, as Augus walked from the room. ‘Don’t fuck with that family, Augus! Seriously!’

Chapter End Notes

In our next chapter:

‘Go on then,’ Augus said, licking his lips slowly. ‘Deck me in the library. Without cause. The second unfortunate brother who can only afford to be here on a full scholarship. That’s going to bolster your case, isn’t it? I dare you. You think I haven’t been hit before?’

Gwyn’s hand flexed, clenched, flexed again. He wanted to run out of there – screw the elevator, he needed to burn off energy on the stairs. He wanted to go. He had to go home that night, look his father in the eyes, pretend this wasn’t happening.

‘Can you just tell me what you want?’ Gwyn said. ‘Please?’
Your New Favourite

Chapter Notes

No new tags really, but a whole lot of exploitation going on. :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Gwyn

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‘The word you’re looking for is assonance,’ a smooth voice said behind him.

Gwyn startled, his pen flying out of his hand and hitting the floor, rolling under a bookshelf. He looked up in surprise, and then wanted to groan when he saw that it was Augus – Ash’s brother…well, sort of, they didn’t share last names, after all. He managed to look uncommonly good as he stepped sideways and pulled out a chair fluidly, coat hardly rumpling, tie in place and his hair better looked after than some of the women he knew.

‘Assonance,’ Augus said, tongue forming the world precisely.

‘Look, if you’re here to-

‘Oh, hold on,’ Augus said, holding up a hand and laughing quietly.

Gwyn looked around. This part of the library was deserted. It was late Friday evening, and Gwyn was putting off driving home for the weekend. He’d likely pay for it somehow – a lecture, a stern look, something worse – but he took the moments of rebellion when he could.

Augus slid off his backpack and sighed in relief.

‘No, I’m here to apologise,’ he said, getting up and crouching on the floor by the bookshelf, hand moving quickly in the dark space until he pulled out a pen clean of dust. He placed it back on the table where Gwyn had been taking notes. He’d always studied better when he was handwriting what he wanted to remember. Computers were all well and good, but he wasn’t as computer literate as most, and sometimes he still needed help formatting his assignments.

‘You…what?’ Gwyn stared at him.

‘Yeah,’ Augus said, offering an easy smile. ‘Look, I know he’s kind of wild, but he does take it too far sometimes. I mean, you have no idea. You should try living with him!’

Augus laughed, the sound rich, and Gwyn started to smile along with him, until he realised that Augus couldn’t be trusted. Everyone knew that, though no one really knew why.

‘I’m- I’m sorry for my part,’ Gwyn said awkwardly. ‘I shouldn’t have retaliated like that.’

Augus gave him a hard look that disappeared so quickly into a softer expression that Gwyn was almost sure he’d imagined it. Augus raised Gwyn’s pen to his mouth and placed the capped end on his lower lip. Gwyn stared, and then looked up to his eyes. Green, watching him, Gwyn shifted
uncomfortably.

‘So…if that’s all…’ Gwyn said.

‘In such a hurry to get rid of me?’ Augus said, eyebrows twisting together, pen sliding from his lip. ‘I suppose my reputation really does precede me. Folks like you can’t be seen with folks like us, right?’

Gwyn remembered his father’s warning:

*I don’t want you to have anything to do with those boys, do you understand me?*

‘That’s a bit city mouse, country mouse, isn’t it?’ Gwyn said, shoving away his father’s words and deciding that what his father didn’t know couldn’t hurt him. Either of them.

‘Upper class versus dregs of the universe.’

‘Oh,’ Gwyn smiled. ‘And I suppose that’s why you’re Prefect and on track to get into one of the top four universities, while people like me struggle with things like assonance?’

Augus’ eyes widened, as though surprised…in a good way. Gwyn shook his head and reached out, taking his pen from Augus’ fingers and writing down the correct word, putting an asterix next to it.

‘What does the asterix mean?’ Augus said, leaning over, hair falling in a curtain over his features.

‘I…it means I have to research it more, later.’

Augus started to laugh when he looked over Gwyn’s other notes, and Gwyn flushed, rubbed at his cheeks.

There were an awful lot of asterixes on his English Lit papers.

‘You look like you could do with some help,’ Augus said, shaking his head and meeting Gwyn’s eyes, a warm glow in them. ‘You know I’m nailing Lit.’

‘I also know you’re in an opposing house, and I smashed your brother’s face in,’ Gwyn said, collecting his papers together.

‘My brother can fight his own battles,’ Augus said, with a sigh of the long-suffering. ‘Going after the Ap Nudd family. Really. He should know better.’

‘I…’ Gwyn stared at him, frowned. ‘He wasn’t going after my family, he was going after me.’

‘It’s all the same, isn’t it?’ Augus said lightly, trailing his finger over Gwyn’s notes. Gwyn watched the gesture and his mouth felt dry. When had that happened? It wasn’t as though Augus was attractive. Except that…

He’d caught himself watching the Prefect before. He’d watched the fencing finals last year, saw the way Augus worked the epee, quietly competent with his body. He wore his school suits well, even if they weren’t tailored like Gwyn’s were. His eyes weren’t lively and vivacious like Mafydd’s had been, but they held a composed sort of challenge in them. There was no time one could make eye contact with Augus and not feel assessed by him.

Gwyn didn’t know why he liked that. If he ever thought about it in more detail, ever fantasised about undressing in front of him, or even more, he mostly thought Augus would simply stare critically at his dick and walk away, scoffing.
‘It’s not the same,’ Gwyn said, pulling his papers towards him, and settling them out of Augus’ reach.

Augus pulled Gwyn’s laptop towards him, and Gwyn huffed and closed it, put it on his papers, folded his arms.

‘It’s not the same,’ Gwyn insisted.

‘What? You mooch off them. Get whatever you want, don’t you? I notice you haven’t been suspended. My brother’s facing a police investigation.’

‘I didn’t know that,’ Gwyn said, eyes widening.

‘Well, that’s his own business,’ Augus said reluctantly.

‘Do you want me to…say something?’ Gwyn said awkwardly. ‘Because he really did key coach’s car. We had championships. We had – it was more than just keying, he broke the windows and- and pissed on the seat. The thing wasn’t driveable!’

Augus sighed.

‘He can fight his own battles. I doubt the police investigation will come to anything. It’s not like he hasn’t been under the spotlight of the law before and gotten away with the things he does.’

Augus sounded beleaguered.

‘Do you have any brothers or sisters? You don’t, do you?’

‘No,’ Gwyn said. ‘Mother tried but…’

_That was none of Augus’ business._

‘That’s a lot of pressure, isn’t it? I’ll admit, I don’t know much about families like yours, but that’s the case, isn’t it?’

‘What do you want, Augus?’ Gwyn said, and Augus flashed a grin at him.

‘What, I can’t get to know you better?’

‘I think you want something.’

‘Maybe I do,’ Augus said. ‘Did you really get that kid expelled?’

‘I didn’t get him expelled!’ Gwyn shouted, and then clapped a hand over his mouth and looked around. No one was around to react, but either way, the conversation was over. Gwyn started putting away all his gear. He could study somewhere else. He didn’t like to study in the dorms, it was harder to concentrate there. Whenever he was near a bed, he wanted to _sleep_.

Maybe he could get something to eat. He’d spent so long picking through the pasta at lunch, looking for…he wasn’t even certain what he was examining it for…that it had gone cold and the sauce had turned gluggy and in the end it was wholly unappetising. He needed some protein. Perhaps he could commandeer the home economics rooms and make himself some chicken.

_PRIVILEGE OF THE RICH._

He felt guilty, even though Augus had no idea what he was thinking.
‘I’m sorry,’ Augus said. ‘Just, it’s hard for queer students like us, you know?’

Gwyn froze, laptop halfway in his rucksack and his eyes widening. His gaze slid sideways to Augus’.

‘What?’ Gwyn said.

‘You know, for queers,’ Augus said, like he hadn’t said anything out of the ordinary. Then he paused and his eyes widened. ‘What, you didn’t know?’

‘You’re gay?’

‘Pan,’ Augus said, and Gwyn furrowed his brow until he realised what Augus was saying. Pansexual. One of those terms he’d seen on the internet, in the confusing corners that made him think too much and hurt his head.

‘You mean you’re up for anything,’ Gwyn clarified.

‘You mean you like all cock no matter what form it comes in?’

Gwyn felt abashed.

‘No, I just meant-’

‘I know what you meant,’ Augus laughed to ease the tension, but Gwyn couldn’t stop staring at him. He thought he was pretty good at…picking the people in the school like him. He’d picked Gulvi years before she had a girlfriend, all the way back when she’d fallen in love with Ash. He’d wondered about Augus in the beginning, and then just assumed he was straight and consumed in schoolwork. Not that he should care so much. It was just after years of…feeling on the outside of everything at home, he started to look for the other outsiders.

It was ridiculous. He couldn’t spend any time with them anyway, most of them hated him on principle.

‘So what happened?’ Augus said, checking his phone quickly and then putting it back in his pocket. ‘With that kid?’

‘It’s really none of your business,’ Gwyn said, voice stiff. He cleared his throat, stood up, pushed his chair in. It clunked against the desk. He’d shoved it too hard. ‘Just because you’re…there’s no club. I don’t owe you anything.’

‘Cagey much?’ Augus said. The casual words didn’t suit him as much as the more formal speech. Gwyn had no idea how his accent was so upper class and genteel, when by all accounts – including his own – he’d spent much of his life on the streets or in terrible home environments. ‘Hang back a bit. Please? I just thought…with everything that happened, it was a good excuse to get to know you better.’

‘Right,’ Gwyn laughed bitterly. ‘Get to know me better. You don’t mean grill me about my history and do something…untoward with it? I don’t know what you’re up to, Augus, but you can’t get that one by me.’

Augus’ expression shuttered, and then his lips thinned and pulled together.

‘Fine,’ he snapped. He pulled out his phone, keyed in a passcode and opened something. He flashed the screen to Gwyn, and Gwyn’s eyes widened when he saw the recording app. Augus pressed stop
with a flourish, turned his phone off, and shoved it into his pocket. ‘Fine. Happy?’

He stood, walked towards Gwyn so quickly that Gwyn backed up without even thinking. He hit the wall, pins from a corkboard digging into his back. He hissed, and Augus poked a sharp fingernail into his chest.

‘I don’t need you to say it anyway,’ Augus said. ‘I know what happened. Mafydd Brant, right? A year above you at the time, and everyone thought he took advantage of you. But you wanted it. Only you didn’t tell anyone that, did you? Just told them what dear old Daddy told you to say. You, stuttering in front of the Principal that you had hardly any idea how it happened, despite the fact that Mafydd is pretty sure you begged him to fuck you in the end.’

Gwyn stared at him, breathing coming faster. Augus’ nail was a tiny, sharp pain in his chest. He wondered if that was what it felt like to be on the receiving end of his rapier.

Augus reached for his phone again, and the screen lit up his face.

‘I went on an adventure yesterday,’ Augus said, voice so quiet Gwyn almost had to strain for it. ‘I work at Sethsmith and Hougham, and they have these wonderful databases telling me where people live. I know, I know, terribly illegal. I think. I can never remember. But I got your little friend on the phone last night, and he was just dying to tell me, well- Listen for yourself.’

Augus tapped his fingers over his phone and Gwyn closed his eyes when he heard Mafydd’s voice:

‘One moment I was like…in love with this kid, you know, and the next I was fucking expelled and fucking, even my mum thought I was some kind of sex offender. I didn’t even- I didn’t even get to speak to him about it. It all had to be done through lawyers. That time we got seen together was the last time- the last time I even got to speak to him. Can you pass a message onto him for me? Just tell him I’m not mad, even though, you know, I mean I can’t even do what I was supposed to. I can’t- They told me I can’t go to the university he goes to. I have to stay away. I’m a year above him. My education’s like, on hold now, isn’t it? Until he decides where he matriculates. I just don’t know why no one believes me. I even have the text messages he sent me, and no one wanted to see them. I still have them! He wanted it, man. I didn’t take advantage of him, I fucking swear, I mean-‘

Gwyn grabbed at Augus’ phone, and Augus danced out of the way, locking his phone and holding his hands up to fend Gwyn off.

‘It’s backed up,’ Augus said. ‘Did your parents ever get to hear about it? About Mafydd’s side of the story? They probably won’t care, too busy scrambling to your defence. But did the school ever get to hear about it? The PA system is hackable. Did you know?’

Gwyn’s heart was pounding as hard as it did when he won a bout.

‘Give it to me,’ Gwyn said. ‘You don’t know what you’re doing with that.’

‘I think I do,’ Augus’ lips lifted in a half-smile and Gwyn was too busy thinking fuck me, fuck me, FUCK me that is not hot, he’s not hot, he’s a devious fucking asshole.

‘What do you want?’ Gwyn said, voice cracking. ‘Do you think you’ll get away with this?’

‘Oh, you going to get your dad to throw money at me? Hm? Is that it?’

Gwyn didn’t know that Mafydd had kept any of those text messages. He’d sworn to him at the time that he was deleting them as he got them. Gwyn made him promise. He’d promised. Mafydd knew what would happen if his father found out about them. He was one of the only people who knew.
Jesus, what if Mafydd had told Augus about that?

‘Don’t look so scared, sweetheart,’ Augus said, voice mock-soothing. ‘I don’t play all my cards unless I really need to.’

‘Just tell me what you want.’

‘I don’t know yet,’ Augus said. ‘I’m just trying to imagine all those wrestler’s faces when they find out you’re a wide receiver. I mean, you bottom?’

Augus raised his eyebrows in surprise – but none of it was genuine. He looked like he was having a grand time. Gwyn’s knuckles itched. His left hand clenched into a tight fist and his breath huffed out of his nostrils.

Augus noticed.

‘Go on then,’ Augus said, licking his lips slowly. ‘Deck me in the library. Without cause. The second unfortunate brother who can only afford to be here on a full scholarship. That’s going to bolster your case, isn’t it? I dare you. You think I haven’t been hit before?’

Gwyn’s hand flexed, clenched, flexed again. He wanted to run out of there – screw the elevator, he needed to burn off energy on the stairs. He wanted to go. He had to go home that night, look his father in the eyes, pretend this wasn’t happening.

‘Can you just tell me what you want?’ Gwyn said. ‘Please?’

‘Is that how you begged Mafydd?’ Augus said. ‘Pretty and desperate like that?’

*Pretty and desperate like that?*

Mafydd had liked that about him too. Gwyn wasn’t an idiot. He knew that some people got off on people who looked like him – the barely popular sports-jock, only likely to get into one of the big four universities on a sports scholarship – on their knees. Maybe Augus was one of them. Maybe-

Gwyn grabbed Augus by the upper arms and ignored the way he struggled, having height and weight and sheer strength against him. He manhandled him against the wall even while Augus spat insults and threats, clearly thinking Gwyn was about to punch him. He knew the security cameras didn’t cover this section. He only studied in this part of the library because it was one of the few places he’d ever felt free to really…be himself.

Because Mafydd had shown him that the security cameras didn’t extend this far.

He went to his knees even as Augus lifted his hand to strike him, quickly undoing Augus’ pants, sliding down the zipper fast.

‘Wait,’ Augus said, sounding shocked. ‘Gwyn, I didn’t—’

‘Be quiet,’ Gwyn said, closing his eyes briefly, and then pressing his mouth to the soft fabric of Augus boxers, inhaling the sharp, thick scent of Augus’ crotch. He couldn’t really say it wasn’t like him, could he? It wasn’t the first time he’d done this. He’d toured the strip downtown, he knew all about alleyways and cold, dirty knees and the taste of strange men’s come against his throat. Sure, he’d only done it *twice*, each time terrified his father would find out, but…

It wasn’t unfamiliar.
He was getting an idea of what people liked.

Fingers curled rough in his hair and Augus ground his soft dick against Gwyn’s face. Gwyn ignored the way his dick jumped, Prefect of Raven House standing above him, fingernails scraping across his scalp. His heart pounded out fear and desperation and something headier and darker.

‘Forget it,’ Augus breathed. ‘I had something else in mind. But this is…yeah, alright, this is better. You can give me this.’

Chapter End Notes

In our next chapter, 'Fountain of Youth:'

‘What, virgins can’t be crude?’ Augus said, grinning. ‘Or is it that you’re wondering how I got him to talk? He was so reluctant at first. ‘But I’m not supposed to,’ ‘but I signed a contract,’ ‘I don’t even know you.’ But people want to talk, Gwyn. Everyone does. Even you, I’m guessing. Though what you talk about beyond wrestling and being an idiot at Lit is beyond me. Oh…perhaps dick. Maybe you talk about that too.’
Fountain of Youth

Chapter Notes

New tags: first time, blowjobs, semi-public sex. You know, the FUN tags. :D

Also, enjoy a very flustered Augus. :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Augus

*

His gasps were thin when Gwyn put his mouth over his boxers. And all Augus could think was that he hadn’t showered, he hadn’t even changed since the morning before and Gwyn didn’t even seem to care. He was taking deep, long breaths like it was good. Augus knew what he smelled like after two days without showering. He could tolerate it, but he was surprised someone else seemed to enjoy it.

Seeing the champion of the school – the one slated to get whatever sports scholarship he wanted, the one already scouted out for different university programs – on his knees, was dizzying. He’d watched at least ten, no, twenty, no - more porn videos where this was the theme. He held curls of shortish, blond hair in his fingers, pressed Gwyn’s face closer, and instead of struggling against him, Gwyn went with it, nose pressed hard into his pelvis and something wriggling a line over his hardening dick. When Augus realised it was Gwyn’s tongue – hot and spreading a damp patch over his underwear – he tilted his head back.

‘Fucking suck me already,’ Augus groaned.

Because he’d dreamed about it, imagined it, but never actually experienced it, and this was already very different to just vicing a lubed hand around his dick and going to town in his head about what someone blowing him might actually feel like.

Giant fingers slipped into his boxers and drew him out, calluses brushed against him in a way that stung and had Augus’ hips bucking against Gwyn’s face, almost knocking him backwards.

‘Take it easy,’ Gwyn chastised, but he sounded amused.

Not vulnerable, not scared, not any of that deliciousness he’d been putting forth earlier. Now he just sounded like he knew what he was doing.

‘You fucking slut,’ Augus gasped, looking down.

Gwyn’s head shot up and he stared at him, something angry in his eyes, his jaw tensed.

He let go of Augus’ dick instantly, and then ducked his head out from beneath Augus’ fingers. Augus’ eyes widened when he realised what he’d said, and he reached for Gwyn’s shoulder, claws snagging in his shirt.

‘Wait,’ Augus said. ‘I say it to my brother all the time.’
‘Before he blows you?’ Gwyn said, quirking an eyebrow. ‘I always wondered about you two.’

‘F**k off.’ Augus snarled, disgusted.

‘I’m not your brother, don’t say that to me.’

‘You’re very confident for someone whose life could be ruined by what I’ve got on tape.’

Gwyn stiffened, stared at him. Augus raised both his eyebrows in response. He could tell from this distance that Gwyn didn’t have to shave. Not yet, anyway. He could see the fact that he didn’t care about things like plucking or waxing his eyebrows, and that he had what looked like a scratch underneath his shirt, probably where Augus had grabbed him.

‘Come on,’ Augus said, leaning back against the wall. ‘You seem like you know what you’re doing.’

He made an embarrassingly high noise when Gwyn grabbed his dick with fingers that were too rough. He looked down, caught, and Gwyn stared up at him.

‘Delete it,’ Gwyn said, squeezing slightly.

‘I’ll think about it after,’ Augus said, wincing and then gasping when Gwyn’s hand moved up and down his length. He opened his mouth to taunt, to say something, and only came up with:

‘You overachiever.’

‘Thanks,’ Gwyn said, flat.

Augus thought he would leave. Thought that offering to delete it later wouldn’t be good enough; knew that extorting sexual favours – he hadn’t really intended to do that, exactly – was probably way beyond even what he thought was acceptable. But then slightly dry lips were wrapping around the head of his dick, a tongue was pushing back his foreskin and laving over the sensitive skin beneath and Augus hissed, knees beginning to shake.

The inside of Gwyn’s mouth was warm and not as slick as he’d expected. He felt a light ridge of the underside of Gwyn’s teeth, before that was tucked away behind his lips. Gwyn sucked hard, almost painfully so, several times, and Augus groaned even as he realised that Gwyn was getting more saliva into his mouth, because a moment later the broad flat of a tongue was painting it over him.

Heat dropped from his chest down into his gut, and then further still into his balls. He wasn’t sure he’d actually gotten hard so quickly before. His fingers fisted in Gwyn’s hair and he tried not to buck forwards and failed, pathetically.

He figured it was his first time, he could hardly be blamed for-

‘Jesus fucking- What are you doing?’ Augus squeaked, forcing his eyes forward from where they’d rolled into the back of his head, in order to stare down at the top of Gwyn’s hair, shuddering, bowing over him.

It wasn’t like all of his dick was in Gwyn’s mouth, but he could feel the head of himself brushing up against that tight space of Gwyn’s throat and he wanted to be composed the first time this happened. He wanted to be put together. He always imagined himself drawing one liners and saying filthy things and instead Gwyn had Augus’ dick filling his mouth and the back of his throat felt like something he couldn’t even try and replicate with his hands and then Gwyn was chuckling, chuckling over him and the vibrations were right there and his balls were drawing up and he was
telling himself no, really, wait, he’s only been down there for about sixty seconds and he’s hardly moved his head back and forth you’re supposed to make the most of this at least pull his hair some more, you-

Augus came hard. His palm slapped against the wall behind him and he made an awkward sound that was half inhale, half strangled choke as his throat closed up and his lungs heaved for air at the same time. And it felt weird, it did, to not be spilling onto his own hand or to be seeing his release pool into a tissue or be immediately washed away in a shower. Not having to do anything but concentrate on remaining standing as Gwyn had no choice but to stay put, Augus’ other hand having an unwittingly cruel grip on the top of his head, fingers scratching back and forth with each spasm that rocked up the back of his thighs.

Gwyn coughed around him, his mouth tightened to the point that it was painful and Augus let go immediately. Gwyn pulled off, coughing deep in his chest, hand coming up to cover his mouth as he turned away. But he didn’t spit anything out, and Augus stared, wide-eyed, breathing hoarsely, as Gwyn coughed a few more times and then was clearly swallowing.

‘What do I taste like?’ Augus said, realising he should care more that they were in a library, and just not.

‘Like come,’ Gwyn said, voice thick like he was recovering from a sore throat, and the glee Augus felt at doing that to him was so intense that he briefly closed his eyes again.

Gwyn pushed himself to his feet, a fairly formidable bulge in his jeans and a dazed look in his eyes. They were faintly red rimmed, but Augus saw no signs of tears. He supposed sixty seconds wasn’t long enough.

Gwyn stepped forwards and Augus thought they were going to kiss, he thought-

Gwyn reached into Augus’ pocket and snatched out his phone.

‘Virgins,’ Gwyn muttered under his breath.

‘It’s locked,’ Augus said, not moving, though his instincts were to lunge at Gwyn and snatch it off him, he was about one hundred percent certain how effective that would be.

‘I’m sure that if I kept this, it would cost a fair penny for you to get it replaced, wouldn’t it? You’re not exactly rolling in cash. Your brother could steal one, I’m sure, everyone knows what he gets up to – but I’m guessing that if this is a stolen phone, you probably have to be pretty careful about… linking accounts, don’t you? At least? You’d have to build everything from scratch – contacts, history.’

‘It’s backed up. You steal my phone and I will email everything Mafydd said to your parents. And trust me, you don’t want them knowing in fairly X-rated detail just how tight you were the first time Mafydd got it up there.’

Gwyn stared at him.

‘What, virgins can’t be crude?’ Augus said, grinning. ‘Or is it that you’re wondering how I got him to talk? He was so reluctant at first. ‘But I’m not supposed to,’ ‘but I signed a contract,’ ‘I don’t even know you.’ But people want to talk, Gwyn. Everyone does. Even you, I’m guessing. Though what you talk about beyond wrestling and being an idiot at Lit is beyond me. Oh…perhaps dick. Maybe you talk about that too.’

Augus tuckled himself into his pants and zipped up the fly of his own jeans, licking his lips. His head
was pounding from the force of his orgasm. He felt like he’d had some kind of revelation. Gwyn was good at this, he was sure. And he was sure it was more than just...the bias of it being his first time.

‘You don’t know me,’ Gwyn said stiffly, still holding the phone above his head. His lips were still swollen. The bulge in his jeans was...less noticeable. Augus thought that was rather a shame.

He walked slowly towards Gwyn and Gwyn’s arm stretched higher to the ceiling, which was almost perfect really, because it meant it was harder for him to push Augus away when he wrapped one arm around his taut waist and pressed his hand against the bulge of his dick, tracing it with his fingers. His mouth opened at his own daring, his eyes lidded, and Gwyn jolted in his arms; like he wanted to get away and didn’t, at the same time.

‘Why don’t you care about being caught?’ Augus said, looking around. His eyes narrowed. ‘It’s a blind spot, isn’t it? Because someone like you would care about being caught. Especially after what happened last time.’

Gwyn made a choked sound as Augus stretched fingers to his fly and undid the button. Gwyn was still wearing his uniform, and the black button was stiff as he worked it through the material. The briefs beneath were black, simple, and probably cost more than Augus could imagine.

He wriggled his fingers beneath, the skin on his knuckles catching on the elastic band.

Gwyn was definitely trembling.

Augus’ breathing was evening out. This was a lot easier to do now that he’d just blown his load into someone else’s mouth. He hardly even had to worry about clean up. Convenient.

He felt faint wisps of pubic hair – not nearly as much as he’d expected – and certainly less than what he had. He rubbed at it curiously, and Gwyn inhaled sharply. Augus didn’t look up at him, focusing instead on slipping dexterous fingers around a dick that was bent to the side – far too trapped for its own comfort he was sure – and thick enough that the ring of his index finger and thumb couldn’t quite close around it. He could smell it between them – sweat and come and he thought it would be disgusting but it wasn’t.

He bit his bottom lip and began stroking Gwyn, hardly able to move, his wrist at an odd angle.

The hand that wasn’t holding Augus’ phone shifted, and Gwyn started to dig his fingers into his pants, like he wanted to draw himself out.

‘No,’ Augus said, his voice surprisingly strong given everything that was happening. Gwyn – equally surprising – froze. ‘No, I want you to come in your tailored fucking pants.’

‘Augus,’ Gwyn breathed, voice faintly wrecked. ‘Can you just-’

‘What was it like?’ Augus said, working his hand faster and feeling more of Gwyn’s length in his palm and finding it dizzying. ‘You must have really liked him. A lot. You put everything on the line for him. And then it all ended the way that it did? He was pretty sad, you know.’

Not sad, exactly. Bitter, Augus was guessing. Mafydd had been interesting enough. A little too cocky and brash for his tastes. He’d been a little too willing to spill everything. For someone who had been made to sign a contract and a confidentiality agreement, he seemed to want to vent about the whole situation.

And it didn’t really seem like Mafydd was really...heartbroken over the whole thing.
Just cut up about the university situation.

Gwyn’s chest was heaving above him, in time to each of Augus’ fast, tight tugs. Something caught at the top of each inhale, like the beginning of a sob.

‘I’m not someone you want to cross,’ Augus said, breathless now because he could feel the way Gwyn was winding up and knew it was uncomfortable because he’d tried to get himself off in his own pants before and he hated it, but he also knew it was more than possible. He pressed the side of his head into Gwyn’s collarbone and kept looking down. ‘And they don’t want to expel me, or even Ash, because guess what? They need to meet a quota of disadvantaged students. It’s part of their creed. And I’m a good choice for them, because I’m definitely going to a university. No wonder you bottom, by the way. I’m pretty sure this is a weapon of mass destruction.’

Gwyn made a low, pained sound and his hips bucked into Augus’ hand. But he didn’t come, not yet. Augus was surprised at how much he was enjoying himself. He turned his face into Gwyn’s neck and smelled the faintest whiff of cologne. He wondered what it was. Beneath that, a sharp sweat – fear and arousal and who knew what else. Augus hummed in the back of his throat and he realised how ridiculous they must look, Gwyn still holding the phone above his head.

‘Keep my phone,’ Augus gritted out as he tightened his grip and worked Gwyn so roughly in his pants that Gwyn tried to half-heartedly push him away. ‘Keep it. Jailbreak it. You’re desperate. And you know what? I think you’re lonely. Gay and expected to be a sports-star, and everyone knowing that you got Mafydd expelled, no matter what you say. The only people who believe it was sexual assault is your parents. And they were just covering for you.’

Gwyn’s knees started to buckle and he caught himself. His spine stiffened, his head bowed forwards and pressed hard against Augus’ head and he was coming, silently, mouth open and breaths rough against Augus’ shirt. Augus’ fingers stayed in that cramped space and were getting painted with spill, and Augus couldn’t tell if he liked it or not, but he certainly liked the power. And when Gwyn seemed to half-collapse onto him, his weight pushing Augus a step backwards, he liked that too.

He carefully plucked his phone from Gwyn’s fingers with his spare hand, and Gwyn made a sound like he was hurt.

Augus’ eyes narrowed.

Gwyn stepped back from him, a shaking hand moving to cover his crotch even though it was far too late – Augus was already surreptitiously wiping remnants of Gwyn’s creamy spill onto the underside of his shirt. Everything got laundered over the weekend, it’d be fine. Maybe he’d just rinse it quickly when he got back to his dorm.

Gwyn looked up and Augus stilled.

His eyes were wet, tears clinging to his eyelashes and the rims so red that the blue was almost painful. No one’s eyes should look like that. It wasn’t fair.

‘I’m sorry I hit him,’ Gwyn said, each word carefully placed down like it was fragile. ‘That’s what you want, isn’t it? Or my- or my humiliation. Were you recording this too? Is this…’

Gwyn closed his eyes, his other hand pressing into his stomach. He looked far too pale all of a sudden, and Augus was about to leave, about to grab his bag and just leave, and instead he found himself walking forwards and pushing Gwyn back into a chair.

The fact that Gwyn didn’t struggle, didn’t even fight him, was shocking. Augus drew a chair up and
faced him. He felt more like he just wanted to curl up in a bed and sleep, but he supposed that was an ingrained habit.

‘I wasn’t recording this,’ Augus said quietly. He laughed. ‘You have no reason to believe me, but I wasn’t.’

‘Then what do you want?’ Gwyn said, resting his head in his hands and not even looking at him. His fingers were still shaking. Augus huffed under his breath and reached over for his rucksack, opening it quickly. He drew out the half-sandwich that was left.

‘You look like you could eat,’ Augus said, and pushed it over.

Gwyn’s head twitched towards it, but he didn’t pick it up, didn’t take it. Maybe he wasn’t hungry. Augus figured anyone who looked that pale, that suddenly, was possibly dealing with more than just emotional distress. It wasn’t like he hadn’t seen kids who were starving in some of the homes he’d lived in, after all.

And then he paused and squinted at the half-sandwich, and back to Gwyn.

It was a weird feeling to get about Gwyn though…

‘Just tell me what you want, Augus,’ Gwyn said, and Augus sighed.

‘Social capital,’ Augus said, pursing his lips. ‘Ash, as you can probably imagine, does nothing solid for my reputation. Despite everything that happened, you’re still well respected by the Principal and many of the staff, and many of the students give you a wide berth. I could ruin you, but I’d much rather take advantage of something you have in abundance. I want you to start spending time with me.’

That…hadn’t been exactly what Augus wanted either. Really, he just wanted to threaten him and hold his life around his little finger for a while – well, until the end of school, really.

He sat there, surprised at what he’d said and still meaning every word of it.

*I want you to start spending time with me.*

Augus figured he probably just wanted more of those blowjobs, and dismissed anything else he felt on the matter.

‘My Dad says I can’t,’ Gwyn said, shifting his dick in his pants and then looking up at Augus with the kind of soulful eyes he’d seen on dogs begging for food.

‘You do everything your Dad says? Oh wait, don’t answer that. Do you want to? I’m not saying we have to date or anything. Just spend time with me. Sit with me in the library sometimes. Have lunch with me. Just let people see us together sometimes.’

‘They’ll think we’re fucking,’ Gwyn said. ‘And then you’ll get expelled.’

The laugh that Gwyn gave was so bleak that it scraped at something in Augus’ chest.

‘I don’t get expelled,’ Augus said. ‘I’m airtight.’

Gwyn said nothing, and Augus laughed.

‘Okay then, hang out with all of us.’
Gwyn looked up and stared at him.

‘I just hit your brother. You hate me. I know you’re going to fuck me over.’

‘Yeah,’ Augus said, leaning back in his chair. ‘We both know that. Maybe you might change my mind? I’m flexible, and you don’t really have many other options, do you?’

Gwyn shook his head, shook it again, and then stood up stiffly and put away all his gear, checking and double checking it, before slinging it over his shoulder and giving Augus a long, unreadable look. He left Augus in the library, half a wrapped sandwich on the desk. Augus decided he was going to use the hot water until it ran out as soon as he could step into the damned shower.

*

Monday morning, after the weekend, Gwyn found him as he walked out of trigonometry.

Augus stared at him. He looked unwell.

‘Gwyn,’ Augus said, ignoring the brush of students past him and staring at him, ‘are you-’

‘Okay,’ Gwyn said, meeting his eyes, something lost in the depths of them. ‘Okay, I’ll spend time with you. It’s just going to make you more likely to use the recording than not. I have no social capital.’

‘Except your family.’

Gwyn closed his eyes. When he opened his eyes, something glittered there that made Augus think he wanted to land a punch. It was a strange thing to think, given his body language was still…defeated.

‘Fuck them,’ Gwyn said, staring at Augus. ‘Right?’

‘Oh, so I’m going to be a part of your teen rebellion phase?’

‘If you want,’ Gwyn said.

He turned and walked away, feet dragging, and Augus had the oddest sense that he’d maybe stepped into something that was a lot bigger than he really understood.

Chapter End Notes

No excerpt this time, sorry! I have to write more chapters. <3
Rally 'Round the Fool

Chapter Notes

So it's only been like *mumbles* 3 and a half years since I last updated! WHOOPS. Thanks to everyone who pushed this story to the front of my 'extra content' queue with your patient requests that I come back to this story one day. Y'all know this chapter is for you. <3

Gwyn

*  

Gwyn sat in the small garden alcove at one of the two heavily graffitied tables. He stared at his hands and had his backpack on his feet so that if anyone tried to grab it, he could yank it back straight away. It would be a pretty nice area, if it wasn’t for the fact that Augus and his friends had commandeered the space years ago, and now wouldn’t let anyone else sit there. Augus had told him to be there at lunch on Tuesday.

‘Don’t be late,’ he'd said.

As it was, students walked past in their black and blue uniforms and all of them stared when they saw where the champion of House of Doves was sitting, and Gwyn felt his cheeks go red and thought this was a shitty waste of his time, this alone was humiliating enough that Augus was probably recording it somewhere and having the time of his life.

Footsteps scuffling nearby and he looked up to see Gulvi, who raised her eyebrows at him as she threw her backpack beneath the table and slid onto one of the benches.

‘You lost?’

‘No,’ Gwyn said.

‘Seem lost,’ Gulvi said, grinning at him. ‘You never sit here.’

He was actually relieved to see her. They weren’t exactly friends, but they weren’t enemies either. They talked sometimes. Her mother was a big deal at the hospital she worked, where his family had bought a wing or owned a wing or sponsored a wing – he never knew exactly what they’d done, only that the hospital basically creamed themselves whenever his parents walked in – and Gulvi’s mother was one of those people who didn’t need millions of dollars when she was saving thousands of lives.

So they’d seen each other at upmarket events. Gulvi always looking incredible and incredibly bored, and Gwyn trying to find a corner of shadows that he could hide in, while his cousin would saunter past and say:

‘Great job there, cousin, you’re doing a fantastic fucking job of not looking like a complete pervert. Well done. Keep hiding in the shadows. I think someone’s calling the cops.’

Which would always annoy the shit out of him, because out of the two of them, Gwyn was not the
But it had meant that he and Gulvi would just…be neutral weird friends at events they apparently both didn’t want to be at.

‘Augus is going to shit a fucking brick,’ she said. Then, as she lit up a cigarette, not caring who saw her, she held onto the end of the table and leaned back. ‘Good.’

‘He asked me here,’ Gwyn said.

She must have inhaled the wrong way, because next minute she was coughing and sputtering, her eyes watering. She went to drop the cigarette onto the table, seemed to realise at the last minute that it was made of wood, and then shoved the cigarette into his fingers. Gwyn stared at the pink rim of lipstick around it and then watched as Gulvi wiped at her eyes with manicured fingers.

‘I’m sorry, fucking what now?’

‘Social capital or…what’s going to be a huge public spectacle at my expense. I don’t know.’

‘Social capital? You?’

‘I did try and tell him,’ Gwyn said as she took back the cigarette and dropped ash directly onto the paved floor.

‘Is Ash in on this little conspiracy theory?’ she said, looking past him. Gwyn turned to see Ash approaching, and watched as he looked confused, and then seemed to realise who Gwyn was, and his face turned to pure shock. ‘Oh no, he’s not. Hilarious. This is going to be the best lunch ever.’

‘Do you think he’ll punch me?’

‘Well don’t let him,’ Gulvi said drily. ‘But no, probably not. Principal Fishdick has been on his ass about everything he’s been up to lately. Though like you’ll ever get Ash to toe the straight and narrow.’

‘Ha,’ Gwyn said.

Her phone dinged, she stared at that instead, leaving Gwyn to sit there like a rabbit in headlights as Ash sauntered up and stared down at him, eyes narrowed.

‘This is Augus, huh?’ he said.

‘Actually, darling, that’s Gwyn?’ Gulvi said, her voice so indifferent and unbothered, that Gwyn didn’t register what she’d said at first.

As he stared up at Ash, he forgot about the public humiliation that might be coming, and remembered – of all things – being on his knees in the library, servicing Ash’s brother. Christ, did Ash know? Was that…something Augus had told him about? Gwyn felt his heart pounding in his neck. This whole thing where he was going to rebel against his own family by going along with Augus’ plan now felt like it had hit a whole new strata of stupid. Was he brain damaged? What was he even doing?

‘You don’t belong here,’ Ash said as he sat down. He drew out a white sharpie, and drew a skull on the table while staring at Gwyn. The skull, as a result, looked awful. Gwyn could only tell what it was because of the general shape – kind of a lightbulb – and the teeth.
'That’s school property,’ Gwyn said.

‘Yeah,’ Ash said. He grinned. He looked somewhat ghoulish, with his two black eyes that were still healing. Gwyn pressed his lips together. He hadn’t realised he’d punched Ash so hard.

‘You’ll get into trouble.’

‘Nah,’ Ash said, leaning across and drawing a white stripe across the sleeve of Gwyn’s uniform.

Gwyn gasped and pulled backwards and Ash winked at him, before grabbing Gulvi’s second cigarette and taking a drag of it.

‘That’s my uniform!’ Gwyn said.

‘You have a hundred, don’t you? Your parents can afford it.’

‘You can’t just deface things because people can afford to replace them!’

‘Huh,’ Ash said. He reached for his backpack and opened it up, looking through it. ‘That’s funny, I can’t find…the rulebook that says that’s true. Do you have one?’ He blinked at Gwyn expectantly, and Gwyn glared back.

‘Fucking douche,’ he snapped.

‘Mm,’ Ash breathed, ‘I like it. Please Sir, may I have another?’

‘Fuck off,’ Gwyn mumbled, looking away.

‘Smooth,’ Gulvi said. ‘Very smooth, Gwyn. You’re going to do great.’

‘You could break my nose again!’ Ash said.

‘It’s not broken,’ Gwyn muttered.

‘I’m sorry, is it your nose? No. It’s not. I get to say it’s broken. And it is.’

‘No, it isn’t,’ Gulvi said. Gwyn decided she was Switzerland.

‘Kayla!’ Ash said happily, and Gulvi looked up, her face transforming into a smile of what Gwyn would call pure adoration. No one had ever looked at him like that in his life. He turned to see Kayla sliding onto the bench beside Gulvi and leaning into her automatically, rubbing her brown hair against Gulvi’s shoulder before straightening and leaning forwards, looking at Gwyn.

‘You’re new,’ she said.

‘I’m…’ Gwyn didn’t know what to say. Gwyn had never really spoken to Kayla much in the past. And the first time Gulvi had told him that she was dating Kayla, Gwyn had committed the immense mistake of saying: ‘So you’re dating a guy? Who’s…who wants to be a girl?’ Gulvi had walked away, hadn’t spoken to him at the last event they’d both been made to attend, and Gwyn had at first been offended that she hadn’t explained it to him, and then decided to look it up on the internet where he realised that, oh boy, he’d fucked up. So he texted Gulvi an apology and then felt too intimidated to bring it up again.

‘He’s trying something,’ Gulvi said, taking Kayla’s phone and swapping it with her own. ‘Do you still need help passing that level?’
‘Do I ever,’ she groaned, as Gulvi opened up some game and started playing it. ‘Okay so we have a jock here? Nice. Okay whatever. Gulvi likes you well enough. So you must have a few brain cells in there, right?’

‘Generous,’ Ash said.

‘What’s generous?’ Augus said, sliding in alongside Gwyn and reaching for one of the sandwiches that Ash had drawn out of his pack. To Gwyn he said: ‘What are you doing here, by the way?’

‘You said-’

‘We don’t talk to each other,’ Augus said archly, unwrapping the plastic wrap and not even looking at him. ‘Did you dream of us having a conversation where I said you could be here? Oh, that’s so sad. There’s like a school counsellor you can tell about that, but careful that doesn’t get back to the Principal. Albion’s not really favourable towards those who like the dick, y’know?’

‘I don’t- I’m not-’

Gwyn stared at Augus, then at the rest of them, with a cold sinking feeling. It wasn’t the worst it could have gone, but Ash was quietly laughing to himself while staring at his phone, and Gulvi was just watching him with something faintly pitying on her face.

He reached beneath his legs, grabbed his backpack, then went to slide away when Augus grasped his sleeve. Gwyn turned, wide-eyed and annoyed at the same time, and Augus smiled at him like the fucking Mona Lisa.

‘Just joking,’ Augus said. ‘Sit.’

Gwyn slide back onto the bench and Ash whistled.

‘You’ve got him trained up like a dog. How’d you do that?’

‘Magic,’ Augus said.

‘Blackmail?’ Gulvi said, and Kayla laughed.

‘Augus can’t make friends without blackmailing them, so probably that.’

‘We can’t all do it with our winning personalities, so we make do,’ Augus said, stretching his arms across the table and then yawning. Gwyn watched him, looked away before others could get the wrong idea. But Augus looked tired and Gwyn wondered why. They had mocks coming up and Gwyn was tired too, but…

He supposed Augus did have that internship as well.

It was hard to reconcile the student sitting next to him, with the person who had shoved his dick into Gwyn’s mouth and pulled on his hair, before getting him off in minutes with a surprisingly expert handjob all while taunting him. This Augus seemed harmless and tired. It was a lie. It was probably all some elaborate joke.

‘Your Dad’s going to shit a brick if he knows you’re sitting with us,’ Gulvi said. Then she tilted her head. ‘Or is that the point? I don’t want to be dragged under that bus with you, darling.’

Gwyn was distracted by Kayla drawing a swan onto the back of Gulvi’s hand in blue ballpoint pen. Kayla could draw anything, he’d heard the rumours. Not that he was in any of those kinds of classes.
with her. His father would rather die than have Gwyn in an arts class. He’d rather Gwyn die than have him in an arts class.

A shiver, and Gwyn decided that he didn’t need to think about his home life at all unless he was home.

His body still hurt. Wrestling was easy compared to what it was like there.

*Don’t think about it, idiot.*

‘There’s no bus,’ Gwyn said. ‘You sit here. Your mother’s a big deal.’

‘Oh, that’s how you’re passing off slumming with us?’ Augus said, sounding intrigued. ‘Interesting. And how will you explain us? We’re just two boys hard on our luck with a full scholarship, trying our best? While Ash tries to avoid jail?’

‘Tries?’ Ash said, indignant. ‘Excuse me, do you see me in juvie? I am avoiding it, thanks for nothing, asshole.’

‘For now,’ Augus drawled.

‘Get off my ass,’ Ash said. ‘You obviously need to get laid.’

‘Darling,’ Gulvi interrupted, ‘you always say that, and he never does. That boy is the most oversexed virgin I’ve ever met. And in this school? *This* school? That’s fucking saying something.’

Gwyn expected Augus to glance at him, to give it away, his whole body locked up cold and febrile in apprehension. Instead Augus just lay his head in his arms and then laughed.

‘Fuck all of you,’ Augus said. Then he dropped one of his hands beneath the table and squeezed Gwyn’s thigh so cruelly that Gwyn tensed. He wanted to drop his own hand beneath the table to pull Augus’ hand away, but he knew people would suspect. No one could know what he was. No one in the school knew. He was a wrestler, he wasn’t camp, and if he went to the alleys of clubs and got fucked or fucked up, well, no one knew who he was there either.

‘How many hours of porn is it now?’ Kayla said gleefully. Then she turned to Gwyn and winked. ‘Augus has an addiction. He’d watch it in class if he could.’

‘Those of us who don’t have pussy to bury our faces into on a regular basis, again, must make do,’ Augus said, lifting up and seeming very nonplussed for someone who was being ragged on. Gwyn was surprised by it all. Shouldn’t they be making fun of him instead? He was the newcomer.

‘Truer words,’ Ash said, raising a hand in acknowledgement.

Kayla only hummed, then she and Gulvi kissed tenderly and Augus made a retching noise and held up his hand and muttered something about being jealous. Meanwhile, he kept rhythmically squeezing Gwyn’s thigh, his fingers digging in so hard that it ached.

‘I don’t understand,’ Kayla said, ‘how Ash can find someone whenever he wants, and Augus— I mean is it that you’re too busy?’ She gasped in mock sadness. ‘Is your dick really small?’

‘That’s it, Kayla, it’s super small,’ Augus said. ‘It’s the smallest you’ve ever seen. It’s inverted.’

The others laughed, and Gwyn’s cheeks were red. He’d had that dick in his mouth, in his *throat*.

‘Gwyn’s embarrassed,’ Gulvi said, frowning. ‘Oh, poor thing. Have your parents had *the talk* with
you yet? Do you know what sex is? When two parents love each other, or in your case, when a hydra and demon decide they need to procreate, they mash their genitals together until fluids comingle and then a baby is born. Or, again, in your case, an egg falls to the ground and hatches.’

Gwyn rubbed at the back of his neck and shook his head and couldn’t think of what to say. He was hungry too. He hadn’t brought lunch with him. He’d avoided meals at home. His mother had been in a mood, which meant none of the food was safe. She’d placed a perfectly laid out miniature roast dinner on a plate for him and Gwyn had smelled detergent in the layers of meat and then stared at it longingly because he couldn’t remember the last time he’d actually felt safe enough to eat a roast dinner. He’d actually wondered how sick he’d get, and if it would be worth it, before he categorically reminded himself that it wouldn’t be.

His stomach grumbled, but he was the only one to hear it.

‘A hydra and a demon,’ Augus said. ‘Well, don’t they sound just lovely? What is it, Gwyn? Sometimes they ground you for five minutes because you’re not the impeccable dream baby you’re supposed to be?’

‘No,’ Kayla laughed. ‘I bet they just say, ‘I’m very disappointed in you, son’ and then pat him on the head and remind him that he still has time to get into venture capital and ruin the world. There’s still time, son! You can do it! Let me buy you thousands of shares so you can keep trying!’

Gwyn didn’t like this part. What he’d expected all along, but he hadn’t- Wasn’t he awkward enough, that they didn’t need to imagine what his home life was like? They could just make fun of him instead.

‘Why can’t you be more like Effles here?’ Ash said, making his voice deeper, apparently pretending to be Gwyn’s father. ‘He’s so golden and pretty. Smashing people into the ground for a living isn’t enough, Gwyn. You can’t just be a wrestler.’

Gwyn jerked out of Augus’ grip and grabbed his backpack. He was two steps away from the table when Augus called out:

‘Just remember what I have on you,’ Augus said.

Gwyn desperately wanted to call what he hoped was a bluff, but he knew it wasn’t. His fingers clenched around the strap of his pack. Augus had ruined people with the things that he knew. And the things that he knew about Mafydd…even the things he knew about Gwyn’s preferences…

As he turned slowly, Gulvi’s eyes had narrowed and she scowled at Augus. Was it possible that she didn’t like what Augus was doing? But they hung out all the time. Ash had a nasty grin on his face as Gwyn came back to the table and pointedly sat on the last unoccupied bench, which meant he was facing Ash now.

‘Must be big,’ Kayla said, frowning at Augus. ‘He’s all tame and shit.’

Augus was finishing off his sandwich. Gwyn stared at the tuna, the lettuce within the wholemeal bread, and thought that it was possible to hide anything at all in a sandwich like that. Sharp things. Poison. And Augus just didn’t care. Gwyn wished he could do the same. His mouth watered and he made himself look around instead.

It would have definitely been noticed that he’d sat with Augus and Ash at lunch, but he wasn’t sure how quickly that would get back to Principal Albion, or for that matter, his parents. What more could they do to him, anyway? Well, military school. Gwyn sometimes wondered if it would be better to
be sent away to the kind of school where he wasn’t even supposed to go home during holidays. It was bad enough that the boarding school was close enough to his parent’s place that he was expected to go home sometimes.

Murdock Academy of Excellence had seemed like a dream right up until he realised he didn’t get to spend all his weekends there. Not if his father had something to say.

But if it was a military school in another state…

Gwyn had a horrible feeling it was more than that. He knew his father would get him into corrective training if he could find a way to make it legitimate, to not be a stain on the family. A radicalised Christian military academy sounded like the perfect place to…address Gwyn’s issues on a lot of fronts. Maybe he could just beat his father to death and go to jail instead. No. That wouldn’t work either. He sighed, and noticed that the others were looking at him and made himself shrug.

‘Obviously I’m having the best fucking time,’ he said sharply.

‘Hey, Augus aside, we’re great company,’ Gulvi said.

‘Augus is also great company,’ Augus said, licking his fingers.

‘Augus, no, honey, that’s not what you are,’ Kayla said, stroking the swan on Gulvi’s fingers. It was finished now, looked too good for something that was a sketch on skin. ‘You’re the one who will become a shark of a lawyer and destroy people’s lives, you’ll have a great company, you won’t be great company. You’ve gotten confused again.’

‘So confused,’ Gulvi said, leaning into Kayla’s arm and closing her eyes. ‘I’m sleeping now.’

‘Goodnight, cygnet,’ Kayla said affectionately, looking down at her.

‘Uh huh,’ Gulvi said, sounding like she really was going to fall asleep.

‘Actually, that reminds me,’ Augus said, folding up the plastic wrap and handing it back to Ash instead of putting it in the bin. Then Ash turned and lobbed it into the bin, and didn’t miss. Gwyn wasn’t impressed. That was not at all impressive. ‘Gwyn, can I talk to you about your parents? Elsewhere?’

‘What?’

‘Oh, he’s going to see if he can get a favour or some shit,’ Ash said, rubbing his fingers through his thick curls until they sprawled messily from the top of his head. On anyone else it would look absurd. On Gwyn it would make him look like a clown. But on Ash, it worked. Gwyn wanted to punch him in the nose again. ‘Cool beans, bro.’

‘Can you not say that?’ Augus said. ‘For the love of god.’

‘It is actually the worst,’ Kayla agreed. ‘We all hate you a little bit more, every time you do it.’

‘Such hate,’ Gulvi breathed out on a sleepy exhale.

Augus was already walking away and Gwyn got up hurriedly, following him. He looked over his shoulder, Kayla playing some game on her phone and smiling at him briefly, Ash going back to doodling on the table. Gwyn brushed at his sleeves, wondering if his teachers would be able to smell the smoke from Gulvi’s cigarettes. How did she not get into trouble?
Probably her mum and her grades. Gulvi was on a fast-track to a great university, and she did it without trying. She was one of those kids.

‘Feeling popular yet?’ Augus said, and then laughed under his breath.

‘Feeling like you have more social capital?’ Gwyn bit out. ‘If you think I have a direct line to my parents-’

‘I don’t know what you have yet,’ Augus said. ‘I’m figuring it out. You’ve got to be worth something. And in the meantime, it’s fun. Come on, down here.’

Down the corridor leading to the home economics rooms which were gated at lunch, consequently, no one was ever there. Augus leaned against the gate and Gwyn’s eyes flew open when he saw that Augus had a key. Gwyn sometimes used the home economics rooms at night, with permission from the groundskeeper, but this?

‘What-? What are you doing?’

‘It’s not breaking and entering when you’re a student at the school and it’s school hours,’ Augus said.

‘I can’t-’

‘Shut up. Come on.’ The gate swung open smoothly, and Augus closed it and locked it behind him, pocketing the key before dragging Gwyn into the first empty classroom, filled with twenty makeshift kitchen benches, complete with state-of-the-art ovens and sinks. The blinds were down. Augus ran off to open the door that led to the teacher’s side room, then slammed that shut and ran back.

He stood in front of Gwyn and grinned like a wolf.

‘Get on your knees.’

‘Huh?’

‘And suck me,’ Augus said, looking so triumphant that Gwyn wanted to punch him.

‘What?’

‘See, you have your uses. Get on your knees, Gwyn. I already know you love the taste of it.’

‘Jesus. How much porn have you watched? I can’t here. If we get caught- I will be- we will both be expelled.’

‘Are we going to get caught?’ Augus said, placing both of his hands on Gwyn’s shoulders and pushing down. Gwyn didn’t budge. ‘No. We’re not. Also you are built. Will you get down?’

_Fucking make me_, Gwyn thought.

But his heart was racing, and no one could see into the classroom, and the security cameras weren’t everywhere throughout the school. They weren’t here. The school boasted it could afford comprehensive surveillance, but they either got lazy about fitting out all the classrooms, or were saving it for later.

He wanted to laugh at the way Augus was now up on his tiptoes, trying to push Gwyn down.

‘Just because you’re good at fencing,’ Gwyn said calmly, ‘doesn’t mean your puny muscles can do
anything except lift that tiny shitty epee.’

‘For that, I’m not going to let you breathe.’

‘And I’ll bite it off,’ Gwyn said. ‘And then it will be really small.’

‘Ugh,’ Augus said, and Gwyn had a moment to try and twist out of Augus’ grip – but was too late to avoid the sharp knee to the gut. Gwyn bent forwards, coughing violently, and Augus used the momentum to shove Gwyn to his knees. ‘What part of ‘I’m going to tell your parents and the school all about your desperation for cock?’ do you not actually understand?’

The sound of Augus undoing his belt, unsnapping the buttons of his fly, unzipping, and Gwyn was gasping for breath and his knees were killing him.

‘Open your mouth. It’ll only take ten seconds, as we established the other day. But practice will hopefully make me last a bit longer. Besides, it’s a compliment, Gwyn. It means you can really take a cock.’

A hand in his hair, pulling his head up and back, and Gwyn stared up at Augus and hated the gleam of success in his eyes, the wicked way his smile hooked upwards. Hated that Augus was beautiful like that, hated that the only way he’d ever draw the attention of someone like him was…through blackmail. Like this.

‘Open up,’ Augus snapped.

Gwyn shivered, opened his mouth and kept staring upwards, waiting for Augus to feed the head of his cock through his lips. Not going for it aggressively, like last time, but doing what he’d been asked to do once or twice at the clubs. Just kneel there. Just take it.

He loved that too.

Augus’ smile wavered and then his eyes turned bright and he was pushing his cock forwards, rubbing it over Gwyn’s lips, rubbing the head over Gwyn’s tongue. A hand still in Gwyn’s hair.

Do you like this? Gwyn wanted to ask.

‘It’s so stupid,’ Augus said, pushing forward sharply and catching the back of Gwyn’s throat at an odd angle. He gagged, pressed his hands against Augus’ thighs, and Augus just leaned in. It was too deep, too fast, and Gwyn panicked. ‘They always joke about how I haven’t gotten laid, like there haven’t been offers. But relationships are for idiots. And no one wants to give it away without true love or some equally dismaying bullshit. That’s it, Gwyn. God, your throat is good.’

Gwyn wasn’t gagging gracefully, he was unable to control the spasms of his throat, nostrils flaring as he beat at Augus’ thigh hard enough that Augus swore and drew back.

Gwyn twisted to the side, retching and then gasping for breath. The difference between Augus and those men who wanted Gwyn to choke on it, was that those men generally understood that Gwyn did have to breathe at some point. Gwyn had been pushed to his limits before, but usually on purpose. Not just through…sheer inexperience.

‘If you don’t want me to throw up on your cock,’ Gwyn said through coughing, ‘then cut it out.’

‘You won’t throw up.’

Gwyn looked at him in disbelief.
'Life isn’t porn,’ Gwyn bit out, rubbing at his wet lips. Augus watched with a hungry, interested gaze. Gwyn was pretty sure not a single thing he was saying was actually getting through. ‘Maybe if you had any experience…’

‘So let me get some, Christ,’ Augus said, rolling his eyes. ‘Open up, princess. I’ll be gentle.’

Gwyn snorted, moved back into position, damned himself for opening his mouth and letting Augus press back in. He did seem to be going a little slower than before, but he also clearly wanted to spend time in Gwyn’s throat from the way he pushed. But Gwyn found it easier to control his gag reflex this time, now that Augus wasn’t just shoving. He swallowed around the head of Augus’ cock, not quite getting it the first couple of times, until he felt the space of his throat open and Augus’ cock move deeper. A strong ache then, his throat telling him it wasn’t supposed to spend time like this.

Gwyn was kind of addicted to that ache.

‘Jesus fuck,’ Augus drawled, fisting Gwyn’s hair up in his hand once more. ‘You being a fag is the best damned thing this school has delivered in a while.’

Gwyn pulled his tongue back and let his teeth graze the underside of Augus’ cock. He expected Augus to pull back, but instead Augus made a strangled sound and after several sharp, fast thrusts that had Gwyn wanting to cough his guts up, Augus came down the back of his throat.

He could taste the bitterness, a background saltiness like seawater. Between trying not to cough and making himself swallow, he wondered if he’d blow some vein in his brain or something. He managed to push Augus away and bent sideways, coughing into his palm. Sprays of saliva and come covered his hand. His heart was still racing. He was hard from it all. He always was, if they weren’t gentle.

‘Lick it off,’ Augus said, his voice lower than before, demanding. Gwyn raised his palm to his mouth without even thinking about it, then hesitated, looking up at Augus, who was now leaning back against one of the kitchen benches, still breathing hard. ‘Do it.’

‘You can’t just-’

‘Fucking do it, you just had all of that in your mouth so if you’re fast, maybe you won’t notice it going cold on your hand.’

Gwyn raised his hand to his mouth, unable to tell exactly what he felt then, a kind of visceral irritation with Augus that could have been hatred, anger at himself for staying hard as he licked at the mix of bitterness and spit. He got most of it off and wanted to wipe the rest on his clothing, but couldn’t. No way. Ash had already drawn a line on his sleeve, he didn’t want anyone to pay attention and notice his clothing smelled like come.

He pushed himself upright and walked over to the sink, washing his hands, and then bending over and washing off his mouth too. His lips felt swollen. He wanted to get a hand on his dick, but he’d be damned if he’d do that around Augus.

‘Yes, that was fantastic,’ Augus said, having already done his pants back up again. ‘Well, I’d tell you to come or whatever but honestly I’ve gotten what I wanted, and we should get out of here. Besides, I like the idea of you having blue balls for the rest of the day. I can tell you’re hard from here.’

‘Fuck off,’ Gwyn muttered, hating how his voice was scratchy. Teachers would probably just write it up to a virus. Maybe he could beg off class, go back to his room and jerk off.

‘You know I’m going to get my dick up your ass at some point? Just…think of that when you’ve got
a hand on yourself, or fingers up your ass, or whatever it is the closeted wrestlers in the school are doing these days. Are you cleaned up yet? Come on then, this isn’t romantic, we’re not going to *cuddle.*’

Gwyn ignored the cold feeling in his chest.

All the bombs were already in place for his life to completely implode, but having Augus treat him like this… it was hot until it really wasn’t. Which was usually immediately afterwards, when he realised just how fucked he was.
Old Enough To Know Bitter

Augus

* 

They had two places. They had their dorm, and then they had the place when the school turfed them out sometimes, the place where they went because Augus was an emancipated adult and he needed somewhere to live even if it was formerly a trap house that’d be better suited for demolition now. He’d found it as an asset in one of his bosses’ client’s files, but the client went to jail, the boss didn’t sell it off – because Augus carefully slipped that paperwork out of the file and the client had too many traps to keep track of – and Augus charged off the rates and bills to the offshore accounts that had landed the client in jail in the first place.

That was called fraud.

Augus sometimes thought about what would happen if he got caught. But he was pretty sure he was covered. The legal firm lost track of the trap house – and it was a trap house and shitty and still had people occasionally coming to the door asking for tina and gack instead of just calling it crystal or speed – and Augus wasn’t technically living there anyway, well, outside of his school paperwork. That was tricky. But it wasn’t his name on the bills, and it wasn’t his name when he called to chase up things like the internet going down.

That was called identity fraud.

Augus lay on the mattress that Ash had dragged in from somewhere – he didn’t want to know exactly where – and stuck his legs up in the air and stared up at the stained ceiling.

He was going to fuck Gwyn in this place. This dusty, stained, crappy place. He was going to come inside him, all over him, down his throat, on his face. In fact, daydreaming in the first place was what drove Augus to lie down on the mattress and jerk off thinking about it. He had an easy ride with Gwyn. He was super gay, apparently into being told what to do, and he had experience. That he could be blackmailed into doing whatever Augus wanted was the icing on the cake. It was perfect.

The sound of Ash and some stranger giggling, and Augus turned to see his bedroom door open. Ash leaned in, and some…girl? Guy? Person? Leaned into Ash and was still laughing. They didn’t look high, so perhaps Ash had amazed someone with his ability to crack a joke that was actually funny. Apparently other people thought Ash was funny.

‘There’s another mattress,’ Augus said, ‘if you want to fuck.’

‘I was saying hi!’ Ash said. ‘Can’t a brother say hi? Jesus, Augus, you’re so mean sometimes. Hey, I got you something.’

Ash tossed a packet onto the mattress. Augus picked it up. A USB drive. Small. Not always electronically protected in the stores, and Ash carried magnets of varying strengths anyway.

‘I don’t need this,’ Augus said. ‘Take it back.’

‘Freebie!’ Ash shouted, before swinging away with his friend for the day, night, whatever.

Augus’ legs fell back to the bed. Ash was not a quiet lover, his friends were never quiet either. He tried to decide how much he wanted to listen to them getting off and in the end reached for his
headphones, his phone, and found a noise generator, because classical music had too many strange pauses that allowed him to hear truly awful things.

He had homework to do. He had other people’s homework to do. He had to get to the office in about an hour. They worked him to the bone. His managers were nice enough, for assholes in a top legal firm who wanted a pretty intern they didn’t have to pay. He’d get one of the partners on sexual harassment, except for that whole top legal firm issue.

They’d probably be proud of him for the whole fraud and identity fraud thing. They weren’t the kinds of lawyers that defended the good guys.

Augus didn’t want to be that kind of lawyer either. More money in defending criminals, even if it did sometimes turn his stomach. It didn’t matter. His brother was a criminal, he was a criminal, he didn’t see the difference sometimes. The world was all about getting what you could and fuck the people who waited to seize their opportunities. They deserved to be looked down upon.

Augus lay on his stomach and dug his hands into his hair, before setting three alarms in his phone so he’d be sure to wake up in time to scramble some homework together before work. Fuck, he needed a break.

*

The next day, a Sunday, Ash decided that they needed some more food and that meant going to the produce store. It was always a low key adrenaline rush, pretending not to see Ash covertly thieving things while staying out of the view of surveillance cameras. To this day, the store didn’t know that Ash was a thief, but Augus thought he toned it down in there because he liked the staff. But Ash clearly had issues with the whole concept of loss prevention.

Augus split off from Ash, not wanting to see what he was doing. Hard to perjure yourself if you didn’t see what happened, Your Honour. Something like that. Augus had been to hardly any actual court cases, and most of what he knew of active court cases came from television, the internet, photocopying and scanning paperwork and sitting files deep in an office with caffeine pills and telling himself that this would all be worth it one day.

He looked down at the packet of lychee jellies he was holding – Kayla had gotten him onto those – and found himself thinking about how, so far, he hadn’t seen Gwyn eat anything yet. He never ate at lunch. At first it was easy to think he just wasn’t lowering himself to it or didn’t want to be seen actually eating at that table. But he always stared at their food for a really long time, and sometimes he looked hungry.

It reminded him of the night in the library, when Gwyn had bizarrely reminded him of a homeless kid. Which made no fucking sense at all. Did he have an eating disorder? Augus pursed his lips. Gwyn? The rumours went that he could eat two whole chickens before a bout. It was just that for someone who apparently needed to keep to his weight bracket, he never seemed to eat.

Augus added the lychee jellies to his basket and then watched a little kid run past him, laughing and shrieking something unintelligible as a mother followed with a trolley, looking tired. Also rich. Because apparently one wore diamonds to the shops. Well. It was a rich neighbourhood, even they had trap houses. She eyed his threadbare shirt as she went past, but instead of frowning, she smiled at him and kept going. She probably thought he was buying his shirts second-hand to be vintage or something, instead of just…wearing them to death. He had his nice clothes for work, his nice clothes for school, and he’d be fucked if he’d waste money on nice shirts for food shopping.

At least she smiled at him. Some people just frowned and looked him up and down, and he smiled
politely at them and mentally tried to decide if he’d screw them over if they were some white collar crime client of his.

That, or he imagined them in porn movies, getting absolutely shafted.

‘Augus,’ Ash hissed from nearby. He ducked into the aisle with Augus and stood alongside him, looking shifty.

‘Did you get caught?’ Augus said.

‘What? No! It’s just…Gwyn’s here, you want to spy on him?’

‘I’m sorry, did I just hear the words ‘do you want to spy on him’ come out of your mouth? Are we eleven?’

Augus did, actually, want to spy on him. He nodded and Ash grinned and they both walked quietly towards the cold section. Gwyn was facing the milk and presumably staring at it, since he wasn’t picking anything up. He held a shopping basket absently on one forearm – making his bicep stand out – and his mother turned to add some Yakult to it. It was enough that Augus saw her face in profile.

Gulvi had said that Gwyn’s mother was wretchedly beautiful, the kind of beauty that you sacrificed newborns for or something, but Augus had dismissed that as Gulvi being incredibly gay. But okay, Gulvi was right, she was stunning. If she had a plastic surgeon – surely she had a plastic surgeon – they were doing extremely fine work. She was some whole *piece de resistance* deal or something.

Her golden blonde hair tumbled in salon curls down her back. Her skin was flawless. Augus had seen the fringe of her thick lashes, the curve of a manicured brow, the cupid’s bow of perfect lips and French manicured nails. She wore chic business pants in a tailored cream, a dark blue shirt. Her shoes looked like they cost a fortune, stylish blue things with a pointed toe and sensible heels for shopping. Augus decided in a handful of seconds that just because he was into lots of different people didn’t mean he could jerk off to someone’s mother.

But…*holy shit.*

‘I so prefer when Efnisien helps me,’ Crielle sighed, her voice a quiet, barbed insult. Gwyn said and did nothing in response to it. Eventually, they moved along the cold section towards chilled juices, and Augus and Ash backed off, realising they could be spotted too easily.

‘Weird,’ Ash said. ‘He’s like a robot. Robot Gwen.’

‘Whatever. Are we done? If I get anything else at this point, it will be junk. I’d rather not.’

‘I can get that any time,’ Ash said, craning his neck around the endcap, before shrugging and spinning back towards the self-service checkout. ‘Man, no wonder Gwyn’s hot though. Look at her. She’s like a test-tube mother. You know, genetically engineered to be uber-hot.’

‘You think Gwyn’s hot?’ Augus said, quietly putting food through the checkout.

‘And you don’t? Come on, man.’

‘I’m fucking him,’ Augus admitted. It was the first time he’d said it. Ash was silent for so long that Augus looked up as he folded the receipt and placed it in the bag.

‘Like, mind-fucking him?’ Ash said, looking around as though Gwyn and his mother would turn up
right beside them. Augus walked towards the exit and Ash followed. ‘Like that, Augus? That kind?’

‘It’s a secret,’ Augus said. ‘The whole point of it being blackmail is that you don’t now text everyone you know about it.’

‘I can actually keep a secret.’

It was true, Ash could. He made it seem like he was an open book, but he had a vault deep down that he shoved things into. If Augus told him not to be careless with information, he wouldn’t be. If Augus told him not to be careless with brazen thievery, he’d tell Augus to go fuck himself.

‘Then keep it,’ Augus said. He got into the passenger seat of Ash’s clunker of a car, and yawned.

‘You’re legit fucking him?’ Ash said.

‘Only blowjobs so far.’

‘Like, who’s giving them? Because I don’t really see you…kind of kneeling to give one but I also don’t really see him…’

‘Him,’ Augus said.

‘Oh my god,’ Ash said, with the strained glee of someone who was probably going to start shouting absently about it. The engine started and Ash pulled out of the carpark, taking them back to their home away from home. ‘Oh my god. Oh my god. Augus, ohhhhhh my god.’

‘Shut the fuck up.’

‘I am torn,’ Ash said to himself, staring out of the windshield. ‘I am torn between wanting to respect you because you’re my brother and I love you, and- honestly- how do you expect me to look him in the eyes next time and not talk about how your dick has been in his mouth? You said blowjobs. As in multiple. You are the king! The king of the school! Wait no, that’s me, you’re the…no, we already have a prince. You’re the…jester of the school!’

‘Shut the fuck up.’

‘My mind is blown,’ Ash said. ‘I mean he’s gay, right? You’re not making him do it and living out some weird straight-to-gay fantasy?’

‘Gayer than I am,’ Augus said.

‘Wow,’ Ash breathed. ‘Wow. I mean the Mafydd thing, so like, we kind of knew. But- The way his family made it sound… Do you think his family knows?’

‘No,’ Augus said. ‘His family think Mafydd sexually assaulted or took advantage of an unwilling straight and upstanding minor.’

‘And the reality is?’

‘I don’t know,’ Augus said. ‘I know Mafydd’s side of the story, but you know how it is. People spin things in their favour. I know Gwyn is scared shitless of anyone finding out he’s gay, and actually, he’s remarkably easy to manipulate with that alone. Honestly, I kind of forgot about the whole revenge thing, it’s just very nice to finally get some.’

‘Welcome to the world of not being a virgin anymore. I’m so…I’m so proud of you.’
‘Fuck you and fuck your virgin-shaming bullshit.’

‘Hey,’ Ash said, ‘I’m shaming you, with anything I can. I would never shame a virgin who wasn’t you.’

‘I hate you,’ Augus said, leaning his head back and closing his eyes.

‘Man, you are beat,’ Ash said, reaching out and jostling Augus’ shoulder. ‘You gotta sleep when we get home.’

‘Can’t.’

‘They don’t even pay you at the firm. You don’t need to be there. I mean, what-’

‘For the millionth time, Ash, what the hell do you expect to support us both once the scholarship is gone? Hm? What, bank heists?’ Augus laughed to himself, then sighed. No. The truth was, Ash’s prospects weren’t dazzling. He didn’t even try to get the jobs he might be able to get in retail for something like the Christmas rush, and Augus had a horrible feeling that he’d get fired for not understanding that you just don’t steal on the job. Maybe he wouldn’t, but Augus didn’t have buckets of faith in his brother when it came to those sticky fingers of his.

Augus was going to graduate, the scholarship would end. Even with Ash supplementing a great deal, they still needed an income. Augus planned on leveraging the shit out of his experience with a firm, and he had what most wouldn’t, experience. For all those ridiculous requests that somehow managed to want newbie workers in order to pay them a shit wage, and expected however many years of experience at the same time. Augus knew the different databases, he knew bookkeeping, he’d managed to flirt with the guy who did payroll and learned the basics of that, and he was gaining an understanding of legalese that made him great for transcribing.

He was going to get somewhere and get there fast. He had a five year plan. He was going to be one of those people who spat on the assholes that didn’t make anything of themselves.

Or at least, that’s what he had to do, because Ash was going to be an asshole who wouldn’t make anything of himself.

‘Hey,’ Ash said soothingly, as they pulled into the driveway past the surprisingly pretty mailbox. A hand on his shoulder, and Augus smacked it away in a rush of fury.

‘Quit it.’

‘You’re exhausted,’ Ash said, shaking his head. ‘Like, I know-’

‘Maybe if you weren’t fucking until all hours, I wouldn’t have to deal with this shit,’ Augus spat, opening the door, yanking the bag of shopping with him and slamming the door behind him so the car rocked. He stormed towards the house even as Ash called after him.

He felt guilty as soon as he got to his room after dumping the bag in the kitchen, leaving everything for Ash to put away. He lay down on the mattress, then reached for his phone, knowing that Ash would leave him alone when he was in this mood. At least he’d get some hours. He needed to get some shit done, but just…twenty minutes, he could steal twenty minutes, couldn’t he?

What are you doing? He sent to Gwyn.

Nothing for five minutes. Not even a read receipt. Augus squinted at his phone and ground his teeth together. What was the point in having someone on the hook if they weren’t actually on the hook
when you wanted them there? *Honestly.*

He messaged Terho instead. *You’d better have that shit together by tomorrow.*

A prompt message in response: *All ready now, you know I’d never dick you around, Augus.*

The way things should be.

His phone pinged and he thought it was Terho again, but instead it was Gwyn:

*Shopping.*

Augus pursed his lips. One word. Robot Gwen was in fine form.

*Getting some magnums for that cock of yours?* he wrote.

*Yes.* Gwyn responded.

Augus smirked in spite of himself. He’d expected some uppity, defensive response. After all, he’d seemed so unimpressed to be shopping with his mum, and she’d seemed unimpressed to have him there. Instead of the scandalised text he’d expected, he could almost imagine the deadpan snark.

*What are you doing later?* he wrote.

*Sleeping. U?*

Augus rolled onto his stomach and stared at his phone. He wasn’t sure how he felt about Gwyn using a ‘U’ instead of a ‘you.’ Augus made a point of not abbreviating his texts. It infuriated Ash, who said something like, ‘If you care about efficiency so much, why are you such a twat in chat?’

*I think you’re going to come over, if you’ve got nothing better to do.*

*Slpng is btr than u.*

‘What the hell?’ Augus hissed. Gwyn was actually worse than Ash at typing. It was impossible.

*I’m sorry, did you think it was a friendly request that you can knock back?*

A long pause, the little ellipsis of a message that made Augus expect a screed of painful writing. Finally, after several minutes, Gwyn simply sent:

*FU*

*Be here by lunch. We’ll eat something. It’ll be nice,* Augus replied.

*Rents wnt go 4 it. Strict.*

Augus stared at that. Eventually he realised that Gwyn had written ‘parents won’t go for it.’

*Tell them you forgot that you had a wrestling workshop on.*

More typing, and a longer message in response:

*Rents fund schl, knw its a lie. Cn nly cm whn schl.*

‘What the hell, Gwyn?’ Augus hissed. ‘This is just painful.’
*If you think I can understand your bullshit jargon, you are fucking mistaken,* Augus wrote.

Wknds nly free whn boarding. Nxt wknd if dad nt douche.

Marginally better. Augus frowned. How strict was strict? And why was he going home on weekends? Why was his dad a douche for having him be home on the weekend? Did they make him go to functions? Did he just want to be home because he knew Augus couldn’t mess with him there? Something wasn’t adding up. Augus knew kids didn’t get along with their parents, but…Gwyn had seemed weirdly enthusiastic about sitting at their table, despite his obvious fear of getting caught.

If anything, over the week, he’d sort of bizarrely settled in. He was quiet, he sometimes did his homework at the table like Kayla and Gulvi did, and the only time he was absent, he had the training that they all knew about anyway. Every Thursday, without fail, Gwyn would go participate in the gayest sport on the planet. All those stripped down boys clutching each other’s thighs and asses and rubbing their sweaty bodies all over each other.

Truthfully Augus didn’t know shit about wrestling. He’d seen some porn of it. He knew it wasn’t accurate, but he preferred to imagine that rather than whatever the reality was.

Augus listened to Ash putting shopping away. Ash didn’t swear under his breath, he didn’t slam cupboard doors, all the things that Augus would have passive aggressively done. Augus felt guilty for that too.

He had to get some shit done. It piled up too fast if he didn’t. He could already feel it like towers over him, looming, dark shadows swallowing him whole. Mr. Prince would tell him to get some rest, but what did he know? He’d obviously come from money.

Augus looked at his phone again.

*Make it happen,* he sent.

He *could* fuck Gwyn at school, they were boarding after all, but the risk was high. Mafydd *had* been booted for it, and Augus was fine flirting with a certain threshold of risk, but anything past it and even he knew he’d be happier getting a dick in Gwyn’s ass at his home away from home.

Biting the inside of his lip, he looked to the closed door, and knew Ash would leave him alone to cool down. He opened Safari and opened some of his Pornhub bookmarks, reaching for his headphones and ignoring all of his responsibilities in favour of feeling something good for a change.
Fall From Grace

Chapter Notes

Okay! So in good news for all you Spoils of the Spoiled fans, SOTS has now officially joined my 'two story' main writing roster (alongside The Ice Plague), which means you can now expect *regular* updates on this instead of *random* updates. I'm hoping for 1-2 chapters a month, ideally two every month until the story is completed.

This will come as good news, I expect, given the content of this chapter. x.x

New tags: Sexual assault, manipulation and coercion, injury, blood, violence, betrayal, dubious consent, withdrawn consent

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Gwyn

*’You say your parents are strict,’ Augus said, kicking back in Gwyn’s car, literally moving the seat so that he could be almost horizontal and placing his booted feet on the dash. Gwyn had picked him up several streets down from his actual house, because there was rebelling subtly against his parents and asking to get fucking murdered. He still didn’t know why he’d agreed to this. Augus treated him like shit, and the sex was fun, but…he wasn’t sure that was enough sometimes. Not that he had much of a choice. ‘What is it? No dessert after din-dins?’

‘That’s exactly it,’ Gwyn said, not taking his eyes off the road, painfully aware of the length of Augus’ body right there. Gwyn hated him. He hated how long and lean he was, and how he was still sweetly sculpted – Gwyn had never seen his body, not all of it, but he’d seen glimpses of his abdomen when Augus levered his cock out of his pants, he’d seen his forearms, he wondered what training went into fencing. It’d always seemed weak as a sport. It wasn’t like Gwyn ever saw him in the gym at school, either.

Now, it meant that Gwyn was half-hard and trying to focus on driving within the speed limit and not on what it might feel like to actually get fucked by Augus. He deliberately didn’t think about Mafydd, thought about everything else instead. He’d been fingered by strangers, but he was still wary of having a dick up his ass in an alleyway behind a club. He wasn’t sentimental by any means, but he’d just…not had a chance to really be into it yet. Usually dudes were happy with his mouth and then they were done and that was it.

There was that one guy though, he must’ve been fifty, and he’d pushed Gwyn against the wall and gotten two spit-slicked fingers into him before Gwyn could say yes to it, and in the end the whole thing had been so hot that Gwyn had come in his pants – so embarrassing – and he’d taken the guy’s cock into his mouth still reeling from the revelation that the rougher they were, the more he liked it. Hard to ask for that. He was sure other people might call what happened to him sexual assault, but it was like none of those people had ever walked into a gay club thirsty for absolutely anything that would look like acceptance and validation and a good fucking time.

Which was why he was in the car now, even though he kind of hated Augus.
‘You’re like the least talkative person I’ve ever met,’ Augus said, stroking his own torso in a way that ought to be banned. Just casually trailing his fingers down the buttons of his shirt like he was going to jerk off in Gwyn’s car. ‘Oh, turn right here.’

Gwyn was surprised Augus could even tell where they were, his head was so low in the car. But he turned right, surprised that the area they seemed to be heading towards wasn’t…terrible.

‘Don’t talk shit about my house,’ Augus said abruptly. ‘It’s the only one I’ve got.’

‘I wouldn’t do that,’ Gwyn said.

He’d just judge it silently, like a good rich boy was supposed to, according to his mother anyway. Whatever. Any place that wasn’t his parent’s place was great. The fact that they’d called him back for the weekend again, like…his father was on more of a rampage than usual. Gwyn knew he was stressed at his job down at the docks, pissed that he wasn’t in the Navy anymore, but it wasn’t like beating on Gwyn seemed to make him feel better. And besides, he couldn’t hurt Gwyn as much or as obviously during active wrestling seasons, which meant he just became meaner in other ways.

He yelled like he wanted to pop his fucking head off with it.

‘Uh huh,’ Augus said, yawning. ‘Sure.’

Augus undid the seatbelt, and as Gwyn opened his mouth to tell him to put it the fuck back on, Augus turned and slid his hand between Gwyn’s legs.

‘Augus, get your fucking seatbelt-’

‘Shut up. Drive safely if you care so much about me,’ Augus cooed. ‘I didn’t know you cared so much.’

‘If I could push you out of the car on a freeway and watch you roll off an embankment without going to jail for it, I would.’

Gwyn was pretty proud of himself for managing to say that much, because Augus’ hand between his legs was a crime. Gwyn’s hands locked on the steering wheel and he swore he dropped his speed by about twenty kilometres.

‘Aw,’ Augus said, his voice lilting upwards at the end. ‘I’m sure you would if you could get this anywhere else as often as you get it with me, princess.’

‘You are the randiest fucking pervert I’ve ever met which is really saying something. You are…’

‘Spectacular?’ Augus finished for him.

Gwyn’s growl turned into a cut off noise as Augus ground his hand hard enough that it hurt. Gwyn nudged the brake automatically, and the car jerked.

‘Turn left here,’ Augus murmured, looking to the road now instead of down between Gwyn’s legs. ‘Can you feel anything through your jeans? Seems…you can.’

Gwyn’s mouth dropped open and he focused on breathing. Unfair. Unfair.

‘I’m impressed,’ Augus said.

A flash of hatred so strong, all of it directed at himself instead of Augus. God, he was so pathetic that Augus’ insincere disdain would still make him light up inside just because the words sounded nice.
Sometimes he thought the only reason he did wrestling was because the coach threw him a kind word every now and then. Maybe he’d quit if someone else did it once in a while.

‘I can’t wait to fuck you,’ Augus said, working his hand rhythmically. It chafed like hell. It was too good.

Definitely worth lying to his parents about wanting to see a movie. That bought him a few hours at least. It wasn’t like he’d never done it before. If his Dad wanted him home on the weekend, Gwyn wanted to be gone for as much as it as he could be, especially with Efnisien coming over that afternoon. Fuck that prick.

‘Mmmhm,’ Gwyn said. ‘We’ll see.’

‘It’s happening, princess. You’re gonna love it.’

‘I wonder which of the billion pornos you’ve watched that phrase comes from.’

Gwyn almost pulled the car over when Augus pushed his hand into Gwyn’s crotch too hard. He coughed, feeling winded, and Augus made some kind of soothing, happy sound in his throat and Gwyn thought that if Augus was this much of a sadist as a teenager, he was going to be terrifying in ten years.

‘When did you learn that you got off on causing people pain?’ Gwyn said, his voice more strained than before. Augus was stroking his thigh now, maybe he’d just figured he didn’t want to die on the road or something.

‘When did you learn that you liked receiving it?’ Augus said smoothly.

Gwyn shrugged. He didn’t see the point in lying about that. ‘Dunno. I don’t always. It’s just in certain circumstances.’

‘Like sex circumstances,’ Augus supplied.

‘Mmmhm.’

‘So when did you learn it then?’

Gwyn looked at Augus sidelong briefly. He’d mostly learned it with Mafydd, but he’d had an idea beforehand too.

‘Probably jerking off, the things I started thinking about that got me off the fastest. You didn’t answer my question.’

‘In one of my foster homes I saw a kid getting absolutely whaled on, like spanked within an inch of his life, and I got harder faster than you can say, ‘well, that’s fucked up.’”

‘What, really?’ Gwyn said.

‘Turn left here,’ Augus said mildly. ‘And no, not really. I mean yeah, I did see that in a foster home a few times, but it didn’t turn me on. Not at the time anyway. I like spanking in other circumstances.’

Gwyn hadn’t really thought about Augus’ history. He knew Ash and Augus were at the school on full ride scholarships that covered their boarding and some other things. He knew that they were poor. And then everything was rumour. Were they orphans? Were they homeless before they’d come to Murdock? Had they ever been drug dealers?
‘Okay, slow down,’ Augus said, sitting up abruptly. ‘It’s the one that looks a bit worse for the wear. Number twenty one.’

Gwyn saw Ash’s car in the driveway and did a quick u-turn so he could parallel park next to the curb. He got out of the car and stared at the house. Not as bad as he expected. It wasn’t the prettiest house in the street, the grass needed to be mowed, but for some reason Gwyn had expected a place of broken glass in the windows and a roof with holes in it or something. Like, it wasn’t a nice house in terms of what he was familiar with, but he’d expected something decrepit from the way Ash and Augus went on about it.

‘It’s not what I expected,’ Gwyn said, when Augus looked at him expectantly.

‘It has termites,’ Augus said, laughing. ‘Sometimes, at night, you can hear them in the roof. It’s going to fall down around us one day.’

‘Not today though.’

‘Probably not. Who fucking cares?’ Augus said, walking up to the front door. Gwyn watched Augus bring out a surprising number of keys from his pocket and let them in.

Gwyn looked around curiously. It was smallish. Maybe only three bedrooms from the general size of it. The lounge had second-hand couches and none of the furniture matched, but it didn’t look terrible. The floors were stained, but clean. The linoleum in the kitchen had chunks taken out of it, but it was also clean. There was only one dish in the sink and the counter was otherwise clean except for half a loaf of bread near the stove.

A bedroom door opened and Ash leaned against the doorway, staring at them both, shit-eating grin on his face.

‘Geez, Gwyn,’ Ash said, ‘can’t think of any reasons you might be here.’

Gwyn was absolutely not doing anything with Augus while Ash was around. He folded his arms and stared at Augus, unimpressed. The last thing he needed was for Ash to know what was going on. That would ruin everything.

‘Oh no, no no, it’s cool, it’s cool,’ Ash said, winking at them conspiratorially as he walked into the lounge and picked up his keys and his wallet. ‘I’m out. There’s some things even my innocent ears cannot handle.’

‘Sure,’ Augus said. ‘Because you don’t fuck in here at all hours.’

‘I don’t fuck him in here at all hours,’ Ash said pointedly.

‘We’re doing homework,’ Gwyn said. ‘That’s all.’

Ash snorted. ‘Precious, your jig was up a while back. Aren’t I sweet? Keeping your secrets for you?’

He blew them both a kiss and then vanished out of the door, locking it behind him. A moment later, the car started up and Gwyn turned to see it easing out of the driveway through the kitchen window.

‘He knows,’ Gwyn said flatly.

‘He is not actually as stupid as he can seem,’ Augus said drily. ‘Miracle, isn’t it?’

‘I should go.’
‘He already knows,’ Augus said impatiently.

‘If this blows up in my face,’ Gwyn said, ‘I will end you.’

‘Oh, hot,’ Augus said casually. ‘Do you want a coffee?’

Gwyn ground his teeth together, not liking Augus’ attitude one bit. Either he was overconfident in Ash’s ability to keep quiet about shit, or he didn’t care about blowing up anything in Gwyn’s face anyway. Why would he? He was happy to blow shit up himself if Gwyn didn’t do what he said. Gwyn walked off through the house, looking around, ignoring Augus calling for him to come back. Gwyn wasn’t a dog.

‘Hey, how come you never eat around us?’ Augus eventually called after him. Gwyn, who was looking at the laundry hamper in bafflement at a sign of civilisation, couldn’t process the question. Then he was surprised that Augus had noticed.

‘I eat,’ Gwyn said.

‘Not around us. Is it like some weird thing where you’re showing that you’re not really hanging out with us, by not eating with us? Not breaking bread? That’s so tired, Gwyn. That’s like, so nineteenth century of you.’

‘I eat a big meal in the mornings,’ Gwyn lied.

Things Gwyn ate: Shit that was pre-packaged that he could buy for himself at a store without his mother anywhere near him, so that he didn’t have to be paranoid, and even then, he still couldn’t stop himself picking over the food and hating himself for doing it because he knew she wouldn’t go to a fucking industrial complex to poison thousands of pre-packaged things in the hopes that he’d eat one. He ate stuff he could buy from a butcher and cook himself, but never at home. He could drive to a takeout and get several whole chickens and go to town on those. He could steal from the Murdock kitchens with relative impunity. Vending machines were safe.

Things Gwyn did not eat: Anything at home. Ever. He made the mistake of once leaving a package of cupcakes and another of carrots on his desk, and his mother had found a way to get in and do something to them. He didn’t even know. He didn’t notice the syringe pinprick until he yanked the plastic wrapper of the six cupcakes out of his bin, looking for it between bouts of running to the toilet and violently vomiting. He also didn’t eat anything pre-prepared at a café or restaurant, even if he was on his own. It was unpleasant anyway, even if he thought it was maybe marginally safer. But picking through a pasta dish was embarrassing for everyone involved, when it meant that it took him well over an hour to consume a single meal. He didn’t eat things that people made for him, and he didn’t eat catered food at events that his parents were at.

His mother would watch him and ask with faux sympathy if he thought he needed a therapist for his eating disorder. Where another mother might give a genuinely caring smile, hers would be wicked.

Gwyn didn’t think he had an eating disorder. He just didn’t eat around her, and he checked through his food a lot. Sometimes it got out of control, but he still fucking ate. He could get down a family sized chips and gravy and multiple chickens in one sitting, if he wanted. It was just…he didn’t eat regularly.

‘I eat,’ Gwyn said again. ‘I ate this morning.’

That was a lie. He didn’t eat whenever he was at his parent’s house. Also, he didn’t eat because he couldn’t douche at home and he knew he had to do that to make sure that anal with Augus wasn’t a
catastrophe, or something. He’d heard a couple of bears talking about it in one of the clubs he went to. One didn’t give a shit about it, said it was unnecessary, said any mess was easily dealt with. The other said it wasn’t hard for a twink to buy something from a pharmacy, and the first bear had laughed and said something like:

‘You obviously haven’t cleaned out before, Jesus.’

Gwyn hadn’t done it before either, but he didn’t think Augus was the kind of top – having only experienced pornography and not revealing any kind of coprophilia kink – who wouldn’t look upon it kindly if Gwyn wasn’t at least like…a little clean.

Mostly he just didn’t eat because he’d been at his parent’s house. On Friday evening, he’d eaten so much he’d lay down in a stupor, too full to feel blissed out. The bliss always came a few hours later when the food finally settled in. It’d be the last time he’d feel good about food until the next time he could find a safe meal.

‘I just…do this fasting thing,’ Gwyn said, turning away from the laundry and jolting when he realised that Augus was standing right there. He blinked dumbly when Augus slid his hands beneath Gwyn’s shirt.

‘It all sounds sort of like lies,’ Augus said, his voice lower than usual, his expression calm, like he didn’t really care that Gwyn was lying to him.

Augus’ hands were clever. He didn’t touch Gwyn like he had little experience. He dragged his clipped nails and blunt fingers up over Gwyn’s torso, and his thumbs landed on Gwyn’s nipples, stroking them as he looked up expectantly at Gwyn’s expression. Gwyn hoped he wasn’t making a stupid face, but he was pretty sure he was. It was hard to concentrate whenever Augus was near him.

‘There are…a lot of things I’d like to do to you,’ Augus said, but it wasn’t delivered like some porn line, it was almost like he was speculating aloud. ‘Things I don’t even think exist. Fuck. Like, just hire some sleazy hotel room somewhere and do ungodly things to you, and then when we’re done and you’re all cried out, I can go to hell and the words ‘worth it’ will be on my lips.’

‘So you just top, then?’ Gwyn said, amazed that he sounded as bored as he did, now that Augus was starting to pinch his nipples. Softly at first, then harder, watching Gwyn’s face so avidly that Gwyn’s cheeks started to burn.

‘Why?’ Augus said. ‘Would you like to fuck me?’

‘I mean,’ Gwyn said idly, ‘you’d deserve it.’

‘Ha. Ha.’ Gwyn bit his tongue gently when the pinches got rough. One of his hands came up to brush Augus’ hands away, but Augus made a inhibiting sound with his mouth, some clucking of his tongue, and Gwyn’s hand froze in mid-air. They both stared at it. Augus with a kind of amazement, and Gwyn not really understanding whatever spell this was, why he liked it this much.

Augus’ fingers turned cruel, the pinch too hard, too sharp, and Gwyn’s chest bowed forward as he dropped his arm. Augus used that grip to shove Gwyn back against the door frame, and then when Gwyn was just about to say maybe they needed safewords or some shit, Augus went back to stroking his nipples gently. The pain diffused into a thorny burn that made him feel warm, sensitive.

‘I want to touch you too,’ Gwyn said.

‘You’re going to get to, in a way that most people don’t, soon enough,’ Augus said. ‘I mean the inside of your ass counts, doesn’t it?’
‘Why don’t you ever let me-?’

‘Ever? We haven’t done that much.’ Augus withdrew his fingers from beneath Gwyn’s shirt, only to deliver a soft but stinging slap over the shirt, against Gwyn’s nipple. Gwyn jerked backwards, shocked.

‘How much do you plan on hurting me?’ Gwyn said. ‘Because safewords are-’

‘I like the RACK system.’

Gwyn had no idea what that was, what that meant, and he could see from the know-it-all light in Augus’ eyes that he enjoyed knowing something Gwyn didn’t. The right thing to do would be to demand to know what that was, but Augus fisted up the base of his shirt and was dragging him slowly – stepping backwards – towards a closed bedroom door. Gwyn wasn’t drowning in the touch, not at all, but his chest burned and his dick was hard-ish and he was…too interested to care about talking about shit. People on the internet cared too much about safety, that’s all he’d really noticed in the articles.

People in real life played fast and loose way more often. Enough that Gwyn wondered if he should go on PrEP, but his parents would have to be dead for that to happen. He couldn’t do anything medical without them finding out about it. It was the final nail in that coffin of their vicious surveillance. His mother had her hands in the local network of hospitals and doctors in a way he didn’t completely understand. His father talked to Principal Albion on the phone and they went fishing together.

‘Sometimes I wonder if you’re too stupid to talk,’ Augus said, reaching back with one hand and turning the door handle. The door swung in, and Gwyn stepped into the dim room, blinking to adjust to the darkness. On the floor was a mattress serving as a bed. It was dressed with sheets, blankets, pillows, but it was still just…a mattress on the floor. A desk was beside it, laptop closed, a mountain of books that didn’t all look like they were about schoolwork. There were too many about law. A wardrobe with one door broken off its hinges, and clothing hanging neatly inside.

Gwyn had a walk-in robe. He had more clothes than he needed, and a lot of them were packed up in boxes because a lot didn’t fit inside the robe anymore.

‘Like what you see?’ Augus said.

The roof showed no signs that it was being eaten out by termites, but Gwyn believed him. There was no way Augus and Ash could afford to live here otherwise.

Gwyn squinted. There was really no way they could afford to live here anyway. Why hadn’t the house been demolished yet?

‘How do you live here?’ Gwyn said, meeting those green eyes. ‘How can you afford it? Ash can shoplift a lot of shit, but you can’t steal a house.’

Augus touched a finger to his nose, winked, and then began undoing Gwyn’s belt buckle. In only a small amount of time, he’d gotten better at it, fingers far less clumsy than they had been in the library. Gwyn stared down, raking his teeth over his bottom lip, wondering what his role should be.

It wasn’t even clear if Augus liked him. Augus could have hated him and just wanted to get laid. It shouldn’t have been hard for him to find someone, but maybe he just…liked the symbolism of it, something about the prefect fucking over the jock. Gwyn didn’t bother responding to half of Augus’ insults. He heard worse from his family regularly, and Augus calling him stupid or whatever, it didn’t
get to him as much as Augus wanted it to.

Gwyn liked that.

His jeans fell down to his ankles, and Gwyn’s ears felt hot. It was different in a house, instead of behind a club amongst the refuse. Or in hidden places in the school, where they could only do so much. It was embarrassing.

_How?_ Gwyn didn’t understand that at all.

‘Turn,’ Augus said, turning Gwyn to face a blank expanse of wall. Some of the plaster was cracked. The pale green paint had split in it. ‘Arms up, palms flat. Here, like this.’

Augus’ body brushing up against his from behind. The cloth of his pants caressing the back of Gwyn’s bare legs. His chest leaning against Gwyn’s back and shoulders. His hands sliding down Gwyn’s arms and grasping his wrists, then raising his arms only because Gwyn let him. Augus’ grip was strong and when he pushed Gwyn’s palms against the wall, on either side of Gwyn’s face, his thumbs stroked over the back of Gwyn’s hands.

‘Like that,’ Augus said.

Gwyn felt cold and shivery. He wondered if he should have demanded this happen elsewhere. Was Augus filming this? Would he leak it to the school?

Shouldn’t Gwyn care more?

Gwyn thought of the way his father could grab him, manhandle him more brutally than any wrestler he’d ever tackle, and get knuckles into a kidney sharply enough that the ache would stay with him for a week. All of that for a minor bruise that could be caused by anything at all. That could happen simply for a wrong look, a rebellious word, not saying yes fast enough. Sometimes, it was just for existing.

So, no, Gwyn didn’t care more. What worse could his father do now anyway, except murder him? Gwyn supposed there was always rape, but he was pretty sure his father would find that repulsive anyway. He’d never really seemed like the type. He’d probably go straight to beating someone to death.

Gwyn sighed and lay the side of his face against the cold wall, closed his eyes when Augus stroked his hands over Gwyn’s flanks. Sometimes above his shirt, sometimes under it.

‘You like that,’ Augus said, stating it in a way that didn’t require a response from Gwyn. ‘You’re a lot… You’re not quite what I… You really just let me do what I want.’

‘Mmhm,’ Gwyn said.

‘You never seem stressed about your homework, even though I know you struggle with it. Is it because you know you’re going to coast into one of the universities anyway? Wrestling will get you in on pretty shitty grades, won’t it?’

‘Yeah,’ Gwyn said. ‘I get stressed about homework.’

‘Interesting.’

Augus’ fingers curved around the cheeks of his ass, followed full strokes that warmed up his skin and did nothing to help with his goose bumps. Then thumbs hooking into his boxer briefs and
pulling them down and Gwyn closed his eyes and realised this was all strangely familiar. He’d never done anything like this in a bed before, but against a wall? Even the sound of Augus spitting onto his fingers was familiar, though Gwyn winced to think that there wouldn’t be any lube yet.

Fingers moving between the seam of his ass, and Gwyn bit the inside of his lip, nervous. It was one thing when an older stranger did it, because they’d probably never see each other again. No one knew who Gwyn was at that club. Even if they did meet eyes again, if the guy hadn’t liked Gwyn, they just…didn’t hook up again. It was neat and simple.

But this…

Gwyn would have to see him at school. Augus could shred him there. A few well-seasoned rumours and everything would be over.

‘You don’t really seem to be into this,’ Augus said, reaching around with his other hand and palming Gwyn’s half-hard cock. ‘Are you bored?’

Augus’ voice was dangerous, Gwyn realised he was still letting his mind drift.

‘I’m not bored,’ Gwyn said. ‘I’m here, aren’t I?’

‘You seem bored,’ Augus said sharply.

‘I’m not bored for fuck’s sake.’

‘Maybe you expect more, because you’re such a fucking whore or something,’ Augus said, and Gwyn opened his mouth to shoot that down, then went silent when the tip of Augus’ finger – barely covered in enough spit – pressed against his hole. Augus pushed a few more times, pressure that came and went, like he was testing to see what it was like. Maybe when it came down to it, he was nervous, shy, but Gwyn doubted it.

He spread his legs a little when Augus pushed enough to breach him, his finger sliding in, and Gwyn felt that discomfort mixed with the thrill of it, tender flesh being used in a way that so many people hated. He held his breath.

‘It’s so warm,’ Augus said. ‘Fuck. I didn’t think—’

_Fucking virgins._

Gwyn didn’t bother explaining that it was the _inside_ of his body, so of course it was fucking hot. Didn’t bother talking at all. He exhaled heavily and felt every minute flex and twitch of Augus’ index finger. Then it was moving back and forth by millimetres, just enough to get a more even coating of saliva, before shoving in deeper.

Augus’ hand on his cock squeezed, and Gwyn groaned softly, because okay, yeah, this wasn’t boring.

‘So now it’s all anatomy one-oh-one, hm?’ Augus said, pushing his index finger all the way to the end, so that his hand bumped against Gwyn’s ass hard. ‘Not everyone likes it, their prostate being touched, what about you?’

‘What about me?’ Gwyn said, about as casually as he could manage, Augus’ finger shifting around inside of him. Not very casually at all, really, his voice was shaking.

Augus’ finger curled, pushing _down_, and Gwyn blew out a hard breath and his cock twitched.
Augus must have felt it too, because his hand squeezed back in response.

‘Like that,’ Augus said. ‘Oh. Well, that’s actually easy, then.’

‘Can this happen without the dubs, thanks?’ Gwyn snapped. ‘We get it, you’re a virgin, and you don’t know what you’re fucking doing, so just-’

Augus’ finger dug down hard enough that Gwyn made an undignified sound, pressing his forehead hard into the wall as he rose on his tiptoes to avoid it. Augus’ other hand now digging into his waist, dragging him back, hissing like he was the one being pulled through the ringer. Seconds later, Augus’ hips pressed hard against Gwyn’s ass, which drove Augus’ finger just that tiny bit deeper.

Gwyn groaned, vaguely realised that he was trying to claw at the wall, made himself stop.

‘Shut the fuck up,’ Augus said and his voice was sharp, edged, but it sounded less like anger and more like lust. Gwyn hated him, but that tone of voice, that finger inside of him, too much and too dry, he sagged against the wall. Was it hard to breathe? Was that just his imagination?

Another finger, and Gwyn made a faint sound of outrage even as his cock twitched. No way did he have anal enough for that to be easy. Not when Augus seemed to want him to be tense as possible anyway.

‘This is the part where I tell you that you’re really tight, isn’t it?’ Augus said, and Gwyn heard the grin, and then felt it when Augus bit into his still-clothed shoulder. The teeth scraping felt good until it became a sure bite, and Gwyn cried out.

‘Fuck,’ he managed, as Augus dug his teeth in even more. Gwyn felt his tongue through the cloth, soaking through the fabric and making it stick. The finger was pressing deeper, Augus’ fingers corkscrewing, making room, on the barest edge of tolerable. Any rougher and Gwyn worried he might actually tear. The sting was too sharp, too uncomfortable, and Gwyn was torn between alarm and wanting to sink into it.

Augus dragged his teeth away, pressed his lips to the back of Gwyn’s neck, nudging away the stray curls there. Gwyn expected another bite, but Augus just licked over the back of his spine, pressing his whole body to Gwyn’s back, grinding into him.

Gwyn’s eyes fluttered closed, he could smell plaster and cleaning products in his nose, as well as sweat and deodorant from the both of them. His palms were flat against the wall again, his legs already ached which didn’t make sense, he couldn’t hear the termites in the ceiling, too aware of his heavy breathing, and Augus exhaling through his nose as he licked over Gwyn’s skin again.

‘You taste good,’ Augus said. ‘I just want to…God, I don’t…’

Augus’ nose nudging Gwyn’s hairline, edging along it, the touch surprisingly tender, intimate.

Augus shoved his fingers deeper and Gwyn flinched, feeling a sting too sharp to be good.

‘I think you-’

‘Shut up,’ Augus said, yanking his fingers out. Gwyn closed his eyes in relief, then heard Augus unzipping his fly and frowned.

‘What about lube?’ Gwyn said.

‘Yeah, yeah, I got some,’ Augus said dismissively.
Gwyn twisted, uncertain, and Augus shoved him back into the wall with a hand between his shoulder blades.

‘What, you don’t trust me?’ Augus said.

‘Have you given me a single fucking reason to?’

‘I got it, I got some. It comes in packets, you know.’

‘Yeah, I know,’ Gwyn said, indignant. Out of the two of them, Gwyn was not the one who was entirely clueless.

‘You’re wound too tight,’ Augus said, reaching around with a hand and rubbing over Gwyn’s cock generously, dipping his fingers into Gwyn’s groin, underneath, touching the tender skin above and below his cock. Gwyn pressed his lips together and his hands fell down the wall as he felt soothed by it. Augus petted him like he wanted Gwyn to be turned on, relaxed, not upset.

Augus’ hand on his cock, stroking it, feeling the shape of it instead of jerking him roughly. Fingers on the head, delicate until they pushed into the slit, and Gwyn’s voice broke. He wasn’t used to this. Mafydd had skull-fucked him a bunch, there were some other minor things. Plenty of times he blew people without reciprocation. That was just how that scene worked. The hand he was most used to feeling was his own. But Augus’ was...knowing.

Probably because he jerked off so much. But it wasn’t like Gwyn didn’t jerk off either, and he didn’t touch himself like that ever.

‘Nice?’ Augus said. ‘There, see? I’d even use lube but I want to save it all for your tight little hole, okay? Aren’t I sweet?’

Gwyn hummed as Augus drew his other hand away from his waist. A wet sound behind him, and Gwyn didn’t care much for what was going on, focusing instead on that hand between his legs. He didn’t know why he kept his hands on the wall, but it seemed important, part of the spell Augus was weaving. Stupid to believe there was a spell at all. But Augus touched him with enough gentleness that Gwyn felt some stupid yawning space inside of him want more.

Shifting, then Gwyn’s eyes widened when he felt the wet head of Augus’ cock move between his ass cheeks.

It wasn’t wet enough.

‘Did you lie?’ Gwyn said, feeling stupid.

‘Just shut up,’ Augus said.

‘Augus, wait-’

The hand at his cock vanished and gripped the flesh of his hip so roughly that Gwyn blinked. Gwyn twisted, his breath deserting him, a background anger like static that Augus had lied, that Augus had fucking lied to him and why wasn’t he surprised that-

‘Wait, Augus!’ Gwyn shouted, pushing back from the wall.

Augus swore, moved shily against Gwyn. The head of his cock notched against Gwyn’s hole, and Gwyn drew in a breath, took one step backwards – tangled in his own jeans and underwear – and Augus shoved.
The force was too much, Gwyn’s body gave way, his flesh tore. He didn’t hear it, but the flash of pain was more brutal than anything he could have guessed, lancing up the back of his spine, stealing his breath.

Red and white flashed in his eyes as he turned, instinctively reacting, unable to think even as warm, wet heat trickled immediately down his legs. Augus was staring at him wide-eyed, shock or horror, and Gwyn drew back his arm and decked Augus as hard as he could across the cheek. The meaty thud of it reverberating through his knuckles.

Augus staggered backwards, crumpling down onto his mattress. Gwyn leaned sideways against the cold wall, gasping faster and faster as the pain raced through him. He reached around behind himself, felt too much blood for a simple tear. That wasn’t… he couldn’t just go home and sleep that off. It felt bad, wrong. He was fucking injured.

He drew his fingers forward and stared at the blood on them. Not just a little bit of blood. His ass was throbbing all the way up deep inside of him, he felt nauseous. Augus hadn’t gotten that deep, Gwyn knew, but still.

‘Shit,’ Augus gasped from the bed. ‘Shit, Gwyn.’

He was pushing himself up, bleeding from his cheek, his eyes too wide. He looked so young.

With tearing like this, Gwyn couldn’t wrestle. Hell, he didn’t even know if he could take a shit. If he couldn’t wrestle, his parents were going to take him to the doctor anyway. He needed stitches. Blood was dripping from him now, not just trickling down his legs. He heard it tapping onto his underwear, his jeans. He felt like he couldn’t breathe. He couldn’t fucking breathe.

It wasn’t the pain.

He had to go to the hospital. He needed stitches. His parents…

Fuck.

Augus crowding close to him, and Gwyn felt rage snap through him. He shoved Augus back as hard as he could, sending him sprawling down onto the floor.

‘Get the fuck away from me!’ Gwyn shouted. ‘You fucking liar! I have to- I have to get to the hospital.’

‘I’ll take you,’ Augus said, his voice rushed and no longer smug or self-assured. ‘Give me your keys and I’ll-’

‘Are you serious?’

Gwyn bent down to grab his jeans, his underwear, pulling them up. A wave of dizziness kept him in that position, too vulnerable, too sore. His eyes were starting to burn from the sheer humiliation of it. He could feel the pieces of his life, the fractured puzzle that it was, beginning to break apart. He was shaking. He kept hoping the blood that he could see staining the insides of his legs, the fabric between his ankles, would just vanish. He kept telling himself that maybe it wasn’t that bad when he could feel in his gut that it was bad.

‘Look, just- Hate me, but give me your keys, you can’t drive yourself,’ Augus said, winded on the floor. He pushed himself up and Gwyn stared at him, knowing that Augus could see how wrecked he was. See the stupid expression on Gwyn’s face. Gwyn’s fury was so vast he thought he was capable of murder in that moment, just smashing his fist into Augus’ face until it was pulp and gore
and nothing more. Augus must have seen some of that too, because he stumbled backwards into his own table. Gwyn realised Augus’ dick was still out, had some blood on it and almost laughed.

‘Don’t ever- Don’t even,’ Gwyn hissed, managing to do the button on his jeans even though his hands were shaking too hard to manage the zip. He checked to see that his keys were still in one pocket, his wallet in the other. God, he was bleeding badly. It just seemed to be getting worse. The seat of his jeans already felt wet.

He walked out of Augus’ room, none of his steps steady, the pain worsening.

‘You can’t drive yourself,’ Augus said insistently, his voice higher than before. ‘Gwyn.’

‘Fucking watch me,’ Gwyn snarled, propelling himself through the front door with the sheer burning force of his anger.

He got into his car, Augus a few steps out of the front door – his dick finally back in his jeans – and staring at Gwyn with his mouth open. Gwyn sobbed once when his ass hit the seat. He could tell the hospital he was assaulted. He could tell them he hadn’t asked for it. Maybe his parents would think it was real, and not…

…No.

They were never going to believe that.

Fuck.

He started the engine and drove off as fast as he could, panicked about the amount of blood he was losing, about what his future held.

‘Fuck!’ he shouted, smashing his fist into the dashboard. His eyes spilled over, tears dripping too fast down his cheeks, collecting under his chin. He bit the inside of both of his cheeks and at the intersection drew up the closest Emergency Department on his phone. He let his phone tell him which way to go, tossing it onto the passenger seat, and listened to his breathing – high, humiliating, stupid, stupid, stupid – all fifteen minutes to the hospital.

Chapter End Notes

(I had a note to myself in this chapter that reads: No, Augus, that is NOT what the RACK system looks like. Not 100% at all, dipshit.)

Feel like shouting at me on Tumblr? Go ahead! :D
When We Go Wrong

Chapter Notes

SO. Here we go.

Augus

*

Augus leaned heavily against the kitchen bench. His phone screen bright on the counter. There, one message to Ash:

Come home. Now.

A throbbing in his upper back where he’d landed badly when Gwyn had pushed him. Blood had gathered at his jaw and chin where it had trickled down his cheek. It didn’t feel like there was too much. It wasn’t dripping to the floor like Gwyn’s blood had.

He couldn’t think of what to do. A part of him wanted to call Gwyn and demand he come back so that Augus could drive him to the hospital instead, which made him want to laugh. It was just such a singularly useless thing to want to do. Augus could feel saliva still drying on his cock, and blood. Probably blood. Augus couldn’t even go back in his room and look. He knew there was some on the floor.

A packet of frozen stir fry vegetables in the freezer, and Augus pressed it against his throbbing cheekbone and thought that normally he was doing this for Ash. Ash was the one that got punched. Well. These days. Augus knew how to take a punch too. But it’d been a long time since he’d had to suffer through the ice cold pain mixed signals that filtered into his eye as he sighed.

His phone buzzed, he looked at it, didn’t reply to Ash’s message. He was coming home. That was all that mattered.

*

‘What’d he do? I’ll fucking kill him,’ Ash was saying through the door even as he turned the key. Augus was in his room now, blood cleaned from his face, staring at Gwyn’s blood on the floor, thinking that he should probably clean that up. Was it evidence? Was Gwyn going to press charges?

‘Augus? Augus-? Are you-?’ Ash stopped in the doorway. ‘He fucking hit you?’

Ash rushed over, staring at Augus with wide eyes, moving the bag of vegetables away to see the cut on his cheek. Augus could see how livid he was, tried to think of how to summarise what might have been one of the most pivotally stupid things he’d ever done in his life.

‘I can assure you, I earned it,’ Augus said.

‘No you fucking didn’t,’ Ash said, face screwing up. ‘Who the fuck says something like that? You know better. You fucking-’
He’d taken two steps backwards, looked down to the drops of blood on the floor. Confusion, then anger again. He pointed at Augus, it felt accusatory. Augus felt like Ash could suddenly see everything that had happened. He thought – stupidly – that Ash would hit him then, which was ridiculous.

‘Look what he did,’ Ash said roughly, pointing at the floor.

‘Oh no,’ Augus said, wincing. ‘What I did.’

He could tell Ash didn’t understand. Didn’t get it.

‘Gwyn drove himself to the hospital,’ Augus added.

Ash’s eyes widened and he looked down again, looked at Augus’ cheek, looked around the room. He paled further. Augus wondered what he was thinking. Then wondered which hospital Gwyn was going to. Then wondered if Gwyn would press charges. Augus would absolutely lose his scholarship over it.

The cut-throat part of him that governed just about every choice in his life wanted to take action to stop that from happening at any cost. Hadn’t he recorded them making out in the past? Didn’t he have evidence? He could prove it was a relationship. Gwyn’s family could smash him into the ground and Augus would still fight them in court if he had to.

The rest of him was tired, shocked at himself, at his stupidity. That part seemed to be winning.

‘What did you do?’ Ash whispered.

Augus summed it up as best as he could, watching the way Ash’s expression turned disbelieving, and then his eyes narrowed and his mouth slanted into a frown that Augus wasn’t used to seeing directed at him.

‘So you assaulted him,’ Ash said. ‘Or rape, really, if he was telling you to wait like that.’

Augus knew he’d made a mistake, but it wasn’t like that, was it? He stared at Ash, then slowly shook his head.

‘No, it wasn’t-’

‘I’m calling it like it is,’ Ash said. ‘Jesus. I mean from what you’ve- Fucking hell, Augus. How did you not know? I know you watch a lot of porn but for fuck’s sake, have you never actually…looked into it before that? I thought that you, with all your research and reading and bullshit would know. Lubricant is a real thing you actually need for fucking someone up the ass if you’re not already fucking them all the goddamn time. God, I’m…’

Ash laughed and walked out of the room. Augus followed him.

‘I’m fucking pissed,’ Ash said.

‘He could press charges,’ Augus said. ‘I could lose the scholarship.’

‘Nope,’ Ash said, pointing at him again. ‘Nope. I’m not listening to you do that. I need to go for a walk. I thought you were fucking smarter than some dick-led wanker, like I know you can be a dirty player but I just… Yeah. Walk. I’ll be back in a bit. Don’t message him. And don’t fucking tell him not to press charges.’
‘I think-’

‘You shut up,’ Ash said, grabbing his keys off the counter and walking out of the front door, slamming it behind him.

_I think I’m the last person he wants to hear from_, Augus wanted to say, but he knew Ash expected Augus to defend himself.

Augus sighed. He sat down on the mattress on his floor and stared at the blood on the carpet. He wasn’t going to message Gwyn now. But at some point, he’d have to do what he hated doing more than anything else.

Apologise.

*

At school, Augus expected to be called up to Principal Albion’s office. Instead, nothing happened. The most significant happening the entire day was Gwyn not showing at lunch.

Gwyn didn’t show up the next day. Or Wednesday. He didn’t respond to text messages. He didn’t respond to phone calls. Didn’t respond to voicemails.

On Friday, no sign of Gwyn and no call to the Principal’s office and no police coming to his on-campus housing, he felt like he was shredding himself on the inside with stress. He couldn’t focus properly, he wasn’t paying as much attention in his job and it was showing, he was snappy, constantly on edge.

Gulvi at lunch shook her head slowly, looking concerned.

‘He hasn’t said anything to me. At all. Maybe he’s really sick?’

‘Just text me if he gets in touch,’ Augus said. ‘I’m… This isn’t like him.’

‘That’s true,’ Gulvi said, and then picked up her phone and smiled at it, and Augus knew it was Kayla. That was always the Kayla smile.

Augus dug his fingers into his hair and stared down at the table.

It wasn’t even that he needed Gwyn to accept his apology. He had a bad feeling. He had a stone cold bad feeling about all of this. Not some fear that Gwyn was going to kick his ass, or that he was going to press charges – though that niggled in the back of his mind, just…

Augus had to see him, just to prove to himself that he was at least okay. Did someone stay in the hospital for a week for what Augus had done? But no, hospitals turfed people as soon as humanly possible, sometimes even neglectfully before that. Which meant he was home. What had he told his parents? Why hadn’t his parents come to the school to kick Augus out of it?

Augus just had a bad, bad feeling. The longer time passed with nothing happening, the more Augus was convinced that something _had_ happened, and he just hadn’t been there to see it.

*

At the end of the second week, going out of his mind, he had Gwyn’s address in the map app on his phone and Ash drove him to one of the streets nearby.

‘It’s been two weeks,’ Augus said. ‘It’s just-’
‘I know, I know, you keep saying, something’s not right. What if he’s just like, fucking traumatised and staying home?’

‘No,’ Augus said, shaking his head, frowning. ‘No. It’s not… I have this weird- Look, you remember when we were in that home together, and I had that feeling about Mikal?’

Ash went silent, blinking ahead for a few seconds. His fingers clenched on the steering wheel.

‘That’s a radically different situation,’ Ash said.

‘I know,’ Augus said. ‘But I have the same feeling.’

‘That’s guilt.’

‘I know,’ Augus snapped. ‘But on top of that, alongside it, look… I know you’re mad at me. I don’t give a shit if he doesn’t care about me or never wants to see me again, whatever, but how come nothing’s happened to me? And if he’s pretending everything is fine, how come he hasn’t been at school for two weeks? You can have major, invasive surgery on three internal organs and still get sent home in a week!’

‘Yeah that part’s fucking dodgy,’ Ash said. ‘No way would they just let him stay home forever. Surely if they thought he was a victim of something they’d come after you the way they did Mafydd, right? So why…nothing at all?’

‘See?’ Augus said impatiently.

He sent Gwyn a text:

I’m near your house. I’m coming over.

N, Gwyn responded.

It was the first text back he’d gotten since Augus had injured him, and Augus grit his teeth. He was relieved that Gwyn was at least alive, but also frustrated.

I'm going to knock on your front door, tell your parents what I did, and apologise.

He had no intention of doing any of those things. Well, apologising to Gwyn, but privately. He wasn’t going to run headlong into shafting the remainder of his scholarship. He didn’t need an ulcer before the age of twenty.

Whr u? Gwyn responded.

Jacaranda St. Opposite the park. A pause, and then Augus sent. Are you okay?

Mt me bhnd my house, nr nd of trees.

Augus held up the message to Ash, just to show him what a trainwreck of bullshit he had to decipher. Even while knowing he’d made one of the stupidest fucking mistakes of his whole life, and still feeling stunned at himself, and needing to see Gwyn, he couldn’t believe what he had to deal with.

‘Huh,’ Ash said. ‘Should I come?’

Do you want Ash with me? He will protect you from me with his life, Augus sent.
Ash, who was looking over his shoulder, made a grumbling noise.

Wlkng dwn now, Gwyn sent.

‘He just drops vowels, mostly,’ Ash said, still reading over Augus’ shoulder. ‘It’s readable. Are you sure you don’t want me to come?’

‘What is he going to do?’ Augus said, rolling his eyes. ‘Kill me? At least then I wouldn’t have to worry about exams.’

‘Hilarious. Fucking hilarious. Well, here, in case you need it.’ Ash reached into his pocket, held out what was unmistakeably a switchblade, and Augus blinked at it.

‘Yes,’ Augus said drily, ‘because after ripping him a new one two weeks ago, I’m going to stab him to death now.’

He got out, kept his map app open and walked, shoving the other hand deep into his pocket. He was nervous. He didn’t like this. Gwyn hadn’t said whether things were okay, of course they weren’t. Maybe he just caught the flu at the hospital, it could happen. Maybe Gwyn was going to tell him they were still preparing a case to press charges. But it really shouldn’t have taken so long to prepare one, Gwyn’s family had the best lawyers, and they had physical evidence, and they had two emancipated youths with shitty backgrounds. A lazy judge could’ve dealt with a case like that in their sleep.

Augus got to the stand of trees first. He walked on the other side of the street when he saw the tall, red-brick fence that bordered the An Fnwy Estate where Gwyn’s parents reigned supreme. He followed it along, seeing a large gate where bigger service vehicles would approach the property. The intermittent trees on the other side of the fence. Then a smaller, green wooden gate that had moss all over it and looked like it was no longer used. There, Augus crossed the road towards the pine trees. They grew thickly on a small plot of land that didn’t seem to be owned by anyone anymore.

He leaned against a dry trunk after checking it for ants or other bugs, and waited. He kept his phone out, and wondered if this would be some kind of practical joke. Maybe Gwyn would just let him wait here, leave him hanging.

Augus had, of course, several days after everything, spent some time on the internet looking up stupid 101 guides for anal sex. Mostly, he just heard Gwyn telling him he was a liar, he felt how Gwyn’s rim had caught on his cock – which had felt great initially – followed by the tearing, the sudden warm wetness where lubricant should have been. He’d had nightmares about it. Waking up from ghostly images of Gwyn bleeding too much, bleeding to death, and Augus couldn’t make it stop, couldn’t help him. Or hearing Gwyn screaming in pain, and Augus unable to move, or worse, moving forward and making it worse.

The mossy gate opened, and Gwyn stepped through it. Augus saw the way his head was down, his shoulders hunched. Augus opened his mouth to apologise and then he saw Gwyn’s face.

In seconds he took in all the details. The long sleeves even though it was too warm for them. The long pants. The sneakers. A fucking turtleneck. It was a miracle that he wasn’t wearing sunglasses to hide the bruising under his eyes.

Gwyn walked over, but stayed some distance away.

‘There’s no surveillance cameras here,’ he said to the ground. ‘But go home. You’ve seen me. Fuck
off.’

Augus wished he couldn’t think. Wished he couldn’t connect the dots as quickly as he was connecting them. Wished that he didn’t know that a turtleneck meant that Gwyn probably had a hand-shaped bruise on his neck, or that the reason he’d stayed home for two weeks was that he’d been beaten to shit and couldn’t show his face, or that this was almost certainly not the first time it had happened, or that Gwyn wasn’t going to do anything about it, which meant he’d gone home with the injury he had, and they’d…they’d…

‘Your Dad?’ Augus said, his tongue sticking in his mouth.

Gwyn shrugged.

‘What did you tell him?’

‘Nothing,’ Gwyn said. ‘The hospital called him, and I got home, and he told me a few things.’

‘With his fists.’

‘And his feet,’ Gwyn said, smirking a little. It made the split on his lip widen, and though it didn’t open, Augus knew that would have been nasty enough that Gwyn wouldn’t have wanted to even open his mouth for the first few days. He had a cut on his eyebrow, bruises on his temple, under both of his eyes. They were fading now to yellows and pale violets. ‘I need to sit down.’

‘Where?’

Gwyn looked around slowly, then walked through the pine trees, following something too thin to be considered a path, that he’d clearly used many times before. On the other side of that, the property with its pines ended and became a tract of natural forest, complete with protective low fence and tiny opening for those who liked to walk through remnant wild places. Gwyn walked through the narrow opening. Augus wondered where the hell they were going. But down a hardly used limestone path was a small bench made of concrete.

Gwyn looked at it for a long time, then sat down slowly, with a hiss, and Augus bit hard on the inside of his lip.

‘What was…the damage that I-?’

‘Six stitches,’ Gwyn said. ‘But they’re dissolving now. And laxatives. And…a cream and an STI panel etcetera.’

‘Did they do a rape kit?’

Gwyn swung his eyes up to Augus, and the sunlight directly on his face made everything look so much worse that Augus felt like he was standing protectively in front of an injured Ash all over again. Standing in front of Ash, staring gamely up at their supposed guardian, all to make sure that it finally stopped.

But Augus had caused this. He’d caused it.

‘No,’ Gwyn said.

‘You should’ve asked for one.’

‘You would’ve lost your scholarship at best,’ Gwyn said, closing his eyes and leaning back. ‘So no.’
‘Your Dad beat the living shit out of you,’ Augus said, because he had to say it aloud to see how Gwyn would react. Gwyn didn’t react like it was a terrible, shameful secret. He just shrugged. He shrugged. ‘And he’s done it before. But you’re a wrestler, you- There’s… People would see the bruises.’

‘They would,’ Gwyn said, ‘but father’s usually smarter about it. He lost his shit when I got home.’

‘You’ve lost too much weight.’

Way too much weight. Augus thought about what he’d said that day, about Gwyn not eating. And Gwyn lying to him about it.

‘Jesus,’ Augus whispered.

‘He’s sending me away,’ Gwyn said, opening his eyes and staring into the shrubs and trees ahead of them. ‘Wentworth Military Academy. I see out this semester, and then that’s it. No more Murdock.’

Augus felt sick.

‘That place is a smokescreen for conversion therapy.’

‘I know what it is,’ Gwyn said.

‘You’re telling me that you came home badly injured from the hospital, with six stitches and a ton of medication and his decision wasn’t to find the person who assaulted you, but to send you to a conversion camp? Beat you? I’m not telling you anything you don’t already know, am I? You can’t go.’

‘I have to go.’

‘They’re not- They’re not infallible. You have the evidence of domestic violence, you’re… You can’t stay in that situation. It’s obviously been bad for some time. It’s- Shit, why you were rebelling in the first place, wasn’t it? Gwyn, you can’t just stay in that situation.’

‘I have to.’

‘No,’ Augus breathed, sitting next to him. ‘You don’t.’ His mind was racing, he felt his chest prickling with heartburn. ‘What about legal emancipation? You have- You have a case. We could… I could help you. I could do that.’

‘You?’ Gwyn said scathingly, he raised his eyebrows at Augus, and Augus hated that he knew exactly how Gwyn could be so flippant about this, about everything that had happened. People who were beaten once, they cried about it. People who were beaten a few times, well, sometimes they still cried about it. But people who were treated badly from the beginning, they…changed.

Augus knew, objectively, that rich people could rape and be violent and be nasty. He knew that all too well, working in the law firm that he did, even though his own life had been one of poverty. But he’d never thought that Gwyn’s family, or…his father…

‘Could your mother help you?’

Gwyn stared at him for a long time, then quietly said: ‘In her own way, she’s worse than he is.’

‘If I could speak to a lawyer, and see what we could do for you, I mean-’

‘-They have the best lawyers,’ Gwyn said grimly. ‘They have the hospital, they have the Principal of
Murdock, they have the police wrapped around their little finger.’

‘Maybe as an institution, but not every individual policeperson who’s ever lived,’ Augus said. ‘Not everyone. And I’ve done it before. I’m a legally emancipated minor, I know the process. Not…not like this, but I know the basics. At least get you out of there and legally making your own decisions for your life or something. If you keep living here, they’ll- I’ve heard rumours about Wentworth, Gwyn. Everyone has.’

Gwyn said nothing at all. He looked defeated. Augus wanted to run back to the car and tell Ash everything, because he knew Ash would understand the urgency Augus felt. Knew that Ash would say that Gwyn didn’t have to spend another night in that house. But it wasn’t logical. It wasn’t the way the world worked. But emancipation? That was a thing the law allowed for. And Gwyn had the bruises. If Augus could get photographic evidence, he could compile a case.

‘Have you ever been to hospital before?’ Augus said quietly. ‘For things…at home?’

‘Mmhm,’ Gwyn said. ‘Dislocations when I was a toddler. Some things since then.’

Augus reached out, hesitated and then placed the flat of his hand against Gwyn’s arm. In a second, Gwyn turned, grabbed Augus’ wrist and twisted it, slamming it down onto the bench. Augus’ entire body moved to stop his joint from breaking, he strangled out a shout of pain.

‘No,’ Gwyn said firmly.

‘So you’ll…’ Augus panted, his whole arm fucking hurt, ‘so you’ll…defend yourself against me, but not them?’

Gwyn let go. Augus lifted his arm slowly as he settled back into a seated position. He gingerly moved his wrist. It was bruised, but not broken or sprained. It was easy to forget Gwyn was actually good at wrestling until he did something like that.

‘I don’t know how much my word is worth to you,’ Augus said. ‘Probably shit, because I lied to you, but I am sorry. I am. I want to help.’

‘You can’t help.’

‘I’m probably the only one in the school who isn’t faculty who can,’ Augus said. ‘Think about where I work. Think about my background. About the fact that I’m legally emancipated. We can find you a prochein ami. Is there…anyone- Any sympathetic adults who would support you? Represent you?’

‘No,’ Gwyn said.

He was so sure. Which meant he had no one he talked to about this. Augus knew. He knew from the way Gwyn hid it, from the way he never let anything slip, the way he had lies ready whenever someone asked him if he had problems eating.

‘I have some ideas for that,’ Augus said. He did. He already wanted to leave and get things rolling. He wanted to talk to Mr. Prince. He wanted to get Gwyn and take him back to the car and then take him home, somewhere Gwyn would likely never want to be again.

‘You lied to me,’ Gwyn said. ‘So you could get some. I would’ve let you fuck me as much as you wanted, if you’d just used lube.’

‘I made a mistake,’ Augus said. ‘I did. I know you hate me, I understand, but—'
‘No,’ Gwyn said tiredly. ‘I don’t. I don’t like you very much. And I think if we ever fuck again, I fuck you.’

Where Augus’ mind had been tripping over itself – trying to build a case even though he wasn’t actually a lawyer and only had his own experiences to build upon – it ground to a halt at Gwyn’s words.

It was pure reflex to say: ‘I don’t think so.’

Gwyn’s face was hard. ‘That’s it. That’s the only way. So you know.’

‘Know what it’s like to end up in hospital?’ Augus said, alarmed.

‘No,’ Gwyn said. ‘The only one out of the two of us who would ever do that is you.’

‘So…you want to fuck me, me, who…’ Augus laughed bitterly. ‘You don’t even want to fuck me, though.’

Gwyn gave him a look. A look. That expression didn’t say ‘hi, I’m a raging bottom 100% of the time.’ It said something very different that Augus had never noticed, never seen before. Maybe Gwyn was only a raging bottom like 97% of the time and Augus had found himself caught in the other 3 percent. It wasn’t a pleasant feeling. He couldn’t even imagine it. He refused to imagine it.

‘But it’s moot,’ Gwyn said. ‘Isn’t it, Augus? You know why. You don’t want a relationship. You hate it all, remember?’

‘I do,’ Augus said, feeling like this conversation wasn’t going anywhere it was supposed to. Hadn’t gone a single predictable direction. Not once. Gwyn still had all those bruises on his face. Augus just wanted to touch them. Or touch the skin near them. He wanted to feel the inflammation in the skin for himself. He wanted to see Gwyn’s expression. He didn’t want to hurt him, he just wanted to… touch him.

‘Go home,’ Gwyn said tiredly. ‘Just go home.’

‘Is he still hitting you?’ Augus said. ‘Since…the hospital? Or did he stop?’

‘It’s not as much now,’ Gwyn said. ‘It’s like before. He knows I need to go back to school soon. Fuck knows what he’s gonna do when I’m in a Christian military camp, because…’

‘Hit his wife?’ Augus volunteered.

‘No one hits her,’ Gwyn said. ‘No one would ever try.’

‘Gwyn,’ Augus said. ‘You have to… You have to get photographs of your bruises and send them to me. As evidence. Even if you do nothing, just in case. No, don’t look at me like that, I mean it. You have to get… okay, you have to get one of your front, one of your back. Do you have a full length mirror? You do, don’t you? You have to get a full length of yourself, and your back if you can, and then close ups. Good lighting. I’d take them but you can’t get out of the house can you?’

‘No,’ Gwyn said.

‘What about now? Will there be consequences for you coming here now?’

‘I don’t know,’ Gwyn said. ‘Maybe. Probably not. They let me jog around the block for thirty minutes. Cardio. Not that I’ve wanted to. Walking is still… The stitches are weird. But they’re
‘This is why you never talk, isn’t it? All those times we talked about you being the rich kid and spoiled and you just take it on the chin and what, go home and he beats you for being a fag?’

‘Not just a fag,’ Gwyn said. ‘He doesn’t like all of this.’

Gwyn gestured at his whole self, and then ran a hand through his scraggly hair. He looked so tired. Too thin. Was he eating at all? Augus wanted to take him home and make him something. And then watch him eat it. Kids did that. Kids stopped eating sometimes in bad households. He’d seen it. Ash had done it. Ash had starved himself.

‘It’s weird that you seem to give a shit,’ Gwyn said. ‘That’s a joke.’

‘I got Ash out of a fucking shithole foster home because I gave a shit, and I emancipated myself so I could represent myself as a fucking adult so I could take care of him.’ His voice was harder than he wanted it to be, and he was suddenly angry that people didn’t realise these things about him. They just didn’t know. Of course Gwyn didn’t know, Augus had treated him like shit, but that was because… It was because…

Augus stood up suddenly and walked across the limestone path, his sneakers in the clover on the other side. He stared down and knew the smart play would be to leave. To say Gwyn was fine. To never talk to him again. To leave Gwyn to go to conversion therapy and forget about him. Augus had done his good deeds. He’d done plenty. More than the average person would ever ante up to.

He wanted to open his mouth and say ‘you’re not worth it,’ but knowing that Gwyn probably heard some version of that from his parents, he couldn’t do it.

‘Would they have made the decision to send you to conversion therapy without me? Without this?’

‘It was always a threat,’ Gwyn said. ‘But it wasn’t definite.’

Augus winced.

‘They’re such good Christians,’ Augus drawled.

‘Depends on how you judge that,’ Gwyn said. ‘But yeah, I guess. In a Leviticus kind of way.’

‘And you’re their only son. So you can’t be queer.’

‘Can’t be fucked by men,’ Gwyn said. ‘Bad enough that I don’t even prefer to top.’

I fucking knew it, you’re so not a top, Augus thought, but left that aside. He’d seen Gwyn’s expression before. He knew whatever Gwyn’s preferences, he could be flexible. The thought was… not a nice one. It made Augus’ entire torso feel tight. It made his ass clench pre-emptively.

‘So then, what was Mafydd?’ Augus said. ‘He take advantage? Your parents had your hands all over that expulsion and that restraining order.’

‘They did,’ Gwyn said. ‘It was complicated. I don’t know what Mafydd was, anymore. I thought I loved him. But you know, probably just… a crush or something.’

It was way more complicated than what Gwyn was saying. Even the way he said it was probably just a crush, like he didn’t believe it, but he was being made to say it. Even then, it was different to the main story, which was that an older student had taken advantage of a younger student, and the
parents had just wanted to protect their son.

‘Did they hit you then?’ Augus said suddenly.

‘Augus,’ Gwyn said impatiently, ‘just pretend the answer is always yes, and stop asking me.’

‘I have so many questions.’

‘I can tell.’

‘And you’re answering a lot of them,’ Augus said. ‘You’re just too tired to do anything else, aren’t you?’

‘No,’ Gwyn said. ‘I mean, yeah. Yes. I’m tired. But I also hate my parents and would like them to die in a fire, so. Here I am. This is…a situation I made myself. I knew it was coming.’

‘So you make them hit you,’ Augus said, turning abruptly, eyes narrowing.

‘Yeah.’

‘Uh huh. Okay, well, that’s a glowing tick in the box of you being super fucked up.’

Gwyn just looked up at him and his expression didn’t change. That same blank, faintly disapproving expression that was always on his face. He wasn’t even going to disagree. He knew. Augus wanted to scream.

‘I’m getting you out of there,’ Augus said.

‘Augus Each Uisge vs. the Ap Nudd Family and Friends?’ Gwyn said. He smirked. ‘Good luck with that.’

‘I have to know one thing,’ Augus said. ‘One fucking thing. If I come to you with a plan, if I tell you that you have to fucking get out, will you do it? Or will you stay with them like the kicked, beaten dog that you are right now?’

‘If you come to me with something more than, ‘hey, Gwyn, come stay at my place that your parents and police will trash in a hot second and then ruin my scholarship and my brother’s too’ then I’ll come with you.’ A flash of desperation across Gwyn’s face that was there and gone in a second. ‘I’ll come with you.’

‘Let me care about my scholarship,’ Augus said. ‘I’ve been dealing with Pain-in-the-Ash-Glashtyn for what feels like my entire life. This will just be… Just need some creative- I’m going to need to talk to some people. I’m going to have to tell some people what’s happening to you.’

‘If that gets back to my father,’ Gwyn said, ‘I hope you know where to pick wildflowers for my grave.’

‘I’m not sentimental like that,’ Augus said. ‘I wouldn’t pick any flowers for your grave.’

They stared at each other. Augus had the sudden sense that he was seeing more of the real Gwyn than anyone at Murdock had ever seen. It was all so familiar too. The cynicism, the bitterness, the deadpan humour, like he’d pulled back a curtain and realised that Gwyn was, miraculously, his people. Gwyn had earned the privilege in one of the worst ways possible. Augus didn’t like it at all.

‘I’ll be careful about who I tell,’ Augus said finally. ‘Trust that I know some people who are like vaults though.’
‘It’s funny, you know,’ Gwyn said. ‘Sixty five text messages. Ten voicemails. Eleven emails. Including one where you just cut and pasted an entire essay on the history of *pro bono*, but changed all the incidences of *bono*, to boner.’

‘I liked that one,’ Augus said. He’d been desperate that day.

‘I laughed,’ Gwyn admitted.

‘I honestly didn’t know I was fucking up *that* badly,’ Augus said quickly. ‘I knew it was wrong to lie. I knew that. I just thought you’d *like* it. I fucked up. Ash is so mad. Probably because he’s been banging people since time immemorial and actually knows about anal.’

‘And you just know about porn,’ Gwyn said, closing his eyes. ‘Well. You know how that’s working in the future. If you want anything to do with me, like that, I fuck you. No better way to learn it, I assume.’

Augus swallowed.

‘What was your favourite text?’ he said.

‘I think it was something like, ‘I’ll let you beat me with a very thin twig if you just send me a reply.”’

‘Of course your reply would have been *nonsense,*’ Augus said, ‘if you’d sent it. Because you hate the English language.’

‘I do,’ Gwyn said. He looked sad now, though the expression disappeared again behind indifference. Augus hated this. He couldn’t do anything. He walked closer, knew he had to get back to the car, knew Gwyn had to get back into that hellhole that they’d all mocked him for. That ‘glamorous’ life they all said he was living. Augus should’ve known better. He *knew* better. He’d been to homes that were all smiles and *perfect* on the outside, and were human trafficking dens on the inside. He *knew.*

But he hadn’t *learned.*

‘Take the photos,’ Augus said, staring down at him. ‘Take them. So help me, take them, or I’ll send you to the hospital again.’

Gwyn just blinked up at him, not scared. Eventually, he nodded once.

‘Send them to me as soon as you can,’ Augus insisted. ‘Tonight, even. If you can. You’re healing, so whatever is there, you need to get it now.’

‘Okay,’ Gwyn said.

‘Good. That’s good. And reply to me. Is it- Wait, is it safe for you to reply to me?’

‘I have apps on my phone that scrub my history and encrypt my data,’ Gwyn said. He drew his phone out of his pocket, and then Augus watched as he drew another phone out of his pocket. They were identical. Same protective cover and everything. ‘Also I have two phones. This is the one they think I use all the time.’

Augus couldn’t quite believe it. That was clever.

‘Wait, so you don’t *have* to type that way to me?’ Augus said.

‘No,’ Gwyn said. ‘But die mad about it.’
Augus opened his mouth, closed it again.

‘I have to get back to Ash,’ Augus said eventually. ‘I have to…talk to some people. Send me those photos, all right? Don’t…wait too long, because you do not want to end up in a situation where you have to fake them by having someone else hit you. I’ve seen it happen. It’s not worth it.’

‘Yeah,’ Gwyn said.

‘Yes, well…’ Augus paused, looked back down the path, looked back at Gwyn. It felt wrong just leaving him here. It felt wrong not giving him something to eat. But he couldn’t take him. It wasn’t logical. Gwyn was right, a plan wasn’t just stealing Gwyn back to Augus’ house, where everything would fall apart quickly. ‘Ah. I’ll be in touch.’

Augus walked past Gwyn, and didn’t step backwards fast enough to stop Gwyn from grabbing onto his wrist again. Gwyn didn’t twist it this time, he just stared up at Augus, his eyebrows knitting together. Eyes too bright, too earnest. Nothing like the tired, flat exhaustion of the entire meeting. Whatever was behind that was so raw that it hurt to see.

‘Get me out of there,’ he said. ‘Please.’

It felt like the temperature had just dropped, but it was Augus’ skin crawling, pimpling with goosebumps in response to those words. He flashed a smile that he hoped looked confident, but his heart was racing.

‘Sure,’ he said. Like it’d be easy. ‘Sure.’

Gwyn let go of his wrist, leaned back against the bench, and Augus walked away, chilled to the bone.

*

‘It’s bad,’ Augus said, dropping into the passenger seat. The whole car smelled of tobacco, but amazingly, not weed. Maybe Ash wanted his wits about him. ‘It’s bad, it’s bad, it’s fucking bad.’

‘He didn’t accept your apology?’ Ash said.

Augus laughed, shaking his head. He hadn’t even thought of that part. He didn’t even care about that part.

‘It’s so much worse than that,’ Augus said. He looked over at Ash and frowned. ‘You need to drive us to campus. I have to go speak to Mr. Prince.’

‘About what?’ Ash said warily.

‘About the emancipation of a minor,’ Augus said, ‘because of child abuse.’

A pause, where Ash just stared at him for a long time. Then he faced forwards.

‘Got it,’ Ash said, turning the key in the ignition and swinging out of the car bay easily. Augus was so grateful for Ash sometimes. He could be a complete pain in the ass. But there were times when he was like this. When he understood exactly what to do.
I'm posting this early because I'm feeling sorry for myself (is that weird? Sometimes I just wanna share stuff when I feel down). New tags: 'Efnisien is his own warning.' Also 'descriptions of child abuse.'

Gwyn

* 

Gwyn stared at himself in the full-length mirror. Looked at the bruises that still mottled his body. There were a few cuts on his thigh still, where his father’s boot had torn the skin. It’d caught him the wrong way, and it hurt more to walk because of that than because of the stitches between his legs that were now beginning to dissolve.

After a few breaths, he took several photos of himself. He included his face in one of them, because maybe they’d need that for identification. But the rest were close ups of the bruises. They weren’t that bad anymore. Gwyn felt sick documenting them. He’d done it once before when he was fourteen, so desperate that he thought he’d do something about what was happening. He never had.

Augus said not everyone could be corrupt, but enough people could be corrupt that it wasn’t always worth the risk.

He took photos of his back, his shoulders, by setting the timer on his camera. He had to do it a few times before his phone camera actually focused on him instead of the trophies and medals on the shelves behind him. Then it was done, and he hurriedly got dressed again. He wasn’t allowed a lock on his door, and while his mother was shopping and his father was having a meeting about something Gwyn didn’t give a single shit about, Efnisien was prowling the house.

Though right now, he was probably listening to classical music in Crielle’s sun-room and jerking off or something. Gwyn didn’t know. He didn’t want to know.

Gwyn sat on the bed and entered the passwords he needed to access his own photos. Everything on this phone was layers of encryption, security, constant password protections that timed out in sixty seconds or less. Then he went back through older folders, to one from two years ago. His younger face miraculously unblemished, his hair longer, shaggier, and his body covered in bruises. That’d been one of the times he’d pissed blood for two weeks. He’d been a mess. Even the bridges of his feet had bruises, his father pushing him back against the wall and ramming the heel of his boot into Gwyn’s foot, and Gwyn desperately hoping that it wouldn’t break anything while begging his father to stop.

He’d thought he was being murdered.

It wasn’t often his father got that bad. Normally it was just…a backhand here, a sneaky kidney punch there, so many lectures that Gwyn began to dream of being hit. But when his father snapped, Gwyn’s entire body seized with the terror that he’d be killed. It was a feeling he didn’t like, and he’d had it two weeks ago when he’d come back from the hospital.
Now, his father was avoiding him. Small blessings. Apparently the sight of Gwyn’s face was too much, or something, and Gwyn wanted to say the feeling was incredibly mutual, but…not worth making him snap again.

He inhaled slowly and brought up Augus’ number, staring at the text messages he’d gotten earlier when Augus had come to visit. It felt unreal. How had Augus come to be at his house? How had he cared enough to say that he’d help, multiple times, even going as far as to lay out some kind of strategy now? Gwyn wondered if he’d send the photos and Augus would laugh at him, print them and blow them up and stick them up all over the school. His anger at Augus was more muted than before, it had deflated when Gwyn had realised how much of this he’d really caused for himself.

Augus had been stupid, but Gwyn had been stupid too.

He sent a message: *Hr*

Then, he sent all the photos. The ones from now. The ones from the past.

Augus responded before all the photos had sent.

_Her? Here? Hero? Hari? What vowels are you dropping? This is absurd. I hate this._

Gwyn stared at the response and wondered how anything could possibly be endearing about it. Maybe it was that he’d been convinced by all those desperate, earnest expressions he’d seen on Augus’ face before. He’d never seen those before.

Augus: *Oh. You meant here. Holy shit._

Gwyn felt nervous.

_Snt older 1s 2_

Augus responded in a flash. *Do you have any others like that? These are gold. Thank you._

Gwyn sent a single letter N.

_That’s okay. This is good. Unlike your texting. Which makes me want to claw my eyes out. I’ll be in touch._

Gwyn shifted so that he was lying back on his bed, head on the pillows. He stared up at the ceiling. He put his phone in a hidden compartment in his pocket, and drew out the other one he used around his family and put that on his side table. Habits to make sure they didn’t suspect.

He couldn’t legally emancipate himself, he knew it was futile, but he couldn’t find it in him to make Augus stop. Was Augus even serious? Gwyn half-wanted to disbelieve it all. But every time he tried to think Augus was the worst, most malicious person he’d met at school, he remembered that Augus really was a virgin who had watched far too much pornography to ever know what he was doing. That Augus’ face when he’d seen the bruises, and his reactions afterwards…his unwillingness to just ignore it or sweep it under the rug as something acceptable was refreshing.

Augus’ inexperience had been there from the beginning. In just about everything he’d done. In his fascination in what he was doing. Even in the lusty way he’d said that the inside of Gwyn’s body was so hot. In his running narrative to himself about how to finger someone.

It was his constant lying that Gwyn hated. Lying about lubricant. Lying about the RACK system. Gwyn had looked that up while waiting at the hospital for the next nurse to come and perform an
STI panel, and then he’d seethed about it afterwards. Augus hadn’t used any system at all. He’d just thought his way was the best way, and that was what had pissed Gwyn off so much in the end. That he’d do so much damage, just to be right about something. That was hot in a top who knew what they were doing, but as the stitches attested, it was shit the rest of the time.

But it was hard to stay as furious when he had to own his part in it. When he decided to ignore his own misgivings – over and over again – and go ahead. When he threw himself towards Augus like he knew they were going to explode in some destructive ballad of fire and grit. He knew the day he turned up at Murdock and agreed to Augus’ deal to sit with them at their table.

Hard to stay furious when his father told him over and over again that the problem wasn’t anyone else, it was obviously Gwyn.

Gwyn understood enough to know objectively, it probably wasn’t true. Him being gay probably wasn’t the most evil thing to have ever happened in the history of the entire world. It wasn’t something he should be ashamed of. Sometimes he felt so much spite over it, that he went out and did as many gay things he could think of, just to prove it.

But sometimes he wondered if he did that so his father could beat him to death, and he wouldn’t have to keep dealing with his life.

It was hard to know. Gwyn closed his eyes and refused to sleep, because Efnisien was in the house. It was always a bad move to sleep when he was around.

*   *

’So, I’m bored,’ Efnisien drawled an hour later, slamming Gwyn’s door and leaning against it. His golden hair long and styled and Gwyn had seen Efnisien’s bathroom, he knew how much product he used to keep it looking like that, and it made him mad to think about Efnisien making himself look so perfect, like that could cover the rot inside of him. Efnisien was like a stunning, blue-eyed, mad god.

‘You’re always bored,’ Gwyn said.

Efnisien jumped onto the bed in a single move – always more athletic than he seemed – and stared down at Gwyn. Then he slowly knelt and rested his palms on Gwyn’s knees.

‘Is this a lead in to incest?’ Gwyn said flatly.

‘No,’ Efnisien said, scoffing. ‘I’m bored, not a criminal.’

‘Sure,’ Gwyn said, rolling his eyes. ‘Sorry I’m not some stranger for you to molest. Your parents paying back your settlement fees for like the rest of your life.’

‘You’re so ugly,’ Efnisien said. ‘I can’t get it up for you. Yuck. How’s your eating disorder going? Your Mom’s so worried for you. You’re not eating anything now. I think she’s making you a special meal tomorrow night. Just for you.’

‘Uh huh,’ Gwyn said.

‘You’re losing weight and everyone can tell. You’re not going to make your weight grade when you front up for school. What are you even going to do? We could go out and get something, if you want. I can’t poison it if I’m right there when you order it.’

‘Fuck off, Efnisien,’ Gwyn said, making to kick him off the bed.
Efnisien grabbed his leg when it kicked out, sat on his shin not at all gently, and Gwyn winced. ‘You’re so mean to me. Anyone would think you want to be assaulted by me.’

Efnisien grinned, reached his hand between Gwyn’s legs, and Gwyn grabbed his wrist and twisted it the same way he’d twisted Augus’ wrist at the nature reserve. With Augus, it had been a reflex that Gwyn had covered by pretending he was just being assertive. With Augus, he’d wanted to know what it would feel like to have his hand on that shoulder. He’d wanted to know, and he’d ruined it.

With Efnisien, it was survival.

‘Oh ho, fine then,’ Efnisien said, holding up his other hand in an absurd peace symbol. ‘You’re bringing down the entire vibe of the house though. You’re so depressed. I mean you can’t help being a queer piece of shit, I know that. But god, man, pop some pills or something. You’re no fun anymore.’

‘Tortured any animals lately?’ Gwyn said idly.

‘I mean, maybe,’ Efnisien said. ‘Depends on how you define torture, I suppose. I didn’t kill any.’

‘Is that better?’

‘I don’t know,’ Efnisien sighed, like it was a serious question. ‘They suffer longer for it, but I don’t know if that always feels as good.’

‘You’re on a serial killer watch-list, I just know it,’ Gwyn said.

‘I’m not,’ Efnisien said. ‘Because there isn’t one. But if there was, I would be.’

‘That’s not something to be proud of.’

‘Eh, isn’t it though? I’m aspirational. I’d never kill you anyway. I’d want you to be around to see it happen and realise that you should’ve reported me, taken it seriously, been like, ‘that kid was always antisocial and a bit of a psychopath.’”

Gwyn smirked, and Efnisien smirked back, kicking his legs lightly into the air off the side of Gwyn’s bed, then lying back so that he no longer had all his pressure on Gwyn’s shin and was just resting on his bed.

It was like this sometimes. It was almost nice. Efnisien was the most bearable company in all of his family, which was saying something, because Gwyn had experienced some of that torture first-hand. It didn’t terrify him like his father’s rages did, but it terrified him in other ways. Efnisien enjoyed slow-burn violence and torture the way most people enjoyed chocolate or cake. It was just disturbing.

Also, painful.

But if he didn’t sleep around him. If he kept his wits about him. It was like this.

They were strangely…family.

‘Lludd is gonna kill you,’ Efnisien said. ‘You know that, right? If not now, then later. Do you think he has enough police in his pocket for that? Because I don’t know. I sometimes wonder if he thinks it’s worth going to jail for. That dude is thirsty for beating someone to death. You can just see it in his eyes sometimes. Do you think he did it in the Navy before? Like, I swear, you walked away from him the other day and his eyes just glittered like he wanted to curb-stomp you. God. It was hot
actually.’

‘Thanks,’ Gwyn said. ‘I might kill him first.’

‘You? Come on, please. You’re- Actually, no, I could see it. Repressed rage ball, aren’t you? But if it hasn’t happened yet, it’s probably not going to happen. I could do it, but it’d make Aunty Crielle sad, and I don’t like to make her sad.’

‘We all know what you’d like to make her do,’ Gwyn said, rolling his eyes.

‘Honestly. Spank bank material, she’s ruined me. Do you think I’d be this bad if I didn’t have such a role-model for how to be a total, sinister asshole? I don’t know. I think about that sometimes.’

‘Really?’

‘Yeah. I wonder how I’d be in another family,’ Efnisien said, sounding surprisingly candid. ‘Don’t you wonder that? I wonder how I’d be in a family that didn’t teach you how to sweep your mistakes and evil impulses under the rug. Or teach you how to do them in shadowy, private places so that you could still do them, and be safe. People who would teach you how to be like…moral instead.’

‘You think you could learn that?’

‘Not all sociopaths end up as serial killers,’ Efnisien said. Gwyn knew he read about the subject, he had a lot of true crime and psychology books in his room. ‘You know that. Most don’t. Most aren’t even criminals. A lot just end up working as bank managers or in the stock-market or whatever. Mercenary enough to fire people and be cut-throat, but safe enough to not be in jail for wearing people’s body organs. I don’t think I could be a bank manager now.’

‘You want to wear people’s body organs?’

‘I don’t think that’s my life path either,’ Efnisien said pensively. ‘Serial rapist could be on the cards. And jail’s not gonna do someone like me any favours. You know that.’

‘You’ll be terrifying in jail,’ Gwyn said, laughing.

‘And they’ve abolished the death penalty, so no one’s ever going to get rid of me. I just want to avoid iso and then I’ll be fine.’

‘You would do so badly in isolation.’

‘So badly,’ Efnisien said. He sat up, his head popping over Gwyn’s bent knee. He rested his chin there, shaking his head. ‘So badly. I’m too extroverted for that. I mean I have to be smarter if I don’t want to end up there. Who knows what the future holds. You know there are people who want to be seriously hurt, like consensually, even people who want to be eaten by cannibals, but even that’s so fucking boring. If they want it, what’s the point?’

‘You know, there are neuropsychologists who would appreciate how honest you are about being so fucked up. Maybe you could sign up with some for studies or something. Talk about all the horrible things you like to do. You’d enjoy that so much.’

‘Fuckin’…so much,’ Efnisien said, eyes turning wistful.

Efnisien moved too quickly for Gwyn to prepare himself. One moment he was resting there and the next he’d moved nimbly backwards and driven his knuckles between Gwyn’s legs, right into his balls. The wave of nausea smashed into Gwyn instantly, he rolled to his side, grunting, and heard the
background music of Efnisien laughing.

‘Good chat,’ Efnisien said. ‘Good chat, cousin.’

Gwyn couldn’t even manage the *Fuck you* that he desperately wanted to say. He was winded, heard the door close, focused on riding out the nausea and the pain and the saliva in his mouth and the tears in his eyes. Damn it. It’d been ages since Efnisien had done something like that.

He rolled into the mattress and dry sobbed a few times, anything to just get the pain out of his system, and then breathed roughly for minutes more. Eventually, the white noise, the worst of the nausea, it subsided to a deep throbbing.

Fingers brushed the table as he reached for the decoy phone. He shoved that into his pocket, pulled out his actual phone and thumbed the passcode, before entering the rest of the passcodes with blurry vision. Three he had to re-enter twice.

Was it foolish to go straight to Augus’ messages that he’d never scrubbed from his phone? Probably. Was it embarrassing to scroll back to the messages Augus had sent him during the two weeks of no contact? Gwyn didn’t think about it.

Augus: *It’s been four days. You’re not at school. Are you dead?*

Augus: *I have never actually said these words before in my entire life except when I had to get out of something allegedly criminal or I was being forced to under duress but I AM SORRY.*

Augus: *Five days. You’re dead. You can interpret that as a threat or a statement of fact.*

Augus: *Hi, this is the Augus-messaging-Gwyn service. Ash thinks this is harassment. And that I am a rapist harassing a rape victim. If you want to opt out of these messages please fucking reply.*

Gwyn snorted at that one, his fingers tightening on the phone. He’d been tempted to reply just to make Augus feel bad. He didn’t think Augus was a rapist, or that he was a rape victim. An assault victim, sure, but…

One of the nurses had been really nice to him in the hospital. Maybe Augus was right and they weren’t *all* corrupt, because the fellow named Paul had gently sat near Gwyn and handed him some lukewarm, milky tea and explained to him that even men could be raped and that it was okay to just get a rape kit even if he didn’t want to press charges, and that he wasn’t going to be judged and that they didn’t need to tell his family – obviously no one had told the nurse how things really happened in that hospital. And while Gwyn was still oozing blood between stitches, he’d been given enough time to think about what he wanted to do.

He kept remembering Augus’ face after Gwyn had punched him the first time. The shock and horror. The desperate attempts to drive him to the hospital. Maybe Augus was so desperate because he wanted to talk Gwyn out of pressing charges or something, but Gwyn wasn’t so sure anymore.

So Gwyn had visibly disappointed the nurse by first trying to explain that it wasn’t rape and then staying quiet about it.

Then he’d disappointed his father by not telling him who the person was, which had made his father furious. Eventually, the thing that had made his father snap, was Gwyn saying petulantly from the floor:

‘It was just some old guy behind the shops.’
Gwyn couldn’t decide if all the violence that followed was because Gwyn would dare to lower himself to fuck some old guy behind the shops, or because his father could tell he was lying.

He sniffed, kept reading through the messages.

Augus: How can I extort or blackmail you when you won’t talk to me, you’re supposed to be terrified of me I don’t understand what is happening wld t hlp f I tlkd lk ths????

Augus: I hate myself I can’t believe I just did that.

Augus: Six days and I still hate myself.

Augus: I hate myself about the texting on your level, not in general. Also about what I did. Don’t tell Ash, he’ll feel very vindicated. Gwyn, are you getting these messages? Have they taken your phone off you? I don’t even know who ‘they’ are. Do you hate me? If you hate me, just block my number. I can tell you haven’t blocked my number. Are you enjoying me like this? This is pitiful, isn’t it? At least if I had a soul, I could send you a thousand apologies. But honestly I think people who send thousands of apologies are full of shit. Tell Ash that. He does it all the time when he wants to be an annoying asshole.

Augus: It’s Monday and you’ve been gone well over a week and the Principal hasn’t said if you’re dead and no one knows where you are including Gulvi I am actually WORRIED IN CASE YOU COULDN’T TELL.

Augus: Hi. My name is Augus Each Uisge. If you could kindly inform me as to the whereabouts of the blond gym-rat known as Gwyn please-fucking-reply-to-my-messages ap Nudd, his rapist would like to know where he is.

Augus: I shouldn’t joke about those things, I’m – does this count as the start of a thousand apologies I hope not – sorry.

Augus: If you’re not going to reply to me I’m going to joke about those things.

Augus: I just googled rape jokes and am now officially the worst because that was a thing I just did. Gwyn, I’m too young for you to treat me like this. I’m a vulnerable teen. Help. Just kidding. I am a wrinkled shrivelled onion covered by the most beautiful face you’ve ever seen.

Augus: School just got out and I’m in dorm listening to Ash listen to that same Modest Mouse song for like the two thousandth time and I’m staring at him and he’s staring back at me and I think this is how it starts. Filicide. This is it. Mourn for me. Because I’m going to go to jail for killing him. I hate having a sibling.

Augus: Update. I didn’t kill him. Are you proud?

Augus: Gwyn. I have your homework. Tell me where to give it to you. (This may or may not be a lie).

Augus: I may or may not have checked the obituaries online to see if you were in them please have a heart and just- Actually fuck you.

Augus: Bro its Ash [thumbs up emoji] apparently my actual bro has been stalking you just block him man its not worth it he is being a total [eggplant emoji] about everything peace

Gwyn had reread these messages so many times. They were, for a while, his only tenuous reminder that something existed outside of his Dad’s violence and his mother’s malice. It felt almost unreal,
knowing they were out there, still at Murdock, while Gwyn convalesced in bed and spat blood out of his mouth and wondered if he’d need to see a dentist again. There were only so many times a dentist could put a molar back in, Gwyn was sure.

Augus: My phone is no longer under house arrest. You haven’t blocked my number. I assume you’re getting something out of this? Or you’re in a coma. Or you’re dead? I don’t know. When I said ‘actually fuck you’ before, I was frustrated. I have been frustrated since I was born. I came out of the womb frustrated and I was screaming in anger when I was left by a lake presumably to drown. And I have been frustrated in every fucking foster home and I have been frustrated by every so-called parent except for the one who didn’t suck and I was frustrated when the system took me away from her. I have been frustrated for what feels like a thousand years and it slips out sometimes and I took it out on you in a text and then Ash told you to block my number and you didn’t and that is also frustrating.

If you want me to suffer, it’s working. Likely you don’t actually care about me that much and you are suffering yourself. Gwyn I am truly, one hundred percent, worried about you. You’re not returning Gulvi’s calls or messages either. I’d go the low road and tell you not to take it out on her but I don’t think you would and I think that means something is wrong can you just tell me if Shit the boss one moment please

Augus: All right I have to stop sending you essays at work here is a picture of what I’m working on right now.

[6 attachments of legal jargon]

Gwyn went over to his saved voicemails, holding the phone tight to his ear and shifting his legs very slightly, wincing when he realised the pain wasn’t gone enough to risk that yet.

‘Okay,’ Augus’ voice, quiet through the phone. ‘You’re not replying to my messages. And I don’t actually know what to say. Ugh. Fucking-

Then the next:

‘Maybe you’re not actually listening to these. When I was in primary school, I did a school assignment on how I watched a three year old get beaten with a PVC pipe and that got me pulled out of my third foster home. Unfortunately the foster home I was put into following that was worse. And then I didn’t write assignments about what happened at foster homes anymore. Are you feeling sorry for me? Don’t. Or maybe do, if it will make you reply. I can’t tell if I’m being manipulative or if it’s just bizarre leaving messages to a voicemail over the phone knowing you won’t listen or reply to these or return them or anything.’

Then:

‘So. I did some research today. About anal sex. Hilarious, right? Not to you. Or actually to me. I mean I knew I fucked up. Do you want me to read it to you though? Read you what they say about lubricant? I know some of those guys don’t have lube when they’re fucking or whatever but I didn’t know they had lube that didn’t look like lube in porn so that it looks like dry fucking when it actually isn’t. Also according to all these websites I should have maybe asked if you were clean or whatever but it doesn’t hurt when I piss and I keep thinking if I get something maybe I’ll deserve it.

‘Which is so- Ugh. Guilt, Gwyn. That was guilt. The most fucking useless emotion to have ever been invented. I hope you’re not over there feeling guilty about what happened. Do you feel bad about punching me? Normally I would tell you to feel bad. Anyone else who’s punched me? I’ve tried to make them feel bad. But no. You don’t have to.’
The next was Augus reading out what amounted to twenty minutes of legal jargon regarding separation proceedings prior to a divorce. Gwyn skipped through that one. But the first time he’d listened to it twice in a row, because he’d gotten it at two in the morning, and retrieved the voicemail in bed, holding the phone to his ear and listening to Augus’ soft, tired-scratchy voice, wondering why Augus was up so late doing this, and if it was homework or work-work, and why he was reading it to Gwyn.

He’d ended that phone call with a yawn and a: ‘Goodnight, asshole.’

Then:

‘Once upon a time, there was a wrestler called Gwyn…Nerdle [muffled snickering]. I used to make up bedtime stories for Ash when he was younger and I always gave us the dumbest fucking names. He was Ash Gloopton. And I was – god, should I tell you? Okay, I’ll tell you. I was Augus A-choo Bless You, because it always made Ash laugh. Sometimes when I say he’ll be the death of me, I worry it might be true. Like. How long do I do everything for him? He’s my responsibility, so maybe forever, right?

‘I think about how badly I hurt you a lot. I can’t stop thinking about it. I imagine you can’t stop either. Worse than me. Because if I’m this disturbed by it and I didn’t actually have to go to a hospital, I don’t know what it’s like for you, obviously. Do you want to wake up from it too? Should I stop calling you? Am I making everything worse? It occurred to me like a week ago that you could keep all of this for prosecution. I’ve admitted to being a rapist. I’ve admitted fault. I’ve apologised. It’s all pure gold, from a legal standpoint. Gwyn, don’t hate me for saying this, but I wish you knew how big a deal it was to me, that I’ve given you all that shit of my own volition, and keep doing it. I keep feeling like your phone is some kind of altar and I keep waiting for you to stab me on it. It’s stupid, I know. Pathetic, right? Like every one of Ash’s emo bands. Except Manchester Orchestra. They’re all right.

Well. Good night. I miss you. Ugh. I hate this.’

Augus’ voice had been softer, more private, even a bit muffled like he’d been talking to Gwyn from under a blanket. Gwyn had imagined him on his mattress on the floor, speaking quietly into his phone, and at that moment he realised he didn’t hate Augus and he wasn’t sure he could. Angry, yes. Certain he wouldn’t let Augus fuck him again until he knew what it was like, definitely.

But there was something in Gwyn that yearned for the voicemails and the messages. That waited for the emails. He didn’t reply, because he didn’t want Augus to stop reaching out desperately like he was. Frightened that he’d lose the connection as soon as he replied.

‘Good morning. Can you please ignore the last message I sent? I wish it was some kind of hallucination but I’m pretty sure life would never be that kind to me. Are you tired of how I always make myself out to be the victim? I mean I’d make you out to be the victim, but you can’t be a victim if you’re dead, Gwyn.’

Then:

‘Of course you can be a victim if you’re dead, what am I even talking about? It’s like I’ve never read a law text in my entire life. Jesus. Listen to that. My boss would bludgeon me with a paperweight for that lapse. Also, do you even like wrestling? You’ve never once talked about it at lunch with us. Or eaten for that matter. Who are you? Aside from dead, that is. A dead victim, as we’ve established. All right that was depressing. Bye.’

And so it went. Gwyn clutching the phone with tight fingers, a sweaty palm, listening out for the
sound of his mother or father coming home, listening to Augus’ voice hungrily and desperately, feeling ashamed. His balls ached, were certainly bruised – like the rest of him – and he knew he was just some needy boy, and he hated the picture he made. But Augus’ voice down the phone – sometimes bitter, sometimes soft, sometimes pensive or curious or angry – made him feel strangely less alone. He’d learned more about Augus in two weeks of not seeing or talking to him, than he’d learned about him previously.

Gwyn wondered if the connection he felt was imagined or real. If the truths Augus shared meant anything. He felt like he opened a compartment in his chest just to keep some of the rawer things Augus said safe.

It felt like a rope out of the ditch he was in.

* 

Later that night, well past midnight, when everyone was asleep and Efnisien had walked back to his parent’s place, Gwyn turned his phone in his fingers and then finally decided to send something.

R u not gng 2 txt me anymore?

Augus’ reply came surprisingly fast.

Did you just make an effort to include more vowels? For me? I’m touched.

Gwyn scowled, even though that’s exactly what he’d done. He didn’t know what to say now. His stomach was like a stone in his belly. He wasn’t hungry, not exactly. Sometimes he sailed past hunger pangs directly into this space where his stomach just hurt dully, but he couldn’t bring himself to eat. He’d think about it, and couldn’t imagine any food good enough to be worth tasting. Nothing was worth the risk. His appetite had been digested by his hungry gut.

It was bad though. He wasn’t eating enough. He wasn’t eating nothing at all, but…close enough.

All right, Augus wrote. On Monday, you’re going to be meeting with at least one person about what’s happening. I can be there if you want. Or not. It’s your call. But we’ll talk about it at school. Are you safe to text me?

Ish, Gwyn replied.

Safe-ish as in your father is in the next room and will storm in any second? Or safe-ish as in…? I don’t even know what that means to you.

Thy’re n bed sleepng. Thy believe n sleep hygiene.

Of course they do, Augus replied. Gwyn swore he could almost hear the dry derision in his voice. He stared at his phone, feeling a burst of something hot and bright in his chest. Can I call?

Gwyn pressed his lips together. Reluctantly he wrote: Shldn’t, I can’t tlk 2 u.

Oh, I don’t actually care about that now that I know you’re not dead anymore, Augus responded.

Then, ten seconds later, Augus was calling him. Gwyn stared in surprise. His phone didn’t vibrate, it was always on total silence, but there it was. Augus calling him. He accepted the call and pressed the phone to his ear.

‘So you’re up late,’ Augus said softly. ‘Me too. Do you normally sleep late? Can you reply a little?’
Gwyn made a faint sound of acknowledgement and Augus hummed, and Gwyn thought maybe he was crazy to be talking to Augus like this after everything that had happened, but...he couldn't help it. He didn’t even want to think about the people he’d be seeing on Monday. Didn’t want to know who Augus had talked to. Whoever they were hadn’t called and told his parents yet, so small mercies, at least.

“We have to get you out of that house,’ Augus said, his voice even quieter, like he was afraid he’d be overheard. Gwyn understood the impulse, he just wasn’t used to other people feeling that way about his parents. ‘It’s the priority. So I don’t know, if you have...spare cash, spare anything lying around that you can take with you if you need to get away. Shit you can sell like watches, jewellery, anything of value that’s small – start bringing it to school with you. Does Gulvi know about your family?’

Gwyn made a faint sound to indicate she didn’t, and then said quietly: ‘Maybe something though.’

‘Shut up,’ Augus said. ‘I mean, just- If you say you can’t talk, don’t...risk it. It’s not worth it. Also I’ve been thinking all day, but are you-? Did you eat tonight?’

Gwyn was silent for a long time, and Augus swore on the other side of the phone, and Gwyn knew he should’ve lied. Should’ve just made a sound in agreement.

‘Is it...safe to eat at home?’ Augus said, in a question that was either accidentally insightful, or so on point that it hurt Gwyn’s chest.

Gwyn made a vague sound of disagreement.

‘Fucking hell,’ Augus whispered. There was a pause, the sound of shifting, of blankets moving, and then Gwyn heard the creak of a door and the click of a light turning on or off. ‘Fuck. Can you text me things you can eat? I can get something, or... I don’t know.’ A pause, and then Gwyn heard Augus talking to Ash, telling him to go back to sleep, and then Ash clearly saying:

‘It’s obviously not nothing after the day we’ve all had. Is that Gwyn? Tell him I say hi.’

‘Did you hear that?’ Augus said.

Gwyn nodded. A faint sound to say that he had.

‘Yeah,’ Augus said, then to Ash: ‘Gwyn told you to go fuck yourself and stop listening to emo bullshit.’

Whatever Ash said after that was muffled and had a swear word in it, but soon after that it seemed like Gwyn had Augus to himself again.

‘I actually love him,’ Augus said quietly, ‘but you can’t tell them that at their age because it will go to their heads or something. I don’t know. I can’t parent a teenager, I am a teenager. We’re both going to need therapy and I have to get rich enough for it and I...ah...’

Augus cut off suddenly, sounded worried.

‘Never mind,’ he said. ‘I’m just getting some water, give me a second.’

The sound of a phone being put down, of water running out of the tap, and then Gwyn could hear Augus’ breathing again and his shuffling footsteps back to his room, the closing of a door by its creak. The settling onto a mattress on the ground.
‘You were serious about the fucking me thing weren’t you?’ Augus said.

Gwyn made a soft ‘mmhm’ sound to indicate that he was. It was self-preservation. It was making sure Augus knew exactly what it felt like to bottom, and understood that it took strength to make yourself vulnerable for someone else instead of looking down on whoever he was going to hurt. Gwyn didn’t mind the being hurt part, he minded being hurt like that. It was also that he wanted a tiny bit of revenge. He didn’t want to injure him. Gwyn didn’t even want Augus to hate it. He just wanted to see Augus’ face when he had a couple of fingers inside of him. He wanted to see if Augus would struggle with it, even when there was buckets of lube.

‘Yeah, I did think so,’ Augus said, sighing. ‘Can you believe I’m actually considering your offer? What is this world coming to? You’re like one of the horsemen in the apocalypse. I’ve read Revelations you know. Actually, no. I had it read to me. When I was like seven. That was the PVC pipe household I told you about. Revelations is memorable, Gwyn. I used to dream about the four horsemen of the apocalypse, you know? I’m glad Ash wasn’t in that house. It seems like he had pretty good foster homes until he landed in the one we were both in together. But that doesn’t make it better.’

Gwyn listened, liked the way Augus’ voice had slowed down, the words getting scratchier and more indistinct. He wondered how Augus dressed when he was ready for bed.

‘I hate that you know what it’s like,’ Augus said, though he sounded so tired the words were almost sweet. ‘I just hate it. And I think I wanted you to know, before. Wanted the rich kid to know what it was like. I hate it now. And worse. I think worse. Much worse than what I’ve gone through. Not that it’s a competition. Just- Fuck. Listen to me. I always imagine myself as being this very suave person but Christ, I’m only… I forget, you know. Because I have to work and make money and with the scholarship, and there’s working the system and making sure Ash doesn’t go to jail? Doesn’t fuck our scholarships? What do people even do for fun at this age? I didn’t know when I was a kid. I don’t know now. I bet you don’t really know. Instead look at us. The sex was good though, right? Until it wasn’t. But up until then, it was, right?’

‘Yeah,’ Gwyn said quietly.

‘Yeah,’ Augus sighed. ‘Okay. Well, I guess…it’s time for me to hang up. You should sleep. And eat something. If you can? If it’s… We’re going to have to talk about that on Monday. None of that taciturn bullshit. I’m onto you now. I’m not letting you get away with shit anymore. I get that you’ve had to hide it all your life, but…’ A deep breath. ‘…But no, not anymore. Not with me. Even if you hate me. Even if you still press charges. I don’t care. Some things are bigger than that. You’re just going to have to learn to deal with it. Maybe someone else would be nicer to you, but I think- I think maybe we can really get you out of there.’

‘Really?’

‘Shush,’ Augus said, voice louder than before. ‘And, yeah, I do. I have- the person I told… Anyway, it doesn’t matter. So, you want me to keep texting you tomorrow too? Are you that desperate?’

Gwyn should have said no, made a sound to indicate no, but he said nothing at all. He listened to Augus’ breath hitching on the phone and wanted to apologise, but stayed quiet.

‘I’m going to text you tomorrow,’ Augus said decisively. ‘For the record, even I wish you hadn’t landed with an asshole like me. But you did. So…I guess- Goodnight. Stay as safe as you can, all right?’

‘Okay,’ Gwyn whispered.
‘All right. That’s good. Sweet dreams, Gwyn Nerdle.’

Silence, and Gwyn ended the call and hid his phone, placing his second family phone back up on the side table. He lifted up and turned the pillow so that he could lie on the cold side, yawning, staring into the darkness of his room.

Back at school on Monday, and he felt like it would all go back to normal, but it seemed like – according to Augus – that wasn’t going to happen. He thought maybe he should feel scared, but he just wanted to feel his phone against his ear again and hear Augus’ voice. He might be an asshole, but in a world full of them, he was one of the only ones who had ever said he was going to do something and now actually seemed to be doing something.

Gwyn knew it would never work, but his heart twinged in a bittersweet way at the gesture. It might be the last time anyone ever made an effort for him, as far as he knew.

He fell asleep feeling heavy and cynical. He knew that like Augus, he had been born frustrated at the world, and he wasn’t sure it would ever end.
Chapter Notes

It's time to meet Mr. Prince properly, I think. There's no official warnings for this chapter, but Augus is in a pretty tough mental place, so a heads up for that.

* Augus *

Augus got back to campus – on a weekend no less, a new low – and left Ash in the car once more while he raced up the steps to Mr. Prince’s home. He didn’t even know if he’d be in. Augus had no idea what Mr. Prince did on the weekend – possibly training or competitions – but everyone knew he lived on the campus to keep an eye on the House of Ravens. All the Head of Houses had to live on campus. But that didn’t mean he’d be there.

He slowed down and walked calmly, despite the way his thoughts raced. When he reached the black wooden door, he rapped five times. He still had no idea exactly what he was going to say, folding his arms behind his back and clasping his hands.

A minute later, the door opened, and Mr. Prince looked down at him. If he was surprised that Augus was there, he showed no sign of it. Augus wondered if he ever wore a simple t-shirt, or tracksuit pants, or something other than pressed, neat, formal clothing. Even today, on a weekend, he didn’t look like a lot of the other teachers did.

‘Yes?’ Mr. Prince said.

Augus’ confidence was evaporating. Mr. Prince murdered him on the piste on a regular basis, and seemed to always know when Augus was up to no good. He was intimidating as hell.

‘I have to talk to you, Sir,’ Augus said.

‘Now?’

‘Yeah,’ Augus said, clearing his throat. ‘Yes, please. It’s…important.’

‘I’m in the middle of a conference call,’ Mr. Prince said. ‘So you’ll wait out here until it’s done, understand?’

Augus nodded hastily, wondering if this was even the right thing to do. Would Mr. Prince even help? He’d have to, wouldn’t he? While Mr. Prince had never directly intervened on Augus and Ash’s behalf that Augus knew of, Augus still got a sense that Mr. Prince had looked out for them. He also knew that Mr. Prince had very little patience with the rich snobs who funded the school, which was weird, because he lived here in thanks to their funding. But maybe that meant he wouldn’t rush to tell Gwyn’s parents what was happening.

He began to pace back and forth, staring over the railing into the quadrangle. Campus was mostly deserted. Many went home for the weekend, with only a few staying on campus. Those that stayed were often in their dorms, the library or the nicer quadrangles. The House of Ravens quad was kind
He’d never seen the inside of Mr. Prince’s living space before. He didn’t know if he’d have to make his case outside, where the wind and any eavesdroppers could hear anything he said.

He hadn’t even been game enough to tell Ash everything, still privately reeling at the entire encounter. His wrist still hurt from when Gwyn grabbed it.

Twenty minutes later – no sign of Mr. Prince – Augus was pacing ten steps one way, ten steps the other way, and his phone buzzed. He opened up the texts straight away, saw Gwyn’s stupid, annoying texting style and almost walked away from all of it. In that moment, realising how absurd this all was. How dangerous. Nothing about this was sane. He couldn’t do anything for Gwyn, he couldn’t go up against that family, he couldn’t…

Not long after he’d replied, the photos began streaming in. Augus saw the full-body bruising, the scabbing on his thigh like he’d been dragged along concrete. Augus felt shaky seeing them, because this was all so fucking familiar, and there were things he didn’t think about anymore and things he had packed up in the box of ‘never going to fucking happen again so it doesn’t matter, don’t think about it.’

The photos kept coming, and Augus paced faster when he saw the photos of a younger Gwyn, the grainier images obviously taken on an older phone. The…sheer brutality of it. Augus swallowed thickly and pressed his phone to his chest and then realised he had to reply, and hated himself even as he asked Gwyn if he had any more. What had these been taken for? Had Gwyn wanted to do something then? Even his hair had blood in it. Augus knew that it was a miracle Gwyn hadn’t been killed yet. Perhaps even just sheer dumb luck.

And now he had them on his phone, and he felt vaguely disgusted with himself and the world and even with Gwyn, for waiting this long to do anything, for waiting for someone like Augus to help him.

He’d known though. He’d fucking known. He’d had that gut reaction that was more than just guilt and wishing that he was wrong, sending desperate text after desperate text. Hoping that Gwyn would tell him to fuck off. Hoping that Gwyn would just tell him that he was avoiding Augus because Augus was an asshole criminal. Of course he’d not wanted that to happen, too. He’d been torn between the two sides. Wanting to be safe. Wanting Gwyn to hate him and press charges, because it would mean that Gwyn was safe.

Augus leaned against the railing that stopped him from falling to the ground, three storeys below. He wondered what it felt like to fall that far. He’d probably survive it. He had no interest in actually doing it, but sometimes the thrill of it spoke to him. He was certain Ash had the same irritating thoughts, but Ash acted on them more often, and a lot of his impulse thoughts were about hotwiring cars, stealing shit, and fucking anyone that wanted to be fucked by him. Which was a lot of people.

The door opened and Mr. Prince beckoned Augus inside, looking a little perturbed that Augus was some steps away from his door. But Augus had been in mid-stride, pacing away, unable to stop. So it was easy to turn and just walk straight in like he belonged there.

He stopped within the room that was some combination of living room and office. Mismatched, full bookshelves lined the walls, so that the couches had to be in the middle of the room, along with too many mismatched wooden and metal coffee tables. There were so many rugs on the wooden floor that they lay over each other. Shoved into a corner was a glass cabinet filled with Olympic gold and silver medals, as well as trophies and medals from the World Championships of Fencing, the Federation Internationale D’escrime Fencing Grand Prix, and other organisations Augus didn’t...
recognise.

He knew Mr. Prince had been a big deal in fencing once, but Augus stared at the cabinet, momentarily forgetting everything except the riddle before him: why the fuck was Mr. Prince teaching here, instead of coaching future Olympic and World Champion hopefuls? He could obviously teach. He enjoyed fencing enough to teach it within the school. But it wasn’t like Murdock was streaming anyone through to colleges with fencing programs.

‘Augus?’ Mr. Prince said acerbically, sitting down at what must have been a dining table on the other side of the room. He was backlit by the open window behind him, the curtains blowing in the wind. He didn’t seem affected by the cold at all.

‘Sure,’ Augus said, drawing his eyes away from the trophy and medal cabinet. He felt awkward just standing there, so he walked across the room, trying not to bump into furniture, and pulled a chair out opposite Mr. Prince and felt acutely like he was being called into the Head of House office for something he or his brother had done. God, he hated this. He placed his phone face down on the table, then tapped his fingers on his knee, refusing to make eye contact.

It was easy to say he was going to help someone, but actually doing it felt a little like going to the dentist.

‘I need your help,’ Augus said.

Mr. Prince sighed like he was disappointed. ‘What has your brother done this time? Or have you finally been caught out in one of your many ah, how shall we say this? Projects?’

Augus met Mr. Prince’s eyes and realised that Mr. Prince knew far more about Augus chronically living on caffeine pills and running homework and assignment rackets than Augus ever suspected.

‘Neither,’ Augus said finally, instead of the more obvious: I don’t know what you’re talking about, Sir.

‘Neither?’ Mr. Prince said, a glimmer of a smirk at the corner of his thin lips. ‘This should be fascinating.’

Abruptly, Augus was angry. He didn’t come all this way, wait for almost thirty minutes, to deal with this shit. But he admired and liked Mr. Prince, and he seemed like a grounded person, it was just… his goddamn attitude.

‘Does anyone actually ever go to you for help, Sir?’ Augus said, unable to stop himself. ‘Or do they realise you’re a total asshole and go elsewhere?’

Mr. Prince stared at him, unblinking, for a long time. Then he shrugged. ‘I think they go elsewhere, usually.’

‘Right. Who do they go to? Because I’ll just fucking go to them.’

‘Watch your language,’ Mr. Prince said, leaning back in his chair and frowning. ‘So this is serious then?’

‘No,’ Augus said, rolling his eyes. ‘I came here for fun. We’re keying your car right now.’

‘Things that you shouldn’t joke about,’ Mr. Prince said, unimpressed, ‘because I’m sure your brother is more than capable and has done it before. He is terrible at flying under the radar, isn’t he? But since we’re not here about him, why don’t you tell me what you’re here about?’
‘I need to know that you can keep…someone’s confidence, Sir,’ Augus said. ‘I know someone in real trouble, not—’

This was supposed to be the part Augus could do without thinking. He’d done it for Ash. He’d done it for himself. So why couldn’t he do it now? It wasn’t like police people or social workers were always less intimidating than Mr. Prince.

‘I can’t keep your confidence if someone is in danger – of hurting themselves, hurting others, or of being hurt.’

‘Yeah, but who would you go to about it? Because this person is in danger from Principal Albion, and like, a lot of fucking places you’d normally go to report that shit.’

Mr. Prince’s eyes narrowed, and his lips thinned. ‘Firstly, language. Secondly, this wouldn’t have anything to do with why Gwyn ap Nudd has been absent for the last two weeks, would it?’

Augus felt chilled then. What the fuck? Mr. Prince only shook his head and sighed.

‘Augus, it hasn’t gone unnoticed that the young man has been sitting with you at lunch. I know you’re not talking about yourself. And I know that Albion is in Lludd’s pocket. Which is why, of course, you don’t want me to report this to Albion. You’re not the only one who observes more than they let on, and I’ve been doing it for far longer than you have, young man.’

It wasn’t like Augus was honestly struck dumb that often, but he couldn’t speak. Then he thought he might be hallucinating Mr. Prince’s expression softening.

‘Start from the beginning,’ Mr. Prince said. ‘I’ll see what I can do.’

‘If any of this gets back to his family,’ Augus said rustily, ‘they’ll kill him. And that’s not hyperbole.’

‘Start from the beginning,’ Mr. Prince repeated. ‘You’re obviously here for a reason. If you want my help, you’ll actually have to talk to me, understand?’

Augus pushed his chair out and had too much nervous energy to sit still. But Mr. Prince didn’t reprimand him for it, and so Augus walked over to the bookshelves and looked at one of the shelves to see what looked like antique first editions in French.

He took a deep breath and decided to start from the actual beginning, because what the hell, right?

It took longer than he’d thought, and he decided not to omit sending Gwyn to the hospital or the reason why, and thankfully Mr. Prince didn’t outright laugh at him or send him out of his home. And finally, Augus stood over the table, watching as Mr. Prince flicked through the photos that Gwyn had sent. He felt shaky and strange.

‘Never thought I’d ever have to fucking do this again,’ Augus said weakly.

‘So he needs a prochein ami,’ Mr. Prince said pensively. ‘Well, I can’t be it.’

‘You can’t? Why not?’

‘I know you want me to do this for you,’ Mr. Prince said. ‘But I’m faculty, and I cannot. But I do know someone…who is trustworthy, and has some weight in law enforcement.’

‘But—’

‘He is trustworthy,’ Mr. Prince said abruptly, his eyes hardening. ‘I understand your fears, and they
are not in any way foundless, but please don’t assume I’m not taking this seriously.’

Mr. Prince stared at a photo of a younger Gwyn’s face, at the blood and the bruises, and Augus wanted to snatch his phone back. It didn’t seem right that Mr. Prince could just…stare like that. Augus didn’t know what he was seeing, what judgements he was making, and Augus hadn’t had to deal with this airless need to protect for a long time. Things had mostly settled with Ash. He’d forgotten how much it stressed him out.

‘You realise,’ Mr. Prince said delicately, finally looking up from Augus’ phone, ‘that this will very likely put your scholarship in danger? If you go ahead with this? Even if you’re not involved in any way, from here into the future? And I think we both know that you will involve yourself.’

Augus closed his eyes. Well, maybe that was also playing into the stress, a little. It had occurred to him.

‘Yeah,’ Augus said.

‘I think this situation calls for some tea,’ Mr. Prince said abruptly, standing. ‘Want some?’

‘Whatever you have, I don’t care,’ Augus said, sitting down on the chair and staring at his phone that Mr. Prince had left on the table. He took it slowly and kept it cradled in his hand like a warm animal. Listened to the sound of Mr. Prince in the kitchen, the sound of water running, a kettle being turned on, a fridge being opened.

‘I can only protect you so much,’ Mr. Prince called from the kitchen. ‘If the ap Nudd family discovers that you’re connected with this – and they will – you’re out. I won’t be able to intercede and keep my job, and I’m not putting my job on the line for you.’

‘Appreciate the honesty, Sir,’ Augus said. He did, actually.

‘I’m not even sure I’ll keep my job, when all is said and done,’ Mr. Prince said, his voice quieter, like he was half-talking to himself.

Mr. Prince returned a few minutes later with a tray of mismatched cups and saucers, a little pitcher of milk, a ceramic bowl of sugar cubes and the kind of sweet, bland biscuits Augus associated with social workers. It made his mouth taste sour to see them, but he took the tea when it was offered, and wrapped his hands around the warmth. The open window made Mr. Prince’s home cold.

‘What will you do if you lose your scholarship?’ Mr. Prince said with a surprising amount of gentleness.

‘Work,’ Augus said. ‘It’s not like I haven’t had to think about losing it before. Or Ash losing it.’

‘True,’ Mr. Prince said. ‘But thinking about it in context of yourself or your adopted ward is different to losing it for someone you don’t know very well. Especially when a lot of this is likely tied to guilt and your own trauma. Are you sure you want to go through with this?’

‘My own trauma,’ Augus said flatly.

‘Yes,’ Mr. Prince said. ‘Have you imagined yet, what that family might be able to do, if they realise your involvement in this? Unsealing your juvenile records in the foster system is the least of it.’

Augus flinched, staring at Mr. Prince in alarm. He didn’t want those unsealed by fucking anyone. He definitely didn’t want Gwyn’s fucked up family seeing it. Mr. Prince steadily returned his gaze.
'Have you considered that this will make the news? If Gwyn is emancipated, that goes into court records, and that family would rather smear anyone else on the planet than have a bad word said against them.'

Augus hadn’t considered that either. His shit had never made the news because he was just one more shitty minor in a shitty system and while self-emancipation from the government wasn’t that common, it happened enough.

‘You say that this young man you’re concerned for doesn’t think this will work, have you considered he’s right? What happens when you’ve lost your scholarships, your name is smeared in all the big law firms, in the news, Gwyn isn’t in any better situation or his situation is worse, and—’

‘With all due respect, Sir,’ Augus said, thinking he might just go back to his room on campus and have an hour-long panic attack before going back to Ash. ‘With all due respect, if you don’t want me to do this, tell me. But otherwise I need your help. I can’t do this on my own. And neither can he.’

Mr. Prince pressed a single index finger to his left temple, and then sighed and drew out his phone. He scrolled through his contacts, pressed on a name that Augus couldn’t see, and the held his phone to his ear, never looking away from Augus.

The other line must have picked up, because Mr. Prince winced and then said: ‘Mikkel, please stop calling me that, or I’ll murder your family. Listen, I have a delicate proposition for you. …Oh yes, far more delicate than that.’

Augus listened as Mr. Prince gave a basic rundown on the situation without mentioning any names, and lowered his forehead to the table. The right thing to do would be to leave it in the hands of the adults involved, and never speak to Gwyn again. Except that felt so far from the right thing that it hurt Augus’ chest to contemplate.

In one meeting, he’d realised that Mr. Prince knew far more about him than he’d ever let on in the past. They’d fucking duelled each other and gotten the measure of each other and Mr. Prince had personally helped train him up to the point where Augus could have gone to a fencing college if he wanted to and never once had Mr. Prince referred to Augus’ damaging childhood or his past trauma. Not once had he ever done anything more except give Augus the occasional disapproving look, which he did to everyone, for everything.

Augus caught enough of the conversation to realise that whoever Mikkel was, they were going to meet Gwyn and assess him with the potential to become his prochein ami. His representative. The adult who would care for him because none of the others fucking would, and Augus couldn’t do it himself. What if it didn’t work out? What if Gwyn backed out?

You can’t let him. Except if he’s not ready, and then you can’t make him be ready.

If he’d been alone, in his dorm or at home, he would have groaned. Instead, he just sighed and thought that he’d probably just trashed his scholarship far more completely than Ash ever could. Maybe he’d trashed Ash’s scholarship too.

Ash could get another one though, maybe. If their reputations weren’t too damaged. Maybe. Augus had already needed to repeat another year of school, and didn’t want to repeat too many more. But Ash had never needed to repeat any schooling, so he could…start again if he needed to.

There was nothing good about this. He knew Ash would tell him it was the right thing to do, and it was – in that moment – the only thing stopping him from claiming it was all bad joke and running away.
Everything Mr. Prince had brought up, the risks…and he hadn’t even brought up the other risks that Augus had already considered. Surely a family like that had criminal connections? Surely they had other ways of doing their dirty work? Augus wanted to be the kind of person who could stand up to someone like Lludd and sneer the entire way through it, but he suspected that he wasn’t. A horrible lurching feeling in his gut even thinking about it. He just wanted to avoid that family’s attention, grab Gwyn by the wrist and run.

‘Augus?’

Augus’ head snapped up, and he realised that Mr. Prince had finished his conversation and was holding his phone elegantly in one hand, and resting his chin on his other, looking at Augus thoughtfully.

‘You don’t have to be the one to save him,’ Mr. Prince said. ‘Not anymore. That’s not your job. You are a child.’

‘Actually—’

‘Forgive me,’ Mr. Prince said, smirking slightly, ‘I forget how inflated your ego is. You have your own life, your own future to consider here. Normally I wouldn’t have to remind you of this, as you’ve overzealously protected it for as long as I’ve known you. This is quite unlike you.’

Augus wished it was. He wished it was. He grasped his own phone and crushed it down into his thigh, and thought that he could’ve gone the rest of his life without knowing this about Gwyn. If he hadn’t just…decided to get revenge against him for some altercation with Ash that Ash probably deserved anyway, he would never have known. It would never have mattered.

Gwyn could’ve died there and he wouldn’t have given a single shit.

‘You didn’t know me before,’ Augus said finally, a cheerless half-smile making his expression strained.

‘Yes,’ Mr. Prince said. ‘I suppose that’s true. All right, give me your phone so I can give you my number.’

A pause, Augus not quite understanding, before he slid his phone – slightly shiny from the sweat on his palm – across the table.

Mr. Prince opened it up and added himself to Augus’ contacts, calmly handing the phone back. Then he took out his own phone more, asking for Augus’ phone number.

‘Advise Gwyn ap Nudd that on Monday morning he will be meeting with a friend of mine, and to come up to my office at lunch. I assume you can contact him?’

Augus nodded, and Mr. Prince pressed his lips together, like he didn’t even agree with Augus doing that much. Augus wanted to say he could handle himself, that he knew what he was doing, but in Mr. Prince’s frigid home, staring at a cup of tea he hadn’t actually drunk, he felt out of his element. He was supposed to return to this kind of world as an adult, a lawyer, as the master of his destiny who would never have to feel afraid again.

‘Don’t abuse the privilege of having my number,’ Mr. Prince said finally, sighing. He stood and Augus followed suit, realising the meeting was over. Augus wished he had more of an assurance that Gwyn could be protected. ‘Though I suspect you wouldn’t, but still, I feel it needs to be said. And Augus?’
Augus paused in the process of turning towards the door. He looked over his shoulder, Mr. Prince’s eyebrows pulling together.

‘Call me if you need to, or text. Be careful. I believe there are far easier ways to get laid.’

Augus stilled, offended, holding back a sharp retort. Mr. Prince stared at him with that unreadable expression for so long, before sighing.

‘It’s not about getting laid, is it?’ Mr. Prince said.

Augus couldn’t even dignify that with a response.

‘Old Pete,’ Mr. Prince said abruptly, and Augus ground his teeth together.

‘I beg your pardon, Sir?’

‘Old Pete is the one that most students go to, when they know they can’t talk to me.’

‘Head of Doves?’ Augus said, turning around in surprise. That was Gwyn’s house. Did Gwyn even know he could talk to him? But then, the guy was like, four hundred years old. Well maybe not that old, but old enough that Augus couldn’t imagine anyone confiding anything in him except perhaps that they were having problems with a fountain pen or some herbs in a garden or something.

‘I’m not a naturally comforting or soothing man,’ Mr. Prince said on a half-smile. ‘You can take your chances with him, but I suspect you came here because you wanted something pragmatic and not a gentle pat on the head. But perhaps you want both. I do apologise. I can only give you one.’

‘I appreciate it, Sir,’ Augus said, voice muted. Despite everything, he did. Mr. Prince hadn’t turned Augus away, hadn’t reported Augus or Gwyn to people who weren’t safe, and did seem to have the kind of allies that Augus hoped he’d have. But Augus was leaving feeling hollow and more frightened than he’d felt in a long time, and the confidence he’d found earlier while talking to Gwyn had vanished.

‘Good day, Augus,’ Mr. Prince said.

Augus said goodbye, closed the door behind him, nervously turning his phone in his hand as he walked away.

It wasn’t until he reached the landing of the last flight of stairs that he stopped, leaning back against the stone wall and closing his eyes. He rested his hands on his chest and thought about Ash waiting for him in the car, and thought about how he’d trained himself to put on that brave face for him and he could fucking do it again now.

*You being a weak little asshole isn’t going to fucking help anyone.*

Augus forced himself to take a deep, slow breath, hating how it shook. But by the fourth, he was starting to sound steadier, and he felt...more like he thought he should.

By the time he got back to the car, his mask was on so well that he was falling for it.

‘How’d it go?’ Ash said.

‘Good,’ Augus said. ‘I was right, he can help us.’

‘Sweet.’
Ash pulled out of the carpark like it was a Friday afternoon, except he didn’t crank his music, he didn’t say anything. Augus wondered if he was supposed to be filling the silence with inane reassurances that it would be fine. Or something scathing, so that Ash thought that things were really fine. Augus closed his eyes, wondered how much longer he’d actually be a student at Murdock for.

Mr. Prince had basically said Augus was going to lose his scholarship, after all. It was tempting to ask Ash what kind of jobs he thought he could do without stealing anything, but that would show his hand, and he couldn’t do that either. Had to pretend it was fine, until it wasn’t fine. That was the game. That had been the game in the foster homes and it was the game now, and it would be the game for the rest of his life.

‘You look like you’re coming down with something,’ Ash said, after clearing his throat.

‘You try interrupting Mr. Prince on the weekend after he makes you wait thirty minutes while he finishes off a conference call.’

‘Ouch,’ Ash said, laughing lightly. ‘But still… You wanna take it easy when we get back? Game or Youtube or something? You want to go do the whole porn thing in your room?’

Augus smirked but felt queasy.

If he was going to commit to this – and too late, he was already committed to it – then things were going to change. He was going to make sure Gwyn looked after himself, that he…ate something, because he obviously wasn’t eating fucking anything. He was going to try and bring Ash into line somehow, look at some new avenue for his shoplifting habits, maybe redirect that…somewhere. He was going to have to do well enough at school that if he lost his scholarship, they couldn’t assassinate his grades in the process, because he’d need to take those with him to another school. If he was lucky enough to get a placement in another school. And he’d ask for extra work at the legal firm.

And he’d…deal with it.

‘Augus?’ Ash said.

Augus wanted to leave another stupid voicemail on Gwyn’s phone. Wanted to text him. Didn’t even know if that was something Gwyn wanted. Telling Gwyn he was going to help get him out of his stupid, abusive home, wasn’t the same as Gwyn actually wanting to talk to him.

‘Can I do anything?’ Ash said.

‘What?’ Augus said, snapping back to reality and glancing over. ‘Jesus, would you watch the road?’

‘Fucking, fine- I’m doing it, see?’ Ash said, turning back to look at the road. ‘So can I do anything?’

‘Like what? Clean your room? Do a load of washing when we get back? What exactly do you want to do?’ Augus sniped, falling back on the caustic irritation that kept the whole world at bay.

‘Yeah,’ Ash said. ‘That, or whatever, Augus. I’m not blind.’

‘It’s fine.’

‘Yeah,’ Ash muttered. ‘Super believable. But instead of letting me actually help you, you’re gonna be a dick about it.’

‘I’m sorry?’ Augus said, staring at him. ‘You drove me all over today, you’re fine. It’s fine. It’s just a
lot – which you *know*, so I don’t know what you want from me, but whatever gentle sweet
reassurances you’re looking for, go to someone else.’

Augus felt like Mr. Prince, and in that moment he just felt old and worn down.

‘I’m just tired,’ Augus muttered. ‘I just need some sleep.’

‘Okay,’ Ash said easily enough. ‘That’s cool.’

‘Stop it.’

‘Nope. I’m allowed to worry about you, asshole.’

Augus felt brittle, said nothing, and went straight to his room when they got home.

*

It was after his conversation with Gwyn in the evening – an actual conversation, even if Gwyn
couldn’t speak to him – that Augus found himself sitting in the lounge at three in the morning,
wishing that he still smoked cigarettes. He had one ankle crossed over the other, leaned back hard
into the old couch, his hands folded into his lap. His phone rested on his knee and he stared at it,
thinking of how Gwyn wanted Augus to keep texting him.

So Gwyn liked him.

Or Gwyn had imprinted on him like a duckling. Fucking *anyone* could have thrown that boy a rope
and he would’ve taken it and licked the hand on the way out of the ditch. Augus knew that. He
knew that.

He rested his head on the couch cushion and pressed the heels of his palms into his eyes. He focused
on breathing evenly and steadily. He imagined Gwyn laughing if he saw Augus like this.

Augus froze when he heard Ash’s door open. It was an old instinct, and he knew Ash hadn’t seen
him as he walked to the sink to get some water. Ash never slept well. Not for as long as Augus had
known him.

It was when Ash returned with the glass of water that he stopped and swore.

‘You scared the living *shit* out of me,’ Ash said.

He came over and sat next to Augus, drinking down the glass in long draughts until it was done, and
setting that on the floor. He leaned into Augus after that, resting his head on Augus’ shoulder.

‘You’re freaking out bigtime,’ Ash said.

‘I suppose I am.’

‘I want to help,’ Ash said.

‘I know.’

‘No, I mean- Augus, I know we don’t talk about it much, but what you went through to get me out
of that house… I know you would’ve gone through way more than you did. And I’m worried you’re
gonna get to find out how far you’ll go now. At least let me do something.’

Augus wanted to tell him that they could lose their scholarships, that their childhoods could be
plastered in the news in the form of foster records and police reports. But he didn’t say a word.

‘He said I didn’t have to help him,’ Augus said quietly. ‘He made it seem like I shouldn’t. Mr. Prince.’

The light from Augus’ phone as he turned it on made him blink rapidly, squint, and then finally he handed the album of photos over to Ash and let him flick through them.

‘Oh my god,’ Ash said quietly. ‘Oh my god. That’s crazy. This is all crazy. And these ones – he was like that when you saw him earlier?’

‘Yeah. What do you think? Could we walk away? Should we let this go and pretend it’s not happening?’

Ash was still staring at the photos, and Augus knew that he should have kept them a secret. Ash was going to be insufferable after this. Almost certainly, Gwyn was going to have to deal with two hundred percent more hugs than Ash was already giving him. And perhaps Augus should care about Gwyn’s privacy more, but he felt too numb to feel much guilt over it.

‘He should’ve come home with us,’ Ash said. ‘He shouldn’t stay there.’

‘I know. But it’s not safe to do it that way.’

‘So…Mr. Prince,’ Ash said. ‘And he thinks you should walk away? Like, he doesn’t know you very well then, does he?’

Augus pressed the heels of his palms into his eyes and made a faint, fractious sound when Ash reached up and scratched his fingers lightly into the top of Augus’ scalp.

‘Not a dog,’ Augus said.

‘Then come here and stop being such a loner loser, you’re actually the fucking worst.’ Ash was manhandling him into a hug, and Augus made a faint sound of discontent even as he didn’t even pretend to struggle. He ended up limp in Ash’s arms, staring ahead balefully, not even reciprocating. He just lay there.

‘I can’t sleep.’

‘Me either,’ Ash said. ‘It’s been one of those nights, y’know? One of those days, actually. Maybe we should do it like the old days or something? What do you think?’

It had been some time since they’d shared a bed, but Augus only nodded and followed Ash into his room. They lay down back to back, and Augus knew that Ash was awake, and he knew that Ash was aware Augus was awake. But their breathing slowed, their bodies warmed beneath the blankets, and eventually Augus felt his joints loosen, his body begin to settle, and felt comforted to know that Ash was doing the same.

Outside, the sound of cars going about their business. Augus imagined bakers getting ready earlier than anyone else. Shift-workers who were getting back from night-shifts or starting early. He imagined crimes being committed and other people just needing to drive, lovers driving back to their homes after seeing their loves, and the broken-hearted after having their hearts broken.

He imagined Gwyn in his bed, alone.

He imagined taking his phone and sending Gwyn something. A text, a voicemail, a bit of legal work,
It was selfish, probably, to want Gwyn to like him in a real way. Selfish to want to touch him and fuck him and even look after him. Maybe Mr. Prince was right, and Augus was just...re-enacting all his past bullshit all over again. Augus didn’t want to have a relationship with anyone – even Gwyn knew that – and he didn’t want to have feelings.

He fell asleep thinking that feelings were like the worst kind of STI, because there was no guaranteed cure. He thought that would be a wry, cynical joke he could send to Gwyn, except he didn’t want Gwyn to know. Feelings just complicated everything. Gwyn could do without more complications. Augus too.

Augus sighed and fell asleep thinking of all the work he meant to get done over the weekend, that he hadn’t yet done.
Gwyn

* 

Gwyn walked into Mr. Prince’s office, feeling nervous. Mr. Prince was waiting outside, but it didn’t help much. There, at a simple desk bare of everything except a notebook, a pen, a laptop, sitting where Mr. Prince would normally sit, was a man in his thirties with brown-red curling hair and a weirdly genial look about him. But his eyes were too perceptive and the smile he gave Gwyn wasn’t warm.

‘Hi, Gwyn. I’m Mikkel. Sit down?’

Gwyn looked at the chair that students probably sat in when they were stressed or in deep shit and sat down, forcing himself to rest his palms flat on his knees. He didn’t like this at all. He suddenly felt like this was the stupidest thing he’d ever thought about doing. He didn’t want to talk. He didn’t want to cooperate.

The whole day had been leading to this and he felt like he’d been waiting weeks, nervously, when it had only been a weekend. He’d gotten to school, gotten a teacher’s note from Mr. Prince, and was now missing lunch to have this meeting. He didn’t feel great about it.

Mikkel opened his laptop and looked over whatever was on the screen, brown eyes taking it in. He was covered in an amount of freckles that probably got him teased when he was younger. He had stubble that wasn’t very well groomed. Gwyn looked towards the door and when he looked back, Mikkel was looking at him. This time, his face was softer, his expression sympathetic.

Gwyn hated that too.

‘You’ve been having a rough time, huh?’ Mikkel said.

Gwyn shrugged.

‘I mean,’ Mikkel continued, ‘I wouldn’t be here otherwise. I work as a liaison for the police, and-Whoa! Hold up- Just-’

Gwyn had stood, was already three steps to the door. The police? Gwyn was supposed to be talking to some person who would help him. Not the fucking police. Police hung out at his parent’s place all the time. He didn’t trust any of them.

‘Gwyn, Gwyn,’ Mikkel said, words falling over themselves, ‘listen, listen- I’m not a boy in blue, okay? I’m a client services and victim liaison. My job, is to sometimes serve as an intermediary
between cops and difficult cases that require sensitivity, okay? I’m not reporting to them. None of this gets back to them. If you want, I can walk out of here and never see you again. But I’m not-Jesus, I’m not whatever you think I am.’

Mikkel’s eyes were earnest and Gwyn already felt too seen, his skin crawling. He didn’t like this at all.

‘Okay, lemme lay some stuff out for you,’ Mikkel said, clearing his throat, leaning back in his chair. He looked harmless, but he obviously wasn’t, and Gwyn was torn between wanting to sit, wanting to walk out. ‘You’re in a bit of a bind with your family. Your family have high powered connections that make anything to do with them dangerous. Whatever happens from here on in, that has to be navigated as carefully as fucking possible. No one comes on board who thinks the sun shines out of their asses. And you’ll need a representative. But I can’t do that either, until I know more about your story.’

‘This is a bad idea,’ Gwyn said, more to himself than to Mikkel.

Mikkel was silent for a long time, and when Gwyn looked at him, Mikkel just said: ‘I’ve seen the photos, Gwyn.’

There was nothing to say to that. Gwyn’s fingers curled into fists, but there were no words he could think to say. Mikkel leaned forwards, seeing too much with his glittering gaze that was by turns soft, then calculating.

‘Don’t you think doing nothing at all is a bad idea?’

‘I can leave in like a year,’ Gwyn said. ‘Less maybe.’

‘You’ll be dead in a year, or in a militarised conversion camp,’ Mikkel said bluntly. Gwyn hadn’t really thought of all the things Augus would have needed to share with Mr. Prince for Mikkel to know this much. He felt chilled and queasy, wanted to be back home convalescing. His father ignoring him. Efnisien putting him on high alert. His mother fussing with soothing words before making him something poisonous. Either way, it was an easier situation to read.

‘Come on,’ Mikkel said, ‘sit down. I’m good at my job, just give me a chance to prove it.’

Gwyn sat down slowly, automatically folding an arm around his torso, wondering what was on the laptop. Was it the photos he’d sent Augus? Something else?

‘First,’ Mikkel said, ‘I want to ask you some questions. Most of them only need a yes or no answer. It’s just to clarify what I know so far, okay? To hear it from you. That’s all. But you have to talk to me. If you don’t want my help, then fine, there are plenty of cases – cops battering and intimidating their spouses, lawyers blackmailing well, fucking everyone, and detectives leveraging their power to hurt people – that I don’t need to waste my time on someone who doesn’t want my help. Get me? But I think you want my help, you’re just not used to anyone wanting to help you.’

Gwyn was silent for a long time, and eventually he just shrugged to indicate that Mikkel should go ahead with the questions. He didn’t know what else to do, what else to say, and he didn’t like how blunt Mikkel was. It was like Augus, but somehow it was easier now with Augus. Maybe because Augus was around his age and not some adult who worked with the police.

Over the next twenty minutes, Mikkel asked Gwyn about his family, about whether he’d been hospitalised before, about whether or not his father was the one who had given him those bruises. Most of the questions only required yes or no answers, and Gwyn didn’t lie, but with every single
syllable he offered, he felt smaller, tireder, until he could only nod or shake his head at what Mikkel was asking him. He felt like the man had a pickaxe and was just digging into him until he got out everything he found valuable.

He hated it.

‘You say you’ve had breaks that healed badly in the past,’ Mikkel said thoughtfully. ‘Would you be willing to have some X-rays or an MRI taken?’

‘I can’t do that here,’ Gwyn said. ‘Not at local hospitals.’

‘Let me deal with that,’ Mikkel said. ‘I know some folks, there are MRI machines in private institutions too, and not all of those rely on funding from your parents.’

‘But I can’t afford- My parents can see what-’

‘It’s my job to deal with that,’ Mikkel said, not even looking at Gwyn as he wrote something on the computer. He typed quickly, the sounds blurring together, and Gwyn suddenly had an image of Mikkel as a hacker, or some kind of gamer with headphones on, just someone living in a dark basement who ate too many chips and drank soft drink from huge supersized cups. Gwyn flushed as he realised that it was probably mean of him, and knotted his fingers together in his lap.

‘Wrestling must explain a lot of the bruises not caused by wrestling,’ Mikkel said, sucking in some air through his front teeth.

Gwyn nodded. It’d always been a very convenient sport. Hand-to-hand grappling caused bruises anyway. Knees slipping into the wrong places, knuckles digging in, even just grasping and pushing and pulling at people.

‘You can’t stay there,’ Mikkel said. ‘I have a safe-house, of a sort. And-’

‘You’re…’ Gwyn cleared his throat when Mikkel looked at him expectantly. ‘There’s a case?’

Mikkel looked confused for a second, and then he offered a rueful smile. ‘Cupcake, there’s one hell of a case for legal emancipation of a minor on the grounds of extensive abuse and neglect. I wouldn’t be here if there wasn’t. They get me in for the big cases.’

‘It’s not a big case,’ Gwyn said.

*I just don’t want to live with them anymore.*

He didn’t like the way Mikkel was looking at him. Eventually Mikkel pushed the laptop away and rested his forearms on the table, facing Gwyn squarely.

‘You’re not going to like being assessed by a psychologist,’ Mikkel said bluntly. ‘We need that to happen too. And it is a big case. There are things I can put into motion to make sure you’re as protected as possible. Video-link statements, getting you out of that environment, etcetera. If the case blows up enough, I suppose your parents could put a hit out on you or something if they wanted to, but they’re less likely to do it, the bigger the case is.’

Gwyn knew he wouldn't like being assessed by a psychologist, but he appreciated that Mikkel was blunt enough to say so. Gwyn was shocked at how casually Mikkel referred to his parents putting a hit out on him. He knew his father could probably beat him to death in a fit of passion, but actual premeditated murder? That seemed extreme. Sort of.
'You see this kind of stuff a lot then?' Gwyn said. 'Uh, like, is this-? A...not high profile, but would this be like-

'This is one hundred percent a high profile case,' Mikkel said. 'That's a really good way to look at it, because that's what it's going to be. And yeah, I see this stuff like way too often, trust me. It's enough to make you want to blow your brains out, except I'm one of the best fuckers out there for this kind of work so y'know. Also survivor's guilt. You do start to think maybe you've got nothing to be upset or depressed about, because like, hey, I'm not being beaten violently by my Dad on a regular basis.'

'It's not that regular,' Gwyn said, looking down.

'Oh, man, you don't get to decide what's regular,' Mikkel said, laughing gently. 'Sorry, but you're not gonna have a good window into reality there.'

'Thanks,' Gwyn said, frowning, staring at him unhappily. 'And you're... I mean you- You don't have to do this if you're... If it's too much or whatever.'

'Me?' Mikkel said, his eyes brightening, his smile then was warm. 'Gee thanks, Mister, but I'm doing swell.'

Gwyn scowled at him, and Mikkel flashed a cheeky grin in response, before tapping his fingers on the table. It looked like more he was doing it to some kind of song in his head, there was a weird specificity to the rhythm.

'I'm good,' Mikkel said. 'I mean I have a therapist and shit, and a prescription, and I'm good. It's getting you on track that's going to be tough. Especially because I don't think you can continue matriculating here forever, especially if we get you out of the house. Like, your parents have funded a significant chunk of this year's and last year's budget. Two buildings here are named after An Fnwy and probably make students think this school has Gaelic roots when it fucking doesn't. Albion loves them.'

'He shines a light up their asses, that's for sure,' Gwyn muttered.

Mikkel laughed, and then bit his lip like maybe he shouldn't have laughed that hard. Of all the ways for this meeting to go, Gwyn hadn't expected it to go quite like this. He'd expected someone terrifying like Mr. Prince. Or someone who meant well, but ultimately wouldn't believe him, or who would quail beneath the power his parents had, like Gwyn did. Now that Mikkel treated it all so casually, Gwyn wondered if he should have found it easier to fight back before now. Except he hadn't really even started fighting back yet, had he? He was letting other people fight his battles for him.

'What do you want for the future?' Mikkel said, his voice quieter. 'Do you want to go into pro wrestling? Something else? Your grades are actually not bad. Are you wanting to stay here? Leave? Are you too fucked up to daydream about that stuff? Too concerned with what your family has coming at you next?'

Gwyn flinched back, staring at him in stock, and Mikkel just lifted his eyebrows.

'If you expect me to dick around and wrap you in cotton wool, that's like- No, man, that is not my job. I feel bad for you, I really do, but that's why I'm like this. Plus I can tell you appreciate honesty over me being like, 'here have some tea and it will all be all right.' But sometimes I'm gonna say things you don't like, or say them in a way you're not used to. Don't worry, you won't ever have to speak to me again if this all works out, because I'll have moved onto some other poor fucker.'
It was hard to just sit there and contemplate the hugeness of it all. Not his future, not what he wanted for himself, but just this. He'd always imagined that he'd just come of age and get out. He'd leave. He'd go to another state or another country if he had to. He'd work any stupid job. He'd do anything. Even if he was scared that maybe he wasn't cut out for labour, like his father said to him. Even if he was afraid that he couldn't manage money, or that he didn't know how to live on hardly any income and everyone would know that he had no idea what he was doing. He'd move into Augus' place with the termites in a heartbeat, if he didn't think he'd be putting everyone out, if he wasn't afraid for what they would bring down on Augus.

'I dunno,' Gwyn said, his voice a lot rougher than before. 'I don't care so much about school. I'm here because I have to be. I do wrestling because... the coach is nice to me. 'Because I don't suck at it. I don't really care about it, like I don't- I know I'd get a scholarship to a university based on wrestling, but the appeal of that was more in getting out and having somewhere else to live in another state maybe. I don't know. You can complete secondary school at any point, though, can't you? I looked it up on a computer in the library once. You don't have to do it right now. You can do it later.'

'That's true,' Mikkel said. 'I've got friends who did it. Some didn't get to university or college until they were thirty or forty, like, whatever works, right?'

Gwyn nodded, feeling like his parents would be scandalised that Gwyn wasn't so much talking about their abuse, but about putting off school.

'We can get a VRO or something,' Mikkel said pensively, looking back at his notebook. 'We have the physical evidence, and I know some people in justice who'd be good to talk to about this shit.'

‘VRO?’ Gwyn said.

‘Violence Restraining Order,’ Mikkel said, without looking at him. 'That way you could stay in school - if Albion doesn't look to expel you, pretty sure your folks will leverage funding against you actually being here - or at the very least you could work or something, or still show your face in public sometimes, and if they come near you... I mean some bent cops are gonna let it slide, but not all of them. Probably you've been told that everyone is evil and no one would support you in order to keep you in line. I bet that's something you've heard, and you see enough evidence of it, yeah?'

Gwyn nodded. Mikkel nodded too, grimacing, eyes flicking over to Gwyn.

'Yeah, I bet,' he said. 'But it's not totally true. There are Magistrates who still believe in doing the right thing. Your parents haven't funded everyone on the planet. Not all police chiefs can be bought. Though - ha - like, most people don't know that cuz there's so fucking few of them. But I know people who can get the ball rolling on emancipation. I think we'll go videolink testimony with you, and then make sure that like...yeah, we're gonna need a VRO. We can get the MRI the week after and see if that's got anything to shore that up in case your parents try and appeal it. Now, I have a place, you can stay there instead of at your folk's place, but as soon as I get that VRO you have to be out. So maybe- end of the week? Sooner? How soon can you do?'

He'd not expected everything to move like this. Didn't court cases take time? Maybe Mikkel had a sense of urgency that wasn't accurate. It wasn't like his dad beat him that badly most of the time.

'Out with it,' Mikkel said. 'I can see you wanna say something. You don't want to go?'

'Just seems fast,' Gwyn said. 'It's not that urgent.'

Is it?
'I don't work slow,' Mikkel said finally. 'Cupcake, we do this as fast as possible, because the sooner they have no legal ties to you as your guardians, the sooner you can press charges against them - if you want to do that. Trust me, bureaucracy is gonna fucking hold us up enough, but I don't have to be a part of that. I'm not gonna be. With the photos Prince sent me, I can get a VRO today. I know a guy. I know a million. I'm hooked up.'

Mikkel laughed to himself and then stretched his arms back behind his head.

'Seriously though it's much more fun to be like hooked up with candy or great Italian food or a really good sandwich. But no, I'm hooked up for this shit. Your parents know every evil, bought, corrupt bastard in this town? I know the ones who are on the opposite side, you could say. If your parents know a firefighter that will burn a house down, I know the guy who'll burn the firefighter down.'

'You sound very sure of yourself,' Gwyn said, wondering if Mikkel was too into his own mythology or something. No one was that good, or had that many connections.

'I am. How about we get the VRO for Saturday? You get through this week with your head down, and then we'll move you in.'

'But...rent- I'm-

'I'll look into helping you get a job,' Mikkel said absently, waving a hand, 'but I can cover the first two months or so. I'm not like rich or anything, but the mortgage on that dump is paid. Don't think you'll be living in the lap of luxury or anything though. It'll be ah, what one might call a significant step down from what you're used to. But there's hot water and a bed, and a fridge and shit. It'll do.'

Gwyn nodded. He felt overwhelmed. Could it happen that fast? Could he really be out that quickly?

'Technical time,' Mikkel said, pulling his laptop towards him and looking at Gwyn with a sharp expression, 'now you overshare with me so I can get all the details. You're gonna hate me after today. The first meeting is always the worst meeting.'

'Uh.'

'It's fine,' Mikkel said. 'I'm not here to be your favourite person, Cupcake. And I'm not gonna be your favourite person. Come on, buckle in, we've got another hour of this shit before I'm gonna be happy with all this.'

Gwyn took a deep breath and made himself nod, not knowing if he felt hope, or dread, or some other thing that he had no name for. He felt distantly queasy, light-headed, shoved it aside. Hard to tell what was stress and what wasn't eating enough and what was being interrogated by some stranger. Maybe it was all three. It wasn't like knowing solved anything anyway.

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He didn't get to properly speak to Augus for the rest of the day. Their classes took them to different parts of the school, and Gwyn was under strict instructions to go straight home afterwards. His lunch and the period afterwards had all gone to Mikkel. Was it strange, to miss Gulvi and Kayla? Ash and Augus? He'd never thought he'd like it so much, sitting at the table with them, listening far more than he spoke, but not feeling like they were excluding him or leaving him out. They teased him about being rich and special and getting everything he wanted, but he suspected that was going to change from what Augus had said. Gwyn hoped Gulvi and Kayla didn't know, but he expected that Ash did.

That day, once he was home and back in his room, he opened his phone and found a message
waiting for him.

Have you eaten? Augus wrote. Did the meeting with Mr. Prince's friend go well? Who was he?

Victm liaison, Gwyn wrote, because he didn't know how to shorten the word 'liaison' and it still come across. Also because he knew Augus liked it when Gwyn was clearer. Seemed ok, sys cn hlp. Wnts me out on wknd.

That's very fast, Augus wrote in response. Is there anything I can do?

N, Gwyn sent.

Sit with us at lunch tomorrow, Augus wrote. Because you have to eat something, and I'm going to make sure you do.

Gwyn paused, staring at his phone.

He felt uneasy. He wasn't going to eat in front of Augus. He wasn't going to eat in front of any of them. Tomorrow he'd get in early enough and cook in one of the home economics rooms. They always had chicken and mince there in bulk, and no one noticed if he took some. He'd never even been caught.

A distant, small part of him knew that it wasn't normal to have such a strong, visceral reaction to the idea of someone else watching him eat, but...

I've eaten, Gwyn replied.

You're lying to me, Augus wrote. And I still don't care even if you have. You're eating something at that table tomorrow. I'll make you a sandwich.

No, Gwyn thought. He stared at his phone until he saw the small ellipsis that meant that Augus was writing something else.

Do you have a problem eating around others? Augus wrote.

Gwyn's chest felt tight. How would Augus even know that? It was impossible that he could know that. He shoved his phone into his pocket and didn't reply, feeling cold. And it didn't matter anyway. Gwyn was going to eat in the morning. He already knew. He'd only need to get there forty minutes early and he could cook the mince or chicken in small batches and it’d need hardly any time. He’d be able to wash up, and he’d finally get to eat something more than the pieces of uncooked pasta and other foods he was stealing for himself from his own cupboard in the depths of the early morning.

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The next day, Gwyn walked towards the lunch table and smiled when he saw Ash, Kayla and Gulvi. It was so easy to pretend everything was normal. Hadn't he done it countless times already? Even with everything else going on, he still found it easy. It didn't matter that his heart beat harder, or that his fingers felt colder. He'd managed to eat that morning, his stomach making the gurgling sounds that came not from being hungry, but from being unused to digestion.

Ash got up when he saw Gwyn, walked over, and Gwyn stared in alarm as Ash threw his arms around Gwyn's shoulders.

'Hey, man,' Ash said, pulling Gwyn so tight that Gwyn could feel the tension on Ash's fingers, the way he squeezed Gwyn close. 'You good?'
'Yeah. Fine,' Gwyn said, stepping back and his throat feeling tight. Ash was looking at him with brighter eyes than usual, though he didn't look teary or anything. His eyebrows were pulled up. God, he must know everything. Or at least enough. But Gwyn wasn't used to being hugged at all, and for a few seconds he just stood there, unsure of what had just happened and whether or not he'd liked it, and whether the others would say anything.

No one said anything as Gwyn awkwardly made his way over and sat on the side of the table that would place him at a right angle to Augus, not that Augus had arrived yet. It was already Gwyn’s space. Ash sat opposite him, and Kayla and Gulvi always sat side by side, often occupied with their phones. Today though, they both watched him. Kayla's gaze was softer, gentler, but he still resisted squirming.

'Darling,' Gulvi said, 'you haven't returned any of my messages.'

'Yeah, homework, and...being sick,' Gwyn said. 'Sorry.'

'Augus was very worried for you. It’s not like him. I began to wonder if something else was going on.'

Ash was looking at Gulvi in a meaningful way, trying to convey something with his eyes, and with a sinking feeling, Gwyn knew exactly what it meant. That Gulvi was probing for information in a way she never did, and clumsily, and Ash staring at her like… A small flash of anger that he shoved down as quickly as he shoved down his rebellions against his father when he was in a rage.

'He told you,' Gwyn said flatly. 'Ash.'

'Hardly anything,' Ash said quickly. 'Just- I thought she knew something, or just-'

'Shit up,' Gwyn said, glaring at him. 'It's my fucking business, not yours.'

'I agree,' Gulvi said, surprising him. 'But I know now. I just wanted to ask if there was anything we could do? Me or Kayla?'

Gwyn blinked at them both, and then his eyes were drawn to Augus who was walking across the quadrangle, wearing his school uniform, his tie, his backpack slung carelessly over one shoulder. He looked more worn than usual. When he saw Gwyn he didn't smile, exactly, but his expression loosened, like he'd untangled a little.

'My Mum isn’t a fan of your family,' Gulvi said quickly, 'but I can get to your house sometimes, we can do homework together. I'd invite Kayla but-'

'She can't be around my family,' Gwyn said abruptly, looking at Kayla in alarm. 'You both can't be around Efenisien.'

'No,' Gulvi murmured, and then placed her fingers over the back of Kayla's hand. 'My thoughts too.'

'Sorry,' Gwyn said to Kayla.

The worst part was knowing that Efenisien would just see her as another notch in...in the long line of people he’d hurt, however he hurt them. And he hated to think that Efenisien would be worse because Kayla was transgender, but he had a horrible feeling Efenisien would be. It made him feel sick. Even Gulvi wasn't safe around Efenisien, and Gwyn knew Gulvi could probably kill a dude with her bare hands. At least, that was always the impression he'd gotten.

'But I can come,' Gulvi said.
'Thanks, but-'

'Good afternoon, everyone,' Augus said, sitting down and placing his backpack next to him, rifling through it for something. 'Anything interesting going on?'

'I mean, your brother told Gulvi about what I told you about in confidence, so now everyone knows,' Gwyn said, unable to stop himself. Augus paused, hands still in the backpack. Gwyn found himself staring at Augus' hands, forgetting how annoyed he was. They'd not talked about hooking up since Gwyn had been sent to the hospital, but his stitches were gone and he knew he was fucking Augus next and he missed Augus' hands and his body and the smell of his cock and it was probably pathetic but it wasn't like he had a ton of stuff to amuse himself over while recovering from his father's latest attack. He'd jacked off a ton as soon as he felt able to.

'It was going to come out anyway,' Augus said finally. 'If you go ahead with emancipation.'

'That's the plan?' Gulvi said to Augus. 'My mother knows people who could help with a case.'

'She's not a lawyer,' Augus said.

'She knows lawyers,' Gulvi said, laughing. 'She's a bit of a bleeding heart at the best of times.'

'Your mother is fucking terrifying,' Augus said fervently. 'I went to Mr. Prince.'

'Because he's not fucking terrifying?' Gulvi half-shrieked, before bursting into laughter. 'Kayla had a theory that his opponents wilted on the *piste* because he just looked at them in that way he does- I mean his fashion is intriguing and I have to admit I wish he was head of our house but- And he helped you?'

Gwyn watched them talking and didn't say anything. Kayla, Gulvi and Augus ended up embroiled in some discussion about which teachers and parents were more terrifying, and Gwyn watched as Augus drew out two sandwiches - separately wrapped - and knew he wasn't going to eat either and hoped Augus wasn't going to ask, or worse, *insist*. Then his eyes moved to Ash, who was watching him with a far softer expression on his face than Ash should be able to make.

It made Gwyn's cheeks warm. He remembered how tightly Ash had hugged him before. Augus had joked about it in a message, hadn't he? Gwyn hadn't thought it was serious.

He avoided looking at Augus as he unwrapped the first sandwich and started eating it. Gwyn didn't even look at what was in it. He knew that Augus had to eat lunch, and that he often had sandwiches, and that it was normal for him to eat at this time. But Gwyn felt like Augus was doing it to make a point, even to be spiteful, and it made him increasingly uncomfortable. Especially when a couple of the others began eating, too.

Did they all notice that he didn't eat? Did they notice it every time? He'd given explanations in the past, and they'd never thought anything of it. But did they think about it now?

He didn't want anyone to think about how he ate. The less attention that had, the better.

Fifteen minutes later, hardly paying attention to the conversations around him, he was shocked when Augus tapped him on the wrist. Gwyn looked over to him quickly and both sandwiches were gone, the plastic wrap balled up in Augus' hand.

'Can I talk to you for a second?' Augus said. 'Privately?'

Gwyn looked around the table, at the curious expression on Kayla's face, the way Gulvi didn't even
look up from her phone - he loved her in that moment, even though she probably just didn't care - and Ash taking selfies and occasionally pausing to ruffle his curly hair to make it even more dishevelled than normal. Finally, he nodded and stood, taking his backpack with him.

The last time Augus had led him away from the group, it had been to get a blowjob. Gwyn knew it wasn't what Augus was doing now, but he wished it was. Augus barely flirted with him since he'd sent Gwyn to the hospital. Aside from warily talking about Gwyn fucking him, which happened in small bursts that gave Gwyn a sinking feeling, it seemed like them ever having sex again was off the table. There was no easy way to just...tell someone he wanted to give them a blowjob. Especially when that someone was probably not really into him in the first place.

He was surprised when Augus led him up to the House of Ravens dorms, and even more surprised to find himself in Augus’ and Ash's twin room. A desk separating two beds, the small space smelling faintly of body odour and old laundry, and what must be the deoderant that Ash wore, because Gwyn knew he'd never smelled it on Augus.

Augus sat down, indicated that Gwyn should sit opposite, so they ended up perching on the beds, facing each other. Gwyn knew that Augus was on his own bed, because it was made immaculately, it was more spartan than Ash's bed. Ash just didn't seem that clean, there were candy wrappers all over it.

'If they see me up here with you,' Gwyn said, frowning. 'I don't want to get you into trouble.'

Augus blinked at him, then laughed. Gwyn couldn't tell what that meant. Did Augus not think he could get into trouble? After speaking with Mikkel, it seemed like anyone near Gwyn could get hurt just by knowing him.

'Was the meeting good?' Augus said. 'With Mr. Prince's friend?'

'Mikkel,' Gwyn said. 'It was okay, I guess.'

'Can he help?'

'He wants me out by the weekend,' Gwyn said, looking down, shaking his head. He hated this. He didn't want to be talking to Augus about any of this. It was better when Augus was just being mean and blackmailing him. 'He's going to help me get a Violence Restraining Order, and that means there are consequences if my parents break it. I don't know. He seemed okay. But you should probably- Like, you should probably...'

You should stay out of it now. It's not safe.

Gwyn couldn't make himself say the words. It made him feel melodramatic and stupid. And then he just couldn't imagine doing it all on his own. He'd never been able to do it on his own before. Maybe that made him desperate and needy. Maybe Augus hated him for it. But Augus could walk away too. Maybe he would.

'I'm in,' Augus said softly, and when Gwyn looked up, Augus was looking at the closed bedroom door with something thoughtful on his face. 'I should probably walk away, shouldn't I? I know that. It's nice of you to say it, I suppose. But, well, I don't know. I'm still thinking of saying yes to you fucking me, can you believe it? There's clearly something wrong with me.'

'I wouldn't hurt you,' Gwyn said.

'I've seen your cock,' Augus said, smiling wryly. 'I don't think it matters what you do with it, I still think it's going to hurt.'
Gwyn's fingers curled around the edges of the bed. Ash's bed. It was tempting to back down on his decision, but it wasn't like Augus' cock was small, and he'd still used it like a weapon. But Augus looked tired, way more tired than he'd ever looked. Gwyn wondered how much he'd been the cause of that. He wanted to make it easier, but he didn't know how.

'I'd only do it once,' Gwyn said. 'Especially if you like...hated it. But I won't send you to hospital.'

Augus winced, then laughed. 'Can't wait for this to be over, and then one day I can talk to people about how I almost fucked a guy and sent him to hospital, but he sure got me back!'

'It's not like-'

'I know it's not like that,' Augus said, his voice harsh. 'I guess. It's what I'd do, if the tables were turned. And I'd say you're nothing like me, but I've seen how much you are now. You're a lot meaner than anyone knows, I think, and it's all completely understandable. But I didn't...bring you up here for that. I wanted to hear about things with Mikkel. Can I help at all?'

Gwyn opened his backpack and started drawing out things he'd taken from his bedroom. A smartwatch he never used, old phones, cash he'd cached away and more. Augus' eyes widened as Gwyn left it all on Ash's bed.

'You said,' Gwyn said.

'I did,' Augus said. 'I just didn't know if you'd do it.'

It was what everyone seemed to think. That Gwyn didn't really want to leave. Even Mikkel had circled around on that like fifteen times, in different ways, but Gwyn could tell every single time it came up, and it made him angrier every time. He folded his arms in his lap and said nothing, annoyed to find himself in the position of having to defend himself once more. Maybe he was afraid of leaving. Maybe he was pretty sure it wouldn't work. But that didn't mean he didn't want to leave.

Augus stood up, walked over, and Gwyn was surprised when instead of picking up all the stuff Gwyn had pilfered from home, he just sat next to Gwyn with a sigh. And then Gwyn tensed when Augus placed his arm around Gwyn's shoulders. The starch in their school coats made the fabric crinkle loudly. Augus didn't seem to care, pulling Gwyn closer, even though Gwyn hardly moved.

Gwyn stared ahead and didn't know what to do.

'You don't eat,' Augus said musingly. 'I mean obviously you do, or you'd be in a hospital, so you obviously have ways of doing it. But you're... Is Mikkel sending you for an assessment?'

'I'm not going to talk about food with some fucking shrink,' Gwyn said abruptly, realising it was true. It was easier to talk about the violence.

'You know you won't make weight at your next weigh in,' Augus said.

Gwyn didn't care about that either, even though it was true. He was most worried about his coach's reaction, but it'd be easy to blame the drop on two weeks of the flu, which was his official excuse anyway. He dug his thumb into his palm and tried not to think about it. 'It's fine.'

'Far be it from me to be honest enough to tell you that you have an eating disorder, but I think you and I both know that's fucking bullshit, Gwyn.'

Gwyn opened his mouth, and then his voice muffled against Augus' other hand. Augus had turned into him, one arm around his shoulders and a palm against his mouth, and Gwyn was staring into
those green eyes that were unblinking and too sharp to weather. Gwyn's gaze skittered sideways.

'You're not fine,' Augus said. 'Maybe you need to say it to convince yourself, but you're leaving your family to go live in some place you've never been before, in the middle of your secondary education, and you're about to get a VRO because a victim services liaison said it was a good idea.'

Gwyn wished he didn't flinch hearing it. Wished Augus couldn't feel it through his arm. He hated the part of his mind that wanted Augus to push him down to his knees, to distract him with something else, something far better. His chest hurt, he kept trying to remember the last time someone had put an arm around him who seemed to actually care about him, and he couldn't. A part of his mind was loud and distressed about it, and he kept trying to stomp it down.

It stopped him from twisting out of Augus' arms. Stopped him from moving his mouth away. He should feel indignant, even insulted, and instead he'd already made the decision to stay because he didn't know when someone would do this for him again. And even though he was taller and broader than Augus, more built than most of the people in the school, he felt so pathetic and so fucking small.

'You're not fine,' Augus said quietly, and Gwyn closed his eyes.

No, he supposed he wasn't really fine at all.

'Ash and I are going to help,' Augus said.

He drew his hand away from Gwyn's mouth, and it ended up resting over Gwyn's knee.

'You're going to let us,' Augus said. 'Which means you're going to have to tell us the address of this place where Mikkel wants you to stay.'

'They will ruin you,' Gwyn said, his voice weak. 'God, Mikkel was talking about the fact that the more high profile this gets, the less likely they are to put a hit out on me. And I don't think they'd do that, but the way he talked about it...'

'You don't think they would?' Augus said.

'They haven't done it yet,' Gwyn said, laughing. 'They would've done it by now.'

'But you've been compliant until now.'

'You sound like him,' Gwyn said. 'Dad just has a bad temper. And mother is harmless, really, like she's never done anything worse than put stuff in my food. She doesn't hit me like he does. She just cares about the family reputation.'

Augus was silent for so long that Gwyn had to look at him, and he was surprised to see horror on his face, in Augus' wide eyes, in the way his mouth was slightly open. Gwyn tried to remember what he'd said, but couldn't think of anything bad enough to create that kind of reaction. He opened his mouth to speak, but Augus spoke over him.

'What does she put in your food?' Augus said, hoarse.

Oh, that's what you said, you fucking idiot.

'Just..' Gwyn shook his head quickly. 'No- I meant that-'

'Does she have Munchausen's by Proxy?'

Gwyn laughed bitterly then, swallowing when Augus' arm around his upper back pulled him closer
and Gwyn didn't have the heart to resist the motion. He ended up with his hair brushing against Augus' shoulder, too tense to lean in, not knowing if he was doing it right. It wasn't comforting.

'You have to want the attention to have Munchausen's by Proxy,' Gwyn said. He'd researched it. 'I think to qualify for that kind of thing, you have to want attention or sympathy for it. She doesn't want anyone to know. It's like...'

*It's like it's our little secret.*

Except his father and Efnisien both knew about it. And probably his Aunty Penny as well.

'So you've learned not to eat anything given to you by other people,' Augus said. 'You did say she was worse. Fuck.'

'She's not worse, really, she's just-'

'Oh what, *harmless really?* Augus said mockingly. 'Go on, play it down some more. We have a whole twenty minutes left of lunch for you to do that before you have to go to your classes and then rush home to avoid being beaten by your father or fucking...fucking poisoned by your mother.'

The flash of anger was strong, and Gwyn twisted away from Augus, grabbing his wrist automatically - knowing that Augus left himself open and didn't know how to defend himself - and had Augus pinned to the bed in less than five seconds, one hand wrenching his wrist out, the other digging down into Augus' chest.

'Fuck you,' Gwyn said, glaring at him.

'Ow,' Augus said, tentatively curling the fingers of his pinned wrist.

'You think you're helping me? You're a fucking nightmare. What part do you enjoy more, Augus? That I'm broken enough to let you treat me like shit? Or that you get to play at being a hero when you're just an asshole?'

Augus looked pale then, but maybe that was the pain in his wrist. Gwyn knew it wasn't broken, but he wasn't being gentle, either.

'Well?' Gwyn said, squeezing harder until he felt the bones compress and Augus' entire body went ramrod tense. He wasn't someone he was sparring with. Augus didn't know how to defend himself - and had Augus pinned to the bed in less than five seconds, one hand wrenching his wrist out, the other digging down into Augus' chest.

'Which part do you enjoy more?' Augus said, voice tight. 'That you can hurt me like your Dad hurts you? Or the part where you pretend there's nothing wrong with you and everything's fine?'

Gwyn felt stung enough that he nearly let go of Augus' wrist, but at the last moment, he stopped himself. He could hurt Augus the way Gwyn's father could hurt someone. He *could* do that. But he hadn't. Not yet. He'd punched Augus to defend himself. And he was pinning him now. Maybe it wasn't fair, maybe it was mean, but Augus was unfair with his words. He was also mean. So he stared down, and eventually Augus bared gritted teeth at Gwyn and looked frustrated instead of desperate.

'I'm not your hero,' Augus said. 'I told you I wasn't! I said that *myself*. And you *are* broken enough to let me treat you like shit. You might have the odd moment where you stand up for yourself, but you're going to need more than moments where you snap because you have a temper, if you want to get through this.'
'You're a fucking asshole,' Gwyn snarled.

'I told you I was,' Augus said, grinning up at him from the bed. 'I fucking told you I was. And you still told me to get you out of that house, and I fucking followed through. So maybe you owe me. Maybe you-

Gwyn moved his hand from Augus' chest, to Augus' mouth, covering it with his palm. But where Gwyn went still beneath Augus' hand, Augus opened his mouth and bit into the heel of Gwyn's palm so sharply that Gwyn yanked his hand back, hissing. Augus laughed.

The way Augus defaulted to that bright, mocking laughter was a kind of fury that Gwyn didn't know how to deal with. He leaned down, half thinking he was going to bite, but instead he pressed his lips too hard against Augus' surprised, open mouth, and silenced him that way.

Augus' wrist tugged beneath Gwyn's tight fingers, and Gwyn let go automatically, shocked that this was his first kiss, too surprised to hang onto his own anger.

No longer pinned, Augus grasped Gwyn's hair with his other hand and kept him close, pulling tight on the strands. His mouth shifted beneath Gwyn's, and then Gwyn felt tense and hot and cold as those mean teeth scraped over his bottom lip. Once, then twice, and then a gentle bite that made Gwyn feel breathless. He pulled back and Augus followed, licking over his mouth, and it was messy, wet, and Gwyn wasn't even sure he liked it until those lips were rubbing against his mouth, encouraging him down again.

After that, Augus' mouth was sweet, careful. His tongue licking slowly into Gwyn's mouth, his breathing ragged, small deep sounds in his chest as he kept Gwyn's head exactly where he wanted it. Gwyn, dazed, didn't even try to take control back again. Half of him enjoyed it, but the other half was still trying to process what was happening. They were kissing. They were kissing each other and Augus who said he hated romance and didn't want anything other than casual fucking or whatever - he was the one leading the kiss.

Minutes passed. Gwyn drew back, feeling warm, his cock half-hard in his pants. He looked down at Augus' wet lips, redder than normal. Augus looked as shocked as Gwyn felt, but his hand was careful in Gwyn's hair, gently nudging strands back into place until he could slide his hand free and draw it down Gwyn's cheek. That, more than anything else that had happened, made Gwyn feel naked and raw, and he ducked down and buried his face into Augus' chest, the sides of Augus’ coat on either side of Gwyn's face.

Augus petted his hair awkwardly, but it was kind all the same, and they didn't say anything for a long time. Gwyn was worried Augus would say something mean, maybe Augus was worried about the same thing.

'What are we even doing?' Augus said.

'Is your wrist okay?'

'I hate that you can do that,' Augus said. 'But it's fine. Bruised, I guess. Again, thanks.'

'You're welcome.'

Two arms came around him, palms resting on his back, and Gwyn was in an uncomfortable position - legs hanging off the bed still - but he didn't care.

'Your brother hugged me,' Gwyn said.
'Did you like it? You can tell him to stop when he gets insufferable.'

'It's not insufferable,' Gwyn said.

The arms around his back pulled him closer, squeezed at him, and Gwyn took a huge breath, like he was gulping down the touch.

'You can't tell me to stop when I get insufferable,' Augus said. 'It's my true nature.'

Gwyn wanted to agree with him, but he wasn't sure he agreed. It was one of the things that pissed him off so much. Augus got mean when he didn't get his own way, but there was something else about him that kept capturing Gwyn's attention. Meanness he was familiar with. Augus was a whole lot of other unknown quantities that he craved.

'You kissed me,' Augus said.

'You did most of it.'

'You started it, though.'

'Whatever,' Gwyn said. 'You kept it going.'

'I wanted to see what it was like.'

Gwyn drew back just enough to see Augus' face. Augus' expression was placid, even calm.

'You've never kissed anyone before?' Gwyn said.

'I don't know why you're so shocked,' Augus said, smiling at him - the smile far less mocking or mean or cruel than it normally was.

'I dunno,' Gwyn said, feeling embarrassed all the same. 'I didn’t think it was bad.'

'Well, no, of course it wasn't bad,' Augus said. 'I'm good at everything.'

'Except fucking people in the ass.'

They looked at each other, the room plunged into silence, only the sound of students outside playing sports on the oval. Then he caught the way Augus' eyes crinkled on a laugh before it spilled, a surprised, shocked sound, and Gwyn couldn't stop himself either. They both burst into laughter at the same time, Gwyn falling onto Augus' chest and forgetting about everything else the day had brought with it.
Watch the World Cave In

Chapter Notes

Added new tags: Awkward sex (yay!) (although this chapter 'only' has awkward foreplay) along with housekeeping tags that should've been there before now, like PTSD, flashbacks and nightmares.

Augus

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The week progressed like normal. Gwyn came to school, sometimes he passed valuables onto Augus, like Augus had ever been trustworthy. He never had any new bruises that Augus could see, and Augus studied him to make sure. They texted sometimes, but Gwyn had become more and more taciturn, his horrendous spelling getting worse, until Augus realised that Gwyn wasn't trying to piss him off on purpose, he was just that stressed.

It was hard to know how to parse all the information he'd learned in such a short amount of time. He looked up eating disorders, but nothing really matched what Gwyn described, and he thought it was a traumatic food response that had become disordered eating, and he didn't think the tricks he'd learned with Ash would apply to Gwyn. He leaned back in his chair at times, fantasising about ordering Gwyn to eat, promising something nice, something...sexual, but it got tangled up in their fucked up sex life, and the fantasy disappeared, and he realised that was probably as stupid and immature as everything else he'd done.

Still, it wouldn't leave him alone. He imagined crazier and crazier things, until he had to pace around the block and try and empty his head because he wasn't getting his homework done, wasn't getting on top of everything he was supposed to be working on.

A nightmare on Thursday night clawed into him brutally. A mish-mash of jagged, overbright images of his past. The flash of a PVC pipe, the shriek of a too-young child, the look on Ash's face when the social worker handed him a small packet of cookies just before Ash had burst into tears, saying Are you sure? Are you sure? over and over again. Other memories too. Augus flinching before a closed fist, a hard glint of satisfaction in the eyes of someone who could never be called a parent. Lying awake at night and wondering if the only reason he wasn't being molested in one of his homes was because he was too acidic, mean, cruel. If the person thought he was an ally instead of prey.

Augus woke choking, hands clapping over his mouth, breath wheezing out of his nose and his body shaking. He turned onto his stomach and buried his face into the bed, sounds on every exhale until he could get himself under control. Fucking humiliating. It was fine. He was fine. It was all behind him, and Gwyn was getting help.

It was fine.

He was fine.

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On Friday afternoon, Augus was swamped with work, sitting in a side office that didn't have a desk in it. He was cross-legged on the carpet, files all around him, typing on his laptop and trying not to check his phone every five seconds. Mikkel had taken Gwyn out of school to get the VRO a day early. Gwyn didn't seem to understand what a big deal it was. VROs completely bypassed a general Restraining Order, and VROs were usually saved for the worst situations. The consequences for violating a VRO were much more serious than ROs, and it was Mikkel's confidence in getting one of those for Gwyn that bumped up Augus' faith in Mr. Prince knowing the right person to call.

But it also meant that Gwyn's parents would find out today. No way was Gwyn ap Nudd a common enough name that they'd just think it was the other Gwyn ap Nudd from the family that didn't give charitably to hospitals, schools, police precincts and more.

It was seven in the evening when his eyesight started to blur. He reached for his backpack, pulling out the caffeine pills and staring at them, not knowing if he should be risking the palpitations and the sense of floating above himself. A regular coffee wasn't going to cut it. He knew he couldn't leave for at least a couple more hours.

He shoved the caffeine pills back in his backpack and began reading out loud to himself in a low undertone to force himself to concentrate. Legalese designed to be deliberately opaque, he didn't know how the others could stand it.

Oh, that was it, they got the intern to do all this shit for them as soon as they could.

He was massaging his temples and groaning softly to himself when he was startled by a cold knock at the open door. He looked up, surprised. They so often left him to himself. He was even more surprised to see it was one of the partners, Mr. Bride. He was a whip-lean greyhound of a man, the kind who looked like he'd kill you in your sleep, but of all the partners he was the nicest. As nice as any of the partners could ever be, anyway.

'I'm collating McAllister now,' Augus said, his voice scratchy from reading to himself for so long.

Bride leaned back into the door frame and stared down at Augus, pursing his lips.

'Is it true that you're spending time with Gwyn ap Nudd at Murdock?'

Augus' entire body stilled. His fingers bit down into his laptop. 'I'm sorry?'

'That family...' Bride said. 'You know we represent them, don't you?'

Augus didn't know. He didn't get carte blanche access to all their biggest clients, and he was still building trust with the partners. But knowing how cut-throat the company was, how high-profile, the kinds of clients they represented, suddenly everything made a horrific kind of sense.

'Oh, Augus,' Bride said, sighing. 'You stupid boy. What, exactly, did you think would happen when we found out?'

Augus' heart was beating hard, he stared upwards, feeling far too vulnerable just sitting there on the floor.

'I don't understand,' he said thickly.

'At approximately one in the afternoon, Mikkel Flynn successfully secured a VRO for Gwyn ap Nudd, along with paperwork to push for the legal emancipation of a minor due to domestic violence and long-term child abuse. Then we were contacted by very concerned parents. Do you know how easy it is for me to send someone down to Murdock - it's only five minutes away, Augus - and ask
around? Do you understand how clear the link is, once we understood you had been spending time at lunch together? Dear me, where did the young man get the legal emancipation of a minor idea from in the first place? Who...who do I know who has been through the system himself, and now works in a legal firm?"

Augus had thought he felt fucked before. But he was *fucked*.

'He's being abused,' Augus said weakly.

'That's not up to you to decide,' Bride said coolly. 'That will be up to a court and Magistrate to decide. But unfortunately, Augus, we're going to have to let you go. I hope you understand that we can't offer anything like severance, given how easy it would have been for you to access the files of Gwyn's parents, and-

'-Except I didn't,' Augus said. If he'd known, he would have. But no one had ever even brought it up. How hadn't he known? How had he spent so many hours here and never known? Bride looked down at him like he was amused with this part. Like he enjoyed Augus scrambling for solid ground.

Augus needed the money. The scholarship only covered so much. Working for the legal firm gave him the ability to buy everything else they needed. Like *food*. Like the kind of clothing that made sure they didn't get the shit kicked out of them on a regular basis. Petrol so they could drive places.

He put the laptop down. He felt ill.

'You can go into the system and check my keystrokes through the logger. You can *see* that I didn't.'

'Perhaps someone *could* see that,' Bride said pensively. 'Perhaps someone *might* also notice how fascinated you were with a particular case a few years ago, a lot of mislaid properties, a cartel, and you and your brother suddenly moving out of the school into a house. There's no paper-trail, exactly, but I wonder who's paying the bills for that house, Augus?' Bride smiled, the expression almost affectionate. 'You were very nearly smart. But not quite.'

His *home*. His shitty, termite-infested home. It was just a step on the ladder to a better place when he could afford one, but it was still a step on the ladder that stopped Ash and Augus from being completely dependent on Murdock to house them in that one bedroom with its twin beds. The room that was so small that Ash and Augus could easily murder each other inside of it.

'How come I didn't know?' Augus said, hating how he sounded; like a plaintive, whiny shithead. 'How come I didn't know about the ap Nudd family?'

'We are very discreet,' Bride said. 'A skill you may have actually learned in this job, if you'd given yourself the opportunity to stay in it.'

Augus wouldn't get any references. They wouldn't want him working at another legal firm. Augus didn't have any other skills that he could market, really. Perhaps he could do night-fill or something. He was too grumpy and acerbic to stand behind a register all day, but probably he could do night-fill. And Ash had done it in the past.

He'd have to leave the house. They'd have to move back into the dorm. He'd have no income. He'd have to actually tell Ash that he'd fucked up everything, and he had no idea how Ash would react to that. Step up the stealing? Do something stupid and get himself expelled?

The case hadn't even started yet and Augus was already fucked. He wanted to say something like, *You can't do this to me.* But life had taught him that this was exactly what to expect at any moment, from any person, and slowly he started closing the manila folders and organising the paperwork,
stacking it neatly, because he wasn't going to finish collating the McAllister information anymore. The laptop wasn't even his. It was given to him by the firm. He backed up all of his homework to Dropbox, which he could still access from the school computers, but it meant he could no longer work on stuff at home unless he did it on his phone.

Which he could no longer technically afford the plan for. He'd be good for a few months, with savings, but that was it.

He also had a sense of just how fucked Gwyn was. Bride, Hildegaard and Morrisson were not a small-time firm. They were not the kind of firm that lost cases. They responded well to power, money and influence, and they were vicious and callous when it came time to defend their clients.

Gwyn didn't even have a lawyer yet. He just had one victim services liaison, and one fucking VRO that his parents were going to contest. They'd appeal it.

Augus stood, leaving the laptop on the floor. Bride was just watching him, looking disappointed. Perhaps he'd expected Augus to fight back more, or maybe he was just unhappy to be losing one of his hardest working interns. They weren't going to be able to replace Augus that easily.

'You're not going to want to stay in that house, Augus,' Bride said finally, as Augus passed him in the doorway. Augus paused once he was in the corridor. He just nodded. 'You students, you're all the same. You think dicking down with someone is worth anything, but is it really worth it? You think about that.'

'I will,' Augus said, unable to stop how condescending he sounded. 'Great sound-byte, Bride. Record it and play it to all your interns.'

'It's almost like you don't appreciate that I'm giving you a chance to get out of that house, that I'm not going to chase up that situation with a heavy hand with a view to getting you charged as an adult and served with jail-time just to get you away from my goddamn clients.'

Augus blinked, and Bride winked at him.

'Leave your lanyard and keys at the front desk. Don't give me a reason to have security flag you down.'

It was possible to feel ten years old again. It was possible to feel like the nightmare he woke up from the night before still didn't compare to reality. Augus simply nodded again and thought about the items he might be leaving behind if he walked out right now. They'd never given him his own office anyway. It wasn’t that much to lose.

He walked out of the building and no one stopped him. Ash had the car - he always did on a Friday night - so Augus stood on the bus home and watched the scenery go by, and briefly thought that at least he’d have time to catch up on his schoolwork. Then he thought of nothing at all.

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When he got home, he looked around and thought about all the things they’d be leaving behind soon. The furniture they'd found on the side of curbs, items they'd purchased second or third hand. Augus thought maybe he could take the microwave with him though, as he stared at the meal he reheated and tried not to do something stupid. He didn't even know what he'd do, only knew there was some instinct floating around inside of him, old and desperate, the same one that looked over the railing outside Mr. Prince's office and wondered what would happen if he decided to fall over it.
He burned his tongue as he ate and didn't care. He'd have to tell Ash. They'd have to get out tomorrow, probably. Ash was going to be so disappointed in him. Augus remembered cockily telling him years before that it was bulletproof, that his scheming was so on point and no one would ever know. But even if they didn't have the details, they knew.

Augus spent time after dinner looking through job postings for juniors, bookmarking a few that looked promising. He wanted to work at a legal firm, but he didn't see that happening. Who would hire him? Who would want to? No one was going to take a law intern that couldn't get references from Bride, Hildegaard and Morrisson.

His phone buzzed and Augus looked down at it. A message from Gwyn. Augus had forgotten to ask him how he was going.

*Nw plc s ok*

Augus closed his eyes briefly, and then opened the phone. He started to write something scathing about the way Gwyn texted, and then had to delete it. He wasn't about to tell Gwyn what had happened, and if he opened with something mean, Gwyn would probably stop messaging him. Augus stared at his phone for a long time. What should he say instead?

*Good. What are you doing right now?*

*Nihng mch Mikkel gve me all ths pprwork n stff*

*Do you need some help with it?*

*Mybe*

The house was dark except for the bare bulb in the lounge where he sat with the remains of his meal in front of him, gluggy and cold. Ash wouldn't be back for a while, and if he got back late, he'd probably have someone with him to fuck and think that Augus was just working at the firm if he wasn't home. Augus quickly checked how much he had left in his bank accounts. He'd saved a bit, not that he knew what he was going to use the money for.

*Do you want a visitor?* Augus wrote.

*U mn now?*

*Sure. Give me your address.*

*U hv 2 delete it after*

*I have a good memory.*

Augus saw the address come through and deleted it straight away. He stood, changed out of his school uniform into a black shirt, black skinny jeans and a second-hand vintage leather motorcycle jacket that looked like it was worth a fortune but had been buried deep in new arrivals at the Salvation Army. He took the tie out of his long hair and left it loose. It wasn't until he started buckling his black boots that he realised he'd gotten about as dressed up as he ever got, like it was maybe a date.

That floating strange impulsive feeling in his gut was drawing tighter, becoming louder, he continued to ignore it.

It was a bus and then a ten minute walk to get to Gwyn's new place, which was a townhouse...
sandwiched between twenty other identical townhouses that all had pale grey plaster and dark grey windowsills. Augus knocked on the plain dark grey door that had the number 22 on it, the second 2 slightly crooked. When Augus went to nudge it back into place, it didn't move. Like it had rusted into the paint behind it. Augus left it alone.

The door swung open and Gwyn was there, still in his school uniform, and Augus suddenly wondered if Gwyn had a change of clothes. If he had anything at all to help him with this transition.

Gwyn looked at him. His eyes doing the sweep down over the jacket, his jeans, his boots. When Gwyn looked up again, he looked shocked. It occurred to Augus that they'd really not seen each other often enough outside of school to know how the other preferred to dress. It felt good to have the attention, even though it definitely wasn't a date. It was just Augus wanting to see what Gwyn's new place looked like. It was Augus revelling in being able to visit Gwyn, instead of having to keep away from him all the time because of his family.

Gwyn stepped backwards, and Augus walked past him without saying a word. Down a narrow corridor that had two rooms coming off it - a tiny lounge with a small television, a kitchen that had a laundry attached, with a small four-seater table that Augus sat at, looking around curiously. The linoleum was a dove blue-grey pattern, and old. It was curling up where it met the appliances. But there was a fridge, a microwave, an oven. It wasn't that bad, really.

'Do you want to see the rest?' Gwyn said.

'Yeah,' Augus said. 'Give me a tour.'

Gwyn smiled a little, the kind of smile that said: There's not much of a tour to give.

They went up the carpeted stairs together. Augus followed behind Gwyn, staring at his back, his shoulders, before looking at the wallpaper that was yellowed, faded, torn in patches.

The second level was more bracing. One bedroom was clearly designed for children, with old second-hand toys inside of it and thin linens, folded blankets at the foot of each bed, thumbed books stacked on a shared cabinet. It was clearly a transitional home for people escaping domestic violence, and a home that needed to have room for children, because they were so often involved. Augus swung away from the room and tried not to think about how he'd stayed in rooms just like it.

A master bedroom, which was Gwyn's room. A backpack rested on the bed, along with some clothing - so at least Gwyn had something - and a wallet and keys. A folder of paperwork. Gwyn had been up here then, instead of sitting in the kitchen. Did it feel safer on the second storey? Did he feel less likely to be hunted down by his family? Augus looked out of the window to the street below. There was no balcony, and then he stared at the glass pane itself where it fitted into the window and frowned. He tapped it curiously. A dull thudding noise.

'Is this double glazed?' Augus said, shocked.

'Apparently it's all sound-proofed,' Gwyn said awkwardly, looking around the house. 'I haven't heard anyone on either side of me yet. Even the cars going by sound far away.'

'It's Mikkel's place?'

'He has a couple. He was telling me earlier that he came from money, and that when his inheritance came in, he was better able to like...help people in these kinds of situations. He says he's not rich, but I think he's like...I don't know, stable or something.'

'I mean he has more than one property,' Augus said.
‘Yeah,’ Gwyn said, looking relieved that Augus had understood what he meant. Augus wondered if someone needed to sit Gwyn down and explain money to him, and then he thought that Gwyn had two months rent-free in a townhouse, and Augus was...what? Functionally homeless? No. He still had Murdock. Still had the scholarships. Even though Mr. Prince had practically assured him that wasn’t going to last either.

Augus leaned one shoulder into the wall and looked at Gwyn with narrowed eyes.

‘I want you to fuck me,’ he said.

That floaty, strange feeling he’d had bubbled out of him in those words. There was fear and reluctance and something sharp and thorny that he wanted to wrestle with his bare hands until his palms bled. Instead, he watched as Gwyn blinked, as his eyes slowly widened.

‘Now?’ Gwyn said.

‘I’m here, aren’t I?’ Augus said, looking Gwyn up and down like this part was the easy part. Like his throat didn’t feel tight. He’d gotten dressed up, hadn’t he? It was like a date, wasn’t it? So who the fuck cared if he asked Gwyn to fuck him?

‘But you—

‘I mean if you don’t want to fuck me, there’s an easy solution to this,’ Augus said slowly, ‘where I could fuck you instead. Because I know you want that too.’

Augus was pretty certain he wanted that, in amongst all the stuttering stop-starts of his fantasies lately. In amongst the research on the internet and the fact that he now had a Fetlife account and had discovered that no one in the land of kink agreed on anything ever if they had a choice about it. The place was angrier than Facebook at times. A lot of overt sexual frustration going on there.

Gwyn’s expression shifted at Augus’ words, he looked at him with a scowl. Augus thought about their size difference. He thought about how Gwyn was taller and broader, that Gwyn knew how to wrestle and Gwyn knew how to pin him by the wrists without even thinking about it, and Augus couldn’t do anything. He thought about how badly the whole day had gone, how maybe this was a strategy.

If this was awful – and it would probably be awful – it would just be another shitty thing happening on a bad day. Then it wouldn’t be Gwyn’s fault, it’d just be...the fault of the bad day.

‘Okay,’ Gwyn said, staring at him.

Augus’ heart stumbled in his chest, a random queasy beat that had him leaning harder against the wall like he could disappear into it.

‘Okay,’ Gwyn said, ‘wait there.’

Gwyn turned and his steps thudded as he went down the stairs. Augus licked his lips slowly, deliberately, and then he shrugged off the leather jacket and hung it on the cheap plastic chair pushed into the cheap melamine table by the wall. He bent down and began to undo the buckles on his boots, thinking that only about thirty minutes ago, he’d been putting them on. Once the buckles were undone, the laces loose enough, he nudged them off his feet by placing his toes to the heel and pulling his leg up.

He placed his boots by the chair.
He was in the process of undoing the fly of his jeans when Gwyn reappeared with a standard plastic bottle of olive oil.

Augus stared at it. Stared as Gwyn set it down on the drawers next to the bed.

Right. Lubricant. Of course kitchen olive oil that he was pretty sure Gwyn hadn’t bought himself and was probably several years past its use-by date wasn’t exactly what Augus had in mind. He walked over to it, smacking Gwyn’s hand away when Gwyn went to reach for him, and looked for the year on the half-used bottle. Who knew how many families had used it. How many bruised wives and husbands.

Its expiry date was over a year ago. Augus handed the bottle to Gwyn, lips in a thin line, pointing at the date.

Gwyn looked at it, then stared calmly at Augus. ‘I’m not using it to cook. But if you think you’ll be less nervous if I go to a drugstore and get some lube, I can do that, I guess.’

‘Fuck you,’ Augus muttered, yanking the bottle back and shoving it down on the chest of drawers. ‘Do you even want to fuck me anyway?’

‘Yeah,’ Gwyn said, not looking away from him, though his cheeks flushed red. ‘I do.’

‘For revenge?’

‘I’ve already told you not for that.’

‘Because I can fucking look shit up and educate myself without you actually giving me some kind of revenge test run.’

‘You asked me to fuck you,’ Gwyn said, then tilted his head. ‘Is everything okay?’

Augus dragged his shirt off with one arm and threw it across the room, then shimmed the jeans down and off, so that he was only in black briefs. He wasn’t hard, he felt scrawny. He wasn’t scrawny, it was just a by-product of standing in front of Gwyn. But he was acutely aware of the smattering of freckles on his arms and shoulders and across his chest that he could normally hide with a shirt. He was aware of the constellation of black moles across one thigh that crept up his pelvis. The doctor had said they were nothing to worry about when Augus had asked that they be checked in hopes that the doctor would whip out a scalpel and cut them all away.

Instead, he’d been firmly told that was a cosmetic choice, and Augus had hissed about it and never brought it up again.

‘If you don’t fuck me,’ Augus said, ‘I can always lie on that bed, jerk myself off, and then go home.’

Gwyn stepped towards him, Augus tensed. His breathing was silent and shallow when Gwyn reached out and placed two incredibly warm hands against Augus’ waist, thumbs curving inwards. Gwyn stared down at him, at all of him, eyes roving everywhere. Then one of Gwyn’s hand lifted and Augus almost jerked back when it reached towards his face, forcing himself to stay still, surprised when Gwyn just smoothed some of Augus’ hair back.

‘You’re so twitchy,’ Gwyn said, and Augus would have nodded, but he found himself distracted with how thick Gwyn’s eyelashes were.

‘This isn’t my preferred way to fuck,’ Augus said.
‘You’ve never done it before, so you don’t know,’ Gwyn said placidly. ‘Besides, seems like you have all these hang ups about what it means to bottom. Like, I dunno, maybe some like…uh, internalised homophobia or something like that.’

‘Big words,’ Augus said scathingly, refusing to examine the truth in them.

‘Some of the few I know,’ Gwyn said, reaching up with his other hand and brushing the rest of Augus’ hair back from his face until it was all tucked behind his ears. Then Gwyn was just stroking behind his ears in motions that were meant to be soothing, but just made Augus feel more and more wound up. ‘You think my family aren’t all about…Ah, well, I guess that’s not internalised, that’s just all external.’

‘Yeah,’ Augus said, frowning when Gwyn stroked the bridge of his nose. Wasn’t it greasy? It was, Augus could see the sheen of oil on Gwyn’s thumb as he drew it away. ‘Having fun?’

‘Touching you? Yeah,’ Gwyn said, fitting his fingertips beneath Augus’ cheekbones and just resting them there. ‘You never let me touch you.’

Augus thought that wasn’t true, given Gwyn’s mouth had been all over his cock, and they’d kissed the other day, but whatever.

No one had ever touched his face like this.

It didn’t even feel hot. It just felt weird. Gwyn’s thumbs were now resting at the corners of Augus’ lips, and Augus felt like he should probably stop talking.

Gwyn was supposed to have shoved him towards the bed by now. Was supposed to be on top of him and pawing at him with those huge hands and…sticking his cock in and coming in like five seconds. Or maybe ten seconds since he had more staying power than Augus, not that it meant much.

‘You seem really tired,’ Gwyn said.

‘God Jesus if you’re not going fuck me, I’m going to leave,’ Augus said, jerking out of his grip, one hand clenching into a fist. ‘I didn’t come here so you’d just be all… What, has everything today gone and made you soft?’

Gwyn walked up to him again, placed both of his hands heavily on Augus’ shoulders and kept him still. Augus was getting cold. It had maybe been a bad idea to take off all his clothes if they weren’t going to do anything.

‘Maybe I can be soft and you just didn’t know,’ Gwyn said, but his fingers dug into Augus’ skin. ‘But you should shut up.’

‘I’m sorry, but-’

Gwyn slid two fingers into Augus’ mouth, and Augus’ teeth clamped down on them automatically. He’d been in the middle of talking, after all. Gwyn winced, but didn’t remove them, and Augus didn’t step backwards away from them. So he just stood there, like an idiot. He refused to suck on them, so he glared up at Gwyn, who was still staring down at him like Augus was puzzling.

Gwyn leaned in, rested his lips against Augus’ ear and said: ‘If you tell me to stop, I’ll stop. If you tell me to go slow, I’ll go slow.’

Augus shivered, resisting the urge to grind his teeth down into Gwyn’s fingers. It wasn’t even that he
wanted to hurt Gwyn, he just wanted to clench his teeth.

‘I don’t know why you want me to do this tonight,’ Gwyn said, his voice lower than before. He waited, but Augus didn’t say anything, just left Gwyn’s stupid fingers in his mouth. So Gwyn leaned back and stared directly into Augus’ eyes. ‘But you asked me, so I guess I will.’

He slid his fingers out of Augus’ mouth, but then placed them – wet and smelling of spit – against Augus’ mouth. It was a reminder to be quiet and Augus seethed, but said nothing when Gwyn stepped back and took his school jacket off, his shirt. Gwyn toed off his socks, flicking them across the room. Then he moved past Augus and took everything off the bed. He drew the blankets back. Then he walked off into the bathroom and came back with towels, laying them on the sheets.

‘What-’

‘Oil stains the sheets,’ Gwyn said.

‘How do you know?’

Gwyn shrugged. ‘Lubricant stains too.’

Augus abruptly wanted to ask how often Gwyn fingered himself on his bed, but found himself falling silent again. Nervous. His whole day full of sharp edges and nothing about this moment feeling soft.

‘So should I just lie down on my stomach?’ Augus said.

‘No,’ Gwyn said, walking up to Augus and taking him by the arm, guiding him towards the bed. ‘I want you on your back.’

‘The good boy missionary position?’ Augus said, smirking, unable to help himself. His smirk vanished when his knees bumped into the bed, when Gwyn pushed him down onto the towels and followed, bracketing him with his arms.

‘I want to see your face,’ Gwyn said. ‘You’re in a weird mood.’

‘I’m always in a weird mood.’

‘That’s so fucking true,’ Gwyn said, almost to himself. ‘Can I kiss you?’

‘You can kiss my cock,’ Augus said.

Gwyn rolled his eyes, and then he was lowering himself, pressing his lips to Augus’. Augus kept his mouth closed at first, forgetting that he was supposed to participate, not sure if he wanted to. But Gwyn’s mouth was soft, gentle, and Augus closed his eyes in spite of himself. He lifted an arm, dug his fingers spitefully into Gwyn’s shoulder to see what he’d do, and Gwyn’s breath hitched, but his lips remained careful.

As Augus’ mouth opened, as the kiss deepened, Gwyn got onto the bed, his knees on either side of Augus’ thighs.

Gwyn’s mouth tasted a little sour, but eventually that vanished into the taste of kissing, like their spit mingled until it all just tasted like his own mouth, his own warmth. But just as Augus thought he was starting to get the hang of it, Gwyn was kissing his way down until he could mouth at Augus’ nipple. He wasn’t rough about it, but it was still a lot more than Augus was expecting and he jerked. He wasn’t exactly in the mood, so it came less as seduction and more as a shock.
But Gwyn kept doing it, moving to the other side, and Augus bit the inside of his lip and thought that this wasn’t terrible. When Gwyn kissed sideways over to Augus’ ribs, his back arched, muscles contracting and eyes closing.

‘You like that?’ Gwyn said, sounding surprised.

‘Maybe,’ Augus said. Gwyn licked over Augus’ ribs, and Augus reached up automatically and grabbed at Gwyn’s hair. He did like that.

Gwyn licked his way up towards Augus’ armpit, and Augus had a moment where he almost said he hadn’t showered, he was kind of a mess, but then Gwyn’s nose was right there, and it felt tingly and good and weird and invasive all at the same time.

‘Fuck,’ Augus said, voice low.

‘You smell good.’

‘You’re so disgusting. I haven’t showered,’ Augus said.

‘Ever?’

Augus pulled a bit harder at Gwyn’s hair, and then Gwyn was licking up into his armpit, over the deodorant Augus put on, the wiry hair, and Augus shivered somewhere between ticklish and so fucking exposed he half-wanted to roll off the bed. He’d seen shit like this in porn, but he didn’t think anyone really liked doing it.

‘You don’t have to,’ Augus said, ‘be so feral I mean.’

‘Shut up,’ Gwyn said, biting at the sensitive skin under his upper arm. His teeth pinched down and Augus swallowed the yelp because it hurt.

‘Be nice,’ Augus said breathlessly. ‘You said you wouldn’t hurt me.’

‘Stop being mean,’ Gwyn said, sliding a hand underneath Augus’ lower back and lifting him bodily, probably just because he could. Another thing that wasn’t terrible, not that Augus was turned on.

‘Just…fuck me,’ Augus said. ‘Come on, already.’

‘Because you’re so into it,’ Gwyn said, kissing his way down Augus’ torso and digging his fingers into Augus’ briefs, pulling them down. Augus lifted his hips, his cock still mostly soft, and realised not even the power of Gwyn being pretty hot was making this super enjoyable.

He didn’t really care, he just wanted it out of the way.

Gwyn’s fingers trailed down Augus’ cock, and Augus lifted up onto his elbows and looked down, frowning. That felt good, but it all still felt kind of wrong. He reached out to stroke Gwyn’s chest, surprised when Gwyn let him. Augus raised his eyebrows at Gwyn, rubbing Gwyn’s pec, tracing his collarbone.

Gwyn’s eyelids fluttered, he looked weak already. He looked like he kind of just wanted Augus to take control. Biting his bottom lip in triumph, Augus pushed Gwyn down to the bed.

Except Gwyn didn’t go with the movement. His eyes opened and he pinned Augus with a stare.

‘Stop it,’ Gwyn said.
‘You want me to.’

‘I want to fuck you too,’ Gwyn said, grabbing Augus’ wrist where it was still resting at his chest and pushing it back to the bed. ‘And that’s what you asked me to do.’

‘Then fucking do it,’ Augus said, kicking out in frustration. ‘This foreplay shit isn’t doing anything for me.’

‘Give me the oil,’ Gwyn said, looking annoyed, and Augus hesitated. Then, riding the wave of irritation at the whole situation, he grabbed the oil and thrust it forward, watching as Gwyn opened it and sniffed at it. Augus lay back down again, cold, agitated, thinking that if Ash ever found out about this he’d probably be mad at both of them.

Gwyn dripped some of the oil into his fingers, rubbing it over them by moving his fingers back and forth so his other hand wouldn’t get oil on it. It didn’t smell rancid or spoiled. Augus watched with a grim kind of fascination as Gwyn dropped his hand between Augus’ legs.

He gasped when those fingers wrapped around his cock. He opened his mouth on a question, but his voice fell away as Gwyn began slowly jacking him off. It was good with the oil, even if Augus briefly felt like he wasn’t going to be able to look at olive oil the same way again.

‘You have a nice dick,’ Gwyn said, twisting his thumb around the tip, teasing at the foreskin. Augus couldn’t think of what to say. Compliments during sex were weird, weren’t they? But Gwyn’s hand was so good, and Augus quietly hoped that he’d shoot now and then they’d call the whole night off and he could go home and…

…and think about how to move his shit out and what he’d take with him.

Augus’ eyes closed, he tried to lose himself in what was happening. Gwyn’s hand was good, different than Augus’, gentler but still demanding. Gwyn paid attention to the parts of Augus that Augus rarely gave a shit about like the base of his cock, or the sensitive skin between his cock and his balls. Gwyn’s other hand gently stroking through his pubic hair above his cock, and then higher, over skin that was so soft that Augus shivered as Gwyn touched him.

The hand stroking him moved down over his thigh, between his legs, and then Gwyn was pushing Augus’ leg outwards and moving into the space. First one knee, brushing between Augus’, and then the next, forcing his legs out wider.

If Augus had any doubts that he was a top, they were dispelled. He was fairly sure he could tolerate it, the same way he could tolerate dentist visits, but the hand on his cock was only a small distraction now. Especially when Gwyn swapped hands so that the oil-slicked fingers were sliding down between his ass cheeks.

Except Gwyn paused and frowned. ‘Access is bad.’

‘I can just roll to my stomach,’ Augus said, pretending like he was completely fine. His cock still wasn’t all the way hard, which almost never happened. Augus could get hard watching porn that really didn’t interest him, just on the basis that he was watching porn.

‘Here, lift up,’ Gwyn said, and Augus thought Gwyn would reach for a pillow, but instead he just slid his knees beneath Augus’ hips.

Gwyn reached for the olive oil again, and Augus seized onto his trigonometry homework and tried to think about Darboux vectors and other kinds, and how to differentiate between them. He tried not to hear the cap on the olive oil coming off, tried to ignore how it smelled, and tried to block out
everything else except that Gwyn’s knees were beneath him, keeping him up at a weird angle.

A weird angle so that Gwyn could fuck him.

Augus was so distant from what was happening that his whole body jerked when Gwyn brushed his lips against Augus’. It scared the shit out of him, and his eyes flew open. He hadn’t even felt Gwyn bend down to do it.

Gwyn pulled back, staring soberly down at him.

‘You hate this so much,’ he said.

*Wouldn’t anyone?*

Except Augus knew that wasn’t true. But he closed his eyes and shrugged. It definitely was low on his list of enjoyable life experiences, which was saying something, given one of the others had involved sending Gwyn to the hospital.

Maybe he was just shit at sex.

Augus laughed, the sound rasping in his throat, and he didn’t bother opening his eyes when Gwyn began stroking his arm like he was trying to comfort him.

‘Do you want me to do anything different?’

‘No,’ Augus said.

‘Maybe we should stop.’

‘Why?’ Augus said. ‘So we can start again some other time? Honestly…’ He opened his eyes and looked towards the window. Gwyn hadn’t even closed the blinds, though no one else could see in unless they scaled the townhouse. ‘Maybe we should just call it quits. Like, the stupidest fucking thing would have to be whatever I did to you, followed by whatever the hell this is. But in good news, at least I wasn’t your first, right? So you know at least that it’s not going to be as fucking miserable with other people.’

Augus pushed up, Gwyn pushed him down, and Augus felt cold and sick.

‘Are you sure it’s not about revenge?’ Augus said, something hard and glittering and sore in his chest. ‘Because you can do whatever the *f*uck you want and you know you can.’

‘I’m worried,’ Gwyn said, looking down at his fist where it was pinning Augus, lifting it.

‘Something’s up.’

‘Something’s always up,’ Augus said, leering.

Gwyn just watched him, and Augus’ words dried up. He had a sense that if he pushed away and got up, Gwyn would let him. Instead he was just naked and useless with his legs spread, and his cock was soft again. It was just what he deserved though, after what he’d done.

‘You’re like super upset,’ Gwyn said. ‘Is it only this? Me?’

‘My life isn’t all about you,’ Augus said.

‘Then what’s wrong?’
‘Nothing’s wrong. Can’t I just want to get laid and-’

‘You don’t want to be fucked by me,’ Gwyn said. ‘Or anyone.’

That wasn’t entirely true. ‘I mean, I do at least want to know what it’s like once,’ Augus said, sighing. ‘I just didn’t think it would happen like this. But this isn’t happening at all, so, whatever.’

Gwyn lowered himself until they were touching, chest to chest, and Augus belatedly realised that Gwyn still had his pants on. The whole time he’d been imagining that Gwyn was like five seconds away from dicking down as Bride had thoughtfully put it, and instead, there would have needed to be an awkward pause. Another one.

Augus could tell Gwyn’s full weight wasn’t resting on him which was weirdly considerate. Augus rested both of his hands on Gwyn’s back, running them over Gwyn’s shoulders.

‘Something’s wrong,’ Gwyn said. ‘And it’s not just that you don’t want me to fuck you.’

‘Okay, psychic,’ Augus said. ‘Whatever.’

‘So we should just stop all of this, like you said, because-’

‘I still want you to fuck me,’ Augus said.

Gwyn pulled back and stared down at him, doubt and disapproval stamped all over his face, making him look older than he was, giving him a pout that was kind of adorable. Augus touched a finger to it, and Gwyn grimaced like Augus was ruining the mood.

Mood was already ruined.

‘You don’t,’ Gwyn said.

‘I do,’ Augus said, smiling, the expression gentle even though he felt brittle and ragged around the edges. ‘Because if it sucks today, then it’s today. And it won’t be your fault.’

Gwyn stared at him like he made no sense. Augus’ smile widened.

‘So I guess you’d better fuck me, asshole.’

A long pause, and then Gwyn pressed his lips so gently to Augus’ mouth, the touch was hardly a touch at all.

‘Okay,’ he said, sparking off self-satisfaction and terror in Augus’ chest with those two syllables. ‘But you have to tell me what to do.’

‘You want me to tell you how I want you to fuck me?’

‘Please,’ Gwyn said, his voice shaking. ‘You already know it’s going to be bad, so just help me make it less bad for you.’

The idea appealed, and Augus stroked his hand languidly down Gwyn’s arm. He stared up at the watermarks on the ceiling, it probably leaked when it rained, or maybe it’d been fixed and just never repainted. He pressed his lips to Gwyn’s. He was resigned to it being awful. But he did like ordering Gwyn around, he liked how Gwyn sometimes seemed at war with himself in his desperation to do whatever Augus said, and it meant that Augus could bypass all the ticklish, infuriating foreplay and make it better. Or at the very least, make it faster.
If it was bad, he’d only have himself to blame.

Like everything else, then.

‘All right,’ Augus said, laughing to himself, ‘let’s get this show on the road.’
In which Augus deals with everything by swearing, a lot.

Gwyn

* 

Augus’ energy was so agitated that it reminded Gwyn of the time the giant storm had knocked down the power line in his suburb and there had been live wires on the ground. The air had *hummed* with sound Gwyn couldn’t hear, he could feel it crackling against his skin, could feel how fatal it would be if he got any closer. A few months later the nouveau riche in the suburb campaigned to have underground powerlines put in, but it was overturned by the old money, including his parents.

Augus beneath him felt like that now, his eyes glittery and sharp, his mouth a thin cutting line. Gwyn had spent the night flipping back and forth between thinking this was a terrible idea, or this might at least distract Augus from whatever was upsetting him, because it was becoming clearer that something else was on his mind. But every time Gwyn asked him anything at all, Augus came back with something acidic. At best, it was bitter and nihilistic, at worst, cruel.

He didn’t want Augus to tell him what to do, he just wanted Augus to *help* him. He wanted to not feel like it was stupid that he’d made a rule between them that he’d fuck Augus next.

Was he firing on all cylinders anyway? It had been a painfully long day. Gwyn had been stared at by perfect strangers who perked up like meerkats when they’d heard his last name. He’d seen at least one government official get on their phone as soon as Mikkel said what they were there for. Heard the whispering, saw the sidelong glances, stared down at the ground and wished he was as small as he felt, instead of someone a foot taller than Mikkel, too broad to shrink away and become invisible.

‘Take your pants off for a start,’ Augus said, and Gwyn was almost relieved to get off the bed. He went to take off his jeans and then winced. Normally he wouldn’t care that he had oil on his fingers, or about the stains, but he didn’t have that many clothes right now.

‘Hang on,’ he said roughly.

He walked into the adjoining bathroom, turned on the light and used the fresh bar of soap to clean off his hands. Then removed his jeans and boxer briefs, leaving them on the bathroom floor. He stared at himself briefly in the mirror. He looked worried. He looked tired. His hair was doing that thing where because he’d touched it randomly throughout the day, it now looked twice as big as it usually was.

It didn’t matter.

He walked back out naked. Augus watched him, not once looking at Gwyn’s eyes, but looking at his body. Gwyn didn’t know if he liked what he was seeing, but at least he wasn’t saying anything mean about it, at least he was quiet.

‘Now what?’ Gwyn said.
‘Now you fuck me.’

Gwyn closed his eyes. He really shouldn’t have let Augus call the shots at all.

‘I think asking you to tell me what to do was a bad idea,’ Gwyn said. He stood by the bed, looking down at Augus, wondering if lying on his back was just too much for him. If – in wanting to see Augus’ face – he made it hard for Augus to relax. He’d just assumed that Augus wouldn’t want to be ass up, but maybe…

‘Here,’ Gwyn said, sitting next to him and placing a hand carefully on Augus’ thigh. ‘Turn over then.’

Augus’ gaze was unblinking. He looked caught, frozen, and Gwyn just wanted him to relax. Truthfully, he didn’t really care if he got to fuck Augus tonight or not. He wanted to, but if Augus relaxed, if this turned into something else, he wouldn’t be mad. But Gwyn knew if he said he wasn’t going to, Augus was going to leave or do something drastic. He could feel it in the air, that livewire of unpredictability.

He didn’t trust that Augus wasn’t going to leave and…do something stupid.

Augus rolled over without a word and Gwyn placed a hand on his lower back, feeling the warm, smooth skin. Augus was beautiful. Like something out of a storybook, or some illustration in oils.

Gwyn turned his hand so that the backs of his knuckles could stroke up Augus’ spine, and he watched Augus shiver, saw the gooseflesh that followed. Then Gwyn drew Augus’ hair to the side, an excuse to also just touch his hair, which was so straight and glossy.

The shine on Augus’ hair made Gwyn look up at the light overhead. Impulsively, he leaned across and turned on the lamp by the bed instead. He got up and turned off the overhead light, feeling like that was a better choice. When he came back, he could see how shallow Augus’ breathing still was.

‘I could touch you like this all the time,’ Gwyn said, stroking his fingers down over the back of Augus’ head. ‘Even if you hate it.’

‘I don’t hate it,’ Augus said after a pause. ‘It’s just…boring. It’s not you fucking me.’

‘You really don’t like this at all?’ Gwyn said, massaging his fingers down towards the back of Augus’ neck. He couldn’t see Augus’ freckles properly anymore in the dimness, instead saw the stark shadows dipping down towards his clavicle, and Gwyn followed them, sliding fingers between the sheets and Augus’ chest, stroking him there too.

Augus’ breath hitched and Gwyn kept touching him. He liked this. If Augus would let him, Gwyn would happily forget about every stupid thing that had happened in his life, just to be able to touch him all day.

‘It’s not…’ Augus said, his voice jagged. ‘Shut up.’

Gwyn wanted to ask him so many questions. Why are you so upset? What happened? Why did you decide to come here? Do you always dress like that when you’re going out? Is the idea of me fucking you that awful? Do you want to fuck me so badly that you’d agree to it anyway? Or do you just want to hurt yourself?

Instead, Gwyn moved his other hand and stroked Augus’ arm where it was bent upwards, hand resting beneath the pillows. Gwyn sneaked his hand underneath and placed it over Augus’ hand, moving his fingers over the silky back of Augus’ hand in the cramped space.
'Who the fuck are you anyway?' Augus said, turning his head to the other side, looking away. 'You’re like a girl.'

Gwyn frowned. He didn’t stop touching Augus, he didn’t want to, but he was alarmed that the guy who had proudly stated he was pansexual when they first had a real conversation, was also someone who seemed to think that bottoming was shameful. And now this. Gwyn didn’t think that Augus really hated women or queer people, but he wanted to figure it out. What was happening that made him say things like that?

'Is it so bad that I can be soft sometimes?' Gwyn said finally. 'If you hated it so much, then you wouldn’t like it the rest of the time, when you get to push me around and you know I’ll pretty much do what you want.'

Or was it that Augus didn’t like being treated softly? Gently? Was it that?

It was a relief to not have to think about his own problems tonight. A relief to not have to look at his phone – in his jeans pocket in the bathroom and on silent, the vibrate setting turned off.

'But you said you wanted me to fuck you,' Gwyn said. 'I want to do it this way. You should’ve gone to someone else if you wanted to be treated like shit.'

Augus tensed hard, and Gwyn wondered if even that was enough to send Augus away from him. Gwyn bent down quickly and placed his lips against the back of Augus’ neck, breathing heat against his skin, Augus inhaled sharply and Gwyn felt his hand clench where it was hidden beneath the pillows. Felt the skin pull tight over Augus’ knuckles.

It bothered him that Augus clearly expected Gwyn to want a ‘revenge fuck’ and he’d still turned up and asked for it. It bothered him a lot.

Augus’ skin tasted faintly salty – sweat that had dried throughout the day – and Gwyn liked it enough that he licked broadly across his neck, his shoulders. His teeth were gentle when he scraped them over Augus’ freckles, feeling like he could eat them up, imagining they had a different taste. They didn’t, but Gwyn wanted to know all of them.

Maybe he should’ve spent the night panicking about all the shit that was about to start raining down on top of him, but this was way better.

'I don’t want you to treat me like shit,' Augus said five minutes later, as though it had been playing on his mind.

Gwyn massaged circles into Augus’ lower back, biting gently and wetly into his shoulders, his flank, and had let go of Augus’ loosened fist to rest his other hand by Augus’ cheek instead.

'Good,' Gwyn said.

'But don’t you want to?' Augus said, his voice soft for the first time that night.

'No,' Gwyn said.

'Your family did such a good job of teaching you how to hurt people though.’

Gwyn froze, feeling like he’d been slapped.

_Jesus, Augus, what the fuck?_
It was so tempting to bite down harder, to knuckle his fist into Augus’ back. Maybe that’s what Augus wanted. Gwyn forced himself to take a deep breath, and as he did that, he felt how Augus’ breathing had turned shallow again, how he’d tensed, like he was waiting to see what Gwyn would do.

Gwyn made a deliberate choice to press his lips to Augus’ shoulder.

‘They taught me how not to treat people,’ Gwyn said. ‘Mikkel says I’ll spend the rest of my life unlearning the other shit, but at least I know that much. Stop baiting me.’

‘No,’ Augus said, but he didn’t say anything else after that.

But as Gwyn kept on, mouthing at Augus’ flank, stroking down over the back of Augus’ thigh, he thought that Augus did seem more relaxed in this position. His voice was less sharp, he was softening. It was a good decision to have Augus turn onto his stomach, even though it’d initially seemed counterintuitive.

‘Are you going to insult me if I tell you that I think you’re really hot?’ Gwyn said.

Augus inhaled like he was going to speak, and then he laughed quietly into the bed.

‘Because you like, kind of are,’ Gwyn added, smiling a little.

It was much nicer in the dimmer light, doing this. It was like he’d placed a cloak of shadows around them, and while Gwyn wanted to see Augus lit up properly, it seemed to create a quieter space for Augus.

He thought of all the horrible things Augus had shared with him over the phone, when Gwyn had been recovering from his father’s fists and feet. Thought of Augus talking about those foster homes, the things he’d seen, and wondered about it. He’d even wondered – especially tonight – if Augus had been raped.

There was no easy way to ask that. No way that Augus wouldn’t somehow turn it around and make it an insult.

It made him realise how little Augus actually revealed about his own life, his own state of mind, in person. Did Augus like this? He could only go by how Augus was reacting to him physically. His breathing deepening, his muscles relaxing, it seemed promising, but then Augus’ words would be poison.

Gwyn focused on the things he could do. He focused on learning Augus’ body. He focused on the things that made Augus’ breath pause or hitch, repeating each one. Augus’ flanks were sensitive and he seemed to like light touches there. His lower back was a safe place to rub, to touch, to rest his hand, always warm and smooth with the dip of Augus’ spine. Whenever Gwyn slid his hands beneath Augus’ body and the sheets, Augus squirmed a little, but then his muscles would relax and at one point, when Gwyn did it, Augus just said ‘Fuck’ quietly into the sheets, and didn’t seem to realise he’d done it.

Gwyn took his time. He let himself get lost in what he was doing, not really aiming towards any endpoint. His body heating up, his cock slowly hardening, daring to lick his way from the very base of Augus’ spine – the rise of his ass – all the way up to the back of his neck. Augus shivered beneath him, Gwyn heard him swallow.

‘Okay,’ Augus said, his voice deeper than before.
‘Yeah?’ Gwyn said.

‘It’s not awful, I guess.’

It wasn’t that Augus needed no foreplay, Gwyn thought, maybe it was just that he needed more of it in a situation like this. But Gwyn didn’t mind. Hell, if Augus told him to do this before demanding a blowjob, Gwyn would do it.

‘If I tell you to fuck me now, will you?’ Augus said. He turned his face to the side, Gwyn could see Augus’ lashes resting on his cheek, see the sharp curve of a black eyebrow. Gwyn leaned up and kissed the corner of his eye, and Augus huffed like he was indulging it.

‘Maybe,’ Gwyn said.

There was no subtle or easy way to reach for the oil, and after a few more minutes, Gwyn got it and felt the way Augus tensed beside him. It wasn’t like before, at least, but Gwyn wasn’t even straddling him.

Gwyn popped the cap as quietly as he could, tightening his fingers on the lid to make the sound less jarring. Then he poured the oil, closing the cap and putting the bottle next to him on the bed so he wouldn’t have to reach for it again. The oil was cold, and he warmed it up again, resting his other hand at Augus’ lower back, thumb pointing down towards his ass.

He hardly understood how this was happening. How Augus had turned up, how he was now naked in a bed that Gwyn hadn’t even slept in yet. How this person who had showed up in Gwyn’s life with the express purpose of ruining him, had turned out to be defensive and shy and brittle.

He’d never truly understood that Augus came from a rough background, until the last three weeks, where he felt like if he saw Augus out of a uniform in an alleyway, he’d be in danger, because Augus cut first to stop himself from being cut.

It bruised him to know that Augus understood violence too. Maybe not in the same way Gwyn did, but in ways Gwyn didn’t understand either.

‘I do actually want to know what it’s like,’ Augus said, his voice tense, but not like before. ‘But it doesn’t feel natural.’

‘Yeah, I’m…’ Gwyn trailed the hand that didn’t have oil on it down over Augus’ ass, before curving fingers around his hip. With the other hand, he dipped fingertips between, oil making the way slick. Gwyn felt Augus’ ass muscles clenching before he’d even touched his hole. ‘I’m not just going to shove in.’

‘Whatever,’ Augus muttered, turning his face into the pillows.

‘I’m not going to suddenly think you’re like, a bottom,’ Gwyn said.

_And I’m into you being a top. I’m just…not against this either._

Gwyn didn’t think of himself as versatile, he’d always pretty firmly lumped himself into the ‘bottom’ category based on the content of his fantasies and never really considered much beyond that. But Augus like this, when he relaxed into Gwyn’s touches, when he lay there receptive to what Gwyn was doing, it was good. It was something Gwyn was going to daydream about in the future.

Augus’ muscles relaxed incrementally, and Gwyn pressed further, touching skin he knew would be sensitive even before Augus’ breath caught. He didn’t do anything except stroke the oil back and
forth, opening his mouth at the heat he felt. He trailed his fingers up to Augus’ lower back, seeing the wet shine of oil in the lamplight, before sliding his fingers back down towards Augus’ balls, stroking over the thin skin of his taint.

Augus’ shoulders worked, his back moved upwards in a huge, deep breath. Gwyn kept moving his fingers, not even teasing at pushing into Augus’ entrance. He wanted to though. He wanted to just slide right in, the way he did to himself sometimes. Gwyn licked at the roof of his mouth, trying to get more saliva, feeling like the air had been sucked out of the room.

He stopped once to get more oil, and Augus tensed a lot, as though he thought maybe Gwyn was going to slick his cock up and get straight to it. He relaxed when Gwyn returned with dripping fingers, mumbling faintly into the pillow.

A few seconds later he turned his head to the side again, his eyes closed, hair messy over his face.

Gwyn realised he liked the weight of it, this moment. When he sucked Augus off, he could have been anyone, any guy desperate to please another guy, especially someone like Augus. But like this, layered in warm shadow, Gwyn was no longer just anyone. No longer someone Augus could just disparage or fob off; not easily, anyway. This would always be between them, this moment where Gwyn would feel his way into Augus’ body, where Augus would let him.

If Augus let him.

Gwyn stroked with his index and middle finger, first one, then the other, a steady stream of sensation as Augus’ shoulders sunk deeper into the bed and he took in a deep breath, sighed it out.

So Gwyn pressed carefully at Augus’ entrance, not enough to enter, but just enough to test, and had moved away before Augus’ body had finished locking up in response to it. Gwyn went back to stroking, and Augus made a disgruntled sound.

‘I know what you’re doing,’ Augus said.

‘That’s good,’ Gwyn said.

‘I still think you should just do it.’

‘I don’t think anyone should take sex tips from you,’ Gwyn said. ‘Somewhere out there, there’s some teen zine or blog with your name on it and sex tips like: ‘Never use enough lubricant,’ and I dunno, stuff like that.’

‘I could make that work,’ Augus said, sounding amused more than offended. ‘I still got you to suck me off.’

‘I know,’ Gwyn said. ‘So you’re doing something right.’

‘Uh huh, I think-’

Augus’ words choked off as Gwyn pressed in again, that tight muscle relaxing just enough for Gwyn to get the tip of his index finger inside. He left it there, reaching up to stroke Augus’ flank, watching as Augus’ ribs just didn’t move.

‘It’s easier to just breathe through it,’ Gwyn said.

‘Done this a lot, have you?’ Augus said sharply.
‘Does it hurt?’ Augus shook his head. ‘And yeah, actually, I mean I’ve fingered myself a bit.’

‘Huh.’

Gwyn pushed deeper, twisting his finger as he went, and Augus made a deep, low sound and his hips jerked like he wanted to get away.

‘It’s weird,’ Augus said.

‘I know. You get used to that.’

‘Not fucking likely,’ Augus said, laughing, and then humming as Gwyn dragged his knuckles up and down Augus’ spine. ‘I can’t believe I’m letting you do this.’

Gwyn withdrew his finger slightly, pushed back in, setting up a very shallow, careful fucking, glad for the extra oil. Augus was tight around him, even when he wasn’t clenched up – Gwyn always paused then – he was still tense. So Gwyn kept stroking his back with his other hand, and kept up the movement, hoping Augus would get used to it. Gwyn wanted to press deeper, find his prostate, but maybe he wasn’t ready for that yet.

‘Fuck,’ Augus muttered, ‘it’s so weird.’

It wasn’t just that Augus had so little experience, Gwyn realised, he just seemed to speak whatever was on his mind when things like this were happening. He wondered if Augus would always be like that. With whatever future partners he had.

Gwyn pushed deeper, kept pushing until his last knuckles were grinding down into the flesh of Augus’ ass. Augus grunted, his arms shifted beneath the pillow, then his shoulders hunched.

‘Okay,’ he said unsteadily.

Gwyn bit his lower lip, staring at Augus’ trembling shoulders, the back of his head, and pressed down with the pad of his finger, curling it back towards himself. He felt Augus’ prostate at the same time as Augus’ head lifted, sucking in a breath. Gwyn paused. Not everyone liked it.

‘Again?’ Gwyn said, feeling shaky.

‘Fuck,’ Augus breathed, face dropping back down towards the pillow. ‘Hang on. Shit.’ His head turned towards the side. ‘Do I actually need to piss or is that just-?’

‘That’s part of it,’ Gwyn said. ‘You get used to that too. Unless you needed to go before, and then maybe you need to go.’

Augus laughed in disbelief and his hips rocked back and forth, like he didn’t know exactly what he wanted to do.

‘Try it again,’ he said.

Gwyn pushed back in, did it again, and Augus shuddered and was hugging the pillow to his face, and Gwyn lifted his hand from Augus’ back to press it down above the base of his cock, mouth open. He hadn’t expected to like this part so much.

He took his time though, and Augus was moaning softly when Gwyn risked pressing in his middle finger. At that Augus made a strangled sound, and Gwyn wanted to wait, because he knew Augus still wasn’t fully relaxed even though he didn’t at least seem to be hating it. But Gwyn didn’t wait,
pushing in, listening to Augus’ ragged breathing.

‘Stupid fat fingers,’ Augus said after inhaling hugely. ‘Stupid fat cock.’

‘Does it hurt?’

‘Maybe,’ Augus said. ‘I don’t know. Maybe.’

Gwyn paused, bent down and kissed Augus’ back and then his shoulder. He didn’t push deeper, instead pulling back and pushing only to that depth again, a shallow back and forth. It could hurt, but Gwyn liked that sometimes. That stretch which felt dangerous but usually wasn’t with lubricant. Gwyn had never made himself bleed before, even when he’d gotten rough with himself. But Augus probably didn’t like the same things that Gwyn did.

He could go slower.

Sooner than he expected, Augus was responding to it, his breathing deepening, and when Gwyn got deep enough to start rubbing gently at Augus’ prostate again, Augus gave a painful moan that sounded so good. He sounded so wrecked.

‘I get it,’ Augus said, his voice rough.

‘Get what?’

‘I get why people don’t hate it.’

Gwyn couldn’t keep himself from smiling, glad that Augus couldn’t see his expression.

‘Do you think we should leave it at this though? Not go any further tonight?’ Gwyn said.

‘Yeah,’ Augus said sarcastically, ‘because what I want to do…is give up. I’m not a quitter. You…’ Augus gasped, ‘better not be either.’

‘I just think-’

‘You might as well.’ Augus moaned again, and then laughed. ‘You need to stop talking.’

‘I like hearing you like this. Like…struggling to talk.’

‘I have fingers in my ass,’ Augus exclaimed, sounding indignant enough that Gwyn laughed too.

‘But they talk all the time in those porn videos you watch, don’t they?’

‘Oh, fuck off,’ Augus grumbled, hips grinding down into the bed. Then Augus did it again, and Gwyn knew that motion, he’d done it himself enough times. It felt good to know that Augus was into it.

Gwyn kept fingering him, his whole hand warm, drawing up the heat from Augus’ insides. Maybe they could just fuck for the next few months, and Gwyn wouldn’t have to think about anything at all except how good Augus felt, the sounds he made, the way he moved like he was trying to figure out how to fit all the sensations in his body.

Eventually, Gwyn tested a third finger, surprised when he got the tip inside. He withdrew all three fingers even as Augus mumbled something that sounded like swearing into the bed. But…that should be enough to actually be able to get his cock inside him, shouldn’t it? Gwyn reached for the oil again, dripping it onto his hand, letting it drip cold into his cock. He gasped softly.
He used as much as he could, even though a lot of it leaked down onto the towels. Then he dropped the bottle of olive oil to the side and rubbed at Augus’ lower back.

Then he hesitated.

‘Do it,’ Augus said, though he didn’t sound like some breathy person a hundred percent into it, he sounded like someone steeling themselves. ‘Seriously,’ Augus said, twisting around to look at Gwyn directly with fever-bright eyes and flushed cheeks. ‘Just think, the sooner you’ve done this, the sooner I get to fuck you, and we both know that’s what you want.’

Gwyn swallowed, fisting his cock in his slippery hand, straddling Augus’ hips. He pressed his hand down into his shoulder, and then stroked the back of his head, the side of his arm. He wanted to kiss him, but Augus had already turned his face back towards the pillow.

Gwyn was nervy, hard, and every now and then he thought that this was the stupidest thing to be doing, but it was easy to sideline that voice when he was so hungry to see how Augus would react to him. He wanted to make Augus feel good, he wanted to take Augus so far outside of himself that he couldn’t think about whatever had upset him so much in the first place. He wanted him to know nothing except Gwyn around him, inside of him.

That need had him pressing forwards, notching his cock into place and pushing carefully, carefully, stopping as soon as he felt the ring of muscle tighten. He wanted to tell Augus to relax, to breathe, to take it easy, but there was no real point. All of those things would just make Augus mad.

‘Let me,’ Gwyn said finally. ‘Come on. You asked me.’

Augus groaned, and Gwyn wondered if that was the secret, to just goad him into wanting it. Eventually, the muscle relaxed enough that Gwyn could press forward again, and then he must have leaned forwards too hard, or maybe the oil had made the way easier, because Gwyn found himself slipping forwards, several inches all at once, and Augus shouted and pushed up onto his elbows, and Gwyn slammed his non-oily hand into the bed and braced himself. *Shit.*

‘Motherfuck,’ Augus breathed, his back dipping. ‘What the fuck?!’

‘Sorry, sorry,’ Gwyn said. ‘Are you okay?’

‘I hate you so much right now,’ Augus managed. ‘Am I bleeding? Jesus. I feel like I’m-’

Gwyn pulled back, touched the wetness around his cock, ran his finger along the rim of Augus’ ass and was momentarily distracted by Augus’ whimper. A whimper. But then Gwyn looked at his hand in the light and saw nothing but oil.

‘You’re not bleeding. Do you want me to stop?’

Gwyn hoped not. Because as the initial panic was receding, it felt really amazing. Really amazing. Gwyn had himself braced, taking deep breaths slowing down how much he wanted to just thrust a handful of times and come. It didn’t feel like it’d take that much. Augus felt different to his own hand, and Gwyn just wanted to push deeper. He grit his teeth together and risked drawing back, rocking forwards, and Augus made a sound like he’d been punched in the gut.

‘I can stop,’ Gwyn said, while not stopping.

‘Gonna…’ Augus moaned, ‘…need a fucking VRO for that cock, asshole.’

Gwyn laughed, surprised, but Augus wasn’t telling him to stop, and Gwyn risked pushing deeper.
‘Wait, wait, wait,’ Augus gasped. ‘Shit. The angle is wrong. It hurts, the angle is—’

He pushed his arms up underneath himself, shifting onto his knees so that his back was in a sharp dip, and Gwyn pressed the heel of his palm into that shadowy space and shoved down, and Augus cried out.

‘Better?’ Gwyn said.

‘Maybe. Yeah. Fuck knows.’

Gwyn withdrew, rocked forwards, squeezed his eyes shut and forced himself not to look at that dip in Augus’ spine or the way his shoulders were tensed because even that made him want to come. Augus made small, sharp exhaled noises every time Gwyn pushed in, but he wasn’t telling Gwyn to stop, and he wasn’t clenching down like before.

So Gwyn pushed deeper, deeper again, Augus reacting by grabbing one of the pillows and tossing it off the bed, shoving his head down and making some strangled noise that Gwyn was going to jerk off to for the rest of his life. He had no idea Augus would be so vocal. It was amazing.

He reached around, grunting at the coordination he needed to get his slicked hand beneath Augus’ hips. He wrapped fingers around Augus’ cock, and started jerking him off roughly, glad that he was hard, convinced he could make Augus come.

‘Oh, I’m dying,’ Augus breathed absently.

Gwyn grit his teeth and shoved all the way in, holding still, and maybe that was mean of him, but it was hard to just go slow and easy when Augus said things like that. Augus trembling beneath him, his breathing heavy and unsteady and perfect. He worked Augus’ cock harder, faster, and Augus whined.

A single jolt of Augus’ hips, and then he was rolling forwards into Gwyn’s hand, the movement almost practiced. Gwyn looked down at his cock moving in and out of Augus’ ass – because of Augus’ movements – and felt like maybe he was too high on lust to actually remember this properly for later even though that’s all he wanted to do.

Fuck it.

He began thrusting again, working Augus’ cock as smoothly as he could given his concentration was shot.

Augus swore into the sheets, the words muffling, enough heat in them that Gwyn thought that maybe Augus was swearing at him. But he could feel how hard Augus was, except it was getting harder to focus on that too. His whole body was burning up. He thought he’d last ten, fifteen minutes maybe, but after the slow build up, after watching Augus writhe and tighten on his fingers, he’d overestimated his staying power.

His head dropped forwards, hair brushing his face, mouth open as he panted. He was trying not to fuck too roughly, held himself back from slamming in, from grinding deeply, from doing all the things that he knew would feel incredible but would also have him coming in like two whole seconds. Also, distantly, he didn’t want Augus to hate it, so he held back as much as he could.

Augus went silent, so quiet that Gwyn thought something was wrong and almost slowed down, but then Augus’ hips were bucking unevenly and Gwyn slammed straight from shock at the fact that Augus was actually coming, to being so overloaded with arousal at the image that he followed seconds later.
He groaned roughly, grabbing handfuls of towel in one of his hands, as he clutched Augus’ hip with
the other.

Gwyn came down from the headrush of it all, looking down at Augus who – even face down – still
managed to look shattered. His hair had tangled, gone everywhere.

Then Augus slid his hand out from beneath the remaining pillow and smacked Gwyn’s thigh with it
hard enough to hurt.

‘Out,’ Augus muttered, his voice worn. ‘Out. This part sucks.’

Gwyn withdrew and Augus groaned, the sound weak and faintly pained. Gwyn looked down at his
softening cock, but there was still no blood.

‘Hang on,’ Gwyn said, climbing off the bed. ‘I’ll get some stuff to clean up.’

‘Mmph.’

Gwyn walked into the bathroom, thinking maybe he should’ve stayed behind to check that Augus
was okay, but he couldn’t concentrate properly. He looked for a cloth and found a small stack of thin
facecloths in the cupboard, dampening one of them, waiting forever for the water to turn warm. He
left that on the counter and went to the toilet, cleaning the oil and the creaminess of his own come
with toilet paper, only realising once he’d started that it was far too harsh to be using on his soft,
sensitive cock. But then decided it was too late, and kept going until he was done.

He walked back into the bedroom. Augus was slumped back into the bed. His hair was just as messy
as before.

Gwyn stopped, looking at him. ‘Are you okay?’

‘Fine,’ Augus said.

He didn’t sound fine. Gwyn took the cloth and smoothed it down Augus’ back first, before pressing
it between Augus’ legs, only to freeze when Augus pushed up and twisted around, grabbing his
wrist hard.

‘What the fuck are you doing?’ Augus said.

Gwyn blinked at him. He paused, feeling caught out.

‘It’s… It’s gonna be messy,’ Gwyn said.

‘Give me the cloth,’ Augus said, and then contorted his spine, pushed up even further and snatched it
out of Gwyn’s hand. He turned onto his back, grabbed a pillow from the other side of the bed and
pushed it beneath his head so that he was resting on two pillows again, and stared up at the ceiling.
There were streaks of creamy white on Augus’ belly. The rest, Gwyn had washed off his own hand.

Gwyn felt wary. He picked up the pillow Augus had thrown and sat on the other side of the bed,
wanting to get dressed, or get under the covers, and feeling like he couldn’t.

‘You hated it?’ Gwyn said.

‘No,’ Augus said. ‘Parts of it. But no. All in all, you were surprisingly considerate.’

Augus was still staring up at the ceiling. His lips looked darker than usual. His eyes brighter. Gwyn
wanted to reach out and touch him. Wanted to inch closer until he could lie fully alongside him, and
then drape an arm over his chest and hold him. But Augus – in seconds – was back to seeming untouchable.

Except for the way he stared up at the ceiling, hardly blinking.

‘I didn’t want you to hate it,’ Gwyn said.

‘Well, I didn’t.’

‘Is it that you’re sore now?’

Augus’ chest moved on shallow breaths, like before. He lifted one of his long, narrow hands and rested it on his sternum. His throat bobbed in a swallow.

‘It’s really not that bad,’ Augus said. His other hand still held the cloth, fingers limply clinging to it. ‘A bit gross. You could dress a salad with the amount of olive oil between my ass and you’d probably eat it.’

Augus’ fingers curled a bit more into the cloth.

‘It’s funny though,’ Augus said, still not looking away from the ceiling. ‘It was supposed to be bad.’ Gwyn’s forehead furrowed when he realised that Augus’ eyes were too bright. He saw the glint of a tear trickle down the side of Augus’ face. But Augus wasn’t sobbing, his chest was still moving shallowly but evenly. Was he crying?

‘Augus?’ Gwyn said, moving closer.

‘You were supposed to make it bad,’ Augus said, strained.

‘I don’t understand, what’s going on?’

‘That is the question, isn’t it?’ Augus said. His next breath was a loud, shaking inhale. ‘Well, fuck.’

The hand on his chest came up and covered his eyes. His next breath was a sharp thing, like a knife had dug into his ribs. Augus turned to his side, away from Gwyn, his knees bending up towards his stomach, and Gwyn moved closer, horrified. Close enough that he could look down on Augus’ hidden face and see the way he dug his fingers into his own skin, so hard that it had to hurt.

Augus’ sobs were ugly and jagged, torn up from some place inside of himself that seemed so dark and deep that Gwyn couldn’t believe it was happening at all, let alone where he could see it.

Automatically, he leaned across Augus and turned the lamp off, plunging the room into a darkness only illuminated by the night that peered through the window. Gwyn’s own breath shaking as he yanked the blankets back further so he could slip behind Augus, chest pressing to Augus’ back as it shook with sobs.

Augus wasn’t pushing him away, and Gwyn didn’t know what to do, afraid that maybe Augus was so traumatised by what had just happened that he was having a breakdown about it.

Gwyn eased his arm around Augus’ side, waiting for Augus to push him away, but he didn’t. Instead, Augus seemed to crumple, his shoulders bowing inwards, his body balling up tighter.

‘I’m sorry,’ he cried past his hand. Then he was laughing through sobs, sounding hysterical. ‘Shouldn’t we be- Ha, shouldn’t we be…worried about you today? Look at me. Love- Love a good spotlight.’
'Augus,' Gwyn said helplessly. What did he say? That it was okay? What if it wasn’t? So Gwyn just made useless hushing sounds and tucked his face into Augus’ neck and pulled him closer, as Augus cried so hard that he sounded like he was going to throw up.

A few minutes later, as his sobs became less violent, Augus uncurled and lashed out violently at the lamp closest to him. Gwyn heard the sound of it flying off onto the floor, but he didn’t hear a bulb shattering, or anything breaking, so he ignored it. Augus was still crying, the exhales trembling and long before each spate of hard, scratchy sobs.

‘Of all the *fucking* nights,’ Augus spat between breaths. ‘Do you think I could be any *more* selfish?’

‘You’re not being selfish at all.’

‘You’re probably…having some silent panic attack that you raped me or something.’

Gwyn wasn’t. It had occurred to him initially, but as Augus continued, it became more obvious that it was…everything else. Whatever that was.

‘I’m not,’ Gwyn said, trying to modulate his voice and not knowing if he was succeeding. ‘It’s…You’ve had a hard day, Augus. Or, sometimes it just happens.’

‘You should’ve hurt me,’ Augus said, his voice low and wet and dark.

‘I didn’t want to.’

‘I’m saying you should’ve, asshole,’ Augus said, turning at once and digging his nails into Gwyn’s arm until he hissed and reached for his wrists. A short struggle, Augus’ breath gusting in the dark, and then Gwyn pushed him back to the bed and had his wrists pinned and felt like a monster for it.

‘I didn’t fucking want to,’ Gwyn said. ‘I don’t know how many times I have to tell you, but—’

‘Do you think I feel safe around you?’ Augus said, laughing weakly, his wrists twisting in Gwyn’s grip. Gwyn let go of one of them, and Augus just covered his eyes again. ‘Do you think this is what this is? That I feel safe enough? Or do you think I’d be doing this at home right now, waiting for Ash to come home? That I could’ve done it anywhere? On a bus even?’

‘Shhh,’ Gwyn said, not liking how wild Augus was sounding, how scathing, as though he was insulting himself even now. ‘It’s okay.’

‘Nothing’s okay,’ Augus muttered, ‘and everything’s fine. That’s the refrain, isn’t it? I can’t believe I’m doing this. You didn’t cry when I tore up your ass. Unless you sobbed like a baby in the car?’

‘I didn’t.’

‘You could’ve given me that one, dickhead,’ Augus said, sniffing, the sound making it clear his nose was blocked. ‘I bet you never cry. Even when your Dad is throwing you into walls.’

‘It’s better not to cry around him,’ Gwyn said. ‘He’s not one of those guys who backs off if you break.’

‘Yeah,’ Augus said, his voice cracking. ‘Yeah. I know the type well.’

‘I don’t think you cry much either,’ Gwyn risked saying.

‘I really don’t,’ Augus said, lifting his hand, staring at Gwyn. All Gwyn could see was the faint shine of his eyes, the gleam of tears on his cheeks, his lips. Some of that was probably snot.
'Do you want a tissue or something?'

'I have a cloth,' Augus said, reaching for it where it had been dropped on the bed. He raised it and dropped it on his face. After a beat, he started actually cleaning himself up, though his breathing was still torn up, his body feverish. 'If you ever, ever tell anyone that you fucked me, or that I cried afterwards, I’ll make tearing you a new one look like a goddamn papercut.'

'You’re so sweet,' Gwyn said, frowning down at him. He let go of Augus’ other wrist and placed his hand alongside Augus’ face, thumbing at his chin. Augus stilled, then seemed to settle somewhat at the touch. 'How safe do you feel around me really if you keep thinking you need to make threats like that?'

'I’m just covering my bases.'

'You expect everyone to hurt you.'

'That’s because everyone does,' Augus said. 'You’ll learn. You’ve only had the one fucked up family. Wait until you’ve had a dozen.' Augus lowered the cloth to his neck and breathed slowly, deliberately. 'Don’t worry. You won’t have a dozen. The emancipation will work.'

'Mikkel thinks there’s a case.'

'It has to work,' Augus said, dropping the cloth off the side of the bed.

They were silent. Gwyn didn’t know what to say. He dragged his thumb over Augus’ cheekbone. At least Augus let him do that much.

'Will you tell me what’s wrong?' Gwyn whispered.

'No,' Augus said. 'I should get home.'

'What?'

'I mean I wasn’t planning on staying the night. I have to talk to Ash about some stuff. Busy weekend.'

'Oh,' Gwyn said. He twisted away and turned on the lamp on the other side of the bed, and turned back in time to see Augus still cringing away from the light of it. Gwyn leaned in again. Augus’ eyelashes were stuck together still. He looked so tired. 'But not yet. You can rest for five seconds.'

Gwyn felt bold – like he was breaking the rules – as he placed his hand on Augus’ chest and pressed down. He was close enough now to look down at him, to bend down and kiss Augus gently, feel the shuddery way Augus was still breathing.

Augus wasn’t well enough to go anywhere.

'You’re staying,' Gwyn said.

'Am I?' he said, voice distant. He wasn’t meeting Gwyn’s eyes. 'I still can’t believe… Ah. It doesn’t matter. You don’t have to put up with me when I’m like this, you know. You’re the one who’s meant to be all…upset.’

'It hasn’t really sunk in yet,’ Gwyn said, and Augus looked at him. ‘Also, I like not spending the night at my parent’s place. I would’ve stayed at school on weekends if I could have. They just didn’t want me to. I used to ask for extracurricular shit with wrestling just so I’d have an excuse to stay.'
‘And have you eaten anything?’ Augus said.

Gwyn frowned, eyes ducking down to Augus’ neck. ‘Yeah. I got some stuff at the store. Mikkel made me.’

That had been unpleasant. Mikkel had offered to shout Gwyn lunch, Gwyn had turned him down, and Mikkel had zeroed in on that so fast that it blindsided him. How could Mikkel tell that Gwyn had an issue with food just from Gwyn turning down lunch? Everyone turned down lunch sometimes. That was normal. It was uncanny at times, how much Mikkel seemed to understand what was happening around him.

He’d driven Gwyn to the shops, given him some money and said: ‘You need to stock up the fridge in the house and I don’t want you to fill it with shit.’

Within five minutes, Gwyn realised he couldn’t shop for anything with Mikkel watching him, and Mikkel had sighed, placed his hands on his hips and rolled his eyes.

‘Is it that you don’t know what to eat because you’ve had such a privileged upbringing? Or is it that I’m watching you?’

Gwyn nodded furtively, Mikkel’s nose wrinkled, and then he just looked at his watch.

‘I’ll give you twenty five minutes to get what you want. I’ll be waiting in the car. Deal?’

‘Thanks,’ Gwyn said awkwardly.

And that was how Gwyn ended up with a ton of fruit and vegetables, a lot of chicken, and then packets of pasta that were on special because he didn’t really know how to cook a meal if it wasn’t just...a protein, and he could eat the pasta dry. He didn’t get any cereal. Too many bad experiences there. He didn’t get any confectionary. He did get two cartons of eggs. Boiled eggs, and his mother couldn’t get a needle through the shell, and they’d always been pretty safe. The riskiest thing he bought was a block of cheap cheese.

He got back to the car in twenty minutes and Mikkel looked at the translucent plastic bags that Gwyn placed onto the back seat, and Gwyn tensed automatically. He realised that if Mikkel actually went through the bags, Gwyn wouldn’t be able to eat any of it. He knew technically, objectively, Mikkel wasn’t going to do shit to his food. He knew that Mikkel looking through the bags while Gwyn watched meant that nothing could happen. But he still waited with his heart in his throat to see what Mikkel would do.

Mikkel just turned back and shrugged. ‘You eat better than I do.’

Gwyn went to hand him the change, and Mikkel refused it. Gwyn frowned at him reprovingly, and Mikkel made exactly the same expression back like a thirteen year old, and Gwyn realised it probably wasn’t worth arguing with him.

In the new house, Gwyn felt particularly daring, cooking himself some chicken and eating apples raw and then waiting an hour afterwards uneasily, to see if he’d somehow accidentally poisoned himself.

‘What did you eat?’ Augus said, drawing his attention back.

‘Just some chicken,’ Gwyn said. ‘Mikkel knows...I don’t eat very well. I didn’t tell him. He just knew. I don’t like people like that.’
'The ones who just see right into you?’ Augus said. He laughed weakly. ‘I don’t like them much either. It’s my experience that those people are the ones who are very good at fucking you up.’

‘Same.’

‘If he fucks you up, tell me, and I’ll murder him for you.’

‘You’re so violent,’ Gwyn said, leaning down and kissing him again. ‘You’re just a whole lot of threats and violence. People think you have your shit together and you really don’t.’

‘I mean I did,’ Augus said against Gwyn’s mouth. ‘Sort of. It’s a work in progress.’

Gwyn was surprised when Augus turned towards him, when he reached out and curled his fingers lightly against Gwyn’s side, the touch almost cautious. He pressed his forehead to Gwyn’s shoulder. Gwyn took up the blankets by his side and pulled them up and over, covering them both. He dared to stroke his hand through Augus’ hair. It was messy, and he couldn’t stroke deeply or his fingers would pull on knots, so he just coasted over it.

‘An hour,’ Augus said. ‘I’ll stay an hour.’

‘I wish you’d talk to me about what’s going on. Are you sure it wasn’t this? Me?’

‘Yeah, no, it wasn’t this,’ Augus said. ‘This didn’t… I mean I’m- It’s not my preferred way of doing things, but I think I get what other people like about it. All I could think was how much I wanted to do it to you. I mean, in amongst the whole being cored out by your cock, which was distracting.’

‘Sorry.’

‘You should be sorry. And then you should work in porn or something. But shut up for five seconds. This doesn’t suck.’

‘What doesn’t?’

‘This,’ Augus said, pushing his forehead into Gwyn’s shoulder, squeezing him lightly with his hand.

Gwyn gathered Augus closer, one of his hands ending up in the sweat sticky on Augus’ lower back. Gwyn closed his eyes and felt himself drift, and he could tell from Augus’ breathing that at least he was relaxed now. At least he’d lost all that jittery wildness from before.

Gwyn’s last thought was that Augus needed someone to take care of him, and that Gwyn liked doing it, because it meant he could think about someone else for a change, because it felt good to tame Augus down until he was loose and pliant and breathing slowly, occasionally sniffing his blocked nose clear.

*

An hour later, Augus reluctantly pulled away and went to the bathroom, then dressed. Gwyn did the same. Augus left after staring at Gwyn like he wanted to say something. He looked bruised still, and Gwyn wished he knew Ash well enough to send a message telling him to hug his brother or something.

‘I’ll text you,’ Augus said at the front door. ‘Thanks, though. Might be over again this weekend if you can stand it.’

‘I’ll see if I can fit you in between all the wild parties I have planned.’
'You better,' Augus said, lifting one eyebrow and then smiling a little. 'Goodnight, Gwyn ap Nudd.'

'Goodnight, Augus,' Gwyn said.

Augus walked down the small, paved path and then turned.

'Did you just do that because you can’t pronounce my last name?’ His eyes narrowed.

Gwyn smiled at him and let the door swing shut. He waited a minute to see if Augus would come back and knock to leave with a parting insult or something, but he didn’t.

It was dark downstairs, the only light coming from the kitchen and the dull light in the tiny section before the front door that was too small to be called a foyer.

He reached for his phone, sliding his fingers into his pocket. His fingers bumped into both phones, and he drew out the one he used with Augus first. It was still bright from the message he’d just gotten from Augus.

You fucker. Goodnight.

There was also a missed call from Mikkel, and a quick text that said:

Checking in, nothing urgent, call me if there’s probs, Bobs.

Gwyn sat down at the kitchen table, a smile on his face, and placed that phone down on the table. It took him another few seconds to look at the family phone, because he’d been deliberately avoiding it all day. He stared at the black screen and then opened it, blinking at the messages that greeted him. He quickly unlocked his phone so he didn’t read the snippets of them on the screen.

Legally, his parents couldn’t contact him anymore. They couldn’t come within a certain distance anymore. They couldn’t approach him at the school, and they had to inform the school if they needed to collect Efnisien, so that Gwyn could be placed somewhere else. Whether Albion would cooperate with that or not was another matter.

But his parents couldn’t – at least easily – get their hands on him.

For the sake of Efnisien’s education, and because Gwyn couldn’t prove that Efnisien hurt him and because he just didn’t think of his cousin in the same way, he’d left Efnisien off the VRO details.

So all the messages were from him.

The first message was just a picture of a cute, white rabbit. Gwyn thought it was a stock photo, but his blood still chilled, his body crawled with goosebumps.

Then: Try not to think about what I did to it.

Then: Try not to think about what I did to it while thinking about what I’m going to do to you, you fucking piece of shit.

Then: Ignore me. I’ll see you at school, Princess.

Then: You want to ruin this family because you’re too weak to handle it? You know what we do to weak things, don’t you?

Then: You’d better fucking respond to my messages.
A whole ream of threats that continued, another twenty messages.

Finally, it ended with two words: You’re dead.

Gwyn’s heart was thumping in his chest so fast that it made him feel sick. He screen-capped everything, sent it to his other phone, and then opened that up and sent it all onto Mikkel. His arms were shaking. He didn’t even think Crielle or Lludd had put Efniisien up to it. That was just…his cousin angry and maybe even hurt, and the only way he knew how to deal with either of those emotions, was to crush whatever made him feel that way.

He jumped when the phone screen that had gone dark, lit up again, and he realised Mikkel was calling. He answered the call and didn’t know what to say.

‘Hey,’ Mikkel said, ‘I told you that you should’ve included him on the VRO. I know you say you want to look after his schooling – whatever the hell that means – but this is… I mean it’ll be useful at least, in the case we’re building, but honestly. Are you okay?’

‘Uh huh.’

‘Sure. At least he doesn’t know where you are, and if he touches you at school, we will take him out of that fucking school. Rough night?’

Gwyn spun the other phone with his fingers, feeling weird. ‘No. Augus just left.’

A long silence, and Gwyn’s eyebrows knitted together. Had the line died? He couldn’t hear anything at all.

‘You better not be doing anything stupid, Cupcake,’ Mikkel said, his voice lower, darker than before.

‘What?’

‘Seriously? The more obvious your friendship – or whatever the hell is going on there – with that boy, the more your parent’s lawyers are going to fuck you up with it. You know he worked at the firm that represents your parents? Rumour on the vine is that he was fired today for knowing you, so they’re canvassing fast to build a case against you. If he was followed to your place today, your parents will know where you are, and their lawyers will tell the world that you wanted to get laid so badly you went and fucked your family for it.’

Gwyn stared ahead, then he got up and bolted to the front door and undid the locks, throwing it open, but Augus wasn’t there. Gwyn didn’t know which way he’s gone. He looked down both sides of the street, panicked and annoyed at the same time.

Augus hadn’t said anything. He’d just come over, asked to be fucked, had a breakdown, and now he was gone.

‘Are you listening to me, Gwyn?’

‘Yeah, of course I’m listening,’ Gwyn said, irritated. ‘He needed that job.’

‘That’s not your responsibility. Not your fault. Not actually anything to do with you. Whatever teenage romance you have brewing will ruin your case, do you hear me? You need to stay away from him.’

‘Will you drop the case if I do?’
Mikkel swore and then it sounded like he placed his fingers over the phone, and then Gwyn heard the muffled sounds of him swearing even louder. When he spoke though, everything was loud and clear again.

‘No.’

‘We got him fired.’

‘Him working at the scummiest fucking slick con-job excuse of a firm is what got him fired.’

‘Literally what we did today got him fired,’ Gwyn said, reluctantly closing the door again. God, he couldn’t even bring it up with Augus. If Augus had gone to such lengths to say nothing about it, he didn’t want Gwyn to know. Gwyn didn’t know how Augus would react if he said something about it. ‘Do you really think he was followed here?’

‘Probably not,’ Mikkel said, sighing. ‘But I have to think that way.’

‘He didn’t even tell me,’ Gwyn said, standing by the light of the kitchen, feeling isolated and strange. ‘He refused to tell me. He was just really upset and wouldn’t say why.’

‘Oh god,’ Mikkel muttered. ‘I am not your therapist. I’m not listening to your teenage angst about this while I’m staring down the barrel of that fucking legal firm and trying to think what lawyer I can scramble to represent you. Do you know how many are going to refuse to take your case just on the basis of who you are? We have bigger things to worry about.’

‘I’m not going to stop seeing him,’ Gwyn said. ‘Doing this wasn’t my idea in the first place. It was his. It was him who talked to his Head of House and it was that guy who contacted you. You should be nicer about it.’

‘And you should have a cousin that doesn’t threaten cute widdle animals when you do something he doesn’t like. Has he tortured animals before?’

‘Sure,’ Gwyn said. ‘But that looked like a stock photo.’

‘Has he sent you pictures of tortured animals before?’ Mikkel said, his voice escalating with outrage.

‘I mean sure, you can tell the difference between like, a stock photo and-’

‘Do you have the pictures?’

‘Oh yeah, I keep all the most horrible pictures of everything Efnisien has ever sent to me,’ Gwyn said flatly. ‘The autopsy photos are my favourite. I go through them every night to help me go to sleep.’

‘No offence, Cupcake, and I totally understand why you delete all that shit, but man do I wish you hadn’t deleted all that shit. Also, stay angry for me, okay? That side of you that is like twenty parts rebellious teenage bullshit is probably the part of you that’s going to get you through this. So as annoying as you are, and as deeply unhelpful you are, I guess… No, I’ve got nothing, that’s about it. Stay angry.’

Gwyn didn’t know if he was angry about the right things. He was mad that Augus hadn’t told him. He was mad that Augus had gotten fired, and no one had warned him this would be a consequence of what he was doing and no one seemed to care.

He wasn’t angry at Efnisien. The messages had creeped him out. But that was what Efnisien wanted
so…Gwyn grimaced and mentally awarded a point to him.

‘Are you okay?’ Mikkel said eventually. ‘Want to talk about it?’

‘No,’ Gwyn said. ‘I wasn’t even the one who called. You called me.’

‘Right. Yeah, okay, well thanks for screencapping all that for me. Don’t delete the messages or the photos or anything else he sends because they go on about doctoring of screencaps in Court sometimes and it’s good to have the originals on the original phone. From here on in, that’s a policy okay? Have your parents tried to get in touch?’

‘No,’ Gwyn said.

‘Yeah. I kind of wish they’d be that stupid, but they’re probably not going to be. All right. I’ll talk to you soon. Don’t be surprised if it’s a rough night tonight. It’s weird to sleep in a new place, and I know this is a lot for you. Message or call if you need to. I don’t go to bed until like two or three anyway.’

‘Uh. Sure. Okay. Thanks.’

‘Yeah. Bye, then.’

Mikkel hung up, and Gwyn put the phone down, swallowing around the dry lump in his throat until he finally just got himself a glass of water. At his parent’s place, it would be filtered water. But he preferred it like this. It meant that he wasn’t staying there, it meant that all the food in the fridge was his and no one had tampered with it, so even if he felt weird about eating it, he hadn’t been *hurt* because of eating it.

He stared at his other phone and mentally composed messages he’d send to Augus to try and open up some kind of line of communication between them, but in the end he just hung onto Augus’ quiet admission that he might come over again on the weekend.

Gwyn needed to learn how to talk to him, and the problem was that not only was that not a skill of his, but he didn’t think Augus opening up was something Augus was good at either.

Gwyn dug the heels of his hands into his forehead and decided that they were just both going to have to learn.
Augus

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Ash still hadn’t arrived home when Augus returned, so Augus spent the next ten minutes in the shower, cleaning sweat off his body, the remnants of dried come off his torso, and sliding fingers between his legs and wincing at how tender the skin was. He’d been horrified when come and oil had continued to ooze out of him on the bus. He hadn’t thought about how long that part would last. It didn’t ooze constantly either, every time he thought he was done, it turned out he wasn’t.

He spent the rest of the night sitting on his mattress, poring over BDSM how-to sites on his phone – he missed his laptop – and getting too much mixed information. He sent a couple of messages out on Fetlife asking for advice. One person blocked him because of his age, the other told him he was too young to be asking anything at all, but sent him a friend request anyway. Augus accepted it while frowning. Bullshit, he was too young. If Gwyn could fuck him like that, then Augus could figure out how to top him, or Dom him, or...something him.

There was a lot of terminology to learn. It was a distraction to overload himself with it all.

Ash got home at four in the morning, swinging into Augus’ room with a tired, pleased look on his face.

‘You’re up wicked late. Homework? Shit for the firm?’

‘Homework,’ Augus said, closing out of a site that sold sex toys, marvelling at just how fucking expensive and out of his budget everything was. How rich did someone have to be? He’d previously overlooked ‘BDSM on a Budget’ articles but he was going to have to bring them up again. It wasn’t like he could point Ash towards a local adult store and say ‘have at it.’ Or maybe he could…

No, probably shouldn’t. He wasn’t supposed to be encouraging the stealing.

‘Actually, I have to talk to you about something,’ Augus said, then closed his eyes. He should have waited until morning to bring it up. He shook his head at himself. He was tired. His eyes were still scratchy and it hurt to sit on the mattress on the floor.

‘Sure, what’s up?’

Augus stared at his phone. ‘It can wait until morning.’

A pause, then Ash walked into Augus’ room and slid down the wall to sit splay-legged on the floor. He tilted his head. His hair looked far more ridiculous than usual, and Augus suspected someone had
been dragging their fingers through it all night. Augus had no idea how Ash picked up so easily, so often, and he’d seen Ash in action. Though it did seem that mostly he just went to people’s houses to help them with their homework, and went to a lot of highschool and college parties. He seemed to have every popular kid’s number in his phone. He was just dangerous enough to be appealing, just good-natured enough to not have the cops called on him if he turned up uninvited.

‘I’m here now,’ Ash said.

‘Don’t be mad…’

‘That’s not really like me,’ Ash said, leaning his head back against the wall. Augus tapped the side of his phone and for a couple of minutes couldn’t even find the words to say what he had to say. He wished, desperately, for a way to exit reality.

_Just say it, chickenshit._

‘I was fired,’ Augus said, not looking up. ‘Like, ‘get out immediately’ fired. And we have to move. Like…this weekend. Because they- I mean they don’t- They’re giving me that much. Time to get out.’

A long silence, and Augus looked over at Ash who was staring back at him. But Ash had that look on his face that meant he was staring at nothing, thinking it over. Too shocked to speak.

‘It’ll be okay,’ Augus said, feeling like it didn’t matter how much older Ash got, Augus was always going to be aware of him as someone younger, more vulnerable. A kid who needed someone to root for him, who tried to be everyone’s friend and had no one’s support. ‘It’ll be fine. We’ll move into the dorm this weekend and that’ll give us housing through our schooling, and I’m going to get another job and look into maybe renting down the track maybe. We could be eligible for some kind of housing assistance… There’ll be something.’

Things that Augus was supposed to be looking up on his phone but couldn’t find the energy to do yet.

‘Wait,’ Ash said, scrubbing at his forehead with his fingers. ‘What? You got fired because of the house? I thought you said that was airtight.’

‘Ah, well…apparently not,’ Augus said, feeling cold. ‘But I wasn’t fired because of that. It was because they know I’m helping Gwyn, the firm represents his family. I can’t be there.’

‘Other firms would kill to have you though, right? You fucking laid yourself out for them over and over again, so at least your references…’

Ash stared at Augus for a long time, and then his head tipped forward and he gripped at his own messed up hair.

‘They’re not gonna give you any references are they?’ Ash said. ‘Fuck. When did this happen? Earlier? Why didn’t you call me?’

‘I went to Gwyn’s.’

‘What’d he say?’

‘Probably something incredibly saccharine and pathetic if I’d told him.’

Ash lifted up, frowning at Augus, looking – of all things – disappointed. Augus glared.
‘So you’d better get the shit together that you want to take to the dorm,’ he snapped. ‘Clothing, whatever. We can’t fit much in there. Make sure it counts. Don’t just bring weed or whatever other dumb shit you’re thinking of.’

Ash flinched back, then pushed himself up, shoving his hands into his pocket.

‘Get some sleep,’ Ash said. ‘I’m sorry you got fired, and I’m sorry things are shitty, but I need some goddamned sleep and I don’t want to deal with you when you’re like this.’

‘Like what?’ Augus said as Ash walked out of the room. ‘How am I being?’

‘Get some sleep,’ Ash called back, and then the bathroom door closed, and Augus tipped sideways on the mattress and wished Ash would come back and fight with him.

*

Augus woke at seven to a text message from another student demanding an assignment he was supposed to give to them on Friday. Augus replied he’d have the assignment in on Monday, in time to be handed in Wednesday. Really, the student could do their own assignment, but then Augus wouldn’t get paid fifty dollars. He pinched the bridge of his nose, because he wasn’t in the mood to do a year eleven law essay. Not today. Not tomorrow.

He felt heavy and like everything was urgent all at once. He could feel pressure closing in, telling him he had to get his stuff out, that he had to leave so much behind, that they had to get moving, but instead he lay there and stared blankly at the wall and wished he was one of the termites in the wooden frame of the house.

If he slid his legs together he could feel the ache between them and that was something too large to really think about. He wished he was more upset about it, but maybe he was and he just couldn’t tell.

He’d wanted to tell Gwyn so badly, but what would that have achieved? Nothing. Like the kid who was staring that family down and about to go to war with one of the nastiest legal firms needed Augus’ shit.

Augus groaned and pressed both of his hands against his face and eventually fell into an unsettled doze.

*

He woke to sounds in the kitchen and he pushed up and stumbled out. Ash was eating a bowl of bran flakes. A second bowl – the milk next to it – was waiting. Ash was scooping up huge mouthfuls, chewing noisily, and Augus almost turned around and went straight back to lying down again.

‘So like, what can I do?’ Ash said. ‘Should I get a job or something?’

‘So you can get fired?’ Augus said. ‘Sure. Do that.’

‘Jesus,’ Ash said to himself around a huge mouthful of food. ‘I hate you when you’re like this. I’m trying to ask you how I can help.’

‘Just…’ Augus folded his arms. He stared at the bowl of cereal with the milk waiting next to it, because Ash knew how much Augus hated soggy cereal. The consideration touched and annoyed him. It wasn’t Ash’s job to worry about things like that.
‘I think I should get a job,’ Ash said, not waiting for Augus to finish his sentence. ‘I mean it. I know a bunch of people, I’m sure someone’ll offer me something. Maybe I could get something for you as well?’

‘You might as well focus on schooling,’ Augus said.

‘Yeah, the formal education system hasn’t ever really done anything for me,’ Ash said, chasing around little bits of cereal in the milk left at the bottom of the bowl. ‘I mean I’m not gonna give it up or anything, but learning’s way better without having to deal with half the teachers and half the kids. Wish I was like a Montessori or Steiner kid.’

Augus walked over to the kitchen counter and poured in a small amount of milk before returning the container to the fridge.

‘Also,’ Ash said, excited, ‘wouldn’t it be great if we worked together? Oh my god that’d be so cool. Maybe I could look into that too.’

Augus walked into the lounge and sat on the couch. The couch that wasn’t theirs anymore because they had nowhere to store it. Augus scraped his heel down the chair leg. Probably some squatter would come in or something eventually. Use the mattress. All the things they’d found for themselves. The coffee table, the small cabinet for the TV, the TV.

He ate and tried not to think about how he’d cried the night before, losing it in a way he hadn’t in so long he’d forgotten he could cry like that.

‘Y’know Gulvi’s offered to help in the past,’ Ash said, washing and rinsing the bowl and then looking at it with furrowed brows. Augus wondered if he was deciding if he should take the bowl with them to the school. Or maybe he was thinking about something else. ‘Her family has like a little detached place they’re not using, and—’

‘No handouts.’

‘Okay,’ Ash said slowly. ‘But it wouldn’t be a handout. I’m sure we’d still be paying rent.’

‘I’ll be paying rent. It’ll be easier for us to just go to the school.’

‘Yeah, for now, of course. I’m just saying it might be worth talking to Gulvi—’

‘Gulvi and Kayla probably use it to fuck their hearts out. I’m—’

‘Shut up for a minute,’ Ash said, one of his hands clenching into a fist. ‘Just shut up. Stop doing that thing where you close every door before you even look through it! I’m saying there’s options, and you’re doing your best to shoot every fucking one of them down. You want me to stop helping? Would it be better if I just got stoned and watched you fucking pack everything that matters to us?’

Ash’s voice cracked towards the end, he turned away, and Augus felt torn between wanting to get up and comfort him, and profound apathy. In the end he just kept eating cereal, staring ahead stonily.

‘Gulvi and Kayla don’t fuck their hearts out in the detachable,’ Ash stubbornly continued, ‘because Gulvi’s mother is like one of those ultra-feminists who’s super sex positive and happy for her gay-as-fuck daughter to be getting laid, so I’m pretty sure they just fuck in Gulvi’s room. Or, who cares, it’s not our business except that Gulvi has suggested the detachable before. Even if it is her fuck den, she’s happy for us to take it.’

Augus kept eating cereal, didn’t say a word. He slid his phone out of his pocket with his other hand.
and saw no messages from Gwyn. Not even to ask if he was doing okay. Augus couldn’t tell if that was annoying, or if that was normal. Maybe Gwyn wouldn’t even be awake yet. And he did have all that paperwork to do that Augus was supposed to help with, maybe he was struggling with that instead.

‘I know you’re used to doing everything alone,’ Ash persisted, sounding desperate, ‘but things change all the time.’

‘Case in point,’ Augus said, gesturing to the house around them.

‘Yeah, maybe, but so not my point. We have friends? I know people? Why can’t we talk to them about it?’

Augus finished up breakfast, walked past Ash in the kitchen and cleaned his bowl. He was tempted for a second to just smash it on the floor, because what was the point in cleaning it? What was the point in letting it drain on the clean sink?

He walked back to his room and scowled when Ash caught him by the wrist.

‘I’m gonna message Gulvi.’

‘Do whatever you like.’

‘Is it cuz you feel so guilty?’ Ash said. ‘I can tell when you feel like you’ve fucked up. But all of this is happening because you’re trying to help someone, right? Isn’t it just proof that he never could’ve done this on his own, if his family have so much power? Or his lawyers do? And that place treated you like shit, Augus.’

‘It paid,’ Augus snarled, rounding on him, and he lifted his hands to shove at Ash’s chest, instead finding himself pinned against it. Ash was hugging him.

*The low, underhanded asshole.*

‘I don’t want this,’ Augus said.

‘You don’t want anything,’ Ash said. ‘Your mood is the worst. Were you like this with Gwyn last night too?’

*I was. And he fucked me. And then I had a breakdown like a little bitch.*

Ash made a small soothing sound like Augus had answered with something heartfelt and miserable and he pulled Augus closer.

‘No use fighting,’ Ash said. ‘My hugs are the best.’

‘You smell like cereal.’

‘We both smell like cereal,’ Ash said cheerfully, then he squeezed Augus so close that Augus felt his lungs compress. He grunted, and Ash just kept doing it. ‘Look, it sucks. But you’re doing the right thing, and I think we can get some help, maybe? I know I’m a fuck up, but you could try not thinking I’m going to be the worst at this. We’ll get our stuff back to school, and for some of the other stuff, I’ve got some friends who could probably put it in a shed or something. I dunno if you’ve noticed, but this is a pretty rich area, and a lot of my friends are pretty flush.’

‘I don’t think you’re a fuck up,’ Augus said as Ash’s hug became something more normal and less
‘broken rib inducing.’

‘I mean I am,’ Ash said, ‘but like… You’re doing all this stuff for Gwyn, let me do something for you maybe? Please?’

Augus pulled back and didn’t like the expression on Ash’s face.

‘You’re not a fuck up,’ he said.

‘I mean you say it,’ Ash said laughing.

‘Well I say a lot of shit you ignore,’ Augus griped. ‘I’m saying you can ignore that too. I mean if we’re going to talk fuck ups, can we talk about how incredibly I ruined-’

Augus’ voice became a squeak as Ash crushed him into a hug again, and this one was too tight, and it hurt, and Augus had to thump Ash’s back to get himself free again. He laughed weakly, and Ash raised his hands in the air in victory.


‘Think you broke a rib,’ Augus gasped.

‘Are you gonna see Gwyn today? Do you want me to get our stuff together while you do that? Maybe you should get out of the house.’

‘I was just there,’ Augus said. ‘No, let me… Give me an hour and then we’ll pack the important shit together. And maybe I’ll see Gwyn tonight, but we’ll take it as it comes?’

‘Deal,’ Ash said, grinning at him. The kind of grin that made Augus feel, for a moment, as though everything was okay. He took a deep breath and went back to his room, not quite ready to start sorting out what clothes he was going to bring – no way would there be enough room in the dorm for everything.

Instead, he scrolled through his phone on BDSM sites. Something about looking at all the different things he could try with Gwyn was incredibly exciting, but more than that, it soothed him to think of asserting control over someone. Control in circumstances that would be safer for the both of them, seeing Gwyn doing what Augus wanted, because Augus wanted it. Maybe even struggling, but still trying.

He was slowly starting to realise that for the most part, the porn sites he watched were just tiny interstitials of much larger happenings – scenes – and there was so much that went into it. He’d found a couple of sub blogs he liked because the subs talked about what they enjoyed about pain, or being made to do things they didn’t want to do, about being controlled, about discipline, about submission and needing to please and obey. He’d found plenty more Dom blogs which all had different focuses. One was really science-oriented, talking a lot about adrenaline and serotonin and the chemistry of subspace and topspace.

In the past, the videos had really just turned him on, given him something to jerk off to and fantasise about. But this was a strange combination of turning him on, but also offering something vaguely comforting. He didn’t really understand it, but it helped reading about Doms who wrote about what it was like to find their ‘space,’ to know they were doing the best thing for themselves and their sub or bottom in the moment.

All of it would have been a lot easier to enjoy if he didn’t worry every five minutes that he was exploring a subject that had ended in him tearing up Gwyn’s ass in the past. He hated that Gwyn
would probably make a better Dom than he would, and Gwyn didn’t even want to be one.

* 

Packing took hardly any time at all. Augus was so used to being moved into and out of homes over his life, that he knew what the basic necessities were, and had to be encouraged by Ash to take a few more items. Even then, Augus had some sort of internal value metric that allowed him to instantly understand how much everything was worth to him. The vintage leather jacket? A lot. Every pair of briefs and boxer briefs? Not worth a ton, but handy to have. The ripped jeans that he’d only worn twice? They could stay.

Ash seemed to find it easy as well, though he packed more things. He took more kitchen items than Augus expected, and Ash just said:

‘I think it’ll be nice to be able to eat in our own bowls at school sometimes. Even if it’s just cereal or whatever. I dunno, like a reminder that we were here and that we’ll have our own place again in the future. And if they break then they’re just bowls, right?’

Augus shrugged. He wasn’t attached to those sorts of things in the same way.

It was frustrating realising he was meant to be working on another student’s assignment, when he couldn’t type as fast on his phone as he could on a computer. He stopped about five hundred words in, frustrated, and realised he’d just be better off doing it on one of the school library computers. But that would mean going to the library to use one.

He messaged Gwyn instead: You busy?


_for the love of god please type like a real person. Do you have a computer? Augus sent. Should I come over?_

Yeah, bt its on campus. Ill gt it Mnday. Im jst dng readings

‘You’re trying, I suppose,’ Augus muttered to himself. ‘There’s like, three whole words in there. Imagine that.’

_U cn come over, _Gwyn sent a few seconds later. If u wnt. U doing k?

_I don’t need stitches but my ass still hurts. But yeah, doing fine._

_Good, _Gwyn sent.

Augus rubbed at the back of his neck, feeling awkward. He didn’t know if he wanted Gwyn to fuck him again any time soon, but maybe one day, if it was like that. If Gwyn was implacable but still sensitive about it, if he was careful. It’d felt like nothing else Augus had ever experienced before. He knew his body could be ruined with pain, he’d experienced that in the past. But he didn’t know he could be ruined like that. So overloaded with pleasure that it hurt, where the pain was some kind of aftertaste, adding something good to everything.

He reluctantly conceded that he might be a bit of a masochist, but the websites said that even Doms and tops could be masochists sometimes. Maybe it would just be an asset in the long-run, give him an opportunity to understand what other masochists needed.

He sent a time to Gwyn, who confirmed it.
Ash swung into Augus’ room an hour later.

‘How do you want to do this? One more night here? Or should we get out?’

‘I’m going to see Gwyn at four,’ Augus said. ‘But I don’t mind. I can come back here or go back to campus. The buses—’

‘I’ll drop you off and pick you up,’ Ash said. ‘Unless it goes too late. I’ve got a thing I wanted to make an appearance at, but it’s not like a huge party and I think everyone’ll be done at like eight. So I could pick you up after?’

‘The address can’t be shared,’ Augus said reluctantly. ‘It’s…like a witness protection home. Or something.’

‘Okay,’ Ash said easily, ‘just tell me the street next to it and I’ll drop you off and pick you up there, okay? That way I won’t know it until I go visit. I can visit, right? I’m not gonna tell anyone. Promise.’

Augus nodded. ‘I’ll check with Gwyn, but it should be fine.’

‘Coolio. I’m gonna use up some of the stuff in the fridge and make lunch. Anything you don’t want?’

‘Peas,’ Augus said.

‘That’s good, we don’t have any.’ Ash winked and swung back out of the room.

Augus spent the rest of the early afternoon working on the student’s assignment and making more headway than he expected, occasionally dipping into BDSM websites and Youtube channels, and trying to decide what to wear.

* 

Ash dropped him off at a street nearby, and Augus walked the rest of the way. A bus drove by once, the one he’d caught the night before. He stared at it as it passed, felt strange and nervous. Everything that happened the night before put him on the back foot. Like somehow Gwyn held more power over him now, because he’d seen Augus fucked out, and desperate, and incoherent, and crying.

Yes, he definitely holds more power over you now. For fuck’s sake.

He knocked on the front door, fifteen minutes early, staring at the bland cement planter boxes on either side of it. One had a lot of overgrown rosemary, and the other, nothing at all. Augus reached out and brushed his fingers over the rosemary automatically, and he was smelling his fingers when Gwyn swung the door open.

‘You have rosemary,’ Augus said, shoving his fingers underneath Gwyn’s nose. ‘Smell.’

Gwyn’s whole face wrinkled, but he breathed in and looked relieved – as though he’d expected an entirely different smell to be on the tips of Augus’ fingers – and then ducked his head out of the door to look where Augus was pointing.

‘How do you know it’s rosemary?’

‘I know things,’ Augus said.

He’d stayed in a house once where the woman was all about gardening and herbs. He’d liked it.
He’d liked her. It was all her boyfriends that were the problem.

‘What can you use it for?’ Gwyn said, letting Augus in.

‘Roasts. Soap. I don’t know. Other shit I suppose. It’s strong.’

‘Just looks like a bush to me.’

Gwyn walked into the kitchen, even more loose paperwork strewn over it today. Augus sat down and pulled it towards him, pursing his lips. He could feel how heavy Gwyn’s gaze was across the table, and wondered if Gwyn was looking for signs that he’d fucked Augus. Or signs that he was… okay? Gwyn seemed like the kind of person to care about that.

‘How did you sleep?’ Augus said, looking up.

‘Pretty well,’ Gwyn said. ‘Didn’t expect to sleep much at all. But ended up sleeping in until like, ten.’

‘Have you had breakfast?’

Gwyn hesitated, and Augus’ eyes narrowed. He pounced.

‘So what are the rules?’ Augus said. ‘With your eating? You know enough to know that you have a problem, even if you never talk about it. But I assume there’re rules? Like, you don’t eat in front of other people? That’s a rule. Are there others? Do you ever eat in front of people?’

Gwyn blew out a slow breath and then stood, walking over to the kitchen sink and leaning against it. He stared at the fridge for a long time, then looked at Augus.

‘This is really what you want to talk about?’

‘What else would we talk about?’ Augus said, confused. ‘Last night? You want to talk about fucking me again? Because it’s not happening. Not like that anyway. I want to talk about this.’

‘Seriously?’ Gwyn looked hunted already, and Augus leaned back in his chair, his legs stretching out.

‘I seriously do.’

If Augus was the kind of person to want to give someone a break based on how miserable they were looking, he’d change the subject. But he wasn’t that kind of person.

‘Give me a rule,’ Augus said. ‘The rules for yourself. Or for others. I don’t care. Just tell me.’

‘It can’t be processed,’ Gwyn said, the words quiet and almost swallowed. ‘I mean it can be, I just don’t like it when it is. And it can’t have a lot of ingredients in it. Like a salad. Or…pasta or something.’

Augus looked over to the packets of uncooked pasta on the counter and frowned, and Gwyn saw where he was looking and shrugged.

‘I eat it dry.’

‘I hope you have a good dentist.’

‘I do,’ Gwyn said, then he hesitated. ‘I mean I did. I can’t…afford that anymore.’
He looked down at the floor, his blond eyebrows pulling together as though it had only just occurred to him what it meant to not have the money of his parents to fall back on.

‘And you can’t have people watching you eat because…what? You think they might have poisoned your food? Or done to it whatever your mother did to it?’

‘It’s stupid,’ Gwyn said.

‘I mean it’s obviously a rule you live by so whatever, whether it’s stupid or not, it’s important to you.’

‘But it’s stupid.’

‘Of course it’s fucking stupid!’ Augus exclaimed, tapping his fingers on the table. ‘You can’t functionally eat! You’ve lost a shit-ton of weight since you haven’t been at school and I don’t think you realise how bad it is. I’m starting to think that without the pressure of having to maintain a weight range for wrestling, you will actually starve.’

‘I ate yesterday,’ Gwyn said defensively, and Augus smirked.

‘It’s not three meals a week,’ Augus said. ‘It’s three squares a day. Tell me another rule.’

‘I don’t fucking want to,’ Gwyn said, folding his arms. ‘Did you come over here to talk about this shit?’

‘I mean, no, but we were going to end up talking about it eventually.’

Gwyn shook his head, and then he walked out of the kitchen into the tiny lounge. Augus followed, leaving the paperwork behind, pressing his fingers to the coffee table to see how sturdy it was, before sitting on it. It meant he was sitting opposite Gwyn, but close enough to him that his outer knee brushed Gwyn’s outer knee. The contact felt weird now, given they’d been all over each other the night before.

Well, Gwyn had been all over him, but still.

‘I don’t talk about it.’

‘Of course not,’ Augus said. ‘Who would you have talked about it with? Your mother? Efnisien? The giant bag of dicks that is your father?’

Gwyn smiled a little, and Augus smiled in return.

‘I can’t really talk about it,’ Gwyn said. ‘It’s just stupid and that’s it.’

Augus rubbed at his chin, thinking it over. He ended up going with a trick that he’d used with Ash very early on, when he’d been trying to find out if Ash wanted to live with him and Ash still struggled with complete sentences.

‘What if…you got to ask me a question, every time I asked you one? And you could ask me anything at all. And I’ll answer in good faith, and you can do the same.’

Gwyn looked at Augus for a long time, then pulled an old maroon cushion to him and rested it on his bent knees, then rested his arms on that. He stared at Augus hard and finally nodded once, like he was committing to a serious legal agreement.

‘What did you like about last night?’ Gwyn said.
Augus blinked at him. ‘Um, I go first?’

‘You just asked me a ton of questions,’ Gwyn said. ‘So it’s my turn. What did you like about it?’

‘Are you-? Fucking hell,’ Augus groaned, scuffing his shoes along the carpet. ‘I guess some of last night was okay. My turn.’

‘No, if you don’t answer properly, I’m not going to answer properly,’ Gwyn said, sounding so high-and-mighty that Augus wanted to shake him.

‘You’re horrible and I hate you,’ Augus said, and Gwyn grinned at him, and Augus half-wanted to smack the expression off his face and half-wanted to kiss him and sat there for a minute trying to remember what the actual question was. And then he squirmed a little, knotting his hands together.

‘Did you like anything?’ Gwyn prompted.

‘I just said some of it was okay,’ Augus said. He ducked his head and stared at his knees. ‘I don’t know, it was… You were… good about it. I mean your cock’s a murder weapon but like, I guess, I mean I didn’t expect to come. And I didn’t expect it to feel that good. Also it’s nice when you touch my back and stuff. Kissing isn’t the worst thing ever. There, is that enough?’

‘Yeah,’ Gwyn said, clearing his throat. ‘So basically you liked all of it.’

‘Oh my god, I did not say that.’

‘That’s what I heard though?’ Gwyn said. ‘So… anyway. Your turn. Unless you just want me to ask you something else because I-’

‘How long have you had problems with eating for?’

Gwyn winced, sighed, and then tucked his legs up on the couch like he could make himself small which didn’t work at all. Eventually his heels slid off the end of the cushion and his feet landed back on the floor.

‘I don’t know,’ Gwyn said. ‘As long as I can remember. She started putting stuff in my food pretty early. Not all the time. So I guess at first I didn’t have major problems, because I would just get sick and not realise why. So I’d just sort of… start to not like the foods that were making me sick. I mean I was really young, and I didn’t realise what was going on, because she always pretended to be really upset about it. But one day I realised it was her and then like, then I guess all my problems got worse. I still eat.’

‘I know you do,’ Augus said patiently, feeling queasy just hearing Gwyn talk about it. ‘I know you do. You wouldn’t be here, and alive, and all ripped and shit if you weren’t eating at all. So you found ways around it?’

‘It’s my turn,’ Gwyn said. Augus smiled ruefully, and then just shrugged. ‘Do you still want to fuck me?’

‘Yeah,’ Augus said, surprised. ‘Why would you ask that?’

‘Because aside from last night we’ve done nothing since like-’

‘Oh, since I put you in the hospital?’ Augus said, staring at him. ‘Maybe I was trying to give you some space? Also you said we couldn’t do anything until you fucked me, so-’
‘No, I said you couldn’t *fuck* me. I still would’ve like…’ Gwyn pressed his back into the couch. ‘I dunno like blowjobs and stuff. You just haven’t seemed interested at all.’

Augus frowned. He’d not really considered it. But he supposed it was true. There were opportunities for that earlier, rougher treatment he’d used with Gwyn but he just never really thought about it until he was alone, and then he felt…like a fuck up and it wasn’t hot anymore.

‘I put you in the hospital,’ Augus said slowly. ‘And your dad beat you to within an inch of your life? Remember? How are you not more upset about it?’

‘Because he beats me to within an inch of my life all the fucking time!’ Gwyn said, cheeks turning red. ‘I mean, you think that was the worst? It wasn’t. It was just that someone noticed. I’ve had absences from school before. And as for you putting me in the hospital, you fucked up, sure, but whatever. People fuck up. You obviously didn’t *mean* to do it, you practically begged me to let you take me to the hospital. It was a few stitches. What’s a few stitches? My ass is fine. I only said I’d fuck you first so you could learn something that wasn’t porn for once.’

Augus had never really talked to Gwyn about it in any great detail. The next time he’d seen Gwyn after putting him in hospital, he’d had all the bruises. There were bigger things to talk about. But he hadn’t realised Gwyn was so fine about it. Or maybe he was just a really good actor.

‘You keep calling yourself a rapist,’ Gwyn said, his voice dropping in volume, ‘but I think I’m the one who gets to make that decision and I don’t think you are. Like, yeah, you should’ve listened to me, and you should’ve used *lube*, but… Are we just not ever going to do anything again? Because that’s fine, I guess, but-’

‘I think about fucking you a lot,’ Augus said. He didn’t add on the part where it then kind of turned into a freakish guilt-laden nightmare, but whatever, the intention was there. ‘I’m still into you. It’s my turn to ask a question.’

‘So ask it,’ Gwyn said, shifting on the couch until he could put his feet on it. Augus wondered if Gwyn was allowed to do that back at his parent’s home, or if he got into trouble for it.

‘What would it take for you to eat around me?’

‘Yeah, right,’ Gwyn said, and then he turned to Augus as though checking he was serious. ‘Really?’

‘Yes, *really*,’ Augus said. ‘Answer.’

Gwyn tilted his head back on the armrest and stared up at the ceiling. Augus wanted to poke at him verbally some more, but it was obvious Gwyn was thinking about it, and it wasn’t like Augus had gone for a gentle question. But time kept ticking on, and Gwyn wasn’t saying anything at all.

‘Would it help if I made suggestions?’ Augus said.

‘Knock yourself out.’

‘What about if I cooked the food and ate the same thing as you?’

‘No,’ Gwyn said. ‘There’re ways to get stuff into one person’s dish and not the other.’

‘What if I ate from your plate?’

Gwyn paused for a long time, and then looked at Augus, forehead furrowed, corners of his lips pinched in.
‘I don’t know,’ he said finally.

‘Okay, so that’s a maybe,’ Augus said. ‘What if we both go to a store, you buy some stuff, and I don’t eat anything? And you can see my hands the entire time?’

‘This is so stupid,’ Gwyn said, putting his hands over his face. ‘It’s just- You don’t need to do this. I can eat. When people aren’t here, it’s fine. When you go, I’ll have something. I ate like two chicken breasts and a bunch of apples yesterday. I’m not like- There are people who are dealing with way worse.’

‘Yeah,’ Augus said. ‘Ask me how much I give a shit about them.’

‘I just think you’re making a big deal out of something that isn’t really a big deal.’

‘Cool,’ Augus said. ‘Then we can eat from the same plate and it won’t be a problem.’

‘You know what I mean,’ Gwyn said, turning and staring at him, looking deeply unimpressed.

‘I really don’t,’ Augus said innocently. ‘I mean, it’s not a big deal, you can eat pretty fine, it’s not that bad – you just said so yourself – so we can definitely eat from the same plate. It’d be romantic. No problems, right?’

‘Fuck you,’ Gwyn said quietly, staring up at the ceiling again.

Augus took pity on him. ‘Ask me a question then. It’s your turn.’

‘Were you ever going to tell me that you got fired from your job because of me, or were you just going to sit on that and make up some excuse about it later? How fragile do you think I am?’

Augus stared at him. How did he know? Did Ash tell him?

‘How? ’ Augus said, feeling flinty spires of stone building inside of him, turning him sharper and harder than before. ‘Who told you?’

‘Mikkel,’ Gwyn said. ‘After you left last night.’

At least it wasn’t Ash. At least Augus didn’t have to go tear Ash a new one. But it wasn’t like he could take on Mikkel either. And how the hell did Mikkel know? Was it just common gossip already? God, had his bosses told other people before they’d told Augus?

Augus stood, feeling choked, and then turned and walked towards the front door. He flinched backwards when Gwyn’s hand slammed against it before Augus could even get his fingers on the doorknob.

‘You weren’t gonna tell me at all, were you?’

‘No,’ Augus said.

‘Why not? I know it’s my fault. Why didn’t you just-?’

‘This is why I didn’t tell you!’ Augus said, turning on Gwyn, grinding his teeth together. ‘This! You doing this whole routine where you blame yourself for it and it’s not going to change anything except maybe make you back out of this whole thing, which you can’t fucking do. That’s why! So stop looking at me like that. I’m so not interested in your pity party about it. I’m just not.’

Gwyn’s arm was stretched past him to the door, his hair hanging down around his face, his eyes
piercing as he searched Augus’. His expression softened, and he looked down.

‘Okay,’ he said. ‘But you were so upset last night.’

‘Can we just not talk about it ever again, please?’ Augus said, hating how desperate he sounded.

‘It’s unfair,’ Gwyn said, looking at Augus again. ‘It’s unfair that you get to ask me questions about all sorts of personal shit, and I ask you one, and you storm out.’

‘I’m still here,’ Augus pointed out.

‘Only because I’m making you be here,’ Gwyn said, smiling a little. ‘You would’ve just run. Can’t I be sorry that you lost your job? It’s not fair.’

‘Fuck fair,’ Augus said, pushing past Gwyn back into the lounge. He tossed himself down on the couch, taking up all of it, stretching his legs out until his ankles rested on the armrest. ‘Nothing in life is fair.’

Gwyn followed, but instead of sitting on the coffee table, he pushed that aside and sat on the floor instead. He was cross-legged, facing the couch and Augus rolled to his side to just look at him. Gwyn was close. He reached out with his arm and petted the top of Gwyn’s head like he was a dog, and that felt mildly satisfying. Gwyn wasn’t stopping him either.

‘Nothing in life is fair,’ Augus said again. ‘You take the victories when you can, because everything else is defeat.’

‘Really?’ Gwyn said.

‘You haven’t learnt that yet?’ Augus said, lifting his eyebrows.

‘I’m cynical about my family,’ Gwyn said. ‘I’m not cynical in general. Well. Not much.’

‘Ever thought about killing yourself?’ Augus said.

‘More like thought about just not doing anything to stop myself from dying,’ Gwyn said, pressing up and leaning into Augus’ touch. ‘Like, just not looking both ways before crossing a road. Or not balling up when he gets super violent. Just letting it happen. Sometimes I provoke him. To make it happen.’

Augus swallowed the sudden lump in his throat. He tightened his hand in Gwyn’s hair and pulled him forwards so that Gwyn’s forehead bumped into the couch cushion. Gwyn just let him, and Augus couldn’t think of what to say.

‘What happens after you provoke him?’ Augus said.

‘He hits me,’ Gwyn said, his voice muted. ‘And I still ball up and try and protect myself. So…yeah. I don’t know.’

‘Same,’ Augus said, his grip softening. He went back to petting, and then stroking, and Gwyn’s shoulders rose and fell in a sigh. Augus marvelled at the power he possessed, even as a small thread of alarm rose inside of him.

He wanted to tell Gwyn to suck him off, but he couldn’t. His chest went tight at the thought of what had happened last time. The blood, the shock, Gwyn driving away in the car, not hearing from him again. Not knowing how bad it’d been.
Augus’ fingers became lighter in Gwyn’s hair, he wished he could relax, but he couldn’t.

‘Mikkel says I have to see a therapist,’ Gwyn said.

‘That might not be terrible. But it’ll depend on who you see.’

‘Have you seen one?’

‘A few,’ Augus said. ‘Mostly social workers with a counselling add-on, honestly, like, not so much with the clinical psychs or anything. Saw a psychiatrist once because the guy who had me probably thought it’d be easier to convince people he wasn’t hitting me if he could blame it on all the disorders he said I had.’

‘You don’t talk about it much,’ Gwyn said. ‘All of that.’

Gwyn dragged his forehead back and forth along the couch cushion, like he just liked the texture of the velvety material against his forehead. Augus watched as gleaming strands of hair caught and pulled, moving from side to side. He gently lifted them from the fabric and pushed them back towards the rest of the mass that was Gwyn’s hair.

‘I texted you a ton about it,’ Augus said, biting the side of his lip.

‘Not really. You just don’t really talk about stuff unless you can use it for shock value or something, or I don’t know…maybe it’s easier through texting? You didn’t fucking tell me you got fired, on the day you got fired, and I know how much you did for that job. Or not- Well, I mean I know a bit. You could’ve let me like…be nice about it or something.’

‘I wasn’t interested in your guilt,’ Augus said. He didn’t say that he also wasn’t interested in Gwyn being nice about it. Augus had brought it on himself anyway.

Gwyn lifted his head, his eyes narrowed, disapproving, or maybe disappointed. ‘No, you just wanted me to like…fuck you, even though you thought it’d be a revenge fuck. That’s what you were interested in.’

Augus’ eyebrows rose, and Gwyn’s did the same.

‘You’re so fucked up,’ Gwyn said.

‘People in glass houses...’ Augus warned.

‘You really are though. I had no idea in the beginning. You had all your shit together. You won’t even make out with me anymore. But maybe you’re just not interested? You still haven’t told me if you are or not.’

‘I let you fuck me up the ass with your cock that is like three cocks.’

‘It’s normal sized,’ Gwyn said in a way that Augus thought meant even Gwyn knew it was larger than average.

‘Ha. Still. You have your answer.’

‘Then why don’t you do anything?’ Gwyn said, and Augus pushed up onto his elbow, surprised at how plaintive he sounded. Was it really that much of an issue? ‘I even have like a place now, and—’

‘You want to do stuff now?’ Augus said, blinking at him.
‘I mean if you want to sit here and play twenty questions and talk about how sad our lives are we could do that too?’ Gwyn didn’t look like he wanted to do that. ‘You can help me with paperwork and shit later, right?’

‘We can eat off the same plate together later,’ Augus said, winking at him.

‘Maybe.’

‘You really want to do something now?’

Gwyn made a growling sound of frustration and shoved his head back into the chair cushion again. Augus pressed his lips together.

‘There’ll be rules though,’ Augus said.

‘What kind of rules?’ Gwyn said.

‘Like, safeword rules and stuff.’

‘Oh,’ Gwyn said. ‘Okay. Good.’

‘We have to talk about it.’

‘Okay,’ Gwyn said. ‘Can we stop talking about talking about it?’

Augus nodded, even though Gwyn wasn’t looking at him. He didn’t even know exactly what he wanted to do, but it didn’t matter, did it? He could improvise. He knew what safeword system he wanted to use. So it had to go fine, didn’t it?

It would be better than fine, it’d be really hot. Augus nodded decisively to himself, and tightened his fingers in Gwyn’s hair.
How You're Bound

Chapter Notes

Slowing down a bit as I'm heading into a hiatus while I write new The Ice Plague content! But I hope folks enjoy this chapter. :D

New tags: fingering, bondage, spanking, mild (the mildest) subdrop.

Gwyn
*

They ended up back in the main bedroom. Gwyn still wasn’t able to think of it as his room yet. It felt more impersonal than even a hotel room. He’d slept deeply, but spent his waking hours wondering how long he was going to have to stay here, what his life would look like afterwards. Whether he’d be back with his family because the case had failed, or…he didn’t know.

Mikkel said he’d need to get a job, Gwyn didn’t even know what kind of job he could do. He wasn’t really skilled at anything, but he’d do whatever he had to if it meant keeping him out of his parent’s place.

Every thought piled together until Gwyn just wanted to think about something else, so he thought about sex instead. He thought about Augus. He thought about the things he wanted to do, the things he wanted done to him.

Which was how Augus came back from rummaging around the house with a length of rope that looked worn, and several old dishrags. From Gwyn’s own backpack, he found two old button up shirts. He scowled at the oil on the drawers and shrugged.

‘All right,’ Augus said, staring at everything. ‘This rope doesn’t seem that good. I think it can give you splinters? I don’t know. It’s very rough.’

‘You want to tie me up?’ Gwyn said. ‘You’re not fucking me if you tie me up.’

Chances were high that Gwyn would let Augus fuck him if he was tied up, he was more worried about himself than about Augus, who seemed strangely reticent to do anything. Even though Augus had reassured him, it felt strange, like Augus just wasn’t into it anymore. Gwyn had a horrible feeling that Augus was backsliding into some vanilla zone which would be fine for him, but not great for Gwyn.

‘Just hang on,’ Augus said, glaring at him. He placed everything on the bed, running his fingers speculatively over the rope. ‘Maybe if I put something beneath it…’

‘I could just suck you,’ Gwyn said, aiming to be helpful. Judging from Augus’ expression, it wasn’t. ‘I don’t see why it has to be a huge production.’

‘Your ass will thank me later,’ Augus muttered. ‘Look, okay, there’s… Ah, I’ve been looking it up. You say red if you want to stop, and yellow if you want to slow down, and green if you like what’s happening. And I’ll…check in to make sure that you’re on green.’
Gwyn sat down on the side of the bed and frowned.

‘What?’ Augus said. ‘I thought you wanted safewords.’

‘I do,’ Gwyn said. ‘And I’m familiar with like, red and yellow. I mean sort of. Not personally, but like, I’ve read about it.’

‘Right, so you - shit at reading in general - are apparently amazing at reading about this? Why does that not surprise me?’

‘I get off on it,’ Gwyn said, and then stared forward, his cheeks burning. ‘I mean not just the- I dunno, you read an article about things you can do to someone and it’s hot, okay? Anyway it’s like basic 101 isn’t it? Everyone comes across like, red and yellow at some point.’

‘And green,’ Augus said.

‘Fine,’ Gwyn said. ‘Green.’

‘I haven’t even started yet.’

‘I know,’ Gwyn said.

‘You don’t make this easy, asshole,’ Augus said, and then paused, staring at Gwyn. After a moment he smiled weakly. Gwyn couldn’t help but smile back. He didn’t know what to suggest. It was obvious that Augus was nervous, but it wasn’t like Gwyn expected to be put back in the hospital again. It was a dumb mistake. It wasn’t the kind of thing a person kept repeating when they were horrified to have done it in the first place. Gwyn didn’t think Augus would put anyone in hospital again for something like sex.

‘I just… want you to do whatever you want,’ Gwyn said roughly. The back of his neck burned.

‘It’s not good for you to not set any limits,’ Augus said, like he was reading it out of a book.

‘God,’ Gwyn said, lying back on the bed. ‘I don’t know what they all fucking are, do I? No one’s ever pissed on me, so I can’t say that’s a no, and I don’t-’

‘That’s the first place you go to?’ Augus said, his voice rising half an octave. ‘Piss-play?’

Gwyn shrugged, staring up at the ceiling. ‘I’m not against it in theory.’

‘We are so not doing that. Ever. Definitely not today,’ Augus muttered.

‘Everything you have seems fine,’ Gwyn said petulantly. ‘If you want to tie me up, fine. Or you could spank me. I don’t know if I’m into that. I mean I could suck you, but you seem to be anti-blowjob.’

‘I’m not anti-blowjob,’ Augus said indignantly. ‘Christ. Okay, you have to shut up. That’s your first order. Unless you’re giving me a colour, just shut up and let me figure this out.’

‘Will you punish me if I don’t?’

‘I don’t know!’ Augus shouted. ‘Do you want me to?’

‘I mean, yes, okay, if it’ll get you started,’ Gwyn said.

‘Take your clothes off then,’ Augus said.
Gwyn looked at him to check he was serious and saw that he was. So Gwyn got off the bed and took his shirt off, took off his jeans, and then was left standing in boxer briefs and glad that the heating in the place was actually pretty good. He slipped his thumb into the hem of his underwear.

‘This too?’ Gwyn said.

Augus paused, then nodded. So Gwyn stripped off and felt like he was in the change-rooms at school. Enough that he wasn’t too embarrassed, anyway, even though Augus had all his clothes on.

Gwyn had been worried initially that it’d feel too much like the night before, but as soon as he was stripped and Augus had his clothes on, Gwyn felt the dynamic shift. He didn’t know how to explain it. Nervousness threaded up alongside the low-key arousal he’d been feeling on and off since Augus arrived.

‘Turn your back to me,’ Augus said, spinning his finger to indicate that Gwyn should turn. ‘What colour are you?’

‘What?’

‘Are you green? Or do you want to stop?’

Gwyn scowled at him. ‘Did I say I wanted to stop? You haven’t done anything yet.’

‘Then turn around,’ Augus said, and Gwyn made a faint, low sound of frustration as he stood with his back to Augus, and his hands pressed uncertainly against his hips. He could hear Augus moving behind him, wanted to look at what he was doing, but instead stared at a random point on the wall.

When Augus walked up to him, he grasped one of Gwyn’s arms by the wrist and moved it carefully behind his back. He made a thoughtful sound with his tongue.

‘Grasp your forearms behind your back.’

Gwyn nodded and did it, feeling Augus wrapping one of Gwyn’s shirts around his wrists first. He tied a knot with the sleeves, and obsessed with checking it was okay, even though it felt pretty loose. Gwyn stared down at his cock, which was half-hard.

Augus then got the rope and began looping it over the protective layer of the shirt. When he started to fasten it, Gwyn shifted to feel the tension in his shoulders, pressing his teeth gently into his lip. He felt himself start to relax into it, which was weird, because should anyone relax around Augus once he’d tied them up? Probably not.

‘Colour?’ Augus said.

Gwyn blinked, confusion washing over him. What? He cast around, and then realised what Augus wanted.

‘Green,’ he said, and then grimaced. Wasn’t it obvious? Didn’t he have the words yellow and red for if he didn’t like something? Did Augus think he wouldn’t use them? Why would he think that, when Gwyn was the one who suggested they use safewords in the first place last time?

Augus began tying a knot, and Gwyn wanted to see what kind it was, but Augus seemed to have it under control. It didn’t seem like a regular knot either.

‘Were you a boy scout?’ Gwyn said.
‘I watched a bunch of videos,’ Augus said, sounding amused. ‘I don’t know if I’ve done it properly. Does it feel okay? It’s not too tight?’

Gwyn knew it wasn’t. He thought if he really struggled, he’d get loose pretty easily. He decided that didn’t really matter, but that, combined with being asked if he was okay with everything and being prompted for a colour, was turning his nervousness into an itch of agitation. He breathed quietly through his nose. It was obvious that Augus wanted this to be good, but…Gwyn didn’t know if he wanted Augus to treat him well. Not during this.

Maybe that was Gwyn’s problem. Maybe he was wrong for liking this in the first place. It was obvious that Augus had done a lot of research, and maybe he was doing everything right, and it was Gwyn who was wrong.

His eyebrows knitted together, and he nearly startled when Augus placed his hands on Gwyn’s hips.

‘All right, kneel facing the bed,’ Augus said. ‘I’ll help you.’

Gwyn realised quickly that without his arms to brace himself, kneeling was harder than normal, though he still thought he could have done it on his own. Maybe Augus just wanted to touch him as he knelt. He shifted until he found an okay position for his knees. The carpet was a little scratchy, and he found that if he put more weight on his shins and the bridge of his feet, he could give his knees a break. He knelt sometimes on bare floorboards or on the wrestling mats, but this was different.

Augus walked in front of Gwyn and sat right at the edge of the bed, then undid his belt and the fly of his jeans. Only enough that he could lift his cock out. Gwyn was surprised that it was still soft.

Augus didn’t pull down his jeans, so he was able to spread his legs, and then he gestured for Gwyn to move on his knees between the gap. Gwyn’s knees scraped on the carpet, his upper arms brushing the inside of Augus’ legs.

‘So you’re not anti-blowjob,’ Gwyn said and Augus smirked at him, and Gwyn’s shoulders twitched as Augus reached out and combed his fingers lightly through his hair. Augus’ fingernails rubbed against his scalp, dragged behind his ears, and Gwyn’s head bowed forwards automatically, his eyelids fluttering.

‘I could tie you up and just pet you,’ Augus said, almost sounding surprised. ‘Would you hate it? You couldn’t stop me then. I could pet you as much as I wanted.’

Gwyn rested his forehead gently between Augus’ legs, not crushing his cock, which was a little harder than before. The fingernails of both of Augus’ hands were scratching at the back of his neck, at his hairline.

‘I wouldn’t hate it,’ Gwyn said, surprised at how low his voice was.

‘You might,’ Augus said. ‘If that was all I did.’

Gwyn closed his eyes, thinking that the right thing to say was that it would be awful. Because it was obvious that Augus was teasing him. And maybe it was possible to have too much of it. Maybe he would get sick of it. Gwyn breathed in deeply, and then pushed closer when Augus smoothed his flat palms over Gwyn’s shoulders, stroking them.

‘What colour are you?’ Augus said.

Definitely jarring. Gwyn felt like he shouldn’t have to answer when he’d just pushed up into Augus’
‘It’s fine, Augus,’ Gwyn said.

‘You should still tell me.’

‘Green,’ Gwyn said, rolling his eyes. ‘So do I get started now?’

‘I just don’t want to hurt you again.’

Was this how it was with everyone else? When they did this? It took a lot of the fun out of it. Gwyn decided to take matters into his own hands, pressing his mouth against Augus’ cock. He heard Augus’ breathing change, felt the twitch of muscle against his lips, then worked his mouth to draw more saliva into it before opening and letting the head slide inside. He was gentle with the foreskin, instead enjoying the fact that he could press his lips to the base of Augus’ cock easily when he wasn’t fully hard, filling his mouth with the taste of him. The faintness of sweat, salt and soap, Augus must have showered before he came over.

Hands moved to the back of his neck, palms pressing and keeping him in place, and Gwyn felt that thrill of alarm and anticipation. Would Augus hold him down? Would he force him to stay in place? He sucked down a breath through his nose even as his mouth filled with saliva, pooling at the base of Augus’ cock and trapped in place by the suction of Gwyn’s mouth. When he pulled back and sucked, he swallowed at the same time, and Augus groaned softly.

He got hard quickly. Augus’ hands became pressure, keeping Gwyn in place, and Gwyn felt that trapped but still somehow good when his throat spasmed and he choked. He didn’t need to breathe, not yet, his throat just wasn’t used to it.

Augus’ hands left him immediately, he pushed Gwyn off his cock by the forehead and Gwyn looked up to see concerned eyes, Augus’ lips pressed together.

‘Colour?’ Augus said.

Fuck this.

Gwyn almost slammed his forehead into Augus’ knee but instead wedged his shoulder against Augus’ thigh and stood up.

‘This is fucking stupid,’ Gwyn said. ‘This is stupid. I hate it.’

‘What?’

‘What’s the point in you giving me safewords if you’re not even going to let me use them?’

‘You can’t speak when you’re giving me a blowjob!’ Augus said. ‘I should have given you some kind of signal or—’

‘You don’t get it,’ Gwyn said, feeling ridiculous standing there naked, half-hard, spit around his lips and his arms tied behind his back. ‘I liked everything you did, everything you fucking did except injuring me. Everything except that! And I warned you about that too! You just didn’t listen. But I don’t want to have the mood killed, not knowing when you’re going to ask me if I’m good to go when I’m good to go. I don’t want to— This is so— God. Just untie me and let’s… Whatever. If this is the way it’s meant to be done, I don’t want to do it.’

Augus stared at him, and Gwyn could see that he was afraid, upset, and Gwyn felt like he was
ruining all of it. Clearly he’d just wanted a fantasy, and the reality wasn’t going to work. He was putting too much of it on Augus. He was just bad at this. He turned around and presented his tied forearms as much to get out of this situation as it was to hide his face from Augus.

But it was frustrating, being jerked out of the mood like that. And he didn’t always *want* to seem like he was enjoying it. That was the *point*. But it wasn’t like he wanted to make Augus feel like a rapist either.

*You’re just too fucked up for this.*

Gwyn sighed, feeling deflated, even as Augus didn’t do anything. Gwyn wanted to apologise for his outburst, wanted to apologise for at least not giving Augus a blowjob, or just constantly saying green so he could give Augus what he wanted. Wasn’t that what he was supposed to do?

Augus cleared his throat, and Gwyn’s head hung, waiting for the inevitable let down and what would probably be a shitty rest of his day.

‘Tell me precisely what you don’t like,’ Augus said.

‘While I just stand here like this?’ Gwyn said sharply.

‘Yes.’

‘But—’

‘Tell me,’ Augus said, his voice lower than before. ‘If you can’t *tell* me, then we’re not going to do this at all. Ever.’

Gwyn looked over his shoulder, and there was something stern and…intriguing in Augus’ expression. Gwyn bit the inside of his lip and faced forward again.

‘Red and yellow are fine,’ Gwyn said. ‘But having to say green, it’s like you don’t trust I’m liking it when I’m liking it, like you’re second-guessing me all the time, and I don’t like…’ Gwyn wished he could cover his face with his hand even though Augus wasn’t looking at him, and his shoulders bunched in frustration. He didn’t like *talking* about it.

‘Tell me,’ Augus said.

‘It’s embarrassing.’

‘I’m sitting here with my cock out covered in spit, it’s *all* embarrassing, so just tell me?’

Augus didn’t sound as catty as normal, and Gwyn’s hands were clenching in the air because he really didn’t like having his arms tied behind his back for this part. He hadn’t realised how often he used his hands or arms to fidget away nervous energy. Now it was all just coiling uselessly inside of him.

‘I like you *making* me,’ Gwyn said roughly. ‘I like not always wanting it. I like you just…I mean the only thing I don’t like about that is—’

He cut off abruptly, hands clenching into sudden fists. He tensed when Augus stood, walked to him, placed his hands on Gwyn’s sides. A cheek rested on the side of his arm, hair cascading down over him in ticklish falls.

‘Tell me.’
‘No,’ Gwyn said.

‘Do you want me to make you tell me?’

Gwyn blinked, swallowing, hating that the words did something to him even when he really didn’t know if he wanted to talk about any of it.

‘How would you do that?’

Augus was silent for a long time, and then:

‘How do you feel about spanking?’

Gwyn pressed his lips together. He didn’t know. He shrugged. His father had done it a few times when he was younger, before he progressed to just outright hitting. Gwyn hadn’t liked it, but then, he was pretty sure Augus doing it would mean something different, feel different.

‘If you don’t say red or yellow,’ Augus said in a quiet voice, ‘how about I just do it anyway?’

‘Uh,’ Gwyn said.

‘Step backwards,’ Augus said, pulling on Gwyn’s torso. Gwyn’s arms tensed to brace himself even though he couldn’t balance with them, and he stared down at the ground to orient himself, stepping backwards in small steps until he bumped into the bed, between Augus’ legs. Augus scooted until his thighs were fully on the bed, and then shifted Gwyn until he could lay down over them, and Gwyn had no proper sense of balance and couldn’t brace himself and it wasn’t until his chest was on the bed itself – his shoulder over the edge of the mattress – that he thought maybe this was about to join the long list of the many stupid things he’d done.

But then Augus’ hand rested on one of Gwyn’s fists, moving him into a better position for the both of them, and Augus’ other arm rested on the back of his thigh.

‘So…’ Augus said, ‘tell me the other thing you don’t like.’

Gwyn turned his face away from Augus and then squirmed when he felt the hand on the back of his thigh begin to trail up towards his ass. He almost asked what porn scene Augus had seen this in, but couldn’t quite manage. He was in such a vulnerable position.

‘I’m crushing you,’ Gwyn said finally.

‘You’re not,’ Augus said. ‘A lot of the weight is on your chest and knees.’

‘But-’

‘I think actually how about a rule where you only say red, or yellow, or tell me the other thing you don’t like. And if you speak again otherwise, except to maybe say ow, or whatever, I’ll just ignore you.’

Fingers pinched up the soft, tender skin at the base of Gwyn’s ass, and Gwyn’s eyes went wide.

Were they really doing this? It seemed like Augus was really going to do this. Gwyn felt like if he just tipped sideways he’d fall onto the floor. He wouldn’t be able to brace himself with his arms. But Augus’ hand was still resting on one of his hands, like he’d stop that from happening.

Another pinch at the base of Gwyn’s ass, and then Augus’ palm was rubbing over the skin, over the small fuzz of hairs on the curves of Gwyn’s ass. It felt shocking, exposing, and vastly different from
anything he’d experienced before.

“You can answer my questions too, I guess,” Augus said. “You ever thought about this happening before?”

“Not…exactly,” Gwyn said, thinking that if they talked about this, maybe they wouldn’t talk about the other thing.

“What does that even mean? You rag on me for not talking about shit but you don’t either.”

“I told you about things at home.”

“Because I saw you,” Augus said slowly. “Because you weren’t returning any of my calls, or messages. Because you didn’t want me to know. You only told me about it because it was too late, because you knew I’d figured some of it out as soon as I saw you.”

All those things were true. And none of those things were a question. Augus’ hand went from smoothing over his skin to scratching over it, and Gwyn realised he kind of liked that, it was tingly and the skin was surprisingly sensitive given he sat on his ass all the time. The scratches turned into light taps, and Gwyn wanted to ask how many videos of this he’d watched before. How often he’d thought about it. If he thought that Gwyn couldn’t handle anything harder than the taps.

“You have goosebumps,” Augus said, and Gwyn thought that Augus’ habit of just observing random shit was not only not annoying, but kind of embarrassing right now. And not for Augus.

The taps got harder, and Gwyn was surprised that even when they sounded quite sharp and loud and like they should hurt, they didn’t really hurt. He started to relax, thinking that it was strange, but not bad.

Augus’ first real spank against his skin still didn’t hurt a ton. It was like a sharp flash that vanished almost immediately, and Augus was tracing it with his fingers.

“It’s gone so red,” Augus said.

Gwyn could scratch his own skin lightly with a fingernail and it would go red. He just had that kind of skin.

“Does it hurt?” Augus said.

“No,” Gwyn said.

“So you’re not going to tell me about that other thing you don’t like, that I do?”

“Don’t think so.”

Augus slapped him again over the same spot, the sound loud in the room. Another flash, but not really much pain. It felt warm though. He kind of liked it.

It wasn’t until the sixth blow over the same spot that the warmth became a constant heat, and he felt a kind of itchiness in his skin. The flashes of sensation that didn’t feel exactly like pain were starting to become discomfort. He wiggled his hips a little, and Augus brought his hand down harder. Gwyn grunted.

He frowned, breathing through it, liking the heat of it anyway. And when he wiggled his hips again, his cock rubbed against the inside of Augus’ thigh. Gwyn inhaled sharply through his nose.
The discomfort built as Augus kept spanking him, crossed a line into pain, and Gwyn shifted automatically to try and get Augus’ hand to land on a different part of his ass so it could start at the beginning, where it didn’t hurt so much. Augus’ hand kept landing in the exact same spot, at the base of his ass, just under one cheek.

‘Pick a different spot,’ Gwyn muttered.

The next blow was hard, a catch of raw pain that had him holding his breath, his eyes widening.

‘Goddamn. My fucking hand,’ Augus laughed, and then did it again.

‘Ow!’ Gwyn said, indignant.

‘Good. That’s the point, Gwyn. You should see how red this spot is. It’s amazing.’

Augus kept spanking him, and instead of it only being a hot sensation, or an itchy sensation, it now hurt between each blow, and hurt more sharply each time Augus’ hand connected, Gwyn’s ass tensing in anticipation, and that only making things worse. His tied up forearms struggled, his fingers splayed like he could cover his own ass, which he couldn’t. Augus’ hand tightened on his arm, holding him in place, and Gwyn squirmed harder and felt confused and alarmed that his cock was still sending lances of arousal through him.

Gwyn’s breathing got rougher, Augus’ blows were intensifying, and Gwyn uselessly said ‘okay’ and ‘ow’ like that would make Augus pay attention to him, and instead Augus just kept going.

Gwyn had lost count of how long Augus had been spanking him for, when Augus abruptly stopped. Gwyn could feel the uneven soreness making one side of his back tenser than the other. He panted for air.

‘Fuck,’ Augus said. ‘No one tells you how hard that is.’

I feel so sorry for you, Gwyn thought snarkily, but didn’t dare say it, because he didn’t want Augus to spank him again. It hurt, and Gwyn wanted the part where he just jacked off or rubbed against Augus’ leg and got to come.

He didn’t expect Augus to reach for the olive oil. Didn’t expect Augus drizzling the oil directly between his ass-cheeks before carefully placing the bottle onto the bed.

‘Don’t chew my head off or anything,’ Augus said, trailing his fingers over the oil that oozed down Gwyn’s skin, ‘but do you need to say yellow or red? Because you know what the oil is for, don’t you? I’m going to give my hand a break, and maybe just give my fingers something to do instead. Or you could just say nothing, and I’m going to take that as a sign that you want me to keep messing you up.’

Gwyn said nothing, his heart beating a confusing tattoo in his chest.

Augus’ fingers slid between his ass cheeks, pushing the oil against him until he could stroke it over his hole.

‘Are you scarred?’ Augus said.

After a pause, Gwyn nodded. Not badly.

‘Have you fingered yourself since it happened?’
Gwyn’s shoulders shifted, and then he just shrugged.

‘I had to use like a cream,’ Gwyn said, his voice breaking as Augus’ index and middle finger traced over his entrance. Augus’ fingers withdrew a bit, gathered more oil, pushed it down and rubbed it into him. ‘So sort of. It’s um, fine. Healed well.’

What if Augus backed off? What if this was the point where he couldn’t keep going, and he decided-

Augus’ index finger pushed a little, and then slid deeply into him. Gwyn’s fingers curled, his body letting him know that he was definitely turned on despite the pain from the spanking, the discomfort of Augus’ finger feeling around in a way that felt more clinical than arousing. He could feel Augus pushing all around, as though looking for the scar.

He found it close to Gwyn’s entrance, which was really the only place Gwyn could feel it too. But only when he reached behind himself with a finger while showering, not at any other time.

‘Here,’ Augus said, rubbing it. ‘Does it hurt?’

Gwyn shook his head. It felt strange. But not sore. Augus rubbing the nervy, sensitive skin just on the inside of his hole had Gwyn’s legs spreading a little wider automatically. He could feel Augus’ cock hard against his hip.

Augus played with him, played with his ass, there was no other word for the idle way Augus moved his finger around. Sometimes he thrust back and forth, sometimes he ground his finger in, pushing Gwyn’s ass so hard that Gwyn felt like he was going to be shoved further up the bed. Sometimes he circled the rim of Gwyn’s hole or tested the scar tissue or went back to sliding his finger between Gwyn’s ass cheeks. A few times he deliberately glanced across Gwyn’s prostate, and each time Gwyn tried to helpfully lift his hips, and Augus would ignore him, and do something else.

The pain where Augus spanked him settled into a faint stinging, the deep ache of a bruise.

Augus pressed in with two fingers, and Gwyn felt squeezed tight. It wasn’t just that tender skin had to stretch for Augus, it was also the pressure around his forearms, it was the awkward position. He wasn’t thinking about the faint noises he was making - not as much anyway - and it wasn’t like Augus seemed to mind.

What started as casual fingering became Augus driving his fingers into Gwyn with force, thrusting in and down, Gwyn crying out and jerking half up and half away because it was intense. He wanted to come so badly. Didn’t know if Augus was going to fuck him, or finger him into it, or what, but the background hum of sore skin made everything far more intense.

At least Gwyn didn’t have to say ‘green’ anymore. He didn’t want to speak.

That concerted thrusting eased off again and Gwyn groaned in a mixture of gratitude and loss. Augus’ fingers twisted lazily, they fluttered inside of him, they spread at his entrance, and it kept him hard and lulled at the same time.

Until Augus withdrew his fingers and began spanking Gwyn again, harder than before, directly over the same spot.

And it fucking hurt.

Gwyn struggled then, yelping, and Augus’ other hand gripped vicelike on his forearm, keeping him in place.
‘It’s meant to hurt, Gwyn,’ Augus said calmly.

‘Not this much!’ Gwyn managed, and then tried twisting his body into Augus, which just resulted in Augus slapping the side of his hip, catching the edge of the bruising with the heel of his hand.

‘Definitely this much,’ Augus said, laughing. ‘I mean if you’re not going to say red or yellow I’m just going to have to conclude that you’re fine with it.’

Gwyn growled into the blanket because now he wanted to say it just to be spiteful, and him not saying it meant some level of complicity that he didn’t even want to look at. Fuck Augus for putting that in his head.

His voice broke into a higher register, he tried to bite down the noises but couldn’t, and it felt like Augus was going to break through his skin. Everything felt swollen and red and bright, and even though it was just some stupid small part of his body, he couldn’t think about anything else. The slapping sounds weren’t even that loud sometimes, they just hurt.

Augus only stopped to shove his fingers back into Gwyn’s ass, and Gwyn made a choked sound and stiffened, then fell limp. Realised his cock was still hard, realised he wanted to come so much. The pain throbbed hard, he breathed heavily.

‘You like it,’ Augus said, sounding smug. His thighs shifted beneath Gwyn’s pelvis. ‘I can feel how much you like it. You really are such a fucking masochist.’

Gwyn moaned miserably, because okay, maybe, but it still hurt.

‘Shhh,’ Augus said, dragging his fingers over Gwyn’s prostate. ‘You feel like talking?’

‘No.’

‘Tough. You know, I get now why so many people use paddles and canes and stuff. My hand is killing me.’

‘Oh, poor you!’ Gwyn said, outraged, and didn’t like that Augus just laughed in response. ‘I hope it falls off.’

‘But then I couldn’t do this,’ Augus said, thrusting his fingers back and forth, rubbing them over Gwyn’s prostate. ‘Also, shit, it’s like edging myself. I want to come so much. You’re amazing.’

That was somewhat better, and Gwyn felt mollified as his shoulders relaxed back into the bed. At least Augus sounded like he meant it.

‘Do you want to come?’ Augus said.

‘Yeah,’ Gwyn murmured. ‘A lot. Like now?’

‘Nice try. I’ll let you come if you tell me what you were going to say before you cut yourself off. About that thing you don’t like that I do. I want to know. So tell me?’

‘It’s a mood-killer,’ Gwyn said. ‘And you’ll get mad.’

‘Promise I won’t,’ Augus said, sounding serious. ‘I think it’s impossible for me to be mad at you when you’re like this. Turns out having you at my mercy is very relaxing. This is the best I’ve felt in ages.’

Gwyn didn’t want to say he agreed, because that was just betraying himself. It wasn’t like the
bruising in his ass felt like the best thing ever.

‘I won’t get mad,’ Augus said again, his voice softer than before.

‘Yeah but maybe I’m mad because you keep spanking me,’ Gwyn said. ‘So screw you.’

Augus’ close-mouthed chuckle was downright alarming. Even moreso when Augus slid his fingers free from Gwyn’s ass and patted him in what was clearly a condescending gesture.

‘Do you not get how this works?’ Augus said. ‘I give you incentive to talk, and then you talk. That’s your only option here, if you’re not going to safeword out of it. Are you going to tell me what I want to hear? It’s not like you’d ever tell me otherwise. I don’t know why you think you talk to me about shit, because you kind of don’t.’

Oil-covered fingers poking at redness, soreness, and Gwyn pressed his lips together.

‘But your hand’s sore,’ Gwyn said, trying to appeal to Augus’ own sense of self-preservation.

‘It definitely is,’ Augus said, his voice low. ‘But trust me, it’s so worth it.’

Gwyn knew from the thickness of Augus’ voice that he was going to start again. Gwyn tensed without meaning to, bracing himself for Augus’ open palm, and then still cried out, mouth stretching open, because whatever had built before seemed to have reached the point where it was just going to be awful from here on in. He gasped, his hips jerked forwards and down to get away, and his cock brushed down Augus’ skin and he moaned helplessly, overloaded. How could something be good and terrible?

Another blow, another, and Gwyn whined in the back of his throat. Between the next few concerted smacks from Augus, he almost said either safeword. But there was a part of him that wanted to be driven beyond himself, driven beyond his decision to not tell Augus something humiliating and embarrassing, wanted Augus to contain it. He didn’t understand it, and it wasn’t fair on Augus, and it would probably end badly for both of them, but Gwyn hung on, because he could never give into his own stubbornness.

But maybe, maybe, he could give into someone else’s.

Somewhere between Augus dragging his nails over that reddened skin, and then digging his knuckles into it, and then continuing on with the spanking, Gwyn hit a point where he was yanking hard at the ties on his forearms, teeth gritted together. After that, his fingers splaying as though he could make Augus stop or grab his wrist or scratch at Augus’ leg, he realised that he’d rather talk about it.

‘Okay!’ Gwyn shouted. ‘Okay, okay. Fuck.’

‘Okay,’ Augus said, also sounding out of breath. He rested his fingers above the mass of heat on Gwyn’s ass cheek, trailing his fingers in a way that would have been gentle if the skin hadn’t been so sensitised that even where he wasn’t bruised and red, it still felt like electricity. ‘So tell me.’

‘Fuck,’ Gwyn breathed, catching his breath first. He was grateful that Augus gave him the time. Augus’ other hand rubbing his lower back, where he was clammy. His shoulders hurt. He felt like if he turned and looked at where Augus had been spanking him, the skin would just be black. All the way down.

‘Come on,’ Augus coaxed.
‘It’s nothing,’ Gwyn said, turning his face the side that let him see Augus’ body in his peripheral vision. ‘We haven’t even done anything since then and it was only casual then so it’s like, whatever, I just didn’t like that after we did anything, you just fucked off. But that’s just…whatever.’

Augus fingers kept moving idly for some time. Gwyn thought he’d feel anxious waiting for Augus to reply, but he was still trying to pull himself together. He’d started tearing up towards the end, unaware that he was doing it until Augus stopped. His eyes itched. His cock was a dark ache between his legs, a promise that the blare of throbbing pain in his ass would be worth it. God, he wanted to come so much.

‘Yeah,’ Augus said after a while, sighing. ‘That was shitty of me. I remember. I was too high on like…just being able to lord it over someone I guess. It won’t happen again.’

Gwyn’s forehead furrowed. He’d not expected that at all. He made a questioning sound, because he couldn’t be sure he’d heard right and not just hallucinated the whole thing.

‘Do you know what sorts of things you’d like? After?’ Augus said.

‘I want to come,’ Gwyn said.

‘Not now,’ Augus said, sounding amused. ‘After.’

‘Ask me after I’ve come.’

Augus’ fingers poked into the section he’d been spanking, and Gwyn made a fractious sound, even as he knew exactly why Augus was doing it.

‘You’re rude,’ Augus said. ‘But I like it. Can’t train that out of you. I have a suggestion.’

‘Shoot,’ Gwyn said, his voice scratchy from crying out, from tiredness. God he hoped Mikkel wouldn’t visit today. Hoped his phone wasn’t about to start ringing. But all he heard was Augus’ fingers moving over his skin again, his palms rubbing.

‘I think I’m going to untie your arms, and then you’re going to suck me. We should really prove once and for all that I’m not anti-blowjob. And then after, I’ll think about letting you come.’

‘Mmkay,’ Gwyn said, distantly annoyed that he wouldn’t get to come now, and his mouth feeling hot and ready. He was so tired. He imagined himself just pressing his forehead to Augus’ pelvis and falling asleep with his cock in his mouth. It didn’t even seem like a bad thing, except Gwyn would probably choke to death.

Augus untied him, muttering something at one of the knots that didn’t release quickly. But then the rope was shifted away, the shirt was untied, and Augus carefully manipulated Gwyn’s arms into a more comfortable position like he wanted Gwyn to be careful with them.

His shoulders ached surprisingly little once they’d been freed. Maybe he just hadn’t been tied up long enough for it to be a problem. But it was also strange to be able to move his hands freely, like being able to move them in front of him was a privilege instead of something he could just take for granted.

His slide down to the thin, worn carpet was clumsy, even with Augus helping. His knees landed hard and he grunted, then jerked up when the underside of his ass touched his heel, because ow.

So he couldn’t rest his ass on his heels, not properly anyway, and that made everything harder. His shoulders pressed between Augus’ thighs, spreading them, and he mouthed over Augus’ cock
clumsily, tiredly, his lips sore from biting them.

Gwyn moaned weakly when fingers slid into his hair, gathering it up, stroking it, pushing down.

‘If you need me to stop,’ Augus said, ‘just pull back hard or something.’

Gwyn didn’t care about any of that. He cared about how overwhelmingly good it was to have the head of Augus’ cock wedging into the back of his throat. The gagging hurt his chest, his throat going into spasm was a rude shock, but his hips jerked forwards anyway. It still felt like what he imagined being fucked felt like. It was too much, good at flattening his thoughts, riding the line between unpleasant, uncomfortable, and the pleasure that came from knowing he was ruining Augus.

Because he was. Augus was so hard in his mouth, his fingers hungry and demanding in his hair, his moans low and urgent. Gwyn thought that it was amazing thatspanking someone –spanking him– could turn Augus on, and it was worth all the aching scrapes at the back of his throat. Especially when he knew it wouldn’t last.

Augus came quickly, after less than five minutes of Gwyn’s wet mouth on him, the suction inconsistent but eager. Gwyn swallowed salt and bitterness and heard his own hungry sound never making it past his lips and Augus’ cock. He wanted to come so much. He dropped one of his hands from where he’d been clutching at Augus’ calf, to his own cock, and then forced himself to hold back. A shred of self-control telling him that maybe it would be better if Augus jerked him off.

Augus leaned over him heavily for a couple of minutes after, his fingers hard in Gwyn’s hair, even as Gwyn ducked his head to let Augus’ softening cock slip out of his mouth. He caught his breath, shattered and wanting to sleep, wanting to come.

‘Augus,’ he said, hoping that he could convey everything in that one word.

‘In a minute,’ Augus breathed. ‘Jesus. Okay. Okay, come up, come up. Get back on the bed.’

Gwyn pulled himself up, one hand on Augus’ knee, the other on the bed. Augus scooted backwards, making room, and Gwyn fell onto his side and realised that in order to face Augus, he had to lie on the side of his ass that Augus had spanked.

‘Spanking sucks,’ Gwyn swore fervently.

‘Oh yeah,’ Augus said, pushing Gwyn firmly onto his back and straddling his thighs, getting two hands on his cock – one half-tacky and half-slick with olive oil. ‘Sucks so much, you being hard for like twenty minutes. You have all my sympathy.’

Augus’ hands worked him roughly. Fingers of one hand twisting over the head of his cock, his other hand jacking him hard, and Gwyn’s back arched and it pushed his ass into the bed and just as Gwyn thought he couldn’t take this position at all - pain screaming at him - his lower back clenched hard, his balls drew up, heat pooling and flooding and flashing through him.

The back of his head pressed down hard, hair brushing up against pillows and his mind went blank as he came. The pain in his ass made everything sharper, better, and his orgasm seemed to last forever, the hard pulses stronger, more of them to deal with and aftershocks beyond that which had Gwyn shuddering and then trembling, feeling strangely shaken.

‘Fuck,’ Augus breathed. ‘Well. Two things. I’m definitely a Dom. Baby Dom. Some shit like that. And you are just…like a wet goddamn dream.’

Hands smoothed up his flanks, over his arms, and then thumbs rested on his cheeks and Gwyn kept
his eyes closed. His breathing wasn’t calm at all. He was so tired, didn’t understand why he was shivering like he was cold.

Augus reached for something, and then the old shirt that had been around Gwyn’s forearms was used to mop up the come on his belly and pelvis. Augus gently coaxed him onto his stomach.

‘Come on,’ Augus said, his voice softer, calmer, less biting. ‘It’s going to hurt more now that you’re not turned on anymore.’

Gwyn wasn’t really aware of it, except as a kind of full-body haze that he could tune out. He felt like his orgasm had thrown him so far outside of himself that he didn’t know how to come back.

Augus got off the bed, and Gwyn’s arms pulled into his sides. He dragged pillows down to his head and realised he was cold.

He wasn’t sure how much time had passed when Augus came back with a couple of extra blankets.

‘Found these in the kid’s room, in their closet,’ Augus said, placing them over Gwyn and trying to make sure they wrinkled in a way that stopped them from pressing too hard over Gwyn’s ass. It was just that one spot. It wasn’t even both cheeks. It was a mean technique.

‘Is the bruising bad?’ Gwyn said, suddenly worried, his voice smaller than normal.

‘You’re hardly bruised at the moment,’ Augus said, getting onto the bed beside him and lying on his side, facing Gwyn, sneaking a hand beneath the blankets and running it up and down Gwyn’s back. ‘It’s just super red, with a few dark spots.’

‘What?’ Gwyn said, shocked.

‘It’s going to bruise,’ Augus said.

‘It just seemed like a lot more,’ Gwyn said, feeling fuzzy.

‘I hope this isn’t some shit where you talk about how it wasn’t anything because my hand is killing me. You can take a lot, it turns out. That or we’re both wimps. You sound so tired, just…lie down for a bit.’ Augus pressed his forehead to Gwyn’s shoulder. ‘Saying ‘good boy’ sounds stupid, but you did really well.’

Gwyn nodded, deciding the fact that he wasn’t super bruised yet wasn’t worth getting upset over. It was weird, Augus saying nice things, but it felt good too. Gwyn’s whole body was lax on top of the bed, his heart still pounding.

‘So we actually did that,’ Augus said, and Gwyn didn’t think he was supposed to reply. ‘And you obviously hate being asked what colour you are.’

‘Just trust me instead,’ Gwyn said, his voice low and sleepy. ‘Or find another way.’

‘I did,’ Augus said, after a pause. ‘I think just reminding you that you have safewords in the first place, or giving you options and letting you pick one, works better for us? You don’t think that it’s bad that I…ah, like hurting you so much?’

Gwyn shook his head, the shuddering turning into more pleasant shivers as Augus kept rubbing his back.

‘Really?’ Augus said. ‘It doesn’t remind you of your Dad?’
‘God, no,’ Gwyn said, feeling disgusted at the thought.

Augus said nothing for some time. Gwyn’s body temperature was settling somewhere below freezing, breathing more deeply than he could remember breathing before, as though all the gasping and strain of before had hollowed out a new space in his lungs. Even fucking Augus hadn’t given him that.

Gwyn was half-asleep when Augus spoke again.

‘Are we dating?’ Augus said. ‘Without the actual dates?’

‘You…don’t want that,’ Gwyn reminded him.

‘I don’t know how to do it. But if you wanted to fuck it up with me…’

Gwyn inhaled slowly through his nose and forced his tired eyes open. Augus’ fingers were curled over the back of his neck, just resting there like they belonged.

‘Does hurting me make you sappy?’ Gwyn said, smiling a little.

‘Maybe it does, fucker.’

Gwyn snorted, laughed weakly, deeply, and Augus hummed like he was pleased and pressed the bony bridge of his nose against the side of Gwyn’s head.

‘Whatever,’ Gwyn said. ‘You can be my boyfriend.’

‘Thanks.’

‘My super fucked up boyfriend.’

‘Thanks.’

Augus went on to say something about the hypocrisy of Gwyn being the one to call him ‘super fucked up,’ but Gwyn let go of the tether he’d been holding onto. Augus seemed okay. Gwyn felt okay – if sore – and all the energy he’d had before had vanished behind a heavy, welcome lassitude. He fell asleep with Augus’ fingers trailing along his hairline, half-ticklish, half-sensual, and a kind of softness he’d distantly dreamed of, a long time ago.
Never Be Alone

Chapter Notes

We're back! WE'RE BACK! Is it possible that I might be more excited about this than all of y'all who have probably forgotten this AU existed? It's possible! Also I have like three chapters but I can only write one chapter a month atm (if I'm lucky) due to like, other tasks/projects, I thought about updating like, monthly, but I think I might update every fortnight (once every two weeks) until the content is done, and then write more when I can, which I know! So annoying. But apparently I am not four different authors and can't write Eversion, TIP, Little Star AND this and possibly other things as fast as I'd like? *shakes fist at the PTB*

Notes: (Very mild) Sexual assault in this chapter, and not the fun 'dubious consent' kind between Augus and Gwyn. *coughs*

Augus

*

On Monday, Augus spent a lot of time half-hard, trying to focus on his schoolwork while mostly daydreaming about what Gwyn’s voice sounded like when it broke, how he writhed over Augus’ lap, and the visceral power of being able to hurt someone and watch as they made themselves take it. He’d never experienced a power trip like it. Even when he’d pushed Gwyn down to his knees at school, it had never been like that. Augus’ mouth sometimes watered when he thought about it.

He flashed on images of grabbing Gwyn’s wrists, dragging him down the bed by his ankles, tying him up, tying him down, a cavalcade of bright, rich imagery fed by an intense diet of pornography and the knowledge that he could now do it. Not like some porn king, not in some insipid way. He could really do it. He hadn’t put Gwyn in the hospital. Far from it, he’d left Gwyn lax in the bed and even smiling, while Augus had gone downstairs to look over Gwyn’s paperwork and help him with it, still shocked that it had worked out.

It was a revelation. He was never going to go back to what society thought regular fucking was. Never. And that made him feel broken, too, and he hated it. Because it wasn’t supposed to be like that, was it? He wasn’t supposed to know this about himself as a teenager. He wasn’t supposed to sail straight past vanilla or the missionary position or non-bondage sex, he was supposed to want that too.

He didn’t.

It was hard to avoid the conclusion that he only wanted it to be like this because of his fucked up childhood. And Gwyn only wanted it like this because of Gwyn’s fucked up childhood. Augus hated the slinking, oozing feeling inside of him when he contemplated it. How could something so raw and so, so good, be some kind of sick byproduct of his past?

He wanted to look it up, but he no longer had a laptop at home, and he was in class anyway. He couldn’t just Google: ‘Is it wrong to like BDSM?’
He didn’t want to learn that he was wrong for liking it. Not when he knew that he wouldn’t give it up anyway.

His hand hurt though. He found himself massaging the bones in his wrist, the ligaments across the back of his hand, and he’d smile, distracted, as the teacher kept talking.

But also, he was going to find a paddle, or something else. Maybe a spatula, they weren’t too expensive.

*

Slowly, he began to feel like he was getting on top of the mountain of schoolwork – his own and other people’s – that he’d fallen behind on. But it thinned him out, and he felt like he couldn’t keep it up, and that was its own fear that was huge inside of him. What was he going to do? He still didn’t have a job. He had to work on his resume at lunch. He was stuck with Ash on campus, and they were already pissing each other off. They just needed...space.

It was up to Augus to find it. He printed out copies of his resume – laughing bitterly because he had no real references, despite all his experience. They’d shafted him. Even though he should never have expected anything less, even though he was trying to become like them, he’d still been shocked by it.

‘Incompetent,’ he muttered at himself, the word cutting.

Still, he looked at all the copies he’d printed and then moved over to the stapler by the photocopier. Upon realising it had no staples, he threw it at the wall violently, and then glared at the next student who had already walked in, stalking past them and wishing it was the weekend once more.

*

Gwyn sat next to him at lunch, their thighs touching, and Augus felt like he wasn’t able to concentrate on anything at all. Except that Gwyn wasn’t eating, and Augus’ lust banked behind a wall of sudden heavy sadness.

*Reality. Right. Remember that?

‘Principal Albion hasn’t said anything to me yet,’ Gwyn was saying to Ash. ‘I don’t know why. But he must know what’s happening by now. And I have an MRI this week. I’ve never had one before.’

‘Isn’t that radioactive?’ Ash said, alarmed. ‘Are you gonna like, become the Hulk or something?’

‘That’s contrast scans,’ Kayla said quietly, not looking up from her homework. Her laptop was closed, she was working on paper, the fountain pen in her hand a gift from Gulvi. ‘CT scans and PET scans.’

‘Oh,’ Ash said. ‘Well that’s less cool. Wait, so which ones are MRIs?’

‘The murder tube in House,’ Kayla said, writing something down. After a moment she looked up and seemed to realise what she’d said. She frowned at Gwyn while tucking a length of brown hair behind her ear. ‘It’s fine. It’s not a murder tube in real life. I hear they’re noisy. I’ve never had one before.’

That resulted in everyone looking up MRIs and what they sounded like on their phones, and then Ash played a video at maximum volume, while Gwyn stared in mild alarm.
‘They say it’s really loud,’ Kayla said, browsing Wikipedia. ‘They give you noise protection. It’s louder than like, rock concerts.’

‘It’s like the world’s worst dubstep,’ Ash said, bopping along to something that sounded like an angry car alarm with a broken voice. ‘So you’re going to a bad dubstep concert in a murder tube.’

‘Uh,’ Gwyn said.

‘And they cost thousands of dollars,’ Kayla said. ‘So obviously you’re not paying for it, because you’re poor now? Are you poor now? I know that’s insensitive, but basically do you need us to buy you lunch sometimes?’

‘Mm, good point, darling,’ Gulvi said, kissing the side of Kayla’s face. ‘Do you need-?’

‘I’m fine,’ Gwyn said firmly. ‘Mikkel is helping with that side of things. And I’m going to get a job.’

Gulvi’s eyes widened, and Gwyn just nodded like he knew that was what he was going to do, and then he stared down at his phone. But he wasn’t reading, Augus could see that he was just staring at apps. Absently, he shifted so he could touch his fingers to Gwyn’s upper thigh.

Gwyn looked sharply at him, and then took a shallow breath and seemed to relax. Augus hadn’t asked him about the MRI, and thought maybe he should have. He looked stressed. And they were… dating now.

Augus didn’t really know what that meant, they hadn’t talked about the details. He bit his lower lip and lifted his hand above the table and went back to his own homework, writing on his phone and hating autocorrect with a passion, but unwilling to turn it off.

‘What kind of job?’ Gulvi said.

‘I don’t know,’ Gwyn said finally. ‘I’m going to look. I don’t really…’

‘I’ll help,’ Ash said. ‘As long as you don’t want anything too fancy, I’m looking too so, I can definitely help.’

Augus’ thumbs froze above the small touch keyboard on his phone. Ash looking for a job. Almost certainly because Augus had failed at looking after them both. He couldn’t look up, couldn’t meet Ash’s eyes. They hadn’t even talked about it. Ash listened to music through his headphones, Augus didn’t know how to speak to him without getting angry about things that weren’t Ash’s fault, and taking it out on him because he was there.

Ash had been through enough, and Augus’ anger was on a hair trigger at the best of times.

‘Thank you,’ Gwyn said. ‘That would be great.’

‘I can ask my Dad,’ Kayla said. ‘It’s a bad time of year for casual jobs though. He runs a store. You know, one of those sports superstores. And you know things about sports.’

‘Only wrestling,’ Gwyn said.

‘Yeah, still, I can ask my Dad. I’ll message him now. It’ll be good. It’ll distract him from how mad he is at his parents.’

‘Shit,’ Ash said. ‘Still about that whole thing with you and job shit?’

‘I suppose it was too much to expect they’d be okay with me being trans and not wanting to go into
like pharmacy or law or engineering. They can get me cards that say granddaughter, but as soon as I say I want to go into fashion or the arts, it’s suddenly like…” Kayla rolled her eyes and sighed. Gulvi slung an arm over her shoulder and said nothing, but her expression was protective, eyebrows knitted together.

‘At the rate it’s going,’ Kayla continued, ‘they’re going to give me the hardest time at the Moon Festival family thing.’

‘I can bring mooncakes,’ Gulvi said, ‘and distract them. Because they never expect me to bring them even though I always do.’

‘Yeah, five minutes of distraction before they remember I’m their big gay failure of a granddaughter,’ Kayla said, putting her head in her hands.

‘Your Dad will kick their asses!’ Gulvi said, lifting her hand and clenching her fist. ‘Seriously though, darling, just give them time. My grandparents won’t even speak to me, and yours still love you. I know it’s not much of a consolation.’

‘It’s not,’ Kayla said laughing. ‘But thanks for trying. I mean you failed, but still.’

They bumped shoulders, and then kept bumping shoulders until Augus faked retching. And then they kissed.

‘I hate you both,’ Augus muttered.

‘Just because you’re allergic to romance,’ Gulvi said, ‘and love.’

‘And happiness,’ Ash added, ‘and joy.’

Augus had been willing to go along with the joke, but something about the way they were laughing, Gwyn sitting silently next to him – did he agree? – made the anger from before flare sharp and hot inside of him.

He shoved out of the seat, furious, grabbing his paperwork and his phone, ignoring the alarmed look Gwyn gave him. Hating that they all stared at him like it was a shock that he didn’t find it hilarious that they thought he couldn’t feel things like that.

‘Fuck all of you,’ he said. ‘Some of us are dealing with bigger shit than fucking family squabbles.’

He stormed off, ignoring Gwyn calling after him, hearing no footsteps coming after him. No one was following.

He hated himself. It wasn’t even fair. Gwyn was going through the most out of all of them. He turned a corner, turned another, trying to get back to his dorm room so he didn’t have to deal with them. He could hear the shakiness of his breathing as he walked down a deserted corridor, and realised how close he was to a panic attack, alarmed and pressing the heel of his hand into the divot between his collarbones.

He had one step on the stairs when he felt fingers grab the collar of his shirt and yank him backwards.

Arms pinwheeling to get his balance, he still ended up falling flat on his ass, crying out as his lower back hit the veranda with force. He stared up in outrage, expecting to see Ash, or even Gwyn, and then his mouth slammed shut.
Efnisien.

‘Hey, bitch,’ Efnisien said, quickly crouching beside him, eyes gleaming happily when Augus flinched backwards. ‘Hear you’re ruining our fucking family.’

‘Your family ruined itself,’ Augus spat, placing a hand on the ground and pushing himself up.

He half-expected the knee to his gut when it came, Efnisien shooting upwards with startling speed. But the knuckles to his kidney sent a blast of pain through him and Augus fell to his knees. His palms landed hard on concrete.

‘Stay down,’ Efnisien said, and then Augus’ eyes widened when he heard the sound of someone spitting, felt it in his hair. ‘You are fucking scum, you know that? You are a fucking piece of shit, and we all know it.’

Augus’ heart was pounding so hard he couldn’t breathe when he felt the fingers in his hair, dragging him upwards. Efnisien shoved him into a brick wall, Augus’ eyes rolling side to side, but no one was in the corridor. He considered shouting for help, but the thought was suffocated before it started.

What would it do to Gwyn’s case? Would it help it or hurt it? Augus needed time to think, but Efnisien was leaning in closer, and Augus felt panic turn his reflexes into a white flash.

His head snapped forward, he would have head-butted Efnisien, except that Efnisien’s reflexes were sharp too.

‘Ruin our family,’ Efnisien said, shoving Augus’ head back into brick. ‘Fuck you. What do you have that’s so good, huh? What’s so good about you? What is the sex that great?’

Augus’ eyes flew open when he felt a hand casually move between his legs, grabbing him roughly, his mouth dropping. He went limp, and then his arms lashed out and came up, and he clawed at Efnisien’s face, a snarl behind his closed mouth.

‘Calm down, calm down,’ Efnisien said, laughing, dodging the attacks or letting them fall, apparently impervious to the pain. He removed his hand though, but Augus could still feel the fingers, the imprint of his palm. He felt ill. His vision was swimming. He looked sideways and saw no one.

‘Why aren’t you calling out for help?’ Efnisien said, leaning in and smiling against Augus’ cheek. ‘Is it because you know you’re trash? Because you like it? Or because you know you’re messing with shit you shouldn’t have touched in the first place? See, I thought at first, that he was breaking my family up, but it’s you, isn’t it? The lawyer says that’s what you do. You break up families, Augus. You’re a fucking homewrecker. What, you steal Ash from one family and you’re gonna steal Gwyn from ours?’

‘You know he’s being abused,’ Augus said, and then flinched when Efnisien pressed his teeth to the side of Augus’ forehead. His breath smelled like pizza.

‘He belongs to us,’ Efnisien said. ‘He’s ours. And I swear to god, if you don’t find a way to get him to drop all of this, I will look at the long, long list of all the ways I want to fuck you up, and do the ones that seem the most fun. Pencils in your ass, shoving a ruler down your throat until it snaps, whatever I feel like. You don’t want to know,’ Efnisien said, his breathing hard and heavy, and he ground in closely and Augus choked when he felt how turned on Efnisien was.

Maybe you’re like him. Don’t you like hurting people too? Doesn’t it turn you on?

‘You don’t want to know,’ Efnisien purred, that beautiful, educated voice turning to poison. ‘But, I
want you to know. Don’t tempt me, for your own fucking sake.’

Efnisien shoved himself backwards abruptly, glaring at him, his face twisted up like he was turned on, in pain, angry, some mess of emotions that Augus couldn’t read. He stayed pressed back against the wall, aware that he was sore, wanting to rub away the touch between his legs.

‘Fix it,’ Efnisien said, staring at him, and then looking over his shoulder when a first year student walked towards them from one of the busier quadrangles. ‘Fucking fix it, or I’m going to make sure everything that you thought was bad about your life looks like sparkles and rainbows once I’m through with you.’

Efnisien’s head tossed, golden hair flashing, and then he turned and walked back to the main quad, like nothing had happened.

Augus stared after him, trembling, and then sagged down until his ass met the bench. The first year student walked past him, and Augus lifted his hand and felt Efnisien’s spit on his cheek and forehead and realised it was still in his hair, and he felt burning in his eyes, and dug his fingernails into his forearm until it stopped.

*It’s fine. Just think. Use your brain and think. Don’t lose your shit. You’ve been through shit like this before. You’ve got this.*

After a few more minutes he stood and continued to walk to his dorm, shaken, unwilling to message Gwyn about it.

Because what if it ruined the case somehow? What if his connection to Gwyn was…something his family wanted to exploit? What if Gwyn hurt Efnisien, got revenge somehow, and Gwyn’s family used it to harm him? Harm the case?

And worse, what if Gwyn knew, and he didn’t do anything?

Augus’ breath trembled as he walked up the stairs.

He couldn’t tell Ash either.

You can’t tell anyone.

He looked behind his shoulder as he continued to walk up the stairs, and then wrapped an arm around his waist and focused on breathing, and told himself that this was still better than the past, because he’d left that behind.

He’d left it all behind.

*It was stupid to be too scared to go to the communal shower. It was fucking stupid. Augus stood with a tissue in one hand, trying to get the saliva out, and he was still shaking and he was mad as hell. After a few minutes of not being able to stop his physical reaction with sheer willpower, he kicked Ash’s bed so hard that his foot blazed with pain and he swore.

‘Motherfucker!’

He listened to himself gasping, trying to hold back the pain, and then he burst out laughing, the sound tinged with hysteria. He threw the tissue into the bin and stared at his phone that he’d tossed on his bed.
Would the school even take it seriously if he reported Efnisien at this point? No. Principal Albion would already know, surely, that Augus was involved somehow in Gwyn’s case. Mikkel knew. Gwyn’s family knew. Efnisien knew. And Principal Albion already hated Ash. Any excuse to accuse Augus of making trouble for the great ap Nudd family, and Augus didn’t want to hand it to him.

Worse, Augus had a horrible feeling that even though he was sore, he didn’t think anything was going to bruise. The spit left no lasting mark. The knuckles in his kidney probably weren’t going to come to anything. The back of his head throbbed, he had a headache, but he knew from experience that having your head slammed into a hard object didn’t always result in bruises even if it gave a nasty migraine that lasted two days after.

What do I do?

Because Augus knew he couldn’t *not* tell someone. He paced the room, staring at his phone, and knew they were going to mark him down as skipping a class and felt the fluttering in his chest and turned to Ash’s bed and punched the pillow until his arm ached with fatigue and his jaw hurt from grinding his teeth together.

He reached for his phone with a shaking hand and sent a text.

* 

That afternoon he parked the car in Gulvi’s driveway, and she was already waiting for him, arms folded and foot tapping. Augus looked at the huge house and felt sick. It wasn’t as huge as Gwyn’s, but it was close. It felt like he was polluting it just by parking his and Ash’s bomb of a car in front of it, but he knew Gulvi’s family – unlike Gwyn’s – didn’t care about that.

No, instead they didn’t like Augus because he was *Augus*. Oh, Mrs. Vajat was civil enough to him, but she had eyes that pinned him to her shit-list the first time she saw him.

‘Warpath Augus,’ Gulvi said, when she caught a look at his face.

‘Fuck off.’

‘Come in,’ she said, having an ability to handle him when he was like this that no one else ever had. Augus didn’t know where it came from, and she’d only seen him like this a couple of times before.

Augus followed her into the open plan house, following Gulvi upstairs.

‘Is your Mum home?’

‘No, she won’t be back until later,’ Gulvi said. ‘She’ll want to say hello. She’s very proper like that. Even if she’s really not in every other way.’

‘And Kayla?’

‘We’ll chat later,’ Gulvi said. ‘She’s got a lot of stuff on. She didn’t mind.’

*She didn’t mind.* Which meant that she was going to come over until Augus messaged. Augus blew out a slow breath, still shaky, still feeling ill.

Gulvi’s room had a double bed with a quilt on it covered in different medieval sword blueprints. Probably something she found online. Heavy metal and punk posters were tacked to the wall. But it was painted in white and pink, the carpet was a plush white, the curtains were soft pastels. It was a
room for someone who had started out girly, and veered away over time.

He closed the door behind him, taking his bottle of water out of his bag and drinking from it, sitting on the chair when Gulvi took the bed.

‘Is this about earlier today?’ she said. ‘What we said?’

‘No,’ Augus said, and then laughed. He’d forgotten all about that. ‘No, I wish. No, I don’t give a shit that you all think I’m not capable of happiness or whatever.’

‘I’m sure,’ Gulvi said, frowning and getting on the bed properly, folding her legs and leaning forwards. She had that calculating look on her face that made him think this was a bad idea.

‘You can’t tell anyone,’ Augus said. ‘I mean it.’

‘I’m a vault,’ Gulvi said, shrugging. ‘You know I am. Give me some credit, please?’

‘Efnisien attacked me,’ he bit out, pushing the words out all at once. ‘When I fucked off earlier today, he just- He blames me for what’s happening, and he wants me to stop Gwyn from taking his family to court. Which I can’t do. I think even if I wanted to, I couldn’t.’

‘What did he do?’

‘Nothing,’ Augus said, and then pushed the chair back until it bumped sharply into the table. The lamp on it rocked and he turned quickly to stabilise the desk. ‘Nearly nothing.’

‘So what did he do?’ Gulvi said, her voice softer.

Augus hated this. ‘You’ve got an imagination, don’t you?’

‘I do,’ Gulvi said, sighing. ‘It’s why I want to know.’

‘He spat on me,’ Augus said, rolling his eyes. ‘Was a bit violent, but I don’t think anything that will bruise. And he put a hand between my legs. In the grand scheme of things, especially since learning about Gwyn’s family – I mean what, he’d call that a casual hello from his cousin probably – it’s nothing. But he made it clear it was kind of just the beginning. So I don’t know- I can’t tell Ash.’

‘Ash would kill him,’ Gulvi said flatly, immediately understanding, and Augus felt so relieved he closed his eyes. ‘He’d kill him and go to jail for it. Someone so much as looks at you wrong and I think Ash would kill them. Given his own upbringing, he has a dark streak, and I know he wants to be sunshine and light, but darling, I can see why you haven’t told him. And I suppose, do you wonder if Gwyn will do the same?’

‘I don’t know about Gwyn,’ Augus said. ‘But I still don’t think I should say anything. I don’t think he cares about me enough to stop the case, I don’t even think Mikkel would let him, but I don’t want to do anything to jeopardise it. Between this and losing my job, I just-’

‘Yeah, Ash told me.’

‘Fucking Ash,’ Augus muttered.

‘I know you’re fucking Gwyn,’ Gulvi said, laughing quietly. ‘I know you lost your job. I know a little about Gwyn’s horrendous past – well, Ash’s version of it that he got from your version of it. I know you assaulted Gwyn and put him in the hospital.’

‘Wait, what?’ Augus yelped.
‘Mm, darling, I told you I’m a vault.’

‘Except how you’re not, and you just fucking told me all that shit?’ Augus said, and then started laughing. ‘You’re the worst.’

‘You’re the worst,’ Gulvi said, lying back on her bed and throwing a small decorative cushion at him.

‘Well, you can’t tell him about this,’ Augus said, catching the cushion.

‘Of course. There’s stuff he tells me that I don’t tell you.’

Augus wondered if it was a lot about how much of a controlling older brother he was and how he was kind of the worst to be around when he was stressed or angry, which was all the time lately. Ash needed someone to talk to about that. Augus thought about getting annoyed, but instead he just felt like Gulvi was some unacknowledged part of their family and he didn’t know what to do with that.

He couldn’t think of what else to say. Just stating what Efnisien had done made him feel ridiculous for being so upset about it, made him upset all over again.

‘I couldn’t shower,’ Augus said, his shoulders hunching. ‘I was just worried that he’d turn up, even though like, of course he wouldn’t. Only people who dorm on campus can access those showers, but…’

‘He could get into anything,’ Gulvi said. ‘And he has that ‘hidden’ reputation for sexual assault.’

‘Yeah,’ Augus said. ‘Yeah. That.’

‘Do you want to shower here?’ Gulvi said. ‘You can. It’s just down the hall and the towels are nice. It’ll be nicer than the school shower anyway.’

Augus bit into his lip, feeling like he was already imposing on the whole house. Gulvi not so much, but the house, its sacred…rich space, where all the nice things and people were…

He’d stayed in a nice house once. But the owners hadn’t been nice. He was always reminded of how filthy he was, no matter how clean he tried to make himself. He took a slow breath, annoyed at where his thoughts kept drifting.

‘I’m so behind,’ Augus said. ‘On everything.’

‘Darling, your life has been stressful.’

‘It’s not really been- I mean when you consider what Gwyn-’

‘Cut it out,’ Gulvi snapped suddenly, sitting up. ‘I get that it’s probably how you think, but Augus, seriously? If you want to shit on your own experiences, find another way to do it. The idea that there’s a mythical hierarchy of bad shit. Even if there was, it got triaged didn’t it? Mum says she sees it all the time, people who come into the hospital with something serious but say it’s not serious and then they often end up dying because of it because at least people who just admit they’re in pain will get put somewhere in the triage. You’re obviously here for a reason. It’s not like we just chat for funsies.’

‘I mean we could, but you have Ash already. Why would you share with the murder-brother?’

‘Basically,’ Gulvi said.
Augus laughed, and she smiled up at the ceiling.

‘Go have a shower, Augus.’

‘I did get it out of my hair. I tissued it away.’

‘He spat in your hair?’ Gulvi pushed upright. It was the one thing they really saw eye to eye on.

‘But you chose to wear it down today!’

‘I know!’ Augus said raising his hands. ‘I know! Gwyn didn’t even notice!’

‘He noticed,’ Gulvi said, smirking.

‘No, he didn’t. He just stares ahead and never eats.’

‘He noticed. He has this way of looking at you where he doesn’t turn his head so you probably don’t realise, but he sort of…it looks like a judgemental side eye but it’s really not.’

‘Oh,’ Augus said, feeling a little pleased. ‘Really?’

‘Mmhm, it’s nice. It’s romantic.’

‘You shut the fuck up, and don’t start that again. Stupid fucked up ‘allergic to romance’ bullshit. It so happens that I was the one to ask him to start dating. And he said yes.’ Augus paused and then placed his head in his hands. ‘Listen to how pathetic that was.’

‘Go have a shower,’ Gulvi said, laughing in a way that could almost be called gentle, except that she could be such a bitch sometimes. Augus sighed and stood, wiped his hands on his shirt when he realised that he’d touched the part of his face that Efnisien’s teeth had rested against.

‘Is there anything I should know about it? Like, the hot water doesn’t work properly, or-’

‘It works like a shower,’ Gulvi said, rolling her eyes. ‘Go on. I’ll be here after.’

Augus looked at her for a long time, thinking that he should say thank you or something, but not really knowing how. He walked out of her room and down the hall, and into a bathroom filled with so many girls’ products that he stood there wondering exactly what kind of flower he wanted his hair to smell like, and where all of Gulvi’s sisters were.

*

Afterwards, Augus brushed his hair with the comb he carried in his shoulder bag, and sat on the bed with Gulvi. A bowl of popcorn had appeared, and Gulvi was snacking on it, daintily picking up each individual piece and nibbling on it, instead of just taking a handful.

‘Where is everyone?’ Augus said.

‘They all do extracurricular shit. And the ones that aren’t in school anymore do…whatever. Julvia does some kind of geek embroidery thing. I don’t know. It sounds so stupid, but she likes it. They descend on some bookstore-café thing and embroider together and…I’m so tired just thinking about it that I want to die.’

‘She’s good though. Right? You’ve showed us some.’

‘She wins awards. Doesn’t stop it from being boring as fuck. Don’t let my Mum know I said that. It’s all about heritage. Don’t get Mum started about Latgale dress and dyeing shit with leaves and
whatever. The Baltic Song and Dance Celebration is coming up next year and she’ll go with Julvia and a bunch of the others. I don’t know where she finds time for it. She’s too busy as it is, but she’s like, the ultimate overachiever role model.’

They fell silent for a while, and finally Gulvi turned to him, on her side and poking her black fingernail into the bed hard.

‘Don’t shoot the messenger, but you should move into the apartment at the back of the house. It’s a fully detached flat, basically. I mean it’s like a subdivided block at this point. It has its own kitchen. It has two rooms. And it means you’d be safer. Mum would go for it.’

‘She hates me. And I don’t need charity.’

‘It wouldn’t be charity, and she doesn’t hate you!’ Gulvi made a sound of exasperation. ‘Look, Augus, I know you have all your shitty hang ups and whatever, that make you doubt absolutely every adult figure you’ve ever met except for some reason, Mr Prince, who doesn’t deserve your loyalty, but like, Mum doesn’t hate you. She doesn’t love you, because she hardly knows you and you’re standoffish and hostile, and you don’t know how to be polite without being exceedingly awkward which makes it seem like you’re hiding something. Oh, and she hated the firm you were working at.’

‘Yeah,’ Augus said sighing. ‘That’s not a problem anymore. If it’s not charity, I don’t know if I can afford to live there. I don’t even have a laptop or tablet for school. It’s just…’

‘So let us help. Let me talk to Mum about it. Get over yourself for five seconds and think about Ash.’

‘Fuck you,’ Augus muttered, forehead creasing as he stared at the bed.

‘No, fuck you. I’m trying to help. You came here for it, didn’t you? Isn’t that what happens? This stupid, imbalanced thing, because I don’t need to vent to you, I can vent to Ash anyway.’

Augus opened his mouth to speak when his phone buzzed in his pocket, and he drew it out expecting it to be Gwyn. Instead, Ash, judging by the sheer number of emojis:

I got the job! I’m doing nightfill! And it pays pretty good!!!! Aw yeah condom city here we come (cum) [eggplant emoji] [eggplant emoji] [eggplant emoji]

Augus stared at it for a long time, unable to describe the sinking sensation in his chest, so he covered it by holding up the screen.

‘Remember when you used to love my brother?’

‘Shit, don’t remind me,’ Gulvi said, reading the message. ‘Look he’s a safe target for lesbians everywhere who aren’t ready to y’know, figure that out yet, I bet lots of gay women love him until they have their revelation. But this is good!’ She stared at Augus and then her eyes narrowed. ‘Isn’t it good?’

‘Great,’ Augus said, unable to get the right emotion into his voice.

‘He’s not a baby,’ Gulvi said. ‘You can be proud of him. Tell him you’re proud of him!’

Augus winced and then did just that, making sure that it was something he would say instead of something that sounded fake.

That was fast. Please don’t steal anything.
Gulvi read the message upside down and snorted. ‘Wow.’

‘Do you know how many jobs he’s lost from stealing shit? It’s amazing he hasn’t been blacklisted from retail all over the world at this point.’

‘Maybe just encourage him?’

Augus took a shallow, uncomfortable breath. It was great that Ash had a job. Before Augus did. Augus was meant to be his parent and his guardian, but Ash was the one who had the job and couldn’t focus on his schooling when he didn’t focus on it enough anyway. Augus felt cold and forced himself to sit up, staring at his phone.

Ash wasn’t the one who should be worried about it in the first place.

‘What now?’ Gulvi snapped.

‘Can you just, for one second-?’

The door opened, and Gulvi and Augus turned quickly to see Gulvi’s Mum lean in. She was a short, broad woman with waist length white hair that was always up and bound because of her work at the hospital. She had the kind of gaze that made Augus feel in trouble just for being there. For existing. But he was certainly in the shit for sitting on Gulvi’s bed. Even though Gulvi was gay, and Gulvi’s Mum was sex positive, and…

‘Greetings, Mrs Dubna,’ Augus said.

‘Fucking…’ Gulvi started laughing.

‘Greetings?’

‘What?’ Augus hissed, looking at Gulvi as she rolled back on the bed, hands on her chest as she laughed so loudly that Augus’ cheeks flamed. ‘What was I supposed to say?’

‘Hi, Augus,’ Mrs Dubna said.

‘Like,’ Gulvi managed, before giggling, ‘Greetings Mum.’

‘Hi, Gulvi managed, before giggling, ‘Greetings Mum.’

‘Hi,’ Mrs Dubna said.

For some reason that made Gulvi laugh so hard that Augus gave up on her helping him out, and looked at Mrs Dubna, wondering if he should leave.

Ask her how work was. No. Maybe she hates it. She’s definitely mad that you’re here. At least Mr Prince has to listen to you. He’s a teacher. Not a parent.

‘Hi,’ Augus said weakly, and Gulvi reached out and slapped his thigh like he’d made a joke on purpose. Even Mrs Dubna smiled a little, and Augus thought that was fucking pity. It was fucking pity. He was never going to live in that stupid apartment at the back of this house, he’d die.

‘Haven’t seen you in a while,’ Mrs Dubna said. ‘Everything all right?’

‘No, no,’ Gulvi said, still laughing and forcing herself to stop. ‘Mum, wait. Can Augus move into the apartment at the back?’

‘No,’ Augus said, shaking his head, glaring at Gulvi. ‘Wait a minute-’

‘Because Efnisien beat him up today and he’s trying to manipulate Augus into stopping Gwyn’s case, and he got fired from the firm because that’s Gwyn’s parent’s lawyers, and they took his house,
so he doesn’t really have anywhere—'

‘Gulvi!’ Augus said, refusing to look up at Gulvi’s Mum. God, she was just going to think that he was here to beg like a million favours with some pathetic story that just sounded weak. Of course the ex-foster kids would be looking to use people. That’s just what they did. Augus had heard that so many times. He shook his head vehemently.

‘Augus, seriously,’ Gulvi said. ‘It’s not forever or anything.’

‘It sounds fine,’ Mrs Dubna said finally. ‘We can work something out. I’d rather that case go ahead. The ap Nudd family are nasty at the best of times, and that’s not good about Efnisien. Are you going to file a police report?’

Augus shook his head, cold all over, staring fixedly down at the quilt cover. Gulvi shifted closer and then she was sitting right next to him, Augus realised he’d been asked a question and he had to answer. He should answer properly.

‘No, Ma’am,’ he said. ‘Gwyn could drop the case if he gets worried, I just… It’s not worth it. He hardly did anything at all. It was just a threat. And he can’t- I mean I know to keep an eye out for him now. That fucker has another thing coming if he thinks he’ll get me a second time. I know how to fight.’

There, see, the execution started well enough, but you certainly failed at the end.

‘Ah, sorry for swearing,’ Augus said. ‘Also I don’t fight.’

‘I’m sure,’ Mrs Dubna said, and Augus finally looked up, wincing before he even saw her face. But she was staring at him steadily, her expression even, as though she dealt with this sort of thing all the time. But he could feel how she was getting the measure of him, and seeing all the ways that he was messing things up. If he was doing things well, he and Ash would have a home, he’d still have a job, he wouldn’t be behind on his schooling, he would have noticed Efnisien in the first place…

What was the point in being so fucking twitchy if he didn’t notice that shit?

‘Are you staying for dinner?’ Mrs Dubna said. ‘You can. There’s always plenty to go around.’

‘Ah,’ Augus said, looking desperately at Gulvi, who didn’t help him at all. She nodded to her Mum. ‘No, I don’t think—’

‘We have to talk about the apartment anyway, right, Mum?’

‘Sounds good. Well. I’m going to go get cleaned up, I don’t have lates for the next two weeks unless they call me in.’

‘They will though,’ Gulvi said. ‘They always need you.’

‘I was firm this time,’ Mrs Dubna said, leaning out of the doorway and walking back down the corridor. ‘Dinner in two hours!’

Augus waited until he couldn’t hear her footsteps anymore and then shuddered. ‘She’s scary.’

He expected Gulvi to say she wasn’t, but Gulvi hummed. ‘She can be. She just knows her own mind. And she likes to know everyone else’s too. But she’s a badass.’

‘I think I summed it up best,’ Augus said, looking at the closed door for some time.
‘Hey,’ Gulvi said after a couple of minutes. ‘Why can’t you be proud of him? Ash? I know he fucks up a lot, but…you’ve done everything for him, you obviously believe in him. Unless you wish you hadn’t done all of that? Maybe you just don’t want him in your life?’

Augus looked at her sharply, needles building in the back of his throat, eyes suddenly hot, and Gulvi held up her hands.

‘Or maybe you do? I don’t know! I wouldn’t blame you if you didn’t! If I had to take care of one of my sisters I’d scream. Like sure, I’d get them out of a shit situation, but if I then had to like deal with all of the aftermath? Forever?’

‘How can you ask me that?’ Augus said.

‘You treat him like, I don’t fucking know, a stone in your shoe.’

‘I treat everyone like that.’

Augus bit the inside of his cheek as he thought about it. He knew he was badly behaved around Ash sometimes, but he hadn’t expected anyone to ever say anything about it. Excuses built up in his mouth. Ash was lazy. Ash stole things. Ash perpetually put their scholarships on the line. Ash enjoyed making trouble for the sake of making trouble. Ash took authoritarian boundaries as a challenge rather than rules.

Ash was all of that, and he was still the first one out of the two of them to get a job in this mess, because Augus was the one who had been fucking around and ignoring his responsibilities.

‘Look,’ Augus said, trying to put his thoughts in order.

‘No,’ Gulvi said, her voice so quiet that he realised he had nothing to say anyway. ‘Don’t say anything. What could you say? He’s a lot. He likes to be a child about some things. Instead of being hard on him in that way where you think he can’t do anything. Just…be hard on him in a way where you think he can.’

Augus frowned at her, and she frowned back at him. Her black eyes searched his, and then she smirked.

‘Tell him to get his shit together, and then accept nothing less.’

‘Right,’ Augus said, shaking his head. ‘He’s still a teenager. It’s unreasonable to-’

‘Why?’ Gulvi said. ‘Why is it? Just…think about it. I mean what the fuck do I know? According to my Mum, I’m still a brainless child or some shit. But so are you. And so is he.’

Augus tapped back on the bed until his shoulders hit the mattress. He fussed with his hair until it wasn’t lumped uncomfortably at his scalp, tugging where it was pinned beneath his own back. It felt like Gulvi was asking him to consider the impossible. He stared up at a pristine white ceiling that had never had mould marks on it and placed his hands on his chest, wondering what Gwyn was doing.

‘How do you date someone?’ Augus said. ‘Is it really like, stereotypical shit?’

‘Ah,’ Gulvi said. ‘Let’s ask Google.’

Augus laughed weakly. ‘I can do that.’

‘Yeah, let’s ask Google, make fun of the answers, and come up with our own shit.’
Augus turned to her and smiled, the expression tired, and Gulvi winked at him.

As she browsed through her phone, Augus still felt the impression of Efnisien’s hands on his body, between his legs, roughly groping him, and swallowed the sick feeling back down again, and told himself that if nothing from his childhood had broken him, this wasn’t allowed to either.
Wow, it's been way too long since I've posted a chapter of this. O.O And I have like...three chapters to post eventually as well, so for the first time in a while I can put some teaser text in at the end for the next chapter.

Author’s notes: Not a new tag, but a gentle warning for a non-invasive medical procedure (MRI) described in some detail. Also vomiting, which always features in my stories at least once, lol.

Gwyn sat in a small cubicle, on a hinged bench fixed into the wall, with its cushioned, synthetic, pea-green cover. Underneath the cover was the compartment that held all the belongings he brought with him. His shoes, his wallet, his jeans and shirt, everything that he had to exchange for a loose, poorly fitting pale green robe that left him feeling weirdly exposed even though he could keep wearing his briefs. The cubicle smelled like the rest of the facility, a bouquet of sterilisation and cleaning chemicals.

He was nervous, he wanted to take his phone in with him, but that was turned off and in the bench storage box too. All he held was a key on a fluorescent rope.

An attendant had asked him so many questions when he’d already answered them on all on the piece of paper they’d given to him. Did he have any piercings? Had he ever had any surgery? Did he have any surgical implants, especially around the head or neck? Did he have a pacemaker? Did he have any tattoos? Gwyn steadily answered ‘no’ to each question feeling like it was an exam designed to trick him, and even afterwards he sat there wondering if he had some dangerous thing inside of himself, waiting to ruin the test that was coming.

Mikkel sat out in the waiting room, and Gwyn felt guilty about that too. He knew Mikkel was busy, working even now. They’d not had a good time in the drive over.

‘You have to stop seeing that boy,’ Mikkel said firmly.

‘I'm not going to,’ Gwyn said, frowning as he looked out of the window.

‘Look, Cupcake, this isn’t some Romeo and Juliet bullshit you have going on here. This isn’t some City Mouse and Country Mouse become friends. It’s not~’

‘I'm not leaving him until he leaves me,’ Gwyn said.

I need him.

But Augus had been in a strange mood, too, and Gwyn didn’t know what he’d done wrong. He asked Augus several times if he could help, if it was something he could fix, and then hoped it was as Augus said – school stress, life stuff, nothing Gwyn could do anything about.

‘I’m telling you, this will be shit for your case. He’s bad news, Gwyn. He’s~’
‘He’s the only reason I’m doing this!’ Gwyn shouted, and he turned to see Mikkel’s face cloud and his eyes narrow as he stared at the road. ‘He’s the only reason you met me! Drop me off here and I’ll get back home on my own without you. I don’t want the stupid MRI anyway. It was your idea.’

‘You’re getting the fucking MRI,’ Mikkel said, exhaling hard enough that his nostrils flared. ‘Fucking damn it. Why won’t you at least think about this logically for five seconds? What do you think the lawyers are gonna do to you? What do you think a boy like that can offer you? He’s pulled himself this far but he’s not going to go much further, y’know. He’s got a brother that is well known to law enforcement, and Augus is well known in his own way. They’re old enough that if anything happens to them from here on in, they’ll be tried as adults. They’re on a path that doesn’t end well for them. You think that won’t be hard for Augus too, during your case? You think he won’t be ruined because of you?’

Gwyn pressed his fists into his thighs and stared out of the window, forcing himself to breathe slowly.

‘He’s already lost his job, hasn’t he?’ Mikkel said, his voice softer. ‘Because of this. He’s got a brother to think of.’

‘Fucking shut up!’

Gwyn’s shoulders locked, and then he shook his head, shook it again, and hated Mikkel so much in that moment he wanted to deck him.

‘Listen, I’m sorry, you gotta hear it from somewhere.’

‘I can’t do this without him,’ Gwyn said, refusing to look at Mikkel, refusing to see the disappointment there. ‘You don’t understand. If he needs me to leave, I’ll leave. But…’

It was funny, wasn’t it? To realise just how close you were to the edge of something final, when someone came along and pulled you back from it? Gwyn knew it was atrociously selfish. He knew Augus deserved better than him. He knew hanging on so hard during the case made him a monster. He knew it confirmed all of the things his father told him that he was, but now that he could see the cliff edge more clearly, he was scared to stand so close to it again.

‘I can’t,’ Gwyn finished.

‘Huh. Okay,’ Mikkel said, surprising him. ‘Okay then. Forget about it. So it goes and all of that.’

*Are you mad?*

Of course he would be. Gwyn’s behaviour made Mikkel’s life harder, and Gwyn understood that it was a difficult case in the first place. How could he do everything they needed him to do to win this? He didn’t even want to have the stupid MRI. He kept thinking of the way the others had talked about it at school. But none of them had been in one. He hated medical stuff. Hospitals involved people whispering over his head and his parents taking him home too early and never bringing him back for check-ups.

When Mikkel was looking for parking in the multistorey carpark, Gwyn stared at all the signage and said:

‘I thought it was a private clinic.’

‘It is,’ Mikkel said. ‘Don’t worry. It’s not in the main hospital. They’re just on-site for private patients. Happens sometimes.’
‘Cool,’ he said. ‘Do MRIs hurt?’

He felt Mikkel look at him and refused to look back.

‘No,’ Mikkel said. ‘Of course they don’t. It’s not going to hurt, Gwyn. It might be a bit weird, but they’re not going to hurt you.’

‘Will there be needles?’

Mikkel laughed briefly, like he couldn’t believe Gwyn was asking. Then he sighed. ‘Maybe. They might want to do contrast, but that’s not so bad for a wrestler like you, is it? Your Dad’s been using you as a kickball for about a thousand years and you’re letting this worry you? If it helps, pretend it’s just some shit your family is doing to you. You withstand that like a champ, remember?’

Gwyn knew it was outrageous. He knew if Augus or anyone else heard what Mikkel had said, they might be furious.

But it made Gwyn laugh. He was surprised to hear his own voice loud like that, in Mikkel’s car, as Mikkel did a perfect reverse into a small bay.

‘He’d never do needles,’ Gwyn said. ‘That’s what my mother would do.’

‘There you go,’ Mikkel said, clapping him on the shoulder as he undid his seatbelt. ‘Perfect. You know exactly where this fits in.’

‘Yeah,’ Gwyn said, getting out of the car and flashing a quick smile at Mikkel to indicate he appreciated the attempt at lightening the mood.

But as they walked towards wherever the private clinic was, Gwyn felt nerves crawl over him again, and tried to concentrate on his breathing the way he did before a bout.

A man in starched white with many small metal badges of status at his pocket pulled the curtain back that had sealed Gwyn off from the corridor beyond, and he flinched, startled. What if he’d been naked? But they’d told him to change, and wait for them, and he’d left the curtain closed after they’d closed it themselves, not knowing what to do. The man had three pens in his pocket, and they were all blue, like maybe he just took them without realising he had other blue pens.

‘Hi,’ the man said warmly. ‘I’m Asim. I was looking over your records and…’

Gwyn’s record was just the piece of paper he’d filled in himself earlier.

‘…You’re one of Mr. Flynn’s charges?’

‘Mr. Flynn?’ Gwyn said, before realising with a start that was Mikkel’s surname. ‘Oh. Yeah. He’s out there.’

‘I know,’ Asim said, dark eyes smiling even though his mouth was serious as he looked over the sparse piece of paper. ‘This is your first MRI?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Is there anything you want to ask me?’

*Does it hurt? Are there needles? Will it be louder than a rock concert?*
It didn’t matter, he’d never been to a rock concert.

‘No,’ Gwyn said, and then stood quickly, grasping the key in his fist as Asim beckoned him before turning and walking away without looking to see if Gwyn was following.

He was led into a dark room filled with large flat computer screens, it looked more like the control terminal for some kind of spaceship than it did any doctor’s office he’d ever been in before. And through the windows he could see the huge MRI machine in a white room, though the MRI machine itself was a dullish colour, as though it had faded with time. He saw the tube, the narrow platform he’d have to lie on, and clutched his key tighter just as Asim held out an open hand.

‘We’ll take the key,’ Asim said, smiling gently. ‘We’ll give it to you afterwards. Now, we’re thinking of giving you gadolinium contrast with this scan which happens in the last fifteen minutes. We may decide against it. Gadolinium is non-radioactive, and we use a safe chelation agent, but you have the right to withdraw consent at any point, and we’ll ask you again if we decide to use it. Okay?’

‘Okay,’ Gwyn said. He didn’t know what ‘chelation agent’ meant.

‘Good,’ Asim said. ‘We can’t give you the results today, it will need to go to our head radiologist. But depending on what we see, we may speak to Mr. Flynn briefly. Do you consent to that?’

‘Sure,’ Gwyn said.

‘Good,’ Asim said. Gwyn could feel a strange urgency, and he felt the weight of all the patients in the waiting room and wondered if one of them was waiting for an MRI. If many of them were. And he wasn’t even registered in the system, was he slotted between patients? Was he slowing down their whole day? ‘All right, I’ll pass you onto Ria. If you have any problems at all, let her know, okay? You’re going to be fine.’

Gwyn hoped he didn’t look as nervous as he felt. He turned and a woman – shorter than him – beamed at him and gestured towards the long MRI table. Gwyn thought everything was happening too quickly as he walked into the white room with its drab MRI machine. It was quiet now, like a sleeping beast.

‘Hi, Gwyn,’ Ria said. Her brown wrists had dark reddish-brown tattoos on them in matching, intricate patterns. She caught him staring and turned her arms to show him the undersides where the pattern continued. ‘It’s henna, do you like it?’

‘It’s pretty,’ he said, feeling stupid.

‘It’ll fade in a few weeks.’

‘Is it allowed? With the machine?’

‘Yeah,’ Ria said, offering Gwyn two fluorescent yellow ear plugs easily. ‘No metal in it. So it’s fine. Okay, put those in, and I’m going to give you some headphones. You’ll still be able to hear us through the headphones if we need to ask you to do anything. There’s a microphone and camera in the tube, so we can see how you’re doing in there. We’ll also give you a buzzer to contact us with if you need to stop for any reason. Sound cool?’

Gwyn looked at the serious faces of the three staff behind the glass. They all weren’t looking at him, but instead studying the screens. Maybe they could see his face on there instead. Gwyn swallowed and nodded. He wished he could message Augus, but he didn’t know what Augus would say.
‘How long will it take?’ Gwyn said finally. The websites they’d looked at back at school said anywhere from twenty to forty minutes.

‘An hour maybe,’ Ria said grimacing. ‘Possibly a bit longer. You’re one of the longer ones, I’m afraid. Full body MRIs are tough! If you need a break at all, just tell us, okay? My job is to make sure you’re doing okay.’

She patted his arm and then paused and patted his shoulder, grinning.

‘Hey, you’re pretty strong! You box?’

‘Wrestle,’ Gwyn said, ears burning. ‘At my school mostly.’

‘Damn,’ she said, impressed. ‘I’ve never seen real wrestling, just the WWE kind, you know.’

‘Oh,’ Gwyn said, then laughed. ‘That’s not real.’

‘I know!’ she said. ‘But they’re still built too. I bet some of them know the real stuff. Okay, pop those ear plugs in.’

She held up the headphones, waiting for him, and he recognised that she’d made one minute of small talk to hopefully make the whole test go faster. They were trying to make him less scared. He pushed in the ear plugs automatically, thinking of the mouth splint he wore during wrestling. It was all much of the same, sometimes. After that she got him to lie down, his neck resting on a strange plastic mould.

Ria settled the headphones over his head with her pretty wrists, and then lowered something white over that, and it wasn’t until it clipped into place with terrible finality that he realised it was some kind of cage to keep his head and neck in place. He blinked in alarm, forced himself to go to the headspace before a bout. That was all he needed. It was a blank, empty space. All he had to do was cast himself there, and it would be fine.

She pressed a small soft balloon into his hand and gently closed his fingers over it.

‘You just squeeze that if you need to stop, okay, hon?’

He nodded, surprised that he could hear her through the ear plugs, the headphones.

The narrow table beneath him moved automatically and he flinched as he felt himself rising up, until he didn’t know how high he was. His feet were cold. Then the table moved backwards and it felt like a car reversing as he was drawn smoothly back into the tube. He felt it brush against his arms and tucked them into himself tightly. Then he relaxed when he realised that it was fine, he wasn’t going to get stuck in the tube.

‘Okay, Gwyn,’ Asim’s voice came tinnily through the headphones, ‘we’re going to start now. If you need to stop, squeeze the buzzer. You’re going to do fine.’

The narrow table he lay on moved again, and then once more – a minute adjustment – and then the loud, oppressive bleating of the machine began, vibrating heavily through his body, pounding at him invisibly, over and over again.

You’re going to do fine.

Gwyn closed his eyes and forced himself to take a deep breath in through his nose, out through his nose, and thought that if this was the worst the machine could do to him, he’d handle it.
In the end it was an hour and a half, they said. Gwyn thought he’d relax, but he never quite did. The noises changed every few minutes, with a strange break in between. Sometimes they’d ask him if he was okay, sometimes they said nothing. The sounds always punched into his body, or hummed straight through him, and after a while he felt like he was buzzing, warm despite the cold air pulsing into the machine.

Towards the end, they’d drawn him out to put a needle in his vein, but didn’t remove the face cage or the headphones or the ear plugs, so he couldn’t lift his head to see what they were doing. It was frightening, and he thought his hand might be shaking, but Ria was holding his fingers delicately in hers and the needle felt like nothing at all.

‘We’re using a butterfly,’ she said, which meant nothing to him. Then: ‘The contrast may feel strange. I’m hand-injecting it instead of using the pump. It’s normal for your arm to feel cold, that’s the contrast. And you may feel a little nauseous, but that will pass. Just squeeze the buzzer if you need to, okay?’

Gwyn’s fingers curled around hers, he was surprised when she stroked his wrist briefly.

‘You’re doing great,’ she said. ‘And you’re nearly done.’

He didn’t feel nauseous, and towards the end he almost felt like he was going to cry, though he couldn’t say why, and it passed after a couple of minutes of squeezing his eyes shut and telling himself that he wouldn’t.

It was only afterwards that they told him that a lot of people couldn’t handle MRIs that went for so long, and that he was lucky to not need sedation like some people did. He smiled at them, took his key, and as he walked back to the small cubicle changing room he felt like he’d accomplished something, even though all he had to do was lie there.

* 

As they’d walked back to the car, Asim had run out and called Mikkel back in. When Mikkel came out again, fifteen minutes later, he said nothing and looked troubled and Gwyn wondered if the MRI had failed somehow. Maybe it showed nothing at all. Maybe the images were bad and they’d have to repeat the procedure. That would be really expensive. But Gwyn didn’t ask, and Mikkel didn’t volunteer any information, and they returned to the car in silence.

It was only after ten minutes of driving that Gwyn couldn’t stand it anymore.

‘It’s bad, isn’t it?’ Gwyn said.

‘Yeah,’ Mikkel said, staring ahead.

‘You can’t get a case with my parents, can you?’

Mikkel stared ahead for a long time, and then abruptly laughed, his hands tightening on the wheel. ‘Shit, that’s what you thought? Uh, no, Gwyn, it’s…no man, it’s the opposite. There’s a lot of evidence of maltreatment. We’re going to need to wait for what the radiologist says but they were shocked, buddy. You’re gonna have arthritis by the time you’re twenty.’

‘What?’ Gwyn said.

‘I mean maybe not twenty, but soon. You’re gonna need…medical care. Your body’s either holding
Gwyn realised that Mikkel was silent because he was upset. He was upset about the extent of Gwyn’s injuries. Mikkel, who acted like he’d seen everything, and probably had. It made Gwyn feel strangely pleased, amongst the distress, that someone cared enough to go silent like that. Especially someone like Mikkel. But there was no way to convey that without sounding stupid. After a few minutes he said:

‘They’re just going to blame it on my wrestling, aren’t they? The lawyers. My family.’

‘Uh, they can try,’ Mikkel said, rolling his eyes. ‘They probably will. But they’re gonna have a tough time explaining repeated skull fractures – among other things – and a wrestling coach neglectful enough to never take you to the hospital, or a family that didn’t either. Like, there’s…signs of chronic malnourishment too, that’s… There’s a lot of shit that can’t be blamed on wrestling no matter how you stretch it.’

‘But-‘

‘No high school wrestling team is that irresponsible, Gwyn. If they were, we’d be taking your fucking school to court instead. Get me?’

Mikkel slapped the steering wheel a bit later.

‘Actually, in a way it’s good. I’m pretty sure this means we can get Fenwrel.’

‘Fenwrel?’ Gwyn said.

‘There’s a lawyer I’ve been aiming for, to take you on pro bono,’ Mikkel said. ‘I can’t pay her actual fucking fees because she’s one of the best of the best. She can take on your family, and she can take on their lawyers. I’d feel a lot better if you were in her hands. But she won’t look at your case unless we had some evidence of severe abuse. She won’t take run of the mill stuff. And you were kind of in that category… But now, maybe…’

_Run of the mill stuff._ That was really how they thought about it, for so many people. Just run of the mill abuse, not the severe kind. Gwyn stared down at his thighs. Mikkel probably didn’t see anything wrong with what he said. That was just the world he lived in.

Gwyn also didn’t think that what he’d gone through was that severe. He shook his head a little, confused.

‘But they didn’t rape me or anything,’ Gwyn said finally. ‘They didn’t make me… I don’t know, become a drug mule or pimp me out or anything. I know the kinds of things… Augus never talks to me about what he went through, but I’m not stupid. I looked up stories.’

‘Yeah,’ Mikkel said. ‘But I don’t represent raped three year olds, they go to colleagues. And I don’t do human trafficking, also goes to colleagues. I mean I’ll sometimes take them. Definitely I’ve had people who’ve been in those situations and then because they’re such a mess, they end up in repeat abusive relationships and shit, but…’

_Raped three year olds._

Gwyn wrapped an arm around himself, and then as Mikkel pulled up to the red light, Gwyn undid his seatbelt hurriedly, pushed his door open and threw up next to the curb. He hadn’t eaten anything before the MRI, it was only strings of bile, and he spat several times before closing the door, shaking.
'I’m sorry,’ Mikkel said, as soon as the door closed. ‘I’m sorry, Gwyn. Here.’

Mikkel leaned across him and opened the glovebox, pulling out a small packet of tissues.

‘Here,’ Mikkel said.

Gwyn worked the packet numbly, pulled out two tissues at once, and pressed them to his mouth as the light turned green. He still felt sick.

‘I’m sorry,’ Mikkel said again. ‘I’m used to talking that way, I deal with...I deal with a lot of people who like to live in their naïve fucking bubbles about the state of the world. I listen to sunshine hippies tell me that people reap what they sow while I have to think about a baby in a dumpster wondering what the fuck they sowed into the world to reap a coffin that fucking small. I’m a bitter son of a bitch, Gwyn, and it’s easy to forget that you’re just a child, even if you don’t want me to use that word. A teenager. A young adult. Whatever. A child. And just because you find some of it easy to think about, doesn’t mean you find all of it easy to think about. God knows I fucking don’t.’

Gwyn said nothing.

‘Do you want something to eat?’ Mikkel said.

‘No,’ Gwyn said, horrified.

‘Shit,’ Mikkel said, staring at him. ‘Shit. Hang on.’

He flipped out his phone, brought up his map application, and then steered them off the main road towards a park, and pulled into the parallel parking one handed while looking between his phone and the road.

He put the car into park, reached into the back of the car and brought back a bottle of water and drank from it deeply. He offered it to Gwyn, and Gwyn was thirsty, but he couldn’t bring himself to have any. He shook his head and didn’t like the dubious look Mikkel gave him.

‘You have to drink at least two litres to help the gadolinium contrast flush through your system when you get home, okay?’

Gwyn nodded.

‘I mean it, Gwyn,’ Mikkel said.

Gwyn nodded again.

Mikkel kept drinking and then tossed the water bottle to the back of the car, undoing his seatbelt and stretching before turning to face Gwyn.

‘I’ve given you a pretty hard time today. They said you were nervous about the MRI, too.’

‘I wasn’t,’ Gwyn said, looking out of the window at the park. It wasn’t a rich area, and the park itself was poorly maintained. There was graffiti on a small brick hut that must have kept tools to keep the grounds clean, or maybe a small power box or something. One of the swings was broken. But the trees were huge and graceful, their branches swaying in the wind. Gwyn stared at them.

‘Sure thing,’ Mikkel said.

Mikkel wound down both of the car windows, and a breeze moved through, cool and fresh. He sighed after a moment, scruffing at his unruly hair.
‘What about you?’ Gwyn said. ‘Something, right? For you to be in this line of work? What happened to you?’

‘In the grand scheme of things, not fucking much,’ Mikkel said, his voice heavy and flat at the same time. ‘Abandoned by my parents, and around the same time, a friend was raped and murdered. Honestly, not much happened to me. But aint that the way it always fucking goes?’

‘Abandoned by your parents?’

‘I wasn’t even a baby,’ Mikkel said, flashing a quick, mischievous grin at Gwyn. ‘I was a teenager. But they wanted a life, they didn’t want me in it, and they pissed off. So it goes. Bet you wish yours had abandoned you.’

‘I used to wish they’d kill me,’ Gwyn said, staring out at the park. ‘I didn’t think I could live without them. But I didn’t want to live with them either. I’ve never been…independent. But I can get a job.’ He turned back to Mikkel, not wanting him to get the wrong idea. ‘I’m- I can work.’

‘Yeah,’ Mikkel said, nodding like he didn’t doubt it. But Gwyn didn’t know what Mikkel really thought, because he got the sense that Mikkel used caustic bluntness to hide what was on his mind sometimes. Efnisien, strangely, could be the same. People who always talked in shock tactics were people who had something darker to hide. It could be malicious and sinister, or it could be something else, but it was a lesson Gwyn had already learned.

‘You didn’t have to stop the car,’ Gwyn said.

‘I know,’ Mikkel said. ‘But I thought it’d be good for us both to have a breather. I’m not very fair to you, Gwyn. Wish you could’ve had a soft one. But you got me.’

‘But you’re the best.’

‘Yep,’ Mikkel said, not even pretending at modesty. ‘Jesus, it pisses me off, what your parents have been getting away with.’

Gwyn stayed silent, felt Mikkel look at him after a moment.

‘Tell me something. Do you even like wrestling?’

Gwyn shrugged. ‘It’s something to do. I’m okay at it.’

‘Okay?’ Mikkel said, laughing. ‘It’s going to get you into college, isn’t it?’

Gwyn nodded. ‘I don’t care about it as much as Coach does. I dunno, I don’t want to do it professionally, like everyone thinks I do. But it’s something to do. And I’m not good at anything else.’

‘What, nothing? I saw your grades before I took you on. You’re holding steady in a lot of your classes, unless you’re cheating?’

‘Uh, no,’ Gwyn said. ‘But I’m not like… I mean I’m not like Augus. He’s- He’s the smartest.’

Gwyn said nothing about how Augus was so smart he had a whole racket going in the school about plagiarised assignments, test scores and more.

‘You don’t have to be like him to do something else,’ Mikkel said. ‘You’re probably not going to be a doctor or an engineer, sure, but that leaves a lot of other options. Did you have anything you
wanted to be as a kid?’

‘Alive,’ Gwyn said, and Mikkel hummed thoughtfully. Gwyn didn’t like that Mikkel was taking it all so seriously. ‘I can work in a store. I can do anything like that. I don’t need a degree.’

‘That’s true,’ Mikkel said. ‘And you don’t need one now, either. Also true. I’m just saying…you have options. Not just wrestling. Not just working in a store. I mean sure, for now, you’ll have to take whatever you can get. You’ve been looking through the sites I showed you and stuff, right?’

‘Yeah,’ Gwyn said. ‘I don’t…have anything to put on my resume though.’

‘I can help with that too,’ Mikkel said. ‘How are you holding up overall, with everything? It’s shit, huh?’

Gwyn smiled, but he was too tired to make conversation. He really hadn’t done that much, but he didn’t want to think about what they’d seen on the MRI, why they’d called Mikkel back, or what Mikkel himself had lived and experienced. Gwyn knew it made him selfish, to not care more about Mikkel, or even Augus – who was going through so much for him. He’d just gotten a free MRI, someone was driving him, and he just wanted to lie down and sleep.

‘Yep,’ Mikkel said, ‘it’s shit.’

He started the car, and drove Gwyn home.

*

Gwyn slept for the rest of the day after drinking cup after cup of water like Mikkel had told him. He only woke up to piss and otherwise slept like the dead, too disturbed to eat anything even as his stomach complained at him. It would have to wait until the next day.

He woke to texts on his phone. Two threatening ones from Efnisien that were more of the same crap Gwyn tuned out. Augus asking after him, asking how the MRI went, asking why he wasn’t replying. Then, at the end, a text:

We’re coming over at seven.

Gwyn stared at his phone blurrily and realised it was close to seven, and went down the stairs, rubbing at his face, his hair. Then he ran back upstairs and stared at his hair in the mirror. The MRI hadn’t done it any favours, and it was a wonder Mikkel hadn’t laughed at him as soon as he’d seen it. Gwyn patted it back into a passable shape, frowning at himself – he looked more tired than usual – and then ran back down the stairs again.

Ten minutes later when Augus knocked, Ash waiting behind him, Gwyn was bleached of energy all over again, like he hadn’t napped at all. Augus took one look at him as he walked inside and raised his eyebrows.

‘That good? Hospitals are the worst.’

‘They are,’ Gwyn said. ‘It was just a clinic though.’

‘At a hospital, I looked it up,’ Augus said, walking past Gwyn into the kitchen like he owned the house. He opened the fridge and looked inside, before pulling out a bottle of juice, unscrewing the lid and offering the first to Ash, then taking a second for himself. He held up the third, and Gwyn shook his head.
They ended up in the shabby but clean lounge, and Gwyn sat sandwiched up against the armrest to make room for all three of them on the couch, only for Augus to lower himself down like he was sore, and then lounge upon it, legs sideways. Ash took the floor instead of the coffee table or one of the armchairs.

Gwyn thought he’d have to make conversation, but they started talking without him. School first, and then something to do with social politics and a bunch of people that Gwyn had never met properly before. He stayed quiet, and after a while Augus shifted so that he was sitting upright. He took Gwyn’s arm and pulled him repeatedly until Gwyn had no choice but to lean into him.

He felt huge, awkward, but Augus didn’t seem to care, and plopped two hands in his hair like it was something they did all the time. Ash didn’t even miss a beat as they kept talking, and eventually Gwyn almost dozed, paying attention but liking the beat of Augus’ heart against his ear more.

‘Might have a job for you,’ Ash said. ‘But it’s nights, and it’ll be rough for school as well. It’s easy as shit though.’

For a moment, Gwyn thought Ash was talking about Augus. Then he realised he’d been included in the conversation.

‘A job?’ he said, blinking his eyes open. He’d slid all the way down until his head was on Augus’ thigh, and it was awkward, and it strained his neck, but after holding himself still in an MRI machine it didn’t seem so bad. ‘Doing what?’

‘Nightfill,’ Ash said. ‘I have some friends who work there already, I’m starting this week, and honestly, anyone could fucking do it. You just gotta be able to lift shit and work fast, you’d get it in an instant. It’s just boring.’

‘That’s not a reason to steal from them and get kicked out,’ Augus said, his voice more subdued than normal.

‘I know,’ Ash said. ‘Gwyn, It’d probably be less boring with you there! And Augus will have my fucking gonads if I steal anything this time.’

‘That’s the least of your worries, if you steal again,’ Augus said. ‘I don’t care where else you do it, but just…not where you work.’

Gwyn thought of Mikkel saying that both brothers were well known to law enforcement, and he pushed closer to Augus without thinking. His arm came up, hand resting on Augus’ knee, hanging on.

Ash explained the job, Gwyn said he was interested, and then kept listening as Ash talked about other nightfill jobs he’d done in the past. Gwyn only half-paid attention, occasionally humming or saying some single syllable to indicate he hadn’t fallen asleep. Augus’ fingers in his hair were deft, and his nails scratched in a light, tingling way that made Gwyn’s whole head feel tense and then relaxed. His breathing deepened, and he curled his fingers at Augus’ knee and thought that even if Augus had been weird on the phone lately, he was being fine right now.

He smelled so good. Some spray on deodorant, but the scent of old, worn denim too, and behind that, Augus’ actual sweat, which reminded Gwyn of the other things they’d done together.

‘Fuck, I’m hungry though,’ Ash said. ‘We should get something to eat. Should we go out?’

Gwyn had been half-asleep, but tensed at the change in subject.
‘No,’ Augus said. ‘We can eat later.’

‘But…we can all go now,’ Ash said. ‘It’d be awesome! Or maybe we can go get something and bring it back if Gwyn’s too tired? Like, we could-’

‘Ash,’ Augus said, the warning in his voice soft, but clear.

There was a long silence, and Gwyn didn’t bother opening his eyes, scared of the expression he’d see on Ash’s face. Judgement? Disgust? Disdain?

‘Is he…like me?’ Ash said after a moment.

‘Like you were really early on,’ Augus said easily. ‘But worse.’

‘Oh,’ Ash said. ‘Shit. Okay. Well. Nix that then, we’ll get something later. Do you think you’d want to try the nightfill stuff, bro? Or not really your thing?’

‘I’d rather die,’ Augus said, and then laughed softly. ‘But…we’ll see. One of us has to pretend to care about school for at least another five seconds.’

Relief that Ash hadn’t forced the issue. He could have told Gwyn that they’d fix it. He could have tried to make him eat. He could have told Gwyn to eat more. It could have gone so many different directions, but that he’d just changed the subject like that made him feel like he didn’t deserve these two. Even if they were known to law enforcement. Even if Mikkel didn’t want him seeing them both.

They were the only reason he was doing any of this.

‘Did they say anything about the MRI?’ Augus said quietly, sometime later, when Gwyn wasn’t sure what they’d been talking about anymore.

Gwyn nodded. ‘They called Mikkel in to talk to him, but we don’t get the official results until like, I don’t know. Soon.’

‘What did they say to Mikkel? Did he tell you?’

‘He thinks…the damage is severe enough that he can get the lawyer that only takes really serious cases. Because my case wasn’t serious enough before. But…I don’t know. I feel fine. But apparently my body is not great. Or something. I don’t know.’

‘Sure,’ Augus said, smoothing his hand over Gwyn’s hair. ‘You don’t have to know. But a better lawyer is good, sounds like the MRI was worth it, anyway.’

‘Mm.’ Gwyn nodded. He dragged his arm up until he could wrap it around Augus’ waist, and then yanked his arm back when Augus hissed like he was in pain. ‘Augus?’

‘It’s nothing,’ Augus said, laughing it off. ‘A cramp. Put your hand back, it’s okay.’

Gwyn put it back, and Augus relaxed into the touch, and everything was fine again.

‘Hey,’ Augus said, a few minutes later. ‘You can fall asleep, if you want. Don’t stay up for us. I’ll wake you up when we go, and you can go to bed then. Unless you want us to leave now?’

Gwyn shook his head.

‘Then get some sleep,’ Augus said. ‘You’ve had a long day.’
Gwyn thought he’d had longer days, and certainly more painful and more uncomfortable days, but he decided he’d sleep anyway. As he drifted off, he heard Ash say:

‘I used to think being fostered was the worst,’ Ash said. ‘But it doesn’t matter, does it? They find a way to fucking hate you even when you’re blood.’

‘Yes,’ Augus sighed. ‘It does seem that way.’

‘How bad is the eating thing?’

‘Bad,’ Augus said. ‘Worse than we know.’

‘Fuck,’ Ash said, dragging the word out. ‘Can you adopt him too?’

Augus laughed softly, the sound deep and sweet and perfect. Ash made an amused sound afterwards, like he got the joke.

‘We already kinda have,’ Ash said.

‘I’d say so,’ Augus said, stroking Gwyn’s hair until he fell deeply enough into sleep that he couldn’t hear them anymore.

Chapter End Notes

In our next chapter, 'Send Us A Saint':

Ash knocked briefly at the glass sliding door before coming in, holding a box of both of their clothing in one hand. He grinned when he looked around the room.

‘Yeah, no wonder you and Kayla used to bang in here.’

‘Great,’ Gulvi said. She gestured wildly to her mother. ‘Do you see who this is? Standing right next to me? Do you see who she is?’

‘Yeah!’ Ash dropped the box, walked over and extended his hand. ‘Hi, Lija. Thanks so much, hey. You’re the best.’

‘I am,’ Mrs. Vajat said smiling, shaking Ash’s hand. ‘Good to see you. Nice to know you’re as tactless as always.’

‘And forever more,’ Ash sang, picking up the box and taking it into one of the bedrooms. ‘Hey! Which one did you fuck in, Gulvi? I want the other one!’ He poked his head around the doorway, looking impish. ‘Or did you fuck in both?’

‘You are disowned,’ Gulvi said quietly, ‘as a friend. In all ways. Across all continents. I have no memory of you.’

‘I think I’m going to invite him to your twenty first birthday,’ Mrs. Vajat said soberly. ‘Because if anyone is going to give an appropriately embarrassing speech in front of all of your friends and family, I think it will be him.’
This is actually one of my favourite Augus chapters in this entire story, and honestly I just want really nice things for him, and he deserves to have a break sometimes. Out of all of the AU's I've written re: Augus and Gwyn, being inside teen Augus' head is actually the most stressful experience, given his constant high anxiety levels. So here he is, getting a much needed hug, from an unexpected source.

**Augus**

*The detached flat at the back of Gulvi’s house was a lot bigger than he expected for something that kept being described as tiny. He stood in the two bedroom *home* and folded his arms around himself as he stared suspiciously. It had nice wooden flooring, nice wallpaper, a ceiling with no mould stains, it even had furniture.*

'Why isn’t anyone living here already?’ Augus said, looking at Gulvi, even though Gulvi’s mother was *right there* behind her.

'Because I don’t want strangers living behind my house when I have so many daughters,’ Gulvi’s mum said, and Augus’ shoulders hunched. God, she was terrifying.

'We’re strangers,’ Augus said dubiously.

'You and Ash are friends of my daughter,’ Gulvi’s mum said slowly.

'Augus,’ Gulvi hissed. ‘Just go get the rest of your shit and move in already. Ash has no problems with it.’

'Yeah, well, Ash isn’t…’

He’d almost been about to say that Ash wasn’t the one paying the *nominal* rent fee that Mrs. Vajat was charging, but he probably would be. At least until Augus got another job. He turned and looked around the place again. Mrs. Vajat had been kind enough to offer Augus a chance to look around the place before they moved in, but he hadn’t wanted to seem like a greedy, thieving foster kid, so he’d refused. Because he’d expected somewhere more like…a cubbyhouse or treehouse. Not *this*. This was a *nice* place to live. Even the view from the windows was nice, it looked out into gardens that were clearly maintained by a *gardener*, and about twenty steps away, the back of the Vajat household complete with its lap pool.

'Are we allowed to use the fridge?’ he said.

'Why the fuck wouldn’t you be?’ Gulvi said, but Mrs. Vajat stared at Augus for a long time before she nodded like he’d asked a serious question. Augus had tried to move in when Mrs. Vajat would be at the hospital, but he’d obviously done that wrong, because she was here.

'Gulvi will give you our wifi password,’ Mrs. Vajat said. ‘It extends this far. If you want to stay
longer, we can see about running an Ethernet cable down and—'

‘This won’t be for long,’ Augus said quickly, staring at Gulvi in alarm. ‘It’s just for a little while. This is temporary.’

Mrs. Vajat stared at him for so long that Augus wanted to vanish. He hated parents. He hated parents so much. He was sure Mrs. Vajat was very kind to her daughters, but no one ever wanted to be that kind to foster kids, and Augus hadn’t had to deal with this kind of situation for a while.

Ash knocked briefly at the glass sliding door before coming in, holding a box of both of their clothing in one hand. He grinned when he looked around the room.

‘Yeah, no wonder you and Kayla used to bang in here.’

‘Great,’ Gulvi said. She gestured wildly to her mother. ‘Do you see who this is? Standing right next to me? Do you see who she is?’

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‘I think I’m going to invite him to your twenty first birthday,’ Mrs. Vajat said soberly. ‘Because if anyone is going to give an appropriately embarrassing speech in front of all of your friends and family, I think it will be him.’

‘Mum,’ Gulvi said, hands clenching into fists.

Augus watched on, confused. Ash was on a first name basis with Gulvi’s mother, which Augus had never known. Ash who was still his crude, usual self. Who packed far more efficiently than Augus had, while speaking about how he was excited about his job, and how it would be great if Gwyn could work with him, and how he was going to get his shit together for them both while Augus’ life fell apart by comparison.

Mrs. Vajat walked off, following Ash, and after a moment Augus heard them talking in low voices to each other. Too low to be overheard. The tone of Mrs. Vajat asking certain questions, and then pauses before Ash would reply.

Augus’ ears burned. ‘They’re talking about me,’ he hissed.

‘Who cares?’ Gulvi said. ‘At least the attention’s off me. Besides, Mum’s never had to live with an angry, wet cat before. She didn’t sign up for that when she went to uni to become a doctor.’

‘Did you just call me…? Hang on,’ Augus said staring at her. ‘What the fuck did you just call me?’ Gulvi laughed.
Augus forced himself to take a breath. He’d been so on edge since the incident with Efnisien, which was ridiculous, because it wasn’t like he’d even be dorming at the school anymore or having to use their stupid showers at night. But Gwyn knew something was up, Ash knew something was up, and Augus wanted to focus on Gwyn and his emancipation case, and struggled to concentrate whenever he had homework or apps in front of him for job searching.

‘You’re the most angry, wet cat I’ve ever met,’ Gulvi said.

‘I hate you,’ Augus said, staring at her sidelong, ‘and your whole creepy family.’

‘Baby,’ Gulvi cooed. She reached out to scratch behind Augus’ ear, and he jerked backwards, glaring at her. Gulvi laughed again and Augus realised he’d sold his whole soul to the Vajat family, and he was never going to get it back.

*

Ash spent almost all of his time in Gulvi’s house after that. Over the weekend, he vanished for meals even though the kitchen in the new place was fully kitted out with a really nice oven and stovetop and even a fridge. Augus liked the solitude at first, and then started to go stir crazy. He wanted to see Gwyn, but Gwyn was catching up on his own homework. MRIs and seeing Mikkel and moving house had put Gwyn behind in all of his classes. Augus knew the feeling.

Monday, and as Augus walked out of Calculus, head aching, he bumped straight into the person who stepped directly into his path.

‘Seriously?’ he said, then blinked. Efnisien.

His blood chilled, he clutched his books tighter to himself like it would make a barrier between him and Gwyn’s cousin. It was stupid. He knew how to fight. But something about Efnisien just made him want to run.

‘Y’know,’ Efnisien said, grinning, ‘that’s exactly the expression I like? Fuck. Yes. That’s great. Here, come here a sec.’

Efnisien grabbed Augus’ wrist before he could jerk it out of the way.

‘I’m not going to hurt you,’ Efnisien said, rolling his eyes. ‘There’s students everywhere.’

‘I’m cruel and a sadist, I’m not an idiot,’ Efnisien said. He looked winsome, carefree, and he pulled Augus away from his class towards the stairs. There were students everywhere, some looking at the two of them, wondering what Augus was doing with Efnisien. Wondering what Efnisien wanted with Augus.

‘Leave me alone.’

‘How’s progress going? You know, in getting Gwyn to drop the case?’

‘I’m not helping you,’ Augus said, thinking that it was lunchtime and Gwyn would be waiting for him at the table.

‘Don’t be noble,’ Efnisien said. ‘Not you. You think I don’t know what you’re up to in this school?’
You think I don’t have my own sources? Albion’s wrapped around my little finger, Augus. I mean sure, it’d be just as neat to fuck you with one of my own sharpened pencils and see how much damage I can do, but it’s not like that’s my only option. It’d be a shame though. Be nice to hear you scream, I think?’

Efnisien spoke casually. His voice was light, friendly, not sinister or low or mean. Even the grip around Augus’ wrist wasn’t that tight. It was worse, somehow, knowing that Efnisien meant everything he said and didn’t even care enough to make it an ominous threat.

‘I bet you squeal,’ Efnisien said. ‘You know, Gwyn’s got scars on the soles of his feet? Ask him about them some time. Ask him about the noises he made. God. Okay, I have to stop. I’m popping the biggest boner.’

He stopped halfway down the steps on the landing, other students walking by, rushing to lunch or their lockers. Efnisien tucked a golden curl of hair behind his ear and Augus thought his lashes were unfairly thick. Like Gwyn, except prettier. He could have been a model.

Augus’ eyes dropped and he realised Efnisien was hard.

Gwyn did have scars. They were easy to miss, Gwyn was already so pale, and many of the scars had healed well. Augus had never looked at the soles of Gwyn’s feet. A bubble of anger inside of him, that Efnisien was so casual about it. Inflicting pain that made Gwyn so damaged now, so hurt that the consultant working with Gwyn had bumped his case into the ‘severe’ category.

‘Those scars will be the reason he gets emancipated,’ Augus said calmly.

The smile on Efnisien’s face froze, then vanished. The look he gave Augus was chilling. Augus felt like he’d just been spotted by some monster down a dark alley.

‘You make it so easy,’ Augus continued, hating the tremor in his voice. ‘Because I bet his lawyers want to blame it on wrestling, or school violence, or whatever they want. But what about those scars on the soles of his feet, Effles? What are they going to blame that on? What, did you think he was going to stay in that shitty fucking household for the rest of his life? Be your Uncle’s punching bag? Stay for you to treat him like shit?’

‘I love him,’ Efnisien said.

Augus felt, with some horror, that it might actually be true.

‘And he loves us,’ Efnisien continued, his voice gritty. ‘He won’t do this to us. He’s being made to do it, by feral, worthless fucking ingrates like you.’

Efnisien looked around quickly enough that Augus turned to run, realising that Efnisien was checking for people and there was no one near enough to stop Efnisien from doing something awful.

A hand around the back of his collar, and Augus swung his books, hoping to slam them into Efnisien’s arm. Instead, Efnisien grabbed the books and dropped them, leaning Augus back against the railing, the hand at the back of his collar reaching up and yanking hard on Augus’ ponytail instead.

Then, the sound of someone else descending the stairs, and Efnisien abruptly let go and picked up Augus’ books, handing them to him and taking him by the wrist again.

‘Come on,’ Efnisien said.
‘I’ll scream,’ Augus said. ‘You can find out just how much of a screamer I am.’

‘Okay,’ Efnisien said, laughing. ‘Do it.’

Augus didn’t.

Efnisien walked him across the grassed quadrangle, and Augus tensed when he realised exactly where Efnisien was taking him.

Gwyn was already standing, facing them. Ash looked like he wanted to murder Efnisien. But it was the expression on Gwyn’s face that left him cold. He had to pretend this was fine. He had to. Gwyn already didn’t want to go through with the case. He wasn’t like Augus, forcing himself through the hell of it because he had someone he needed to protect. It was so much easier to fight a battle like that for someone else. Gwyn was only doing it for himself, and he didn’t care enough about himself to do it alone.

‘Just thought I’d escort him,’ Efnisien said, lightly pushing Augus towards Gwyn. ‘You know, because I’m such a good cousin. Also, are you planning on taking a restraining order out on me, or what?’

Augus placed his books on the table and folded his arms, facing Efnisien. He’d caught a glimpse of Gulvi’s face as he turned back, and even she looked like she wanted to cut Efnisien’s face off.

‘Are you harassing him?’ Gwyn said, staring at Efnisien. ‘If you fucking lay a finger on him, I’ll-’

‘Come on, what?’ Efnisien said, raising his hands, palm forwards. ‘If you dropped the case and came home, maybe-’

‘So you can cut him up some more?’ Augus said coldly. ‘Put more scars on him? Your habit of bragging about your sadistic exploits is going to win him the case. I didn’t know it was possible to nail down your own coffin, but you’re doing a great job. Fuck off, Effles.’

Efnisien’s smile was slow and chilling, but then he winked at Gwyn.

‘Guess I’ll just fuck off then,’ he said.

He turned, placed his hands in his pockets, and lightly walked away. Augus had the horrible feeling that even though it looked like he’d won the conversation, he hadn’t won anything at all. He had absolutely no doubt that Efnisien could kill a person. He’d enjoy doing it. Probably ‘pop a boner’ at the thought of it.

He sat down at the table and ignored the way Gwyn looked at him.

‘Did he hurt you?’ Gwyn said, his own voice menacing in different way.

Augus shook his head, laughing. ‘Him? Please. You should’ve seen what I had to deal with in foster homes. He’s nothing.’

It was easy to lie, easy to laugh, easy to smile like someone who was a little bothered but not truly upset. Gwyn seemed to relax beside him, but Gulvi and Ash didn’t. Augus refused to make eye contact with either of them and his phone vibrated in his pocket after Ash typed something into his phone.

He wished that he could tell Gwyn everything. That he could watch Gwyn beat his own cousin to a bloody pulp – because Augus had no doubt Gwyn would beat him half to death and have to be
dragged off him, his protective streak was a mile wide. But he couldn’t say a word. Nothing that would jeopardise the case, nothing that would make this harder than it had to be.

In the meantime, he’d just have to be careful at Murdock.

*

Gulvi’s mother had a cat. Augus met it one night when nightmares woke him at three am and he wasn’t willing to wake Ash, who needed all the sleep he could get, his new job was starting in two days and Augus wanted him to be as ready for it as possible. Augus kept cooking dinner for the both of them, mostly just frozen vegetables and rice and sometimes tins of tuna, or cup noodles, and Ash was never there. He always ate at Gulvi’s house.

So Augus crept outside and closed the glass door and shivered, wrapping his arms around himself. It was his experience that the worst things happened inside houses, so best to go outside and remember that foster parents didn’t like to beat kids to death outside because of potential witnesses.

He took deep, slow breaths and reminded himself that the kid didn’t die anyway, and probably thinking of Gwyn beating Efnisien or maybe Efnisien torturing Gwyn had set off this latest run of nightmares and it didn’t mean anything. His feet tracked over plush, wet grass until he stood near the pool, looking at the large house in front of him.

A small mew to his right, and Augus looked to see a black and white cat watching him from beneath a bush.

‘Hey,’ he said, like he was greeting someone at school. Then, on a whim, he crouched and held out his hand. ‘Hey, sweet thing.’

The cat mewed at him again, it looked curious. Augus stared at it, and then decided to look away in case cats didn’t like people staring at them. The wind blew strands of his hair over his face, and he pursed his lips to try and get it away from his mouth and failed.

‘Ah, damn it,’ he said softly. He used his other hand to move his hair away, and then stilled when he felt warm fur against his hand. He looked at a small, black and white head nestling into his fingers, before it looked up at him expectantly. ‘Hi.’

The cat stared at him, and then rubbed against his hand again. So Augus petted it carefully. He’d never been much of an animal person. In foster homes, there’d been pets sometimes, but he found dogs scary, and most of the cats he knew would run away from people. But this cat was kind of cute and clearly liked to be petted, even though Augus had no idea what he was doing.

After a while the cat lifted its paw and shook it out like it was annoyed, before placing it on the ground again. Maybe it didn’t like wet grass.

‘You’re kind of cute,’ Augus said. ‘You look like a well fed cat.’

The cat gazed up at him, made a trilling noise that Augus had never heard in his life, and then it scampered off into a garden bed near the small detached cottage. Afterwards it vanished, and Augus hoped it was okay.

He thought about sending Gwyn a message, but it was too late for something like that, and in the end he went inside.

The next day, Ash said the cat was named Mintie, and she belonged to Lija. Augus thought Mintie was a dumb name, but the cat was cute, and he hoped he saw her again.
Another day of hardly talking to Gwyn, cramming for tests, Gwyn doing the same at lunch, and then another night of nightmares. Augus woke gasping, placing his hands over his mouth because he couldn’t wake them up he couldn’t wake them he couldn’t wake them he-

It took too long for him to realise it was a nightmare and he fumbled for his phone only to knock his bottle of water off the drawers and then he sat up, turned on the lamp and realised where he was. He drank water thirstily, looked at the time on his phone and swore. He couldn’t keep doing this. He couldn’t keep having nightmares like this. It was stupid.

He forced himself up, knowing he wouldn’t be able to fall asleep again for another thirty minutes at least. His skin crawled and itched as he stepped outside and he looked for Mintie but couldn’t see her, and eventually headed towards Gulvi’s house again. He avoided it during the day, and walked down the side of the house instead of through the house after school. Gulvi joked that she was seeing less of Augus now that he was living on the same block as her.

It was true.

Augus walked silently past the pool, staring down at the glimmering pool lights. He walked across the beautiful liquid limestone paving, up onto the wooden decking, and then over to the glass table that was clean even though it was exposed to the elements. Even the outdoor chairs had cushions, Augus sat in one and sighed, looking towards the dark kitchen now that he was close to it. Some of Gulvi’s sisters had come to the cottage to say hi to Ash, who seemed to be friends with all of them.

When Augus had forbidden him from fucking any of them, Ash had just stared at him and said:

‘You know, you don’t give me much credit pretty much ever, but the fuck, Augus?’

Augus felt like he was sliding down a slope of gravel while Ash stared down from above. Ash had a job. Ash wasn’t doing dumb shit at school as much. He got along with Gulvi’s family. At some point, he’d become the more functional of the two of them and Augus hated it. He didn’t understand why, either. He’d worked his ass off to get Ash out of the situation he’d been in, and now Ash was doing a little better because of it, and Augus was angry at him? Jealous? Envious?

‘You’re just an asshole,’ he muttered to himself as he scrolled through his phone.

Abruptly, he placed his phone facedown and pressed back into the chair, digging his knuckles into the ridges of his eyebrows. He focused on breathing. He was fine. He was-

He flinched when light suddenly glared to his left and he looked, startled, only to see Mrs. Vajat wander into the kitchen, white hair tied back and plaied, in the clothing she wore to the hospital. She paused when she saw him, her eyes going wide like she thought he was an intruder, and then as Augus tensed, her shoulders relaxed.

Augus stood, ready to make a break for it, when she held up her hand clearly indicating for him to stay. He lowered himself back to the chair, feeling like he couldn’t breathe.

Oh shit, oh shit.

He was fucked. He was a creeper sitting in the dark by their house. He had no idea what she was going to think, but she was going to be mad. He watched as she put the kettle on, spooned what looked like cocoa into two large cups, and then a few minutes later came out with two steaming mugs, setting one down in front of Augus.
'Good morning,' she said.

'Yes,' Augus said, 'ah, it’s…shouldn’t you get some sleep?'

'Oh?' Mrs. Vajat said, arching an eyebrow at him. ‘Should I?’

‘You work hard,’ Augus said, turning his phone in his hand and watching with a mild kind of horror as she pushed the mug closer to him. He was going to have to drink it to be polite. And then she was going to lecture him.

‘Relax, Augus,’ Mrs. Vajat said, laughing softly. ‘Can’t sleep?'

‘Hm?’ Augus said, looking at her as he reached for the mug. The chocolate smelled really good. Like she used a really nice kind, or more than the recommended amount on the container. He held the warm ceramic mug in his hands and then nodded. ‘Yeah. A lot.’

She sighed, and Augus waited for her to tell him that he couldn’t just sit outside her house in the dark, and that he should probably stay in the cottage. It was bad enough that he had the reputation that he did, worse still that he was-

He froze when she placed a hand on his back. It was warmer than normal from her own mug.

‘You’re a good kid.’

Augus stared at the mug, not seeing it. Then he laughed. A jagged, coarse thing that he couldn’t take back once he’d let it free.

‘You are,’ Mrs. Vajat said, setting the mug down. ‘Gulvi’s told me that you’re helping that Gwyn ap Nudd a lot. I’ve never liked his family. And I know from Ash how much you’ve helped him.’

‘Right,’ Augus said, unable to look at her. He was unexpectedly angry. She wasn’t following the script and he was tired, strung out, and he wanted to sleep but not if he’d be stuck in those dreams.

‘You don’t think you’re good?’

Augus placed his own mug down on the table and decided to follow the spike of anger all the way to its natural point, until he could hurt her with it.

‘I’m the kind of kid that sat back and watched as the kids around me got raped and beaten. That’s the kind of person I am. Does that sound like a good kid to you?’

‘Hm,’ Mrs. Vajat said, like she was really thinking about it. Her hand moved a little on his back. Augus expected her to draw it away, but she didn’t. ‘Did you sit back, Augus? Or did you protect yourself? You were a child, after all. And didn’t you get Ash out of a situation like that? Was that you protecting yourself?’

‘That was selfish,’ Augus said, not liking how shaken he felt. Not liking the steady contact of the hand over his left shoulder. ‘That was just…’

‘Just what?’

‘Selfish,’ Augus finished.

‘Really? You could have run away and left him there. Instead, from how Ash tells it, you spent all your time in university libraries, learning information far above what’s expected of you to learn at your age, so you could arm yourself against unfriendly laws and an unfriendly system, and you did it
for him. You only had to wait another few years to get out of the system naturally, and that’s what you were doing before you met him, wasn’t it? You’d learned how to survive the system, and then you met him.’

‘It was selfish,’ Augus insisted, his voice flat. ‘I liked him. He was…’

_He was good for me._

‘I see,’ she said. ‘So everything you did, none of that was hard on you. It was all easy, and you could have done that for any of the other kids. Have you ever heard of survivor’s guilt?’

He wanted to tell her to fuck off, but she was Gulvi’s _mother_, and she scared him. She cut people up for a living.

‘Of course I have,’ Augus said. ‘I don’t have it.’

‘Of course you do,’ Mrs. Vajat countered smoothly. Augus abruptly realised that Gulvi got her skill at debating and arguing from her mother.

‘I’m not going to sit here and tell you I think I’m a good kid,’ Augus said. ‘So drop it.’

The hand on his back started moving slowly, up and down, and Augus resisted the urge to settle back into the touch. He swallowed. He looked past her to the kitchen, but no one else was awake. Wasn’t she tired? Too tired for this?

‘It’s unfair, that you get the nightmares you do. I can only imagine.’

‘I’m mostly just watching it happen to other people,’ Augus said, his mouth dry.

‘ Mostly?’ she said softly. ‘So not every time? Did they ever hit you? Assault you?’

‘What even-?’ He turned to look at her, angry, caught, but her face wasn’t the same incisive, calculating expression that he was used to. It was open and gentle, and Augus couldn’t finish his sentence.

‘It’s funny, because Ash paints a picture of you as an extremely competent adult. And in many ways, you’ve made yourself become that. I don’t know what you had to do or break inside your mind to do that, or what was already broken that let that happen. But you don’t know how to behave around us. It feels like you’ve never been around any parent who actually cared.’

‘I know you care for your kids,’ Augus said, staring at her. She was terrifying _and_ he hated her.

‘You don’t know me,’ Augus said.

‘What if I wanted to get to know you? How would someone do that?’

‘This is only temporary. We’re only here for a few weeks at most,’ Augus said. ‘I’m going to get a job, and then I’m going to-’

‘You could just stay,’ Mrs. Vajat said. ‘Until Christmas, at least. I’d really like it if you did that. Shouldn’t you at least see out the school year in a place that’s a bit more stable? You need a break, Augus.’

To his absolute horror, his eyes started to burn. A few seconds passed and he realised he couldn’t
just shut it down like normal and he faced the other way, even as Mrs. Vajat kept rubbing his back.

‘You’re allowed into the house,’ she said, relentlessly gentle. Augus was wiping at his cheeks and hating everything. ‘If you have nightmares again, you can wake me up if I’m here.’

‘What, every night?’ he said, laughing wetly.

‘Yes,’ she said. ‘If you want to.’

‘No!’ he said. ‘You’re a- You’re a surgeon. You need sleep. You have an important job. I’m not going to wake you up because I’m a fucking three year old when it comes to sleep.’

That hand, steadily moving on his back, and Augus didn’t really know what someone was supposed to do in this situation but he wished he’d stop crying.

‘And you don’t think you’re a good person?’ she said.

‘Stop it.’

‘My kids are allowed to wake me up whenever they want,’ she said. ‘It’s always been that way. I’ve found that if I let them do it early, and they learn to trust that I’m there for them, they’ll do it less in the future anyway. That’s what creating a safe environment does.’

‘Well I’m not your kid,’ Augus muttered. He stared out into the dark, mutinous. ‘I’m not anyone’s kid.’

She was silent, and he was trying to discreetly sniff snot back into his throat and it wasn’t working, and there were no tissues anywhere except back in the cottage, that she was letting them stay in for a token payment.

‘Did you tell this to Ash as well?’ he said finally, giving up and wiping his nose with the back of his hand.

‘I didn’t need to,’ she said, a smile in her voice. ‘He knows he can go to you.’

The venomous fuck you that he thought her way was drowned beneath a sharp wave of pain that clenched up hard inside of him. His shoulders hunched forwards, he opened his mouth because he couldn’t breathe through his nose anymore, and though he didn’t sob, his eyes were streaming.

‘Come here,’ she said, almost exasperated, and Augus started to cringe away as she moved her chair closer and wrapped her arms around him. She smelled of antibacterial soap, and she pulled him in like he was nothing more than a recalcitrant child, because she didn’t understand.

‘I’m awful to him,’ he choked out, trying to prove something to her, having to admit his monstrousness to do it.

‘You’re a boy trying to raise another boy,’ Mrs. Vajat said. ‘You’re under critical levels of stress and probably have been since you were a toddler, and Ash can be…ah…challenging in his own way. So you make some silly mistakes and some silly decisions and I’m sure sometimes you are very nasty to him, so what? You can’t try and do better? You think you’re going to be perfect when you’re getting two hours of sleep a night?’

Augus felt like his strings were being slowly cut, one by one, as she rubbed her hand up and down his forearm. He sagged into her, eyes closing. God, he was so fucking tired.
'Stay until Christmas,' Mrs. Vajat said again. ‘You have a sturdy heart, even if you don’t believe it. I have no problems with the two of you staying here. It’s probably best if you wait until the case with the ap Nudd family is over at least. Okay?’

Augus said nothing, and she squeezed him tighter.

‘Okay?’ she said, and Augus cleared his throat.

‘Okay,’ he said, feeling weak.

‘Good,’ she said. ‘Honestly. We’re just going to sit here like this for another five minutes, and then you’re going to have some hot cocoa, and then you’re going to go back to bed. And if you have nightmares, you’re going to wake me up.’

‘Nope,’ he said. He would never. She was a surgeon, and Augus wasn’t going to be the fuck up that made her lose enough sleep that she killed someone on the table. He wasn’t ever going to be that person.

‘It was worth a try,’ she said.

He leaned heavily into her, despite the hard, uncomfortable armrests between them. When she asked permission to stroke his hair, he nodded, shaken with a strange nervousness that someone would ask after Efnisien had just yanked his ponytail like it was nothing. The truth was that he put a lot of care and effort into his hair, even though to a lot of other people, it was just straight and long. It was hard to look after long hair, and Mrs. Vajat probably knew that.

‘You can call me Lija,’ she said, as she stroked his hair from the top of his scalp all the way down. ‘All right?’

‘Okay,’ he said.

She sighed, but not like she was exasperated, and Augus wished she was the kind of person who wanted foster kids but she didn’t need them. She had enough of her own. And no one wanted someone like Augus anyway. But that didn’t mean he couldn’t steal this moment now, that he wouldn’t take it after trying to do the right thing by pushing it away.

‘You have a pretty name,’ he said, yawning. He thought that Gulvi had a name like the sound a frog would make, but he didn’t want to get murdered, and it wasn’t like his name was much better. At least it was pronounceable, unlike the rest of his name which – even after all this time – he still wasn’t sure he was saying properly, because it wasn’t like he had the parents to tell him.

Later, when he’d drunk the sweet, rich lukewarm cocoa, and she’d talked a bit about her day, he lay in his own bed and stared up at the ceiling and palmed his hair and scalp where she’d touched it. She was terrifying, and he loved her.

*

The next day, in Human Biology, he barely looked up as a messenger came in and passed a slip of paper to the teacher. He tensed when his name was called.

‘Principal Albion wants a word,’ the teacher said.

‘Oooo,’ said enough other students that Augus only rolled his eyes and started to pack up. As the teacher told everyone else to settle down, Augus took the slip of paper and walked out of the room,
his mind retreating from his own fear.

Was this it, then? Had Albion found a way to expel them both?

A quick jog down the fancy stairs that led to the main council rooms and the Principal’s office, the waiting foyer with its huge bay windows that looked out into a private garden. Rumour had it that it was a good place to fuck after dark, and a badge of honour too, but Augus knew for a fact that it had surveillance cameras and that anyone who had sex in Albion’s private garden would get shafted for it in a completely different way.

The double wooden doors leading into Albion’s office were open, and Augus peeked in, knocking gently on the door as he held up the slip of paper in his other hand.

He stilled when he saw who was sitting in the other chair opposite Albion’s desk.

Fenwrel Vallakali.

He couldn’t think of any reason she’d be here. She was frequently at odds with Augus’ ex-workplace, and he’d researched and compiled information on many a case designed to ruin her arguments. They used to joke that Augus was the thorn in her side, which Augus laughed at, because she was such a powerhouse that he knew she had no idea he existed. He was just an intern.

But she sat calmly in the chair and stared at him, her tailored blue business suit impeccable, a teal scarf at her brown throat, printed in gold. Her long black hair was up in a bun, shiny and fixed perfectly in place. Even in the presence of Albion, who sat at his giant ‘look how big my cock is’ desk, she dominated the room.

‘I’m sorry for interrupting,’ Augus said, stepping back quickly, thinking that maybe he could just run.

‘Augus Each Uisge,’ Principal Albion said crisply. ‘Come in, please.’

‘Right,’ Augus said, turning around and walking weakly back into the room, standing there, refusing to take the seat opposite Fenwrel. ‘Ah.’

Fenwrel gave Albion a meaningful look, and after a long moment where Albion looked chiselled out of stone – even his stupid, perfect facial hair – he sighed wearily, got up, and walked out of his own office. He closed the double doors behind him, and Augus stared at Fenwrel, thinking that he was fucked.

‘Actually,’ she said, leaning back in the chair after a moment, ‘we, at Vallakali, Dhanial and Permanu would like to offer you an internship. But we can’t. Do you know why we can’t?’
‘Ah, well-’

‘Don’t waste my time with useless filler words,’ Fenwrel said. ‘Think and then give me an answer.’

Augus looked down at the floor, mind racing. All too soon, the picture formed even as he felt confused about it.

‘You’re taking on Gwyn ap Nudd’s case,’ Augus said slowly, looking up at her. ‘But because I’m involved, and helped instigate it, you can’t be seen to be employing me while the case is active. It’s a profound conflict of interest.’

‘Yes, it is,’ Fenwrel said. ‘And yes, I am taking on his case. I’m confident of a trial win, I’m hoping for settlement out of court. Even you were confident enough to help set this in motion, because I’d prefer to think that, than entertain the idea that you’re foolish enough to do this because of a teenage crush, or something else equally tedious.’

*Like raping him and sending him to hospital and then realising he got beaten by his family for it?*

‘The expression on your face isn’t very promising,’ Fenwrel said. ‘I’d been led to believe you were a cold individual, more interested in working the system than in actual justice.’

Augus frowned, and then looked at her. ‘But you wouldn’t want me if that’s all you thought I was. Your company is ruthless, but you don’t work for criminals. If this is a test, presumably I’d fail it by telling you I’m cold and callous only, and don’t possess a shred of empathy. You wouldn’t be here if you knew that was true.’

He missed being able to talk to adults like this. At Murdock, he was always the student, and they always held authority over him. But, briefly, when he was in the process of emancipating himself, he’d earned the respect of some of the adults around him. He’d earned himself an internship out of it.

‘I wouldn’t,’ Fenwrel said, smiling. It cracked through the coolness, and made her eyes warmer. ‘I thought about farming you out to another firm I trusted until we can take you on, but they don’t offer paid internships. I, however, do. If you can wait that long.’

‘I’ll… I might have to get another job,’ Augus said. ‘No, I’ll have to.’

‘What would you prefer? Retail? White collar? An apprenticeship?’

Augus laughed, and then shrugged. ‘White collar. Bookkeeping and payroll I can do, and-’

‘You can do *payroll*?’ Fenwrel said, staring at him.

‘They got me to do whatever, once they knew I could do it,’ Augus said, shrugging. ‘It’s easy.’

‘You will not be touching payroll at my work. Not with a ten foot pole.’

‘That’s fine,’ Augus said. ‘That’s not what I want to spend the rest of my life doing anyway.’

Fenwrel touched her fingers to her chin, and then she stood, looking down at him where he sat. She was much shorter than him, and if Augus stood, he’d still feel smaller than her.

‘The internship isn’t guaranteed,’ Fenwrel said. ‘You have to prove yourself first, and I have my ears to the ground on your behaviour in the lead up to, and during this case. If you meddle, or make any of this harder for me, I won’t be pleased.’

‘So you want me to stop seeing Gwy as well?’ Augus said, and Fenwrel smirked.
‘I didn’t say that. Tell me something about him. Is he strong enough for the case?’

‘I don’t know,’ Augus said. It was a dangerous thing to say, to front up with the truth. ‘But I believe in his desperation to get away from them, and I believe in his survival instinct. I’ve seen it myself.’

He saw it in the glittery hardness in Gwyn’s blue eyes when he’d punched Augus in the face after Augus had fucked into him and torn him up badly enough that he needed stitches. He’d seen it when he tried to insist on driving Gwyn to the hospital, and Gwyn had insisted on going alone.

‘He might be afraid of them,’ Augus said finally. ‘But he’s not afraid of a challenge.’

‘He’s survived them this long,’ Fenwrel said speculatively. ‘I am completely uninterested in wasting my time. But Mikkel’s taken him on, so we’ll see. All right. Take my card. And please,’ she said, taking out her phone. ‘Give me your number in case I need to call you.’

‘Call me?’

‘Are you or are you not a direct line to my prospective client?’ she said, unblinking.

In the end, they exchanged numbers, and Augus thought it was no small thing to have the direct number – or one of the direct numbers – to Fenwrel Vallakali.

‘And you’d prefer white collar work? Desk jockeying? All right. I’ll have someone be in touch.’

‘What?’

‘It won’t be easy,’ Fenwrel said to herself as she walked towards the door. ‘Accommodating your school hours and making sure you’re paid, but I’ll work something out.’

‘Wait,’ Augus said, standing as she opened the double doors and walked through them.

‘Chat soon,’ Fenwrel called, before waving airily at Albion, who had been forced to sit in his own foyer, pushed out of his own office.

Albion stood and marched back into his office, then he sat behind his desk and glowered at Augus.

‘If you are still here in ten seconds, I will suspend you.’

Augus abruptly remembered where he was and slung his bag over his shoulder. He was out before the ten seconds were up, closing the double doors behind him and staring at the business card in his hand, feeling like he’d just woken up from a wildly unrealistic good dream.

‘What…the fuck is happening,’ he whispered to himself as he walked back to class.
Gwyn

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‘You have to distract me from how shithouse my own life is,’ Augus said as soon as Gwyn opened the front door. He swung in, looked around like he was re-assessing the place, and then walked straight into the kitchen. ‘Make me something to eat.’

‘What?’

‘You have to,’ Augus said. He sat down at the kitchen table, unzipped his backpack and pulled out a textbook, opened it to a folded down page and started reading. Gwyn stood in the kitchen entrance suspiciously. This was part of Augus’ plan to get him to eat in front of him. He was sure of it.

‘I’m not stupid,’ Gwyn said.

‘Didn’t we establish that already?’ Augus said, sounding bored. ‘Make me something to eat, please? It’s been a hell of a day. I’m tired of sandwiches and I can’t go grocery shopping properly until like…’ Augus made a gesture with his hand. ‘You know, money. What were you going to have for lunch?’

‘Chicken and salad,’ Gwyn said. ‘And bread.’

‘Oh, that sounds perfect,’ Augus said, beaming. ‘Would you make enough for us to share?’

Gwyn stared at that smile, which damned him into knowing he was going to try until the fear meant he couldn’t anymore. Realistically, he’d just end up making the food for Augus and disappearing until Augus was done eating. But Augus smiled like Gwyn was wonderful, and Gwyn found himself taking two wary steps towards the fridge.

No, he didn’t like this at all. But he had a feeling if he protested, Augus would bring up Gwyn’s issues with food, and if Gwyn dared to say that they weren’t a big deal, Augus would tell him it was
obviously no problem to share a meal that Gwyn himself had made. Augus’ logic was infuriating, and sometimes it was better to go along with it until his fear came up with something better.

Gwyn brought out the raw chicken that needed to be cooked, setting it on the counter, staring at the packaging to make sure he couldn’t see any needle marks or signs that it had been rewrapped. He knew it was ridiculous, but his brain did it anyway, and if he tried to stop himself from checking, he just felt worse. So he let himself check, and ignored what Augus might think about it.

‘So what happened with Mafydd, anyway?’ Augus said, and Gwyn stiffened and looked over his shoulder. Augus looked at him with a kind of studied, false innocence and Gwyn sighed as he brought out cooking oil and salt and pepper. It was more than he’d normally do for himself, but if Augus was the one who was going to be eating it all, the chicken might as well have some salt on it.

Gwyn sniffed the salt and the pepper to see if he could smell any chemicals, and quietly hoped Augus didn’t say a thing.

‘It was…’ Gwyn said, thinking about Mafydd. ‘It wasn’t what I thought it was.’

‘What did you think it was?’ Augus said softly, as Gwyn set out the pan over the stove. As it heated, he added the oil, and then opened the chicken, bending down to smell that too. He was great at knowing when food had spoiled, because he’d spent so much time looking for other things that he’d actually gotten to know…the food itself too. He chopped it up into thin slices, and then he salted them and added the pepper, before placing them into the oil to fry.

‘I think I thought I loved him,’ Gwyn said eventually, taking a deeper breath, trying not to dwell on it. ‘And I think he thought he was getting head from the champion wrestler, who was underage and, you know, entertaining to bring to heel. People like that. You’d remember. You liked that. And then my parents found out and did damage control.’

‘How did they find out?’

‘I kept wanting to see him,’ Gwyn said. ‘And he didn’t really…want to see me. Eventually it became a whole… It was my fault. In the end. I think I wanted too much and I didn’t understand where my place was.’

‘What, on your knees?’

Gwyn laughed. It was a bitter sound, even though the sharpness of the pain had faded since getting to know Augus. ‘I mean, basically.’

The chicken cooked quickly, cut into such thin pieces. Gwyn drew it off when it was ready and added it to a plate covered with a paper towel, so the oil could drain and the meat could rest. After that, he set about making a salad. He knew already that Augus wouldn’t like it. Gwyn didn’t use dressings because he didn’t trust them. He barely trusted the baby spinach leaves and the carrots and the cherry tomatoes as it was. He had to smell and study everything. Had to know if one of the baby spinach leaves looked bruised because it was bruised, or because devious fingers had gotten into the packet somehow and poisoned them.

He kept waiting for Augus to say something, but Augus never did.

‘But my parents got him expelled,’ Gwyn said. ‘They acted like he was the one pursuing me, corrupting me, and they said he was taking advantage of me. So they kicked him out. But he had really good prospects and they ruined him for it, so he sort of…he sort of hates me now. I can’t blame him.’
‘Was he the one pursuing you?’ Augus said. ‘Not for the affection stuff, obviously, but like…for the sex?’

‘In the beginning,’ Gwyn said, nodding to himself. ‘He was really forward. But I wanted it too. I mean you’ve…met me. You know.’

‘I know it’s easy to take advantage of someone who has hormones and like, has some shit going on in his life and maybe doesn’t want to think about it.’

‘He was the victim,’ Gwyn said. It was what he’d been telling himself for a long time. They’d both been young when it started. Mafydd had been sixteen, Gwyn fourteen, and his parents found it more satisfying to write it off as a crime, instead of Gwyn’s nascent gay awakening and his need to have experiences that meant more than what his family had planned for him.

It wasn’t like Gwyn understood a world where he wasn’t allowed to fuck who he wanted, but his father could beat him until his kidneys bled, anyway. That world was one he didn’t want to live in, and for a year afterwards, he’d antagonised Lludd more than ever, hoping that one of the blows would be fatal. It was also the year he’d been angry enough to take photos of the damage one day, terrified that he’d be killed. Bad enough that he wanted to die, worse to be horrified by death at his father’s hands. Gwyn’s mind was determined by its rifts.

‘I mean, he sounds like a twat,’ Augus said. ‘You forget that I actually talked to him to get leverage on you.’

Gwyn turned. Augus was biting the skin at the side of one of his nails, lowering his hand when Gwyn turned.

He’d worn his hair up today, in a pretty style that Gwyn didn’t know the name of. He missed it when it was down. Whenever Augus wore it down, all Gwyn wanted to do was run his hands through it, caress it and watch it fall black and glossy through his fingers.

‘Is that…a plait?’ Gwyn said, ignoring what Augus had said about Mafydd. He didn’t ever want to know what Mafydd had said about him.

‘Oh this?’ Augus said, reaching up and stroking one side of the intricate knots in his hair. ‘It’s a braid. Do you like it?’

‘Um,’ Gwyn said. Then he nodded and turned away.

‘You don’t think it’s too girly?’

Gwyn was sure that was a trap. He didn’t think Augus gave a shit about being too girly.

‘You really suit that hair,’ Gwyn said, as he quietly assembled the ingredients of the salad together and stared at it, finding it wanting. It wasn’t good enough for Augus. It needed…it needed flavour or something. But Gwyn didn’t eat sauces. He’d learned. Sauces were the easiest things to hide something in. The more flavourful, the richer they were, the more Gwyn was likely to be in agony later. ‘You- You won’t like this.’

‘Hm?’ Augus said, standing up and walking to the counter, picking up one of the pieces of chicken and popping it in his mouth. ‘It’s fine. What’s wrong?’

Augus picked up another piece of chicken, and then ate half. As Gwyn listened to him chewing, he froze when he felt the other half of the strip bump against his mouth. Panicking, he stepped backwards, and then grit his teeth together when he felt Augus’ other hand twist up in his shirt.
‘Hungry?’ Augus said. ‘You made all this food. And I just ate some. It’s not like I’ve spent a lifetime developing a secret resistance to iochane powder.’

‘To what?’ Gwyn said.

‘Haven’t you ever seen The Princess Bride?’

Gwyn shook his head as Augus slowly reeled him in by his shirt. Gwyn’s heart was pounding, he felt light-headed. Augus took another tiny nibble of the piece of chicken, leaving only a small amount. He kept proving that there wasn’t anything in there, and Gwyn kept being confronted by his own fear. It wasn’t going away just because Augus was trying to make this easier for him.

‘I can’t do this,’ Gwyn whispered. ‘You can eat it all.’

‘Come here,’ Augus said, reaching around and grasping some of Gwyn’s hair and pulling him forwards. Gwyn grunted when their lips met, tasted salt and chicken, a tiny bit of pepper, and then Augus as well. He opened his mouth, wanting the distraction. He was afraid, for a second, that Augus would force the chicken between his lips, but Augus just kissed him. His lips mostly closed, the kiss almost entirely sweet.

Augus pulled him closer, their hips bumping, Gwyn’s hand sliding on the counter before it came to rest at Augus’ waist. His thumb slid over Augus’ hipbone through his black jeans.

‘You ever played the pocky game?’ Augus said.

‘The what?’

‘I’m beginning to despair of your knowledge of pop culture,’ Augus said, laughing. ‘I’d despair of mine too, but I know Ash and he doesn’t give me a choice. Besides, it wouldn’t be romantic with chicken. So just close your eyes and open your mouth.’

‘What?’ Gwyn said, though he didn’t step back. ‘No.’

‘You can do it,’ Augus said. ‘I’ll kiss you after.’

‘You can’t just fuck my…my…this thing away.’

‘I know,’ Augus said. ‘That’s why I said I’d kiss you after.’

‘You can’t just-’

‘Hey, Gwyn,’ Augus said, his voice firmer. ‘Close your eyes. Open your mouth. I promise to drive you to emergency if I poison you. You can take me to court too.’

A bubble of hysteria alongside the impulse to laugh at the ridiculousness of it, but he quashed both down. Augus looked at him steadily, with his pretty braid, his eyes that made Gwyn want to learn more words for the colour green. He still had a hand on Augus’ waist, and Augus still had a piece of cooling chicken in his fingers. Gwyn’s chest was doing tiny flips, he couldn’t pretend he wasn’t afraid.

But he closed his eyes. After several breaths he opened his mouth the tiniest amount.

He expected the chicken, but instead Augus leaned up and kissed him first. His lips gentle and almost reassuring, though Gwyn didn’t know if kisses could be that. Then, Augus’ lips moved to one side of Gwyn’s mouth, and Augus slid the chicken in over his tongue. After a few seconds, Augus’
other hand stroked up under Gwyn’s chin and closed his mouth.

‘Go on,’ Augus said against his cheek. ‘This part you know how to do.’

Gwyn wanted it to be sensual, but his fear didn’t leave because he wanted it to. He’d gone ramrod tense, fighting the urge to spit the chicken out, fighting the urge to rinse his mouth or shove his fingers down his throat and force himself to purge whatever Crielle had just put in his food. When he started shaking, Augus just stood closer, which meant Gwyn stumbling backwards, bumping into the counter, his other hand moving out for balance and touching the chopping board and the end of a carrot.

He thought of Augus saying that Gwyn was like Ash ‘but worse.’ He thought of Mikkel and the case and how they were mostly going after Lludd’s explicit violence because there was no evidence of what Crielle had done beyond base malnutrition. Gwyn knew all he had to do was close his mouth, chew maybe two or three times at most – the piece of chicken was small – and swallow. He knew. He willed his jaw to do it, he willed his throat to work, he hated it just sitting on his tongue like that.

It would be better to just go back to the sensuality that Augus was offering.

He sensed too, that Augus didn’t know what he was doing. That Augus wanted it to be easier.

Gwyn’s jaw clamped down. He wanted this to be easier for Augus too. Because it seemed like Augus spent a lot of his time thinking of things he could do for Ash, for Gwyn, but not really for himself. He felt ill, ashamed, humiliated that he was like this. He felt short of breath because he wasn’t breathing deeply enough through his nose and he couldn’t open his mouth. He’d spit the chicken out if he did.

He’d never be able to describe to anyone how much effort it took to unlock his jaw, how he shook through chewing the piece of chicken four times, how his throat locked up and refused to swallow twice before he was actually able to do it. He wouldn’t want them to know how hard it was. For a tiny piece of food that he’d bought himself and cooked himself and that Augus had already eaten most of.

Augus leaned into him, pushing him back into the counter, murmuring something that Gwyn couldn’t catch over the roar in his own ears.

‘You’re amazing,’ Augus said, minutes later, when Gwyn’s body couldn’t hold up that much tension anymore.

Gwyn’s breath came in a silent sob. It didn’t feel amazing to be this stuck in himself, in his mind. It felt awful. But he clung to Augus, kept him close.

‘You didn’t run away,’ Augus said. ‘I know you wanted to.’

‘Shut up,’ Gwyn managed.

‘Can you do it again?’

‘Shut up.’

Augus had picked up a stick of carrot and was crunching it down. Gwyn could smell it between them. He expected to have a piece of carrot placed in his mouth, but instead Augus kept feeding himself. Gwyn could tell the difference in what he was eating, the softer sounds of him chewing on baby spinach. The smell of a tomato. More chicken based on where Augus’ arm reached. Eventually
Gwyn relaxed further, glad that Augus was eating, feeling wrung out.

‘Your eyes are already closed,’ Augus said, ‘so that part’s done. Open your mouth for me.’

He was too exhausted to sustain the same level of fear as last time. But it still wriggled up inside of him, waiting in his mouth and his throat, across the band of his forehead. After a moment, his lips barely parted. A tiny piece of carrot, smaller than his thumbnail, was pushed into his mouth and onto his tongue, Augus keeping his fingers there for a few moments.

‘Be good,’ Augus whispered, withdrawing his fingers and tapping the underside of Gwyn’s chin until Gwyn’s mouth closed.

It was easier this time, to chew and swallow. Easier in that it took only a few minutes of resistant terror and tension, instead of however long it had taken before. Easier in that Gwyn was already so tired, his body only able to make so much adrenaline at once. But it was hard enough that Gwyn wondered if he’d ever be able to do this properly. If he’d ever know how to trust eating around someone else.

It wasn’t often that he felt his brokenness. But in that moment, it twanged through him, the sting of broken guitar strings wounding him inside. As he swallowed, he opened his eyes and stared somewhere above Augus’ head, wishing the ground would open up beneath him.

‘This is so stupid,’ Gwyn said.

‘I know you think it is,’ Augus said. ‘But you’re not right about everything.’

‘I can’t do more of this,’ Gwyn said.

‘Okay,’ Augus said. ‘We’ll stop for today. I can keep eating though, right? Can I save you some? Will you have some later?’

Augus made it seem easy. Gwyn found himself nodding even though he wasn’t sure he’d be able to eat whatever Augus saved for him.

‘When was the last time you ate?’ Augus said.

‘Last night.’

‘So that’s not too bad,’ Augus said. ‘You don’t eat enough, but it helps that I know you eat. Probably too much at once, right? To make up for all the times you don’t?’

‘Yeah,’ Gwyn said, looking down at the chicken, the vegetables, everything he’d cooked and prepared himself. ‘Especially for wrestling, with weigh ins and stuff.’

He sighed. He was so tired.

‘One house I was in…’ Augus said, turning and opening cabinets, looking for a plate as he ate another piece of chicken. ‘The guy worked at a grocery store and he used to bring stuff back that was past its best before and use-by date. And that was fine for most things. Stale bread is fine. A lot of things are fine. But I didn’t realise at first until I got food poisoning like the fourth time that he did it with the meat too. He only gave it to the kids. And then he’d say one of us had gastroenteritis or a norovirus or whatever and we must’ve passed it onto the other kids.’

Augus picked up some spinach leaves and ate them easily as he put the salad and the chicken into a bowl. Gwyn watched him, still leaning against the counter.
‘It was bullshit,’ Augus said, laughing to himself. ‘I just stopped eating the meat. I said I was a vegetarian and he was so pissed but like, in the end it didn’t matter because it’s just as easy to eat beans out of a tin and it didn’t take anything away from him for me to just not eat the meat. The other kids didn’t realise. Idiots. I should’ve told them, but all of us being vegetarians would’ve been too suss and I’m just not that much of a hero.’

Augus hesitated for a long moment, bent over as he looked for cling wrap. His gaze went distant. When he straightened, he was silent for a few minutes, crunching on carrot sticks, and Gwyn wondered what he was meant to say but couldn’t think of anything.

‘Anyway,’ Augus said. ‘My point is, adults are sometimes little fucking psychopaths and you do what you can to survive them. Sometimes that fucks you up. Sometimes it doesn’t. When it does, sometimes you work on it, because you don’t want the ghost of a little fucking psychopath to rule you for the rest of your life. Because god, that’s boring.’

Augus turned to Gwyn with a sharp, savage smile.

‘How old were you?’ Gwyn said.

‘Eight?’ Augus said, shrugging with one hand. ‘Nine? I was in that house for a while. Like a year? Honestly it wasn’t so bad, but it turned out he was fucking one of the girls. He was good at hiding it, none of us knew. But the girl reported to the case worker and bam, we were all out of that house. It was a shame. I didn’t go somewhere better after that. And I don’t know if she did either, but I never saw her again.’

‘How old was the girl?’ Gwyn said, his voice thinner than before.

‘Like…seven?’ Augus tipped his head back, eyes narrowing in thought. ‘Maybe six? Don’t get me wrong, it’s not a shame now that she reported. But eight year old me was only in it for himself. I only cared about what happened to me.’

Augus’ smile broadened a little, but it seemed strangely self-deprecating.

‘Anyway,’ Augus said. ‘I made my point, didn’t I? Also, you want to see what I got today?’

Augus walked over to the sink to wash his hands before he walked over to his black satchel and opened it. He brought out a new, small pump pack of lubricant.

Gwyn wanted to be the kind of person who would be horrified at the idea of having sex after everything that Gwyn had just learned about Augus’ past. But he wasn’t that kind of person.

‘No more olive oil?’ Gwyn said.

‘I am going to get so far inside you today, you’re going to choke on it.’

Gwyn laughed even as his cheeks flushed, his neck burned. ‘You still sound like porn.’

‘I happen to think that line is hot,’ Augus said. ‘If I hadn’t heard it in porn, I would’ve made it up. Look, I can’t help it that I want to get something so thick into you that you feel like you’re dying a little. It’s probably not my cock, but I mean, that’s why god invented sex toys and blah blah blah.’

Gwyn’s gut clenched at the ‘you feel like dying a little.’ He wanted that too. But wanting it in his daydreams was very different to knowing what it would be like in reality. Still, the idea of Augus over him, fucking him or fucking something into him, while Gwyn rode out an ache that was very different to being torn…
‘You don’t mind…I mean some guys mind with sex toys and stuff,’ Gwyn said. ‘You don’t get jealous?’

‘Of a toy? That I’m fucking you with?’ Augus burst into indulgent laughter. ‘What the fuck? Just pretend it’s another cock, because that’s how I’m going to use it. What, I suddenly can’t come or something because I get some high grade silicone into your ass? Though…it’s expensive, isn’t it? Even like, BDSM-on-a-budget doesn’t really cover…’

Augus turned abruptly and stared at the food. Then he went over to the kitchen, drew out the crisper drawer, and brought out the bag of carrots.

‘One hundred percent no,’ Gwyn said abruptly.

‘Oh, I have condoms,’ Augus said.

‘No!’ Gwyn was so mortified that he walked over to the table and sat down, all the more to protect his ass from whatever Augus was thinking. They weren’t small carrots. They were the large ‘GMO sized’ kind that were less about boutique organic flavour and more about bang for your buck. But Gwyn didn’t want to find that out literally.

Augus bit his lower lip as he turned, holding a carrot that was definitely larger than Augus’ cock, and a bit bumpy. He bent it as though testing to see if it was easily breakable. Then he looked at Gwyn like he wanted to devour him.

‘Fuck you,’ Gwyn said. ‘We are so not—’

‘Say one of the colours,’ Augus said, grinning, ‘or I’m going to assume you’re some kind of like Victorian maiden shade of green where you have to be made to like it.’

‘Fuck you!’ Gwyn exclaimed.

‘Victorian maiden green it is,’ Augus said. He placed the carrot on the counter, and then put away the bowl of food Gwyn had prepared in the fridge after covering it with cling wrap. He placed all the other items – chopping board, knives, the pan – in the sink, running water over them. Gwyn wondered how many houses he’d been in, to commandeer them so confidently.

‘Augus, you can’t be serious.’

‘Seriously, you think this is extreme?’ Augus said. ‘It’s a carrot. It’ll be covered in a condom. I won’t even make you eat it after.’

Gwyn was aware that he made a sound that could only be called sputtering, before he threw his hands in the air and walked out of the kitchen. When Augus ran after him, Gwyn half-expected an apology, not:

‘Oh good, are we going upstairs?’

‘Remember how you ripped a hole in my fucking ass?’ Gwyn said, rounding on him.

‘Yes,’ Augus said, the light in his eyes not remotely vanquished. ‘So I’ll use these guys first.’ He waggled his fingers. ‘And then when you’re good and loose for it we’ll go to salad land.’

‘You don’t get to call it salad land.’

‘Then stop complaining that all my lines come from porn,’ Augus said, still holding the carrot.
'Stop being so happy about this! You were just talking about how a kid got raped.'

'Not me,' Augus said, eyes widening. Gwyn shook a finger at him and was vaguely aware that he probably looked like his father and told himself that he didn't want – had never wanted to be – fucked by a carrot. Certainly not while Augus looked so evil about it. 'If we got all sweetly anti-sex every time our traumatising pasts came up we'd never have sex.'

'I’m starting to think that’s maybe the best idea ever?' Gwyn said, a little breathless. ‘Good idea. Let’s pass the motion. No more sex with you ever. You need like a hundred years of therapy. You need to live with a therapist.’

‘That’s unhealthy,’ Augus said. ‘Boundaries, Gwyn.’

‘You called it salad land. There’s meds that you need that haven’t been invented yet.’

‘Ouch,’ Augus said, still waving the carrot in the air.

‘Put the carrot down!’

‘I mean I will. But I want to put it down in a really specific place.’

‘Stop it!’

Augus started laughing. ‘And that really specific place is—’

Gwyn ran over and shoved his hand over Augus’ mouth. Augus was in the middle of biting his palm as they both stumbled into the lounge room. Augus laughed, Gwyn started too, in spite of himself. They fell onto the couch and Augus shrieked, then chomped down on the heel of Gwyn’s palm, bursts of laughter coming from his nose.

When Gwyn moved his hand, Augus bit his lower lip while grinning, and Gwyn realised that Augus’ freckles looked perfect and his eyes were still bright and he looked…happy.

‘I don’t get you at all,’ Gwyn said.

Augus’ leg slid between Gwyn’s, rising up, rubbing between his inner thighs. Gwyn looked down, hair flopping over his forehead as he saw dark denim moving back and forth. He gulped.

‘Don’t you get it yet?’ Augus said. ‘We can do what we want. No one’s going to stop us. I’m not going to hurt you more than you want to be hurt, I promise. And maybe you really think now is the wrong time to fuck, but you went and tried super hard to be good for me, eating that food. I saw how hard it was for you, okay? I saw. So maybe you could let me try and blow your mind, because you earned that, didn’t you? And maybe you’ll be a bit humiliated by the carrot part, but if you trust me like, a little, I promise you won’t care much by the time I’m working it into you. Don’t you want me to make you feel good?’

Augus’ leg was shoving up harder, pushing Gwyn’s legs apart, and Gwyn’s gut swooped as Augus’ thigh muscle made contact with his balls. The angle wasn’t great, but it was good. Gwyn was braced over him, one arm on the back of the couch – disturbingly near the carrot – the other on Augus’ shoulder.

‘Don’t I make you feel good?’ Augus breathed, as Gwyn lifted his head to look at Augus. ‘Besides, BDSM-on-a-budget said carrots and cucumbers are a sure thing if you’re careful. It’s not like I learned this from porn. Well…not only from porn.’
Gwyn cleared his throat, carefully lowering his pelvis so that it slid down Augus’ thigh. God, it felt sinfully good. It became easier to forget about everything else that had been stressing him out. Augus looking joyful was addictive. Gwyn hated feeling like Augus’ playground, right up until he remembered that it could feel great.

‘BDSM-on-a-budget,’ Gwyn said roughly.

‘Mmmhm,’ Augus said. ‘Where plastic coat-hangers are okay but metal ones are maybe a bit too harsh right now. I’ve even learned how to change the tension in clothes pegs. Like you deserve the best of the best obviously, but I can’t afford that. And I might not be able to for a while. They also said like, if you’re saving up, it’s best to get the things that are hardest to make yourself, like plugs and really good weighted floggers and stuff. But I might learn to make those because I like leather. Don’t you like leather?’

As Augus spoke, he moved his leg insistently, twisting and shifting until his knee was pressed up achingly against Gwyn’s hardening cock and his balls. Gwyn clutched the back of the couch, thinking they should probably take this upstairs. Maybe he could talk Augus out of the carrot later.

‘I…don’t mind leather,’ Gwyn said.

‘You’re going all pink,’ Augus said, in that habit of saying whatever came to his mind as soon as he was aroused enough. ‘Your ears too. It’s cute.’

‘I don’t want to be cute.’

‘Why, because you think you won’t be handsome anymore?’ Augus said, laughing and lifting up with only his pelvic muscles to kiss Gwyn’s nose. ‘You can be both, cutie.’

‘Shush.’

‘Even cuter now.’

‘Oh my god, your stream of consciousness is so annoying.’

‘Then give me something to do,’ Augus said, pressing up harder. Gwyn winced, mouth opening. ‘That’s it. Maybe I just need to give you something to do instead, so you can’t tell me to shut up anymore. All right.’

He withdrew his leg quickly, pushing Gwyn off the couch so fast he felt dazed. A hand caught his shoulder and then Augus’ face was close to his.

‘Go upstairs and strip for me,’ Augus said.

‘Or you’ll punish me?’ Gwyn said.

‘No,’ Augus said. ‘But do it anyway. Because we’re dating.’

‘I hate you,’ Gwyn muttered as he turned and walked towards the stairs. ‘So much.’

‘Thanks, cutie,’ Augus called as he sailed back off towards the kitchen. Gwyn turned to watch the tail of his braid bounce. In that moment, Gwyn wanted to grab it and yank, but it would only be to vent momentary frustration, because he was half-hard, his balls ached, and he hadn’t wanted Augus to take his leg his away. Hadn’t wanted Augus to stop until Gwyn really hurt, because Gwyn wanted to know how much he could take.
They were probably dangerous for each other, but Gwyn didn’t care. He took the stairs two at a time.

He hesitated, then stripped off, tossing his clothing on the floor and walking over to close the curtains. He walked into the bathroom, filled up the glass he’d brought up, and sipped at it. His mouth was so dry.

Augus took a while, by the time he was done, Gwyn was lying on his side, because facedown made his ass too vulnerable, and face up showed his half-hard cock. Instead, he shoved a pillow in front of his dick and pretended like that was natural, and rested his head on his hand.

When Augus came up with condoms, a carrot, and lubricant, his eyes swooped over Gwyn and he grinned.

‘Why’s the pillow there?’

He walked over and yanked it away before Gwyn could grab it back.

‘Nice,’ Augus said, reaching down and wrapping his cold – cold! – fingers around Gwyn’s cock. Gwyn jerked and hissed, and Augus only dropped the condoms and the lubricant, leaning down so he could get a better angle for jacking Gwyn’s cock. Gwyn stopped bothering trying to look casual, head falling onto the bed. Augus’ hand might be frigid, but it still felt good. ‘I’m cold because I had to wash the carrot.’

‘I hate you.’

‘Really thoroughly, because even though it’s going into a condom first, it’s still going in your ass.’

Augus crawled onto the bed, stretching to place the carrot on the small bedside table. He unbuttoned his dark green shirt quickly, straddling Gwyn’s side at the same time.

‘Touch yourself,’ Augus said.

Gwyn hesitated, then placed his hand on his cock, first protectively, and then just because it felt good. Augus watched as he took his shirt off, flinging it across the room where it hit the wall. He bent down, one hand over Gwyn’s, fingers dipping to rub at Gwyn’s cock, his nose skimming along Gwyn’s jaw before lips followed.

‘Today’s not BDSM-on-a-budget anyway,’ Augus said. ‘It’s just fucking. It’s fine.’

It was hard to come up with a response as Augus slowly massaged Gwyn’s cock, bumping his hand away. Gwyn sighed, shoulders relaxing, because this was nice. Augus’ fingers were so good at this part, all that porn and his obsessive wanking paying off.

‘You like that?’ Augus said, biting at Gwyn’s lower lip before letting go.

‘Anyone would,’ Gwyn said, his voice deeper than before.

‘I suppose that’s true. You want to turn over so I can get my fingers into you?’

‘Fuck,’ Gwyn said, half in disgust and half in want. He nodded after a moment, then waited even longer as Augus’ hand didn’t stop moving on him. It was tempting to just have the handjob, but he liked the feeling of Augus inside of him, pretended that was all that was coming. He didn’t want to know what a carrot felt like, he wasn’t like that.
That would be Augus’ fault and Gwyn could just pretend it was one hundred percent on him.

Augus shifted as Gwyn turned, and Gwyn reached down to move his cock so it wasn’t squashed at a terrible angle. Then Augus straddled one of Gwyn’s legs, his knee keeping a gap between Gwyn’s thighs. Augus reached up, took things off the bedside table, and Gwyn hissed when he felt a freezing carrot land on his back.

‘Cold,’ Gwyn said.

‘Maybe you’ll warm it up.’

There was nothing lulling or even arousing about the way fingers wet with lubricant moved between his ass cheeks. Gwyn made a face and squirmed as Augus painted the stuff down and then added more. It was cold, the carrot was colder on his lower back, and Augus hummed like he was figuring out a puzzle.

‘God you’re so hot,’ Augus said. ‘Both kinds, I mean.’

Gwyn resigned himself to Augus talking endlessly about whatever came to mind during this whole experience, annoyed that it was endearing. He wanted to hate it, instead it felt familiar and comfortable.

‘I can’t believe you let me do this to you,’ Augus said, as he gently worked the tip of his index finger into Gwyn’s ass, not waiting as Gwyn clamped down reflexively.

‘Same.’

‘I’m so hard already,’ Augus laughed, then silence, Gwyn gasping as Augus shoved his finger all the way in. The digit went still inside of him, then turned back and forth as it withdrew. Gwyn tensed as he realised Augus was feeling back for the scar tissue, because as soon as he found it, he stopped and rubbed. A strange, not-quite-comfortable feeling, and Gwyn’s breathing turned uneven. Augus didn’t stop.

‘What are you doing?’

‘It helps,’ Augus said. ‘I read that warming it up and massaging it helps loosen it. And you want to be loose for me, right? And the carrot. Can’t send you to the hospital with groceries up your ass.’

‘Oh, fuck you,’ Gwyn choked, squeezing his eyes shut.

Augus’ finger was now rubbing at Gwyn’s hole all over, sometimes plucking at the rim in a way that made Gwyn’s heart skip. Dipping inside, stroking the outside, a level of attention that made Gwyn too dizzy to move. When Augus slid his finger back inside, all the way, Gwyn’s hips flexed up and back into the movement, Augus’ thighs clamping on his leg.

Two fingers, then three, and Gwyn was moaning quietly to himself, surprised that Augus wasn’t talking more. He knew Augus was probably watching all of it, knew his ass didn’t compare to pornography with all those bleached, pale assholes. Did he like this more? Gwyn was scared to ask.

Augus bent forwards, lips pressing against his shoulder.

‘I mean,’ Augus said. ‘I just could shove things into you for the rest of my life and I think I’d be happy. You ever been curious about fisting? I don’t know if we could do it with this…’ Augus’ three fingers moved back, all three of them stretching and massaging the scar tissue which was numb and tingly at the same time. ‘I bet we could though. I bet there’s a way. Would you want my fist inside
Gwyn’s voice broke when the three fingers shoved back in, curling down hard enough that Gwyn could almost imagine it – Augus’ fist inside him, knuckles pressing relentlessly into his prostate.

‘You make me want to get a job with great pay,’ Augus said, scraping his teeth over Gwyn’s shoulder. ‘Because then I could get like, anal beads, and xeno dildos, and all the other shit I’ve been learning about. Plugs, oh my god, would you like one inside you? Would you wear one out for me? Just…imagine it sitting right here every time you shifted.’

Augus rubbed the pads of his fingers over Gwyn’s prostate, getting to it way better than Gwyn ever could. Gwyn didn’t care about the cold of the carrot anymore, he felt dizzy, warm, hungry. And so, so impatient.

‘Augus,’ he complained.

‘Would you wear one of those ultra femme ones? You know the ones,’ Augus said, ‘with the gems at the end? Would you wear it like jewellery for me?’

‘No,’ Gwyn managed.

‘No?’ Augus said, sounding sad. ‘You wouldn’t? You don’t want to be pretty for me?’

Gwyn’s mind was torn, his cheeks burning, but in the end he didn’t have to say anything at all, because Augus was still touching him deep inside as he said:

‘Tough shit, Gwyn. You’re going to wear it anyway, because I said so.’

That, more than some of the other things Augus had said, sent a wave of heat moving through him. He swallowed down the groan he wanted to make – Augus didn’t deserve it – luxuriating in what Augus was doing instead. That lasted only a minute before he realised what he really wanted.

‘Augus, come on,’ he said. ‘Fuck me.’

‘With the carrot? Ask nicely.’

‘With you, Augus. Please? Don’t you want to come?’

‘Oh my god, Gwyn,’ Augus said, mock scandal in his voice as he strummed his fingers inside Gwyn enough that his hips bucked and twisted, the carrot rolling off him. ‘Oh my god, are you trying to negotiate? Have you found my weak point? Babe, nice try. Haven’t you heard? I have a problem with premature ejaculation. I don’t know if I could keep a hungry ass like yours satisfied without something like this.’

Gwyn tensed when Augus thumped his lower back with the carrot several times.

‘Ask me for it, babe,’ Augus said.

Gwyn gritted his teeth, shoving his face down into the bed, ears flaming. Absolutely not.

‘Sure,’ Augus said lightly. ‘Sure thing. We have all the time in the world. I’ve got nowhere else to be. Your prostate is getting a really nice massage. It’s just relaxing, right? Just relax, Gwyn. You’ll be great.’

For a few minutes, it was great. Those fingers stroking over his prostate, making him half want to piss, half want to come, low and throbbing inside of him as his balls felt heavier and heavier. But
after that it edged into discomfort, Gwyn panting and twisting, trying to get friction for himself but wanting something inside of him more. He wanted Augus to fuck him, but he was beginning to think a carrot wouldn’t be that bad.

‘It’ll be in a condom?’

‘Absolutely,’ Augus said. His fingers dragged back and rubbed over the scar tissue again, and Gwyn managed several half syllables before he just didn’t care anymore.

‘Fine,’ Gwyn said into the bed. ‘Fine, okay.’

‘Fine, okay, what?’

‘Fuck me with a carrot, I don’t fucking care,’ Gwyn said, as Augus laughed all too happily behind him and then slid his fingers free as he reached to get the condoms. ‘Fuck you, also.’

‘I know,’ Augus said. ‘I have it on good authority that I’m terrible. Shit, my fingers are slippery, hang on.’

Gwyn groaned in disgust when Augus wiped the fingers that had been inside Gwyn’s ass, over his thigh instead. A brief moment of alarm when he remembered that they hadn’t put any towels down, but he couldn’t be bothered getting up. He didn’t want to do anything except come. His ass kept clenching down on nothing at all, his breathing refusing to steady.

After a minute, fingers returned to his ass, testing it, and then Gwyn hissed when he felt the cold blunt tip of the carrot sheathed in latex. It wasn’t as cold as before, but it was still noticeable.

‘This has like, zero give,’ Augus said, as he slid it in, pushing gently but firmly against the small amount of resistance Gwyn put up. And then Gwyn bowed his neck, dug his forehead into the bed, surprised at how smoothly it entered him given it was thicker than Augus and cold and unyielding. It wasn’t fair that the idea of how wrong it was just made him harder. His stomach clenching. He couldn’t eat one in front of Augus, but apparently he could be fucked by one, and he didn’t know how he felt about that.

‘Fuck,’ Augus breathed, angling it down over Gwyn’s prostate as it slid deeper into him. Gwyn moaned, his arms stretching up to ball into the pillow as his toes curled. ‘Is it good?’

Gwyn nodded, then tensed abruptly when he felt a low, sudden pulse of pain deep inside. He grunted, then shifted.

‘Wait,’ he said. ‘It’s too deep.’

‘It’s the angle,’ Augus said. ‘I mean probably. Here…’

He didn’t move the carrot at all, keeping it where it was, pushing too hard at some sensitive place inside of Gwyn’s gut. A hand was lifting Gwyn’s hips, which was awful for a few seconds, as it felt like he was just pushing back into the pain. His breathing strained, and then he was half up on his knees and elbows, and Augus was forcing a dip into his lower back by pushing his knuckles in.

Then, the carrot moved inside of him, withdrawing a tiny amount, coming back at a different angle. Gwyn hissed.

‘Not better.’

‘Yeah, yeah, give me a bit. You did this to me too, remember? The position has to be right.’
‘Sometimes things are just too big,’ Gwyn said.

He cried out when Augus pushed forwards at an angle that was just wrong. He was about to use one of the words to stop everything, when Augus shifted the carrot one last time and when he pushed forwards, Gwyn’s eyes flew open when the pain turned into a low ache and the carrot went further than before.

‘Oh, fuck,’ Gwyn managed. That felt so deep. It hadn’t been that much longer than Augus’ cock had it? He took huge breaths, shocked.

‘See?’ Augus said. ‘There you go. That’s the angle, right? We’ll remember this for next time.’

Gwyn didn’t care. His breathing sounded rough and unsteady in his ears. He’d frozen into position, not wanting to shift, a little scared of how deep the carrot felt, past some barrier inside of him.

‘What is that?’ Gwyn said.

‘I thought you’d read all the articles,’ Augus said absently as he fucked the carrot into Gwyn in deep, small movements, keeping it so far inside of him that Augus’ hand was bumping into his ass now. Augus was right, Gwyn did feel like he was dying a little ‘Wouldn’t you know?’

Gwyn made an incoherent sound and didn’t bother responding.

‘I think it’s the pubo-rectal sling,’ Augus said. ‘Shame they don’t teach us about this in human biology though, seriously. Or maybe they did? And I just didn’t remember, because it was so irrelevant until your giant fucking cock rammed up against it and I thought I was going to murder you, it hurt so much.’

‘Huh.’ Gwyn wanted nothing more than to sprawl out onto the bed, not having to worry about his knees or the angle or keeping his spine dipped or any of it. It was uncomfortable inside of him, but also so good. He felt his balls trying to draw up, his cock heavy between his legs. God, he just wanted to come.

‘Can I talk porn lines to you now?’ Augus said, and Gwyn didn’t care what he did anymore. ‘Like, how you can take a fucking dick like a champion?’

Gwyn managed a thin breath of laughter that became a whimper as Augus withdrew the carrot nearly all the way out, then slid it all the back in again. As it passed that curve inside of him that hurt before, Gwyn felt a strange clamping sensation across his lower belly, shivering through him.

‘I honestly don’t know how anyone goes back to work or like, pays rent or whatever once they discover how good fucking is,’ Augus breathed.

Gwyn shut off the part of his brain that had to listen to Augus’ rambling and focused on the sensations instead. He rocked his hips backwards, wincing a little as it changed the angle and brought back a shadow of the pain from before. But instead of stopping, he kept it up, thinking of how it had felt when Augus spanked him, when Gwyn was sometimes too rough with himself.

Maybe he thought Augus would get bored with it, but he didn’t. Augus kept fucking into him until Gwyn’s rim started to feel chafed, his body covered in sweat that was cooling, his breaths shaking hard. The thrusts were thorough now, long strokes in and out, always angled down, always that blunt, thick force over his prostate, hurting and unavoidable and connected directly to his cock.

Gwyn felt exhausted when he came, the heat building sluggishly until he shouted with every thrust into the bed and Augus just kept fucking him. Gwyn thought to get a hand on his cock too late, the
spasms raking through him and making him lose touch of reality for a second. He was only sensation, the too-sharp pleasure of it, the pain of being too overworked, like spending too long at the gym.

Augus withdrew the carrot while Gwyn was still coming, and Gwyn made a faint sound of displeasure, then bucked when Augus pressed his cock inside, the fly of his jeans scraping against Gwyn’s ass as Augus pressed deep.

‘Motherfucker,’ Augus whispered. Then weak, rueful laughter. ‘Oh no, I’m not gonna-’

Augus coming inside of him so quickly was a relief, Gwyn didn’t have the presence of mind to bother with insults, if anything a little flattered that Augus had found the whole thing such a turn on in the first place. Augus bowed over him, cock pulsing inside until it finally stopped, forehead resting between Gwyn’s shoulders, and he felt sore and reached up and pushed awkwardly at Augus’ hip.

‘Off.’

‘Hang on,’ Augus said. ‘I’m dying.’

‘Get off.’

‘God, you’re so grumpy,’ Augus said, withdrawing, Gwyn wincing and rolling to his side, a hand going up to his belly and curling over it. ‘You’re sore?’

Gwyn nodded. Then he made a face when Augus rolled him facedown into the wet patch – gross – and spread his ass cheeks. A thumb brushed tenderly over his entrance, and Gwyn pressed his lips together at how sensitive he felt.

‘You’re pretty swollen,’ Augus said. ‘But there’s no blood. Maybe just no carrots for a few days,’

‘Ha. Ha. You evil fucking goblin.’

Augus laughed, then draped himself over Gwyn’s body, limbs falling on either side of him, legs spread over his legs. Gwyn liked it, his breathing slowly returning to normal, even as he couldn’t wait to roll over away from the wet patch. He was going to have to clean everything, but he’d deal with it later.

Much later.

He sighed when he felt Augus’ come begin to leak out of him. It was filthy, but he found himself agreeing with Augus for once, he really didn’t understand why people did anything else, once they discovered how much fun fucking could be.

*

They lay under blankets after they’d taken turns showering, even though it was only mid-afternoon. Gwyn enjoyed how indulgent it felt, and Augus stroked Gwyn’s fingers, only stopping when Gwyn turned Augus’ hand to gently nestle his fingers in his palm.

‘It must be hard,’ Augus said.

Gwyn nodded. ‘I know Mikkel’s good at his job, and I know like, it’s a good lawyer, but if this all goes wrong—’

‘I know,’ Augus said. ‘I can’t think about it. So I don’t know what it’s like for you.’
‘Efnisien keeps texting me,’ Gwyn said, laughing a little. Because his fingers were resting in Augus’ palm, he didn’t miss the way he tensed. He looked up at Augus’ face, shadowed beneath the blankets. ‘Augus?’

‘Nothing,’ Augus said. ‘I just hate him. He’s an asshole. You should block him from your phone.’

Gwyn thought that was probably true, but there was something in the way Augus reacted that gave him pause. Efnisien had walked Augus over to their table the other day at school. Had Efnisien said something to him? Threatened him?

A wave of hot anger drenched him, Gwyn forced himself to take a slow, deep breath. No, Augus would tell him, because Augus wanted him to get Efnisien out of his life anyway. But if Efnisien so much as tried anything with Augus, Gwyn would kill him. Augus pretended that he was indestructible, talked flippantly about his horrendous childhood, but he was fragile beneath all the shards of sharp glass he used to shelter his personality from others.

Gwyn moved closer and lifted his arm beneath the bed, sliding it over Augus’ side. Augus was naked now too, finally, after his shower. His skin was smooth, the hint of lean muscle beneath skin appealing.

‘I should,’ Gwyn said finally. ‘But he shares things that are relevant sometimes, and I’m screencapping everything for Mikkel. I don’t think Efnisien realises…’

‘You’re using his messages to help with your case?’ Augus said.

‘Yeah.’

Augus nodded, like he agreed with that, and then leaned into Gwyn, his eyes closing. ‘We can just sleep for a bit, all right? Will you eat something with me later?’

‘Maybe,’ Gwyn said. ‘Probably not.’

‘Yeah,’ Augus said sleepily. ‘Probably not. But you did it. I’m really proud of you.’

It was funny how Augus could sound sarcastic or wry or mean almost all the time, but when he said something nice, the words sounded so real that Gwyn wanted to staple them to all the wounds inside of him. Affection pooled and he pulled Augus closer, selfish and wanting, trying not to think about the case and his fear and his worry for Augus and what the both of their lives might turn into.

‘I really like you.’

‘Good,’ Augus said after a minute, like he’d been too tired to understand the words at first. ‘Because I really like you too. You’re stuck with me anyway.’ He yawned hugely, exhaling across Gwyn’s ear and hair, breath smelling like toothpaste.

Gwyn held Augus as he fell asleep, then stuck his head above the blankets for some cooler air, blinking at the dim room around him. It still smelled of sweat and come, the sticky, full scent of latex and lubricant. His arm tightened around Augus and he closed his eyes, still sore, but more content than he could remember feeling in some time.
Let the Reins Go Loose

Chapter Notes

HOW ARE THERE SEVEN CHAPTERS LEFT

Author’s Note: I’m not entirely sure about this chapter despite going through it (and removing a few sections and adding in others) several times, so I apologise! It is what it is.

ALSO, re: the car sex, I know some of you are the kind to think ‘omg I bet they get interrupted and it’s hideous’ and I’m here to lay your fears to rest, it doesn’t happen.

Also it’s really cold this morning, and I should put some socks on. I know, I know, riveting stuff.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Augus

*  

Going to the local Royal Show had been Ash’s idea, one that Augus – and surprisingly Gwyn – had been reluctant to take him up on. But Gulvi and Kayla declared it brilliant, insisting on Augus and Gwyn both coming.

Augus and Ash picked Gwyn up at six in the evening. Augus wore his knee-high boots, customary black jeans, and a dark green, collared shirt he’d found in a thrift store for three dollars, even though it had obviously been tailored in its lifespan. His hair was in a low ponytail, he’d looped the tie with a black leather cord, tying that off so the strands of it fell with his hair, brushing the back of his neck.

Gwyn looked him up and down in a way that was very satisfying, while Ash just laughed and shook his head and walked back to the car saying:

‘Remember when you wanted to murder him? And now you want to murder him with your cock?’

Augus had been about to say something scathing, but instead he deeply enjoyed the look of alarm on Gwyn’s face and held out his hand.

‘Your carriage awaits, my jock.’

‘No,’ Gwyn said, walking straight past him. ‘Yuck.’

‘You really don’t want to be a princess at all, do you?’ Augus said, jogging after him. ‘Princess Gwyn, you have the hair for it, you know. God, you’d look amazing with some eyeliner.’

‘Wow,’ Gwyn said, sliding into the passenger seat next to Ash, meaning Augus had to sit in the back. ‘I’m so glad I don’t have to sit next to you.’

‘Rude,’ Augus said, slamming the door as he slid into the back. Then he grinned as he kicked Gwyn’s seat with his boot, and Gwyn turned around with an hilarious look on his face that was
somewhere between outrage and ‘how old are you exactly?’

Augus laughed and proceeded to kick Gwyn’s seat all the way to the Royal Show, until Ash actually pulled the car over, sternly told him off and told him to walk the rest of the way. They yelled at each other until Augus sulkily said he wouldn’t kick any seats anymore, today, and then they drove the rest of the way in near silence. Gwyn snickered sometimes, and Augus hated that he found it cute. God. *Cute.*

* The sun was setting when they arrived. Discordant, jangling music from different stalls and rides drifted across the oval, and the Ferris wheel turned slowly, glowing with lights that only got brighter as the sky dimmed. Augus shook his head at the spectacle of it all, rolled his eyes, even as Ash bounded off in the direction of a corndog stall.

‘No!’ Augus shouted. ‘God, we’ve only just arrived! You’re going to see a million other things you want!’

‘Corndogs!’ was all Augus heard, by way of reply.

Ash must have messaged Kayla and Gulvi, who came over five minutes later, Gulvi wearing some kind of tacky crown that must have been won in a carnival game. Kayla was rocking a goth look, a long black duster over a skirt that came halfway down her thighs, boots that were even higher than Augus’, someway up past the knee, and several silver and black chokers. Augus saw the red lipstick and wondered how Gwyn would look in it, then realised he’d really have to seriously bring that up with Gwyn at some point. Would he go for it? Augus thought… *maybe,* but he’d have to be careful and persistent and probably even a bit romantic about it. Which was gross.

‘You made it!’ Gulvi said, holding out her arms to hug Augus, laughing as he backed away.

‘We live *near* each other, we’re not *related.*’

‘You’re our honorary brother, *brother,*’ Gulvi said, ‘along with Ash. In our family, we hug.’

‘Sorry, I’m allergic,’ Augus said.

‘Me too,’ Gwyn said, holding up a hand when Gulvi came towards him to hug him as well.

‘What a pair,’ Kayla said, looking between them both. ‘You miserable twats.’

Then Kayla bounded up and wrapped her arms around Gwyn’s torso, and he raised his arms in shock and left them hanging awkwardly in the air. He stared at Augus and Gulvi in alarm. But secretly, Augus thought Gwyn could probably do with more hugs, and Kayla was good at giving them.

Still, when she approached him afterwards, looking devious, Augus held up his hand, he had an image to uphold. She rolled her eyes and backed off, but winked at him.

‘Nice boots,’ he said. ‘Got that goth lesbian vibe going.’

‘I try,’ Kayla said, looking down at them. ‘I do try.’

‘So should we get this stupid thing over and done with?’ Augus said. ‘All the lights and happiness are giving me a shit-storm of a migraine.’
Ash came back with three corndogs, two of which he gave to Gulvi and Kayla. They walked off, getting excited at the smallest things, and Augus hung back with Gwyn. Children ran past them. Families squabbled, bickered or talked excitedly about what they wanted to do next.

Every time Ash or Gulvi or Kayla tried to do something, Augus knocked them back, uninterested in the carnival games, how overpriced everything was – it wasn’t like he had money to burn – and the gaudiness of it. Gwyn always agreed with Augus, but as they fell into silence, Augus noticed Gwyn looking around at everything quietly, a bright curiosity in his eyes.

“You ever done anything like this before?” Augus said.

“No, have you?”

It was pretty normal for Augus and Ash to go to the Royal Show together. Ash loved the energy of it, and Augus dragged himself along and never gave it much thought. He’d just assumed Gwyn would have gone to these kinds of things, because his family had money, but maybe they were way too high class for it.

“What about the circus and stuff?”

“No,” Gwyn said. ‘Mother likes the opera, but she never took me.’

‘Right,’ Augus said. ‘Have you ever had a corndog?’

‘No.‘

‘That’s probably good, they’re disgusting.’

They weren’t, really, but Augus knew Gwyn would never have one here. He wouldn’t eat anything while the rest of them were around. Augus had a better grasp of what really triggered Gwyn into refusing to eat. Mostly everything, especially if other people were around. Augus checked Gwyn’s fridge regularly enough to make sure he was eating and buying food, which he was. His symptoms didn’t match anorexia or bulimia, they were directly trauma triggered, and patterned around his brand of PTSD.

Ash used to starve himself, because he couldn’t control that hideous home they’d been in, so he controlled what he ate. Which was nothing. Augus squeezed his eyes shut, remembering the first time Ash had fallen against him in his huge oversized shirt, lanky and laughing, and Augus had felt the sharp ridges of his ribs against his hands by accident, pressing into him like the spill of a terrible, shocking secret.

Ash hadn’t noticed, and Augus tried to tell himself he didn’t care, but Ash kept coming to him, bringing him things, trying to make him happy…

“You okay?” Gwyn said, jolting him back to the present. Augus realised one of his hands was out a little, his fingers splayed, like he was feeling those ribs all over again.

Augus laughed at himself, the world around them, how easy it was to think about other people’s disorders instead of his own shit.

‘Yeah,’ Augus said. ‘Oh, look, this seems interesting.’

Augus wandered vaguely over to a stall that didn’t look interesting at all, but he wanted to test a theory. He felt a sense of dismay when Gwyn joined him, curious and excited, it was clear now that he’d only shot down the idea of the Royal Show and the carnival because he thought it would please
Augus. And Augus actually didn’t hate Royal Shows, he just enjoyed idly hating things for the sake of it.

‘I didn’t know you liked farm stuff,’ Gwyn said.

They were wandering through the agricultural Hall of Fame, and Augus had blankly ended standing in front of a series of pictures of shaggy, red highland cows wearing showy blue ribbons.

‘This is obviously Ash if he were a cow,’ Augus said.

Gwyn snorted, then laughed properly, and Augus felt it like a hand around his heart.

‘This is you, then,’ Gwyn said, pulling Augus over to the horses and pointing out a black Friesian – an immense, muscular, graceful creature – with an impossibly long mane and tail.

‘I find this acceptable,’ Augus said, resisting the urge to lean into Gwyn’s side. He didn’t like his chances with public displays of affection around all the farm people, it was his experience they weren’t always the most queer friendly. ‘So what animal are you?’

‘Oh,’ Gwyn said, looking around. ‘I don’t know.’

He started heading towards the photos of sheep, and Augus bit the inside of his lip and yanked sharply on Gwyn’s shirt to stop him, knowing exactly why he would go over there. Some self-disparaging ‘because I just do what my family says’ schtick, no doubt, or something worse that Augus couldn’t imagine. He dragged Gwyn back towards the horses, then had a better idea.

‘I know,’ Augus said. ‘Come on, you’ll like this. Wait, you don’t have any animal allergies do you?’

‘I don’t know,’ Gwyn said. ‘Probably not. I haven’t been around animals much.’

‘Dogs?’

‘I’m fine with dogs.’ When Gwyn smiled, it was jarring, like seeing the sun when it shouldn’t be out. Augus wanted to frame it, or slap it off his face and make him cry, or squeeze his cheeks really hard, or maybe just kiss him. It was torture, watching him smile like that.

They headed to the opposite side of the fairground, Augus texting Ash and Gulvi to let them know where they’d be if they needed them. Augus paused at a stall selling leather goods, reminded himself he had literally no money, and that the leatherworker probably didn’t need Augus asking him if he knew anywhere that did leather bondage gear courses. There were probably Youtube videos for that.

The dog pavilion was large, filled with the sounds of excited dogs yipping and barking, people in garishly coloured suits jogging their dogs around in rings to show them off, placing their dogs on tables so they could be stacked in the correct posture and checked over for the right conformation. Augus didn’t know much about animals, but he’d always liked coming to the shows and the pavilions. He even liked the sheepdog demonstrations, though it was a disaster taking Ash, who spent the next few weeks saying: ‘We could adopt a dog! We should adopt a dog! God, just the two of us and a kelpie, wouldn’t that be great?’

Gwyn stood still, staring at everything in amazement. Augus carefully drew him off into the shadows where they wouldn’t get in the way of dogs still being blow-dried, coiffed, and rubbed over with chamois if they had short hair.

‘People love their dogs, it turns out,’ Augus said.
'There’s so many kinds. Did you know there were so many kinds?'

'There’s more than this,' Augus said. 'This is a local show, and there’s only so many breeds here.'

'Breeds,' Gwyn echoed, tasting the word in his mouth. 'What’s that one?'

He pointed to a giant hound that was sitting gracefully nearby. It had a long nose, floppy ears, and a wiry brown-grey coat.

'I don’t know,' Augus said. 'Maybe a wolfhound or something?'

The man standing next to the dog – wearing a royal blue suit – turned, smiled and said: ‘He’s a deerhound. Morris here has just finished showing, do you want to come say hi?’

'Can we?' Gwyn said, staring in amazement.

'Sure! Buggers look better when they’re all coarse anyway, so it’s not like you can mess up that coat any further. Just hold your hands out first and let him get a sniff of you. He’s friendlier than most, but they’re still shy.’

Augus held out his hand first, because Gwyn was his own kind of shy, waiting to see what Augus would do. And then Augus gave the dog a tentative scratch behind its ear and let Gwyn hold his hand out instead.

Gwyn stared in wonder as the deerhound pressed his wet nose all over his hand and then licked the tips of his fingers.

'Morris,’ the owner said in an undertone. ‘Don’t lick.’

Morris placed his chin across Gwyn’s hand and left it there, looking up with doleful eyes, and Augus watched Gwyn instead, the light in his eyes and the way he couldn’t seem to believe that a dog would trust him.

'That means he wants a good old chin scratch, now,’ the owner said. ‘So you’d best give him one. He obviously likes you.’

'Can you tell me more about deerhounds?’ Augus said, to give Gwyn a sense of privacy as he started touching the dog gently at first, before scratching instinctively, looking to do what the dog liked. He froze when Morris stood, but Morris only shifted and leaned his whole body against Gwyn, looking up at him.

'Sure! They’re a rare breed here,’ the owner said. 'I’m Alder, by the way. They were bred to hunt deer, a long time ago, and these days they’re more often kept as decorative couch potatoes that sometimes need to go for a very fast run. Terrible counter surfers, you know, kitchen tables, coffee tables, all that. You have to train them.’

'They sound cool. I’m Augus,’ he said, holding out his hand automatically. Alder didn’t even seem to care that Augus was wearing eyeliner, knee-high boots and was rocking as goth a look as Kayla. Alder shook Augus’ hand with enthusiasm, then smiled at Gwyn, who was just staring down and petting the dog happily.

As Alder continued to tell him about the breed, Augus was overtaken with a strange hunger, somewhere between lust and adoration. He wanted to take Gwyn away and preserve how cute he could be, but he also wanted to smash that cuteness between his hands, but in a weird, affectionate way. His fingers tightened, wanting to claw his way down Gwyn’s chest and back, bite into his
innocent lips and fuck into him until he was owned.

He breathed out shakily. He didn’t think they were going to get to the cat pavilion after all.

‘Sorry,’ Gwyn said, looking up. ‘I just keep patting him. Is he getting tired of it?’

‘No, lad! He’ll let you know if he’s getting tetchy, he’ll just walk away. But I am going to have to head off, I’m afraid, I’ve got a friend- Ah, there he is.’

He waved at a pink-suited man in a distance who was walking something that looked like a giant, white pom-pom. Gwyn gasped quietly beside Augus when he saw it.

‘We should probably go see what our friends are up to,’ Augus said hastily. ‘But thanks so much for talking to us!’

‘Come back later!’ Alder said. ‘Most’ve the dogs will be shown then so owners and showers are a lot more relaxed about letting people touch them and get to know them. And Morris liked the attention! He’s good at hiding it, but he’s a bit of a slut really.’

Augus laughed in surprise, and Alder grinned and walked off, leaving Gwyn standing there a little shocked.

‘Why do we have to go see the others?’ Gwyn said, as Augus grabbed him by the wrist and dragged him out.

Augus said nothing, had his phone out and was calling Ash.

‘I need your car keys,’ he said, when Ash picked up.

‘Why?’

‘Guess.’

‘You can’t wait?’ Ash said, bursting into laughter.

‘I need your fucking car keys.’

Gwyn was staring at Augus like something was wrong, and Augus knew he needed to explain things, but instead he told Ash exactly where they were, and then they waited by the signpost near the dog pavilion, beneath a streetlight and by a recycling bin that had so many cardboard cups and paper straws packed in, it was close to overflowing.

‘Augus,’ Gwyn said, ‘what’s wrong?’

‘I just think there comes a point in every person’s life when they realise they haven’t made out in a car before, and they become certain they need to rectify that, okay?’

Gwyn opened his mouth like he wanted to say something, then closed it. His eyebrows knitted together, and then he looked like he wanted to say something else. Eventually – satisfyingly – he fell silent, and Augus grinned at him.

‘We don’t have to do anything right now,’ Augus said. ‘I just want the option. Ash has the keys. Knowing those three they’ve devolved into playing Pokemon Go. The only thing we’re going to miss out on is Kayla’s face when she sees macarons, because she loses her shit whenever she sees them.’
Ash turned up five minutes later holding out the keys.

‘Your wish is my command,’ Ash said. ‘Just don’t ever tell me about it. That’s the greatest gift you could ever give me.’

‘I’ll remind you of that at Christmas,’ Augus said.

Ash fished in his pocket and brought out condoms and several packets of lubricant, and Augus waved him off with a vague sense of horror. He could not take sex aids from his brother. Well, he could, he’d given the same to Ash when he’d been younger. But he’d gotten them specifically for Ash, and in this case, he didn’t want to take Ash’s own stock for…whatever he had planned.

‘I’m good.’

‘Seriously?’

‘I’m like a boy scout.’

‘They don’t teach this shit in boy scouts,’ Ash said. ‘Or maybe they do? They should anyway.’

He reached deeper into his other pocket and brought out a keyring with a diamante skull at the end. One of the diamantes had already fallen off.

‘Got you something.’

‘Thanks,’ Augus said drily, dangling the skull off the end of his index finger. ‘You shouldn’t have.’

‘Didn’t cost me anything, so don’t worry about it.’ Ash clapped him hard on the shoulder, winked at Gwyn, and then walked off. He slid his phone out of his pocket as he went, the green of the Pokemon Go screen appearing almost instantly.

Augus moved the swinging keychain in Gwyn’s direction.

‘Got you something.’

Gwyn slipped it from Augus’ finger and turned it. The perplexed expression on his face wasn’t helping with how much Augus wanted to destroy him at all. He needed to calm down. If they were going to do anything, he had to get his shit together.

‘Come on, let’s go for a walk. These are ‘just in case’ keys, not ‘I’m going to smash you right now’ keys.’

‘I don’t know how anyone in the school hasn’t realised that you’re not even in the fight for biggest nerd, because you beat everyone by about seventy percent. That’s not a fight. You’d wipe the floor with them.’

‘No one makes these boots look as good as I do,’ Augus said.

The way Gwyn looked down his legs was enough to make Augus’ mouth go dry.

‘Mm, I guess that’s true,’ Gwyn said.

A few seconds of feeling dazed, remembering the time Gwyn had fucked him – even though that was never going to happen again, not without alcohol or something anyway – and then he took a deep breath and walked off away from the noise. Gwyn followed him, and a minute later Augus saw Gwyn trying to add the skull to his keyring and felt a burst of something saccharine and stupid.
When his phone buzzed, Augus looked at the text from Ash and almost smiled.

*He’s looking cute tonight, bro, but don’t send him to the hospital or anything with that [eggplant emoji]*

*I hate you,* Augus replied. *Stop stealing things.*

Ash sent back the laughter emoji and Augus put his phone away and thought, all in all, it was kind of a nice night so far.

*

Gwyn sat and Augus lay on the slope of grass beneath floodlights, the night air not too cold. Augus looked at the Ferris wheel from a distance as he rested his head on Gwyn’s thigh and rubbed his palm over the grass. Gwyn sat with his arms behind him, looking about as content as he ever seemed to get.

‘You like things like this, don’t you?’ Augus said. ‘The fair and stuff.’

‘I think I do,’ Gwyn said.

‘Yeah,’ Augus said. ‘Don’t tell Ash, but I like them too.’

A few other couples and families were sitting around them, but not so close that their conversation could be heard. One dismayingly heterosexual couple was kissing in the distance so enthusiastically that a family nearby moved away. Augus rolled his head back and forth on Gwyn’s lap, closing his eyes and shutting out the world. He wished he could take his hair tie out, but he’d angled himself so it wasn’t pressing hard into the back of his head.

‘I want to do so many things to you,’ Augus said. ‘I can’t fucking deal with it.’

‘Like what?’ Gwyn said.

‘Like make up,’ Augus said, even as Gwyn made a scoffing noise in the back of his throat. ‘Hear me out though, like, some eyeliner, and maybe curling your hair a bit more, and some pink lipstick that you can smear all over my dick. Come on, you have the eyes for it, and the lips!’

Gwyn just sighed like Augus was being tedious, and Augus reached up and pinched his thigh. Or at least, he tried to. He couldn’t get any fat from those legs between his fingers. Augus thumped him instead. Gwyn caught his wrist and held it. A thumb began to trace over the sensitive inner skin and Augus went lax, humming softly to himself.

‘Like bondage,’ Augus said. ‘Like…being old enough to go to clubs and take you there and then show everyone else how you look in a scene and then tell them all that they can’t fucking have you. And plugs. Honestly they have like…sex toys that look like animal dicks and-’

Gwyn cleared his throat loudly. ‘Augus.’

‘Hear me out though,’ Augus said.

‘Can we talk about something else?’

Augus shifted, wiggling up Gwyn’s body with his head until he could press his hair tie back into Gwyn’s crotch. Augus felt quietly triumphant when he realised that Gwyn was getting hard, either due to the conversation, or maybe he’d been kind of turned on since they saw each other. That
probably wasn’t it, but Augus thought it was nice to imagine.

‘Okay,’ Augus said. ‘What about the case? You nervous about it? Fenwrel’s terrifying.’

Gwyn’s hand moved from Augus’ wrist to his hand. Augus thought he was going to be pushed away, but instead Gwyn just slid his thicker fingers between Augus’, pressing their palms together.

‘She’s not that bad,’ Gwyn said, ‘she seems honest, which I appreciate. But…yes, I’m nervous. There’s a lot that could go wrong, and not much that will easily go right. What…what did you want to do to me in the car?’

Augus rolled onto his stomach, resting his chin on Gwyn’s thigh and drinking in the wince that followed. Gwyn was still holding his hand – having to change his grip to maintain it – but the contact was gentle. Augus shifted so that he could rest the side of his face on Gwyn’s lap, facing towards his knees and shoes, the rest of the slope. No one was around them.

‘What do you want?’ Augus said.

‘I don’t think we should fuck.’

‘Hmm.’ Truthfully, Augus hadn’t been thinking about that anyway. Gwyn had brought up more than once now, that Augus didn’t use him like he used to. Augus had loved those early encounters, forcing Gwyn to his knees in the school library, in the home economics room, but the truth was that he’d been motivated by something very ungenerous and since then it was harder to see the line between what was okay and what wasn’t. Augus supposed that was why they had a safeword system in the first place, but he didn’t want to have to hear them, he wanted to be good enough that he never had to hear them.

It didn’t work that way, and Augus was confronted with the truth of his sadism on a regular basis. It was hard not to ask constantly if it was okay, if it wasn’t too cruel, too awful. The car keys rested in Augus’ pocket, and he knew he wanted to do something rough and ill-considered, and now it was difficult to just…do it.

‘I want to hurt you,’ Augus said. ‘But I don’t.’

‘I know,’ Gwyn said. ‘It’s the same for me.’

‘You want to hurt me?’ Augus said, smiling.

‘No, I mean- The other way around. But, Augus, I want you to do something. I get that it’s a lot.’

‘How so?’

God only knew what Gwyn thought. Augus had never really asked him about it. He found it fascinating that Gwyn was submissive, a masochist, but they’d never really talked about it in any detail beyond making sure that Augus wouldn’t injure Gwyn as easily in the future.

‘It can’t be easy, wanting to do the things you like,’ Gwyn said slowly, like he was looking all over for the words and still wasn’t sure of them. ‘I get it. It’s complicated, isn’t it? I sometimes wonder if I like what I like because…because of Efnisien. You know, if something about my past has just warped me or something. Like maybe it’s something I’m meant to be fixing instead of accepting.’

Augus said nothing. This was something he’d wondered about himself, too. But when Gwyn said it, Augus wanted to reassure him, not tell him that it was something he needed to fix. How could the surrender and bliss he’d seen on his face be something he had to go to therapy for? But Augus
couldn’t come out and say that, because what if it was the wrong thing to say? What if Gwyn healing meant…he wouldn’t like any of this stuff anymore?

‘Maybe we’ll grow out of it,’ Augus said.

‘I hope not.’

‘Maybe that’s the right thing to do.’

‘I don’t think so,’ Gwyn said, laughing. Augus stilled when he felt fingers touching his hairline carefully, so light it nearly tickled. When he didn’t say anything, Gwyn ghosted his fingers over Augus’ hair, from the hairline down to the tie. Then he reached further back and took up the hair in the ponytail, and Augus thought of Efnisien, and how he seemed obsessed with pulling or spitting on Augus’ hair. Gwyn only held the length in his hands and then gently lay it down again.

‘You’re so beautiful,’ Gwyn said.

Augus felt his cheeks warming, his ears. Compliments were, apparently, the best thing to combat the growing chill in the night air. Gwyn’s warm, broad hand resting between his shoulder blades wasn’t bad either.

‘Thank you,’ Augus said. ‘I hope you’re not trying to lull me out of mauling you, because the more you do cute shit like this, the more I actually have to maul you.’

‘Ah. You talk about it a lot. Your follow through is poor.’

‘What?’ Augus said, looking up abruptly as Gwyn smiled down at him. ‘I’m sorry, fucking what?’

‘All these things you want to do, and you’re just lying here like a lump.’

‘What?!’

‘Lumpy Augus.’

‘Ohhhhh, oh my god,’ Augus said, pushing up onto all fours and then standing up. He grabbed Gwyn’s wrist. ‘Oh my fucking god. Challenge accepted you little bastard. Get up. Fucking- Never say my name and the word ‘lumpy’ in the same sentence again.’

‘So, things like ‘Augus is lumpy and cute’ isn’t allowed?’

‘Oh my god!’ Augus shouted, dragging him up the slope towards the carpark and the cars. He refused to be charmed by the stupid smile on Gwyn’s face. He was incensed. He was going to make Gwyn cry.

‘Your soul is lumpy with contradictions.’

The laugh Augus gave then was so nasty it surprised him, he turned to see Gwyn’s impish expression subside into one of uncertainty, and Augus – god help him – he loved it. Simultaneously loved and was horrified by the sense of dread he could evoke, the power he held, the knowledge that he could turn this into Gwyn’s blissful, accepting expression where he just looked content. But not without suffering for it first.

They’d parked so far back, that no one was around them when Augus shoved Gwyn onto the passenger seat of the car and crawled in after him, hooking the tip of his boot into the door handle and slamming it shut behind them. The world was dark and shadow around them, Ash had parked
away from streetlights – a habit of his that was hard to break – and Augus shoved Gwyn back into the other door and as his hips came down, one of Gwyn’s legs had nowhere to go but the floor.

Augus placed his teeth wetly against the top part of Gwyn’s chest he could reach before realising with a hammering heart that he probably couldn’t leave visible marks on his neck. Not with the case. He yanked his shirt down, began to bite, then had a better idea. He shoved Gwyn’s shirt up, riding the heave of his suddenly deep breaths, and found the nipple with his finger first before biting down into the soft flesh.

The sound Gwyn made was strangled and far higher than normal, and Augus bit down harder and his lips pulled back in a grin when he felt the way Gwyn’s hand ghosted over his hair like he wanted to pull Augus back but didn’t dare.

‘Augus,’ Gwyn managed. ‘I- I’m not…’

Augus completed the sentence in every way that mattered. I’m not ready. I’m not into that. I’m not happy dealing with the consequences of my actions right now.

He blindly reached for Gwyn’s other nipple and tweaked it gently, a stark counterpoint to what he was doing with his teeth, to the hickie he was trying to suck into the tender skin. Gwyn’s hand hit Augus’ shoulder clumsily, then fell down into the deep, empty space beside them, fingers scraping on the bottom of the car floor.

Lifting up, he licked over the now pebbled skin that held clear divots from his teeth. Gwyn made a muffled noise above him, Augus glancing up to see the shape of fingers over Gwyn’s mouth and his eyes squeezed shut, eyebrows pulled together. The feeling he’d had in the dog pavilion came back in force, so much that Augus felt giddy. He ground his teeth together, wished he was biting, clawing, even shoving Gwyn up a bed and destroying him. But in the back of his head, he knew he had to be careful, he knew this was only something he could let out if he was careful about it.

And then they’d both have a good time.

He clumsily switched nipples, brushing his thumb over the wet skin where he’d bitten. Gwyn’s eyelashes fluttered, a faint gleam in his eyes and Augus realised he was looking up like he’d lost himself even in the few minutes of them being in the car together.

‘Gwyn,’ Augus said, his voice cool.

It was so satisfying to see those eyes snap to his, to feel that connection between them even as he pressed the tip of his thumb down and in, worrying the nipple like he wanted to press it back into Gwyn’s body.

Gwyn’s breathing hitched and his fingers tightened on his face, Augus’ eyes adjusting to the dark.

‘I’m not going to fuck you in Ash’s car,’ Augus said softly, like he didn’t care about Gwyn at all, even though he was so hard he wanted to hump Gwyn’s thigh until he came. ‘But you owe me all the same, for being so rude.’

Instead of punctuating that with hurting him more, Augus lifted up and moved his finger away and blew a stream of cold air over the tortured nipple. Gwyn’s hand dropped from his mouth entirely and he didn’t look away from Augus at all.

‘What do you think you owe me, Gwyn?’

Augus reached up and feathered his hand through Gwyn’s hair, mussing it deliberately, before
scratching his fingers close to his scalp. Gwyn’s breathing was audible now, before stopping entirely when Augus curled his fingers around a hank of hair and yanked.

‘Answer me.’

‘Whatever you want,’ Gwyn said.

It was hard not to close his eyes, it felt so good to hear those words in that tone of voice.

‘Anything?’ Augus said, smiling.

‘Yes,’ Gwyn said.

‘What if I don’t let you come?’

Gwyn’s mouth dropped open, then his lips pressed together. After an agonising moment of Augus pulling tighter on his hair, Gwyn said:

‘Okay.’

‘You don’t sound happy about it, Gwyn. Almost like you think this is something we’re doing for you, and not something you owe me for being such a rude asshole. Remember, Gwyn, of the two of us, it’s not my ass that’s had a carrot inside it.’

Gwyn’s eyes shot to his, narrowed as though he couldn’t quite believe that Augus would bring that up now. But Augus was going to bring that up _forever_. Humiliating Gwyn was like a warm fire inside of him.

Augus lowered his head and nosed along Gwyn’s hairline, down to his ear, forcing his head to the side to better expose it. He licked over the delicate flesh, then kept doing it when Gwyn just seemed to melt back into the car-seat.

‘I could blow you,’ Gwyn whispered.

Augus made a sound of acknowledgement, right into Gwyn’s ear, and couldn’t believe the way Gwyn’s shoulders squirmed because of it. He placed his other hand on Gwyn’s throat, resting it there, stroking his fingers over his larynx.

‘You could,’ Augus said into his ear. ‘And then everyone will know what I made you do, because they’ll hear it in your voice, Gwyn. Do you want that?’

Gwyn said nothing, and Augus took his earlobe between his teeth and moved his jaw back and forth carefully, pinching the skin, Gwyn stiffening beneath him.

‘I think,’ Augus said, letting go, ‘that it doesn’t matter if you want it or not, does it? Because if I tell you to do it, you’ll fucking do it, won’t you?’

‘Yes, Augus,’ Gwyn said, like he’d been hypnotised. His voice was throatier than before. Augus wanted so badly to be back at Gwyn’s house, to have the whole place to themselves, to shove a collar around his stupid, thick neck and attach a leash to it and just drag him into anything Augus wanted.

‘That’s good,’ Augus said, closing his eyes at the way Gwyn reacted, like Augus had touched him, had placed a hand between his legs when he hadn’t. ‘That’s so good, Gwyn.’

‘Is it?’
‘Yeah,’ Augus said. ‘God, you’re so fucking good. But you gotta get on your knees now, and find a way to get my dick in your mouth. You want to stay good, right?’

Gwyn nodded vigorously, and with a surprising amount of strength given how boneless he’d seemed only seconds ago, he pushed Augus back into the opposite passenger door. He moved like he was going to take over and for a moment Augus was alarmed, but instead Gwyn placed his hands on Augus’ fly, opening it and sliding the zipper down. He managed to squeeze his legs into the floor space, the angle nearly impossible, Gwyn having to stretch one of his legs until his shoe bumped into the other door.

Augus kept his eyes open, quickly lifting up to look out of the window, but no one was walking towards them. No one seemed to be around their little patch of carpark. Then his arms buckled as Gwyn got a hand around him. Augus’ gaze darted back, loving the way those large fingers wrapped around his cock. It was a bolt of heat straight into his gut, Augus unable to stop himself from moaning, pressing back into the passenger seat.

He opened his mouth to say something, but words fell away when Gwyn bent down with no ceremony and placed all that hot wetness around him, sucking first gently, then much harder.

He gave himself a minute to work on slowing his breathing, trying not to sink straight into how good it felt. If he wanted to not come in like five seconds – something he’d basically trained himself to do with quick wanks over pornography and something he now had to train himself out of – he had to separate from the intensity of it, and it felt like self-deprivation. While he hated it, making everything last longer wasn’t bad.

It wasn’t like they were aiming for the slowest session anyway.

Augus lifted his hands and plunged fingers into Gwyn’s hair, bunching it up in his grip and then pushing Gwyn’s head down.

‘Move your hand away,’ Augus breathed.

Gwyn made a weak, wretched sound, attempted to shake his head despite the grip Augus had on him, the fact that Augus’ cock was in his mouth.

‘Go on,’ Augus said, surprised at how hard and deep his voice went. ‘Move your hand away. I want everyone to know what you’re willing to do for me.’

It shouldn’t have been hot, thinking about people’s reactions to Gwyn’s scratchy, rusty voice, but it was. Augus wasn’t really one for exhibitionism, but apparently the idea of people knowing afterwards what had happened wasn’t terrible.

Gwyn’s hand trembled as he moved it away, and Augus heard him sucking in a breath through his nose even as he yanked Gwyn’s head down.

Augus winced as the soft palate at the back of Gwyn’s mouth jarred into the head of his cock, but it felt good all the same and his legs tried to spread in the lack of space, his shoulders bowed forwards. Gwyn tensed, coughed a couple of times and then tried to shift like he wanted the angle to be better.

Augus didn’t want anything like that. He took several deep breaths and then undulated his hips upwards in a fast, rough rhythm, and moaned when he felt Gwyn’s throat flutter open for him, allowing him to sink a little deeper. Gwyn’s spit slid down to the base of his cock, tickling, turning cold, and the noises of Gwyn’s mouth around him were perfect.

‘Ah, fuck,’ Augus whispered. ‘It’s unfair, it’s unfair. Even in a car, when it’s meant to be bad,
you’re still so, so good.’

Augus slumped when Gwyn redoubled his efforts, sucking even harder, and Augus wanted to last for ages, wanted to be better at this, but how could anyone hold back when Gwyn tried to make it as pleasurable as he did?

‘Fuck,’ Augus breathed, thighs shaking, wanting to tense and clamp Gwyn’s head in place.

His hips bucked as he came, one hand unclenching on Gwyn’s head and petting him, rubbing hair between his fingers, stroking for the sheer sensory pleasure of it as his other hand kept Gwyn’s head in place and made sure he swallowed everything. Augus’ voice broke into a higher register, he didn’t have the presence of mind to be embarrassed, breathing coming out of him in shocks as he spilled into Gwyn’s mouth.

He kept one hand on Gwyn’s hair, the other dropping down to his side, his breathing loud in the car. Gwyn kept his mouth around Augus, swallowing like he really was making sure to catch everything. Augus rubbed at his face and then touched fingers to Gwyn’s cheek, gentle and coaxing.

‘Hey,’ Augus said. ‘Hey, look at me.’

Gwyn lifted up slowly, eyes brighter than before, no doubt because of the reflexive tears from the rough treatment.

‘Uncomfortable?’ Augus said.

‘Cars aren’t great for this,’ Gwyn said, and his voice was a mess, and Augus was so proud of them both.

He cringed as he put his sensitive cock back into his pants, zipping up. He looked out of the window again, before pushing upright and pulling Gwyn back onto the seat. Then he dug around under the car seat, hand bumping into what felt like twenty different hardware tools – fucking Ash – and some books until finally he found a mangled tissue box from the week they’d both had colds at the same time. He dragged it forwards and pulled up at least ten tissues, shoving them between Gwyn’s body and the car seat.

He got his phone out to check the notifications. He was certain Ash would warn them when he was coming back, but so far all he’d sent was a photo of Kayla and Gulvi kneeling down beside Morris, while the owner Alder did peace signs behind both of their heads. Augus burst into muffled laughter at the ridiculousness of it, and showed Gwyn, only to see by the light of his phone that Gwyn was still really turned on.

‘That dog is so big,’ Gwyn said, dazed, as Augus put his phone back in his pocket.

‘Sure is,’ Augus said. ‘Hey, big guy, get your fly open for me.’

‘Okay,’ Gwyn said, moving like he only existed to follow Augus’ orders. Augus leaned in closer to look at his face, tired from his own orgasm, but glad to not have the height of his own arousal to deal with anymore. Even so, something twinged hard at the sight of Gwyn so helpless.

‘You feeling okay?’ Augus said. He grabbed the tissues and arranged them around Gwyn’s cock, wanting them to catch most of his release. It looked stupid, and it wasn’t very arousing, but it’d work.

‘Yeah,’ Gwyn said.
‘You okay if I mess you up a little?’ Augus said, grinning.

Gwyn nodded, and Augus knelt hunched over between his legs, glancing up at the window to check. He had a horrible image of a whole family of sixteen church-going children running towards them to ask why the two dudes were playing doctor in the back of a car and resisted the urge to giggle.

He needed both of his hands for what he wanted to do, and he heard Gwyn’s shaking in his breathing when he curled his fingers around his thick cock. Augus still couldn’t believe it had been inside of him. Heavy and aching and never quite fitting right, but still something he’d not expected to enjoy as much as he had.

His other hand dropped lower, fingertips brushing the skin of Gwyn’s scrotum before slipping so he could cup his balls on his palm. Augus watched, squeezing Gwyn’s cock and balls lightly, watching avidly as the shape of Gwyn’s hands clenched into fists, as his eyes opened, closed, opened.

Augus used his fingers liberally on Gwyn’s balls, careful not to push too far straight away. He pressed his thumb into the testes, feeling them shift, listening to the way Gwyn’s breath became feathery and shallow, like he was scared. But his cock was still so hard and warm in Augus’ hand.

‘Does it hurt?’

Augus wanted to press his whole body against Gwyn’s to feel him shaking, but listening to the amplified sound of Gwyn’s breathing was still good.

‘S-Sort of,’ Gwyn managed. ‘You’re not-? Don’t… I don’t like…’

‘Shhh,’ Augus said. ‘I’m not going to do much. Here, I’ll show you.’

Gwyn held his breath as Augus eased his palm and fingers around Gwyn’s balls and then started pulling down. He took it slow, feeling the moment Gwyn’s entire body shuddered, a sound deep in his throat of uncertainty and discomfort. The base of Augus’ cock throbbed, but he ignored it.

‘You’re going to come,’ Augus said, ‘and I’m going to keep doing things like this, and it’s going to be fine.’

‘Augus.’

‘Shhh, we’re in a car, remember?’

‘Oh, god.’

‘You can be quiet, can’t you? After all, this is nothing you couldn’t do to yourself.’

Even so, Augus used his fingers to move Gwyn’s testes within the scrotum, he pulled down until he knew it would ache and feel wrong. Gwyn’s legs tensing like he wanted to close them. Augus began to slowly move his hand up and down on his cock, using the pleasure to risk pulling a little harder. His head dropped forward at the sound Gwyn made, like he’d broken.

‘Gwyn,’ Augus whispered, ‘I’m hardly doing anything at all. Look at you.’

‘It’s sensitive,’ Gwyn hissed.

‘Oh, is it?’ Augus lifted his eyebrows. ‘I’d never have guessed.’

He used his thumb, index and middle finger to squeeze down on one of the testes, and Gwyn’s
shoulders lifted off the car seat, his arms stretched forwards and Augus let go of his cock and pressed his hand against his chest instead. He pushed gently, and Gwyn fell back.

‘I want you to hold the wrist of your right hand with your left hand,’ Augus said. His voice was gentle, but he had a feeling Gwyn would know it for the order it was.

Augus rubbed Gwyn’s chest, then went back to slowly jacking Gwyn’s cock again. God, this was good when he didn’t have to worry about his own orgasm. It turned out tormenting Gwyn was something he wanted even if he couldn’t come anymore. The power of it was visceral, Augus enjoying the interplay of knowing he could make Gwyn put up with more discomfort, even pain, if he introduced more pleasure, jacking Gwyn’s cock even faster.

Gwyn had his forearms against his chest, one hand holding the wrist of the other, restraining himself.

Augus didn’t take long after that, knowing that dragging it out in a car was a bad idea, even though he’d decided that playing with Gwyn’s balls to get that shakiness in his breath was absolutely something he had to do again. But he moved his hand faster on Gwyn’s cock, alternated between pulling and squeezing at his balls, making sure that he wasn’t too rough, not pushing too hard. Now wasn’t the time for that. He just wanted to make Gwyn come, and he wanted to make sure Gwyn knew he could come while his whole body was sending alarming mixed messages into his brain.

The whimpers, nearly inaudible, were like honey on Augus’ tongue. He leaned forward more, bracing himself on his thighs, just to get close enough to Gwyn’s mouth to hear more of that helplessness.

Augus felt when Gwyn’s balls started to draw up and tighten, and he bit his lower lip and pulled down against it, watching the way Gwyn’s back arched and his face twisted in the shadows like it was agony. But seconds later Augus knew Gwyn was going to come, and seconds after that he did.

He kept pulling at Gwyn’s balls, though only in the tiniest increments, feeling them jerk along with Gwyn’s cock in his hand, amazed and unable to stop what he was doing when Gwyn suddenly let go of his wrist and slammed both of his hands over his mouth and keened.

‘Good,’ Augus said, amazed at how good it felt to watch, to be a part of it, gently letting go of Gwyn’s balls and making sure the tissues had caught everything and then reaching up to rub Gwyn’s side. ‘You’re so fucking good, letting me do that.’

One of Gwyn’s hands slipped and fell to the car floor with a heavy thud that had Augus wincing.

‘You should probably just focus on breathing,’ Augus said, laughing softly as he focused on cleaning up. It was surprisingly easy, but then he’d placed so many tissues around it looked ridiculous.

Gwyn made a face as Augus cleaned off his softening cock, and Augus desperately wanted to torment him a bit more, a bit longer, but it would have to wait. Then with a bunch of tissues in his hand, he turned and looked out of the car. There were another two people in the distance, leaning against another car, but other than that the coast was clear.

‘I’m just going to find a bin,’ Augus said. ‘Okay?’

‘Mmhm,’ Gwyn said, hand relaxed over his mouth, eyes closed.

Augus hated getting out of the car into the colder night air, running to one of the bins he remembered seeing and dumping all the tissues in there. He rubbed his hand on his pants as he jogged back to the car. Gwyn was exactly as he’d left him, only his eyes were open, and Augus wasted no time
practically climbing on top of him, carefully not to accidentally knee him in the balls or anything, because that’d be a shit end to what had actually turned out to be a really nice night.

‘You want to lean against me?’ Augus said, face close enough to Gwyn’s that he couldn’t see his expression anymore from all the shadows he was casting.

‘I don’t really want to move,’ Gwyn said, with a throat roughened from use. ‘I probably should.’

‘Come on,’ Augus said.

He helped Gwyn sit up, and then leaned against the car door, pulling Gwyn into him and wrapping an arm tightly around him. Gwyn’s breathing still wasn’t quite even, and Augus wondered why he was just as hungry for this part, as he was everything else. The boneless way Gwyn rested against him, like he was truly relaxed. The softness of his ridiculous hair.

‘Your balls sore?’ Augus said.

‘Feel a bit…’ Gwyn cleared his throat. ‘I dunno, almost bruised, but not really. Like blue balls, I guess.’

‘It’ll go away.’

‘Yeah,’ Gwyn said. ‘Can’t believe the things I let you do.’

‘I know,’ Augus said, grinning.

But he felt something in him settle, and he shifted so he could be closer to Gwyn, both of them breathing together, Augus feeling like he could fall asleep. Gwyn’s hand rested against his thigh, warm and steady, and it was hard not to look out at the world and feel weirdly invincible.

‘Hey, Augus?’ Gwyn said, his voice less rough now, though still faintly hoarse.

‘Yeah?’

‘I…want you to know that if things get too rough with the court case, or if I lose or… You don’t have to stay. I want you to know that-’

Easy as anything to gently place his hand against Gwyn’s mouth and listen to him stumble into silence. Augus didn’t even tense as he kept looking out of the window, feeling good and protective and fierce, like he’d rip anyone’s throat out with his teeth if they so much as looked at Gwyn the wrong way.

‘You don’t get it,’ Augus said. ‘Maybe I don’t get it either, but there’s a thing about me. If I decide someone’s mine, that’s it, they are. It doesn’t matter if Ash drives me batshit sometimes, or if you do, but I’m here for the long haul. I don’t know how long that is, but I know it’s not so cheap that I’ll just fuck off when it gets hard.’

‘But maybe you should,’ Gwyn said, against Augus’ fingers. ‘I know it’s hard for you too.’

‘Getting easier though, sometimes,’ Augus said, stroking the skin under Gwyn’s jaw. ‘Especially times like now. You make it easier.’

‘I do?’

It sounded so disbelieving that Augus wanted to personally shove broken glass down every member of Gwyn’s family’s mouths and watch them choke on it. So what if his fantasies were violent? He’d
met enough people who had earned them.

‘Sweetheart,’ Augus said in a croon, turning to smile down at Gwyn’s hair. Gwyn shivered, and Augus wanted to say something meaningful, mushy, even stupid. But the words wouldn’t come. Augus’ arm only tightened, he held Gwyn close, thinking that one day they’d do this in their own home, somehow. Both of them together, touching and warm, Augus’ mouth full of so many sugary things he didn’t know how to say.

Chapter End Notes

Tbh if you can just imagine me having like an entire backstory for Alder and his gay buddy Fred with his samoyeds and how they met at the dog shows they went to and started off as assholes to each other and then started hooking up and now are kind of in love but won’t admit it and basically lsdjkdfsa THERE’S THIS WHOLE BACKGROUND THING ABOUT ALDER AND FRED AND THEIR STUPID SUITS AND DOGS.
The room where Gwyn recorded his testimony had green carpet that peeled at one edge of a water damaged wall. The desk had a fake wood veneer, with legs of powder coated pale grey steel. The most sophisticated item in the room was the computer screen showing him the defence solicitor, or the Crown Prosecution Service, or the police, or that one time, the person who declared him legally fit to recount his memories, some kind of memory-expert something-or-other who said Gwyn was a surprisingly good contender for this kind of case, mostly because he remembered the dates regarding the worst of the abuse.

Gwyn spent all his time in this room, and while they tried to make the sessions fall after school hours, eventually they ate into them, and Gwyn walked into the room feeling sick and heavy and light-headed, and Mikkel was there, and Fenwrel, and a couple of other people who Gwyn didn’t know the roles of, but they always had stuff ready to take notes on their tablets.

Today, he sat before a screen depicting the defence solicitor from Augus’ old workplace.

‘Um,’ Gwyn said. He looked briefly at Mikkel. Then he steeled himself. It turned out that he could talk a lot about what happened to him in really uncomfortable situations. He never felt anything, though sometimes he stumbled over sharing moments he’d been previously desperate to hide. The defence solicitor had already been angry at him for not being ‘emotional’ enough, doubting his stories, and every time Gwyn quailed before that stern, judgemental gaze, Fenwrel or Mikkel would smoothly interject and state that dissociation was a normal by-product of post-trauma. They’d said it enough times that the defence solicitor was starting to fall back on ‘it didn’t happen.’

This, apparently, was what Fenwrel had been waiting for.

They knew all the technical terms. They were at pre-trial, but Gwyn had expected jurors, and there was none. A Judge watched the proceedings from a distance, though Gwyn had met her briefly. She would determine whether this would go to trial after seeing Gwyn’s testimony and that of his parents. Gwyn didn’t envy the mountain of information he seemed to be providing, day after day.

‘And how can you be so sure of the date?’ the defence solicitor asked for what felt like the thousandth time.

Today was one of the worst memories. Gwyn wrapped an arm around his other arm, and then stopped, not wanting to look vulnerable. He wished Augus was there.
‘Um,’ Gwyn said. ‘It was after my first big bout in year 10. I remember the dates of the bouts, because they always fall at the same time at the end of each semester. And this was the first semester bout where I’d been bumped into the senior rank.’

‘Someone who wrestles as well as you do, should have no problems overcoming his father,’ the defence solicitor said. ‘Especially after a big, senior bout. Why do you think you struggled to stand up for yourself? Could it be that no one was being violent to you? Perhaps you knew you needed the discipline?’

Gwyn missed the days when all he had to do was tell his stories to Fenwrel and Mikkel. He didn’t like the part where he was expected to fight for himself. He heard Fenwrel’s quiet ‘tch’ which he knew was code for him to just deflect the question and continue speaking. He hated sharing this stuff with the defence solicitor, who stared at him like he was a beetle.

‘My…father has been- I was used to it. Fighting back makes him worse. I already thought he was going to kill me sometimes.’

‘Continue, Gwyn,’ Fenwrel said.

So Gwyn launched into the memory of what happened after the year 10 mid-semester bout. He’d levelled up into senior wrestler, had only just scraped into weight range by binging in the days beforehand, and felt heavy and sick as a result. He’d lost. His dad said it was a slight against the reputation of the ap Nudd family and he’d had things to say about it. He spoke mostly with his fists.

Gwyn had to pause twice, humiliated when his voice gave out. He hated that his hand shook as he drank from the bottle of water that was always there. He hated that he had to drink from it to keep talking, because it always made him break out in a cold sweat, thinking it had been doctored, his stomach churning. The first time it had happened, he’d needed to excuse himself to throw up, and Mikkel had stood there in the men’s toilets with him, arms folded and looking grim, while Gwyn apologised.

‘Fucking hell,’ Mikkel snapped. ‘I’m not mad at you.’

But the case was making him mad. Or maybe other cases were making him mad. Mikkel seemed like someone who could do with what Gulvi called a ‘spa day.’ Or maybe like, a million spa days.

At the end of the session, thoroughly cross-examined by the asshole at Augus’ old workplace, Gwyn felt clammy and walked around in the large men’s bathroom aimlessly while Mikkel waited with him. Gwyn had become accustomed to Mikkel’s presence, even as he paced and kept his hands up at his chest.

‘Are you going to be sick?’ Mikkel said, intruding on Gwyn’s thoughts.

‘Dunno,’ Gwyn said.

‘That was an intense one,’ Mikkel said, sighing explosively. ‘You’re holding up really well, Gwyn.’

‘Fuck off.’

Mikkel opened his mouth like he wanted to shoot something back, but eventually he just closed it and shook his head.

‘Gwyn, I know you think your stuff is minor compared to…the other shit I see, but it’s- It’s not minor, okay? You do get that, don’t you?’
Gwyn didn’t. It was getting harder to see it with every testimony. It was harder to see it as anything more than a father unhappy with his useless son. It ate into him. He’d had weeks and even months where they’d begun to convince him that it was bad, that it shouldn’t have happened to him. And the testimony was supposed to make him feel better, and it wasn’t. He walked decisively into a stall and stood there, staring at the toilet bowl, feeling dizzy.

‘Hey, Gwyn?’ Mikkel called from where he leaned against the row of basins. ‘Gonna need you to take a few deep breaths for me.’

Gwyn sucked a breath down into his narrowed throat and then another, sagging against the toilet stall, shouldering into it.

‘What if it is minor?’ Gwyn said. ‘What if I’m putting my parents through this for nothing? I could’ve lived there for another two years. I could’ve.’

‘I know you could,’ Mikkel said.

‘I should’ve just stuck it out,’ Gwyn said. His voice was shaking. He grabbed his phone out of his pants and stared at the messages there. Three from Augus, and fifteen from Efnisien, stacked together so he couldn’t see them all. The top one just said:

_I fucking hate you, you little bitch, and if you think your days of crying for me are done, think again, turd._

Gwyn sighed and read through Augus’ messages.

_Good luck today._

_Court sucks._

_Hey, tell Mikkel that he needs a relaxer for his perm._

Gwyn snorted at the last one. He read it out to Mikkel, who was silent for long enough that Gwyn knew he was pissed.

Mikkel was always pissed.

‘I need a relaxer for my whole damn self,’ Mikkel said finally, the anger leached from his voice. ‘Tell your _boyfriend_ to- No, wait. I am _not_ on your level. God all-fucking-mighty, I’m regressing.’ And then in a voice like a soft prayer: ‘O lord, save me from teenage boys.’

Gwyn swung away from the toilet stall and faced Mikkel. He could see himself in the mirror behind the basins. He looked shockingly pale, his skin greasy and his hair stupidly fuzzed where he kept dragging his sweaty palms through it without realising.

‘It’s getting to you,’ Mikkel said. ‘But it’s been getting to you since before the case, Gwyn. They were chasing you into an early grave and they’re _still_ doing it. There’s two things you need to understand. The first is that any normal parents that genuinely love their children wouldn’t be doing this to you. They wouldn’t have hired the most mercenary, sadistic lawyers money could find, they would’ve changed their behaviour, gotten everyone family therapy, _apologised_ for beating you and torturing you and poisoning you. So that’s the first thing. You’re not doing this to them. They are doing this to _you_.’

Gwyn had heard a version of this a few times, but he met Mikkel’s light brown eyes anyway, desperate for the words. He was always drowning after every session, and Mikkel sometimes gave
him nothing, but sometimes he was like this.

‘The second thing, is that I know you shit on the pain you’re going through, which is like…a very classic coping mechanism that you find amongst anyone who has gone through shit they shouldn’t have. Especially when it’s inflicted on them by primary caregivers. Like, if you can’t trust them but you have to be dependent on them to live, it’s no longer safe to blame them for things. You have to blame yourself. That’s a smart thing for a child to do, Gwyn. That’s a really smart coping mechanism, and it kept you as safe as you could be in that household, because constantly calling them out on their bullshit would have absolutely gotten you killed.’

Gwyn rubbed at his mouth and then shrugged. Mikkel was staring at him in that hard, flinty way, he really meant what he was saying. Gwyn wondered how many people he’d said this to before. He hated feeling like a number, he hated knowing there were so many other people out there suffering. Shouldn’t Mikkel be helping them first?

‘And then finally, this is part of the second thing – Gwyn, it’s not rocket science, but you can’t keep comparing your shit to other people’s. I know, I know, easier said than done. But seriously, the worst pain you’ve ever been through, is the worst pain you’ve ever been through. It’s a ten for you, friend, and when any person hits a ten – no matter who they are – they need help. They need it. You’re not doing this on a whim. You’re doing this to survive. You think you’d put yourself through all of this…’ Mikkel indicated the entire bathroom. ‘You think you’d be doing any of this, just because you were selfish? Look, I’ve seen Munchausen’s and this isn’t it.’

Gwyn didn’t like any of it. He didn’t like feeling lectured. He didn’t like feeling sick. He wanted to go home. He wanted to be back at the Royal Show with Augus, sitting on the grass, or shoved back into the car door while Augus tormented him, or staring in wonder at all the different kinds of dogs and patting Morris.

For the first time since the testimonies started, he felt breakable.

‘How much longer do I need to do this?’ Gwyn said, his voice shaking.

‘I think you should consider seeing a therapist again,’ Mikkel said.

‘How much longer?’ Gwyn said.

‘Gwyn, you know we’re in this for a few weeks more unless your parents decide to deal. Even then, the Judge may not be willing to allow negotiations. But I can submit some paperwork talking about how this is getting to you.’

‘Don’t do that.’

‘It’s getting to you,’ Mikkel said, his voice as soft as it ever got.

‘I’m fine.’

‘If only you could trot out a sentence that wasn’t a fucking victim cliché, but you just can’t manage it, can you?’

Gwyn glared at him, stung, and hated that Mikkel wasn’t even trying to make him angry. He could tell Mikkel was just tired of hearing the same thing that apparently every victim said.

‘We’re not all the same!’ Gwyn shouted at him, his voice echoing off the tiles. ‘We’re not the same!’

Mikkel’s eyes widened. ‘I know.’
‘No! I bet if I broke down and cried you’d tell me it was still a cliché. I bet if I was cheerful you’d tell me it. I bet if I did any fucking thing except I don’t know, tell you what you want to hear, you’d think it was a cliché! But even then, if I told you that it wasn’t my fault and I wanted my parents to go to jail forever, I bet victims have done that too, haven’t they? At least once?’

Mikkel stepped away from the counter, staring at Gwyn warily. One of his hands came up, and Gwyn realised he’d been stalking closer, his fists clenched.

‘Yep,’ Mikkel said, his voice calming. ‘People have even hit me.’

Gwyn ground his teeth together. ‘I’m not going to fucking hit you! I don’t do that!’

‘Why?’

Gwyn stared at him, Mikkel stared back, and his face was awful and soft and Gwyn felt a sudden rise of nausea because he hated how Mikkel did this.

‘Why don’t you want to hit me?’ Mikkel said. ‘I would.’

Gwyn bolted back into the stall and threw up all the water he’d had to drink, and Mikkel sighed behind him, and Gwyn told himself he wouldn’t cry. But he couldn’t stop himself, wiping his mouth with his hand, then using the fingers of his other hand to wipe at his eyes.

‘I hate you,’ Gwyn said.

‘I know. If it helps, I hate myself too. I’m not a nice man, Gwyn, just because I’m good at my job. But...I take your point. You’re not all the same, and it’s mean of me to say the things I say to you sometimes, just because I want to goad you into seeing what I see about this situation. Look, I’m sorry, and- Ah, hell.’

Gwyn turned and Mikkel saw his expression.

‘Gwyn, you’ve got to reconsider therapy,’ Mikkel said desperately. ‘I’m gonna say something that I really shouldn’t ever say, but some people are too smart to logic themselves out of this shit on their own, because they’re too busy using logic to keep themselves hemmed in. Some people are – bless their fucking souls – stupid enough or needy enough or whatever enough that if you tell them it’s not their fault, they actually believe you sometimes and you get to cut through like years of therapy just because they’re not using their brain to figure out two hundred ways to undermine what you’ve just said. Can you imagine? I fucking need those clients. But you are not one of those clients, Gwyn.’

‘I don’t want to see a therapist.’

‘Surprise, surprise,’ Mikkel said. ‘You’ve still got to put some serious thought into it. You don’t see all the ways you keep yourself locked up for those assholes, and you probably see it even less at the moment, because you’re getting a lot of shit you’ve never had before, like support. But Gwyn, I can’t be- You need some real compassion and you don’t need my half-ass attempts at it and trust me, your boyfriend can’t be the one who does all that work with you, because you’ll kill your relationship before it’s off the ground. I mean I think it’s dead in the water anyway because you’re both so young, but if you love him, and if you care about him, you will dump some of your shit in therapy.’

‘Maybe I just don’t talk to anyone,’ Gwyn said, but doubt paralysed him.

‘I’m not saying don’t talk to anyone,’ Mikkel said. ‘You don’t talk enough as it is. I’m just saying that when you start talking, you’ll pick your safest person – that’s normal, and that’s obviously
Augus. But then you need to pick more safe people. That’s the rules. I didn’t make up the rules. You can take it up with whatever gods you believe in, or the neurons that make you who you are. You’re a social animal, and you cannot have just one safe person. And Gwyn, fucking hell, I am not a safe person for you.’

‘I know,’ Gwyn said, laughing weakly as he walked over to the basin and rinsed his mouth out. ‘You drive me nuts.’

‘Well, good,’ Mikkel said, folding his arms. ‘Because fuck knows what I’d do if you were in here crying every time we went through this.’

‘You’d be okay,’ Gwyn said grudgingly, spitting the sour taste out of his mouth. It occurred to him that he was getting better about drinking around Mikkel. Like…really better. Mikkel just seemed to have the kind of personality where if he was going to poison Gwyn, he’d do it to his face, and just hold a bottle of turpentine out with a fierce, glinting look in his eyes.

‘I’d hate it though,’ Mikkel said. ‘I’m not in this game to comfort crying people.’

‘Then why are you in this game?’

‘To shaft dickheads like your parents,’ Mikkel said, a brittle bite in his voice. ‘Honestly, I don’t even care about the victims sometimes. I just want to make sure that the people who made them in the first place are as miserable as they can be. Murder’s illegal. This is the next best thing.’

Mikkel stared at Gwyn and his eyes widened a little. Then he swung out of the bathroom, saying ‘fuck’ under his breath as he went, and Gwyn realised it was true. Mikkel had revealed something he clearly didn’t mean to.

Eventually he joined Mikkel in the car and drank from a sealed bottle of water, too tired to manage much more than a small frisson of anxiety about it.

‘I think it’s cool what you do,’ Gwyn said, trying to make peace between them.

‘Yeah?’ Mikkel said, starting the car. ‘Well, I think it’s cool what you’re doing, so I guess we’re even.’

It was as close as they ever came to something like friendship.

*  

A couple of days later, Fenwrel sat him down in her office and didn’t bother offering him any refreshments. She’d learned early that he didn’t eat or drink around other people, and she’d adjusted her behaviour, though she did spend a good thirty minutes trying to find out why Gwyn didn’t eat around others and subsequently, could he get evidence regarding it.

‘Your family are tentatively considering a deal,’ Fenwrel said, resting her chin on the steeple of her fingers. ‘They’ve realised that this will go to trial, and that it will be a messy trial, and that they will likely not come out with their reputations intact or untarnished.’

‘Oh,’ Gwyn said. ‘What does that mean?’

‘We have three fundamental terms for a deal,’ Fenwrel said. ‘The first is that you become legally emancipated and they no longer have any legal hold over you. The second is that you be financially compensated for the future medical and psychological care that you will need, as well as past damages. The third is that you not be forced to sign a non-disclosure agreement – an NDA – about
what you experienced.’

‘And they…they’ll accept that?’

Fenwrel sighed and pursed her lips, leaning back. ‘I don’t know.’

‘Do you think I should take a deal?’

‘I think your parents should go to jail. At the very least, Lludd should be behind bars. There’s a high likelihood that they’ll force the NDA upon you and try and sweeten it financially.’

‘I didn’t think…they’d…’ Gwyn blinked at the table. ‘This seems to be happening really fast.’

‘It’s not,’ Fenwrel said. ‘They’ve been waiting you out to see if you’d break under the pressure of giving evidence repeatedly. They were hoping for a breakdown and a withdrawal of the case.’

Gwyn thought that sounded a lot like something Crielle would do, but it still stung to have it said to him so coldly.

‘I don’t want to sign a non-disclosure thing,’ Gwyn said. ‘I mean I don’t like talking about it, but…’

‘If this goes to trial, I am confident of a win, but a Judge may still want you to sign the NDA. Think about it, your parents have funded hospital wings, and a Magistrate may be looking beyond you to the greater public and what might be best for all. Civic duty and justice do not always go hand in hand.’

Gwyn wrung his hands together. ‘Do I have to make a decision now?’

‘No. I don’t even know if they want to go ahead right now, or if they’re just trying to assess your readiness to avoid a trial. They’re looking for strategies to break you psychologically, after all. Ideally, we’d have some evidence against your mother too, which would give us far more leverage. But we have nothing against her except hearsay, and she’s too reputable for people to believe the word of her teenage son over her own. Especially since you have yet to provide any testimony against her.’

Fenwrel leaned on him like this sometimes, and Gwyn didn’t like it. She came at him like she always thought he was hiding more than he was. But he found it hard to remember dates of when she’d done things to him, and she never did it in front of him, and he’d never had the food tested, so…he knew that his family’s lawyer would just blame it on a sensitive stomach and food poisoning. All the things Crielle blamed it on even when she smiled wickedly at him while he suffered.

‘They will seek to protect Crielle’s reputation in all of this. It’s a miracle they haven’t yet painted her as a victim of Lludd’s, but they may, in order to make sure that you can’t say a thing that might damage her standing.’

‘I don’t have what you want,’ Gwyn said. ‘So is this deal thing happening?’

‘Not right now. We’re pushing forward as though we want a trial and we have no formal offer from your parents. It’s just something that’s been actually placed on the table now. Ultimately, it is good news.’

‘But I have to continue with…talking about it all?’

‘Yes,’ Fenwrel said, leaning back and staring at Gwyn with that expression that meant he couldn’t tell a single thing she was thinking.
Gwyn felt cold thinking about it all. He knew Augus was much better at this stuff, but he found all the legal proceedings overwhelming, and he didn’t remember most of the terms even when they explained them to him.

After a while Fenwrel nodded a dismissal, and Gwyn left, relieved to be outside, under the sky, and away from that office with its smell of fancy books and highly polished furniture.

* 

That night, he had his second ever shift doing nightfill, at an independent grocery store that had started Gwyn out in the ‘dried goods and pantry’ section because they didn’t trust him with fresh foods yet. Gwyn enjoyed carrying all the boxes of tinned goods around, because it made him feel strong, especially when Ash stared at him and then tried to lift a similar box and couldn’t quite stop the grunt of effort he let out in the process.

The work was surprisingly easy. He’d expected it to be really hard, and it was wearing in its own way, but they weren’t mean to him, and the lifting and placing and matching boxes to their products on the shelves was easy. The manager looked over his and Ash’s work semi-frequently, and seemed happy. There were no customers to bother them, and they were allowed to talk if they were working the same aisle.

Gwyn also learned that customers were kind of disgusting. He’d found chewing gum stuck to jars of stock. In only two nights, he’d learned that one person seemed to love putting cans of peas right at the back behind baked beans, tinned spaghetti, and even the bags of pasta. Ash only said:

‘Oh, pea guy, yeah I mean, he may not be a guy, but I’ve seen that shit at other stores as well. Just… little tins of peas everywhere.’

Gwyn found a jar of pickled onions that had been opened. Half the onions were gone, the rest of the jar shoved back in place like the contents could still be sold. Marley and Tomiko, who worked the chocolate aisle, had a running competition every shift to see how many empty chocolate bar wrappers they could find. Tomiko informed them in the breakroom that if there was ever a day where they found no empty wrappers or stolen chocolate, they had to go out for burgers on the weekend and take turns paying for each other’s meal.

Gwyn was surprised at how easily Ash took to the job. He really expected Ash to just loiter and steal things, but Ash was industrious and informative, and explained everything patiently and cheerfully.

‘I missed this,’ Ash said. ‘I actually really dig nightfill. I know, I know, Augus has like…higher expectations for me and says I can’t spend the rest of my life doing this shit, but why not? It’s relaxing in a way, like, I just have to think about how much stock can fit on the shelf and how much room we have in the storeroom for what’s left over. Plus it’s fun cutting down the boxes for the compactor.’

Gwyn nodded, turning the cans so that they all faced the right way. He liked how precise it was. He even liked working in the pantry aisles, where the food was contained and wrapped up and wouldn’t touch his skin.

‘Augus acts like you’re going to do terrible stuff all the time,’ Gwyn risked saying.

‘Sometimes I do!’ Ash said, laughing. He cut down a box and folded it so that it would lie flat, and then tossed that into the trolley with the rest of the boxes. They were making good progress tonight. ‘But, well, he’s…really stressed at the moment. I think- I know he thinks I can’t do it, but I want to look after him sometimes. Especially with money. He starts his new job next week after school but
like, he’s- I don’t think he should be working? He’s so stressed.’

‘Yeah,’ Gwyn said, frowning.

‘The…the hobby I have that he doesn’t approve of, I’m not good at stopping. But I think I can be choosy about where I do it. I don’t have to do it here. And maybe, I dunno… Sometimes I think I wouldn’t do it at all if things were different.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I can provide for him, by doing that shit,’ Ash said, his voice lower and quieter than before. ‘Like, do you know how much stuff we have because I found a way of getting it for us? Cuz like, no offense to our super nice managers or whatever, but it’s not like we get paid a ton. I just…I started because I wanted him to have things. And then one day I couldn’t really stop because I kept seeing the opportunities and it was so easy.’

‘But you can’t provide for him properly if you keep doing it,’ Gwyn said, opening a new box and staring at jars of chargrilled peppers in oil. They looked slimy and red and gross. His mother would be able to poison those easily.

‘I know,’ Ash said. ‘I think about that a lot, too. I’ve been looking up online how to kind of stop yourself from like…you know, doing what I do.’

Ash was painfully careful to not mention the word ‘stealing’ anywhere, in case he was caught. But Gwyn was still surprised at how openly he talked about it.

‘What sort of things do they say?’

‘Oh like, boring stuff. Acknowledge you have a problem. Check. Augus ‘acknowledges’ it all the time. And then like, I dunno, think about the big picture and why you’re doing it and maybe writing feelings down and getting help. But fuck knows I can’t afford therapy and I dunno what I feel when I do it.’

‘You don’t feel anything?’

Ash paused, then cut down another box while thinking it over. The manager walked down their aisle and nodded at their progress. The fact that he didn’t stop and tell them to do anything else meant they were on the right track anyway. Gwyn had learned quickly that if they just kept finding work to do for themselves, they’d be treated like they’d performed some kind of miracle.

‘I feel good in the moment,’ Ash said. ‘Cuz I know I won at something. But mostly I just imagine his face, like, I used to imagine how happy he’d be but now I know it pisses him off. He gets so mad at me, it’s like… But I know he’s stressed. I know better than anyone. He has nightmares every night, Gwyn. Sometimes they’re really bad.’

‘Yeah,’ Gwyn said. He’d seen Augus twitching before, even during short naps. He didn’t really recall a time Augus ever slept comfortably or well. ‘It seems unfair though. You’re good at this. And I think it’s good that you want to help him with things.’

‘Yeah? You think I can?’

‘Why wouldn’t I?’ Gwyn said, shocked.

‘I just don’t think I can sometimes. Augus kind of treats me like a kid still. Maybe I’m just- I mean I know I’m not smart at things. Maybe it’s in the cards, you know, that I’ll lose this job too.’
‘But you only ever lose them for the same reason. So if you don’t do that one thing, you won’t lose the job.’

Ash blew out a hard breath and pulled down a bunch of jars that were close enough to their best before date they’d need to go on clearance. They went in another trolley.

‘Augus is mean sometimes,’ Gwyn said. ‘And he’s really hard on you. Have you ever told him he’s being unfair?’

‘I mean he’s not. And I need someone on me all the time, keeping me focused. Otherwise I’m just… useless.’

‘But you got this job on your own,’ Gwyn said. ‘And then you got me a job. And now we’re working and it’s fine? So how are you useless?’

Ash said nothing for so long that the only sound down the aisle was the sliding of jars and cans as they were pushed onto the shelves, and the occasional ripping sound of a box cutter collapsing another cardboard box.

‘Look,’ Gwyn said finally, his cheeks red. ‘He’s your brother, and I know that family is different but… Don’t let him stay blind to who you are. I think you can achieve a lot.’

Ash stared at Gwyn, and Gwyn looked at him uncomfortably then kept working. It felt a little like a workout. He wished he’d eaten more for lunch that day. He was annoyed, too, that Ash didn’t seem to get it.

‘You’re obviously smart,’ Gwyn said. ‘I mean we all know that, and the only reason you don’t do better in your classes is that you wag school and skip out and don’t give a shit. But you’re street smart. Augus wouldn’t have bothered with you if he didn’t think you were worth his time, and he loves you a ton. So why can’t you do the things you want? Like this job? Or looking after him? Don’t let him boss you around all the time, because he talks a big game, but you’re right, he is stressed and he probably just needs someone to make him sit down and shut up for a while.’

Ash burst into laughter, but then fell silent again quickly and seemed to be thinking it over. As they reached the end of the aisle, Gwyn went to swing his trolley of cardboard into the next aisle, but Ash caught him with a hand on his forearm.

‘Thanks,’ he said.

Gwyn shrugged. ‘You have to stand up to him more.’

‘Do you?’

Gwyn laughed. For a split second he remembered the visceral experience of fucking Augus into the mattress, and the broken, weak, needy sounds Augus made.

‘Yeah,’ Gwyn said. ‘In my own way, sure.’

Ash’s face coloured and he abruptly left for the other aisle. ‘I don’t want to ever know!’ Ash shouted.

Gwyn chuckled to himself, then stared at a pallet stacked far too high with cleaning products and sighed. He liked nightfill, but it was going to be a long night.

*
It was late when he returned, well past midnight, and he opened all of Efnisien’s messages and read through them one by one, rubbing at his forehead.

Hey, bitch.

You’re ruining our family, you know that? Why would you do this to us? We had good times didn’t we?

I know you miss me. You took out a restraining order out on your folks but you didn’t take one out on me. What’re you doing now that no one hurts you anymore? Crying? Fuck you.

I have one of those metal skewers right now, you know, the ones for satay and barbecues and stuff? It’d slide right into you. I could put it anywhere. You can imagine it, can’t you? I like that about you. That you can imagine it right before it happens, so it’s like you get fucked up twice. First by you, then by me.

I raided Lludd’s alcohol cabinet. You know the one. He’s gonna kill me.

Maybe I should take out a restraining order! Haha.

The only person you’re ruining is yourself.

Crielle’s super upset you know. I mean she’s not sad about you, because you’re a worthless sack of shit, dickface, but she’s upset. She’s done so much for us, and now I have to watch her be sad all the fucking time.

Puppies shut down way faster than you’d think when you start torturing them. And then, AND THEN, if you’re NICE to them afterwards, they suck it up! Some even come out of it and come back to you and wag their tail again. Fucking idiots. They deserve it. Like you, Gwyn. You’re like that. You little bitch, what, I should be nice to you so you’ll crawl back and wag your tail?

Fuck you.

God, I dunno how much this whiskey is worth but it tastes like shit.

HOLY SHIT LLUDD SPENT OVER A THOUSAND DOLLARS ON THIS TURPENTINE WHAT I fucking hate you, you little bitch, and if you think your days of crying for me are done, think again, turd.

Gwyn leaned back against the wall, sitting on the floor, thinking that he should go upstairs and go to bed. He should probably eat something. He was exhausted and Efnisien gave him a headache. After a while, he messaged back:

Stop drinking, Efnisien. It’s bad for you.

Efnisien came online almost immediately, even though it was two in the morning and Efnisien started drinking nearly sixteen hours before, judging by the time signature on the messages. Gwyn saw the ellipsis that meant he was typing something. It went away, came back, went away, came back. For five minutes Efnisien was either typing an essay, or deleting everything he was writing.

You breaking the family apart is what’s bad, shit for brains, Efnisien sent.

You really think it’s me, don’t you? Maybe some puppies learn to bite back one day.

More of the ellipsis, but another five minutes passed. Gwyn imagined Efnisien in his opulent room,
surrounded by Tarantino posters and all the other stupid things he liked, maybe even looking at photos of animals he’d hurt. It was hard to tell with Efnisien.

*I was never like them*, Efnisien sent. *I was never as bad as they are. So why’re you doing this to me?*

Gwyn’s headache got worse and he slid down until he was lying on the floor, shuddering.

*I’m doing this to them. You’re collateral damage*, Gwyn sent.

*You’re a cold-hearted bitch. You know I’m not as bad as they are.*

*The court won’t see it that way. Right now they think Crielle is a sad and sorry victim of Lludd*, Gwyn sent.

Efnisien sent back about twenty laughter emojis.

*You’re a victim of theirs as well, you know*, Gwyn sent, feeling sick, feeling daring, knowing Efnisien would hate it.

After that, Gwyn had to put his phone down, because Efnisien sent him photo after photo of massacred animals. Some must have been saved from the internet, but Gwyn never knew which ones were of Efnisien’s own making and which ones weren’t, and he couldn’t stomach it. He knew he was meant to be screencapping everything for Mikkel, but he didn’t want to. One of his legs drew up to his stomach. He felt his phone buzz over and over again. Picture after picture. He’d made Efnisien furious.

Finally, his phone was silent, and under the photo of a butchered rabbit, Efnisien had written:

*That look like something a fucking victim would do? God, keep all your new age bullshit to yourself.*

*I think it’s something some victims would do*, Gwyn wrote.

*I like my life, thanks. Being rich and getting to fuck up anyone I want, whenever I want, is great.*

*Then you won’t miss me when I’m gone*, Gwyn sent.

A few minutes passed and another photo came through, and Gwyn sat up abruptly, staring at the picture of Efnisien’s ankle, the lines of red across it. There were three. His heart raced, and though the cuts weren’t deep, they were long and bloodied already. There were fingerprints in the red, like Efnisien had touched and smeared and opened the wounds.

*It feels good*, Efnisien wrote. *Don’t you miss it? You liked it sometimes. I know you did. You cried for me. You let me clean you up after, when I bothered. That was more than Crielle or Lludd ever gave you, and you know it.*

Gwyn exhaled heavily and wanted, desperately, to call Augus. It was so late, they all had school the next day. Gwyn hated the case, he hated his family, he hated knowing that Efnisien was a manipulative asshole, but a drunk and upset one too. Efnisien was the only one who actually bothered to treat him like family, sometimes.

*Does it hurt?* Gwyn sent.

*Stings. It’s nice. Wish it was you. Imagining it’s you.*

*Go clean up, Gwyn sent, and go to bed. There are like a billion other love languages that you could bother to learn, and if you could see how fucked up you were, maybe you’d know that.*
Maybe I know how fucked up I am, Efnisien sent. A black heart emoji followed seconds later.

That seemed to be the end of the conversation. Efnisien didn’t send him anything else, and Gwyn wrapped his hand around his own ankle and placed his phone face down and took deep breaths. He laughed weakly when he realised that Augus would be proud of him for writing like a normal person in his texts, but he only ever wrote like that to Efnisien, because the only time they ever had proper conversations was over the phone.

Gwyn had wondered if they’d ever have one again, and now that they had, he felt weak. Mikkel was going to be mad at him. Maybe the lawyers could use it against him. He hoped not.

He sniffed and then forced himself to stand and walk up the stairs, sinking onto the bed without stripping. He should brush his teeth, but they’d survive if he didn’t do it for a night. He kicked off his shoes and messaged Augus.

Up?

His phone buzzed, and Gwyn slid beneath worn blankets onto a worn mattress when he read:

*Please, please, for the love of god, please text me with real words. Please. I'm so tired.*

*I'll lt u slp,* Gwyn wrote, smiling to himself.

*I'll let you slip? I'll let you slop? I'll let you slap? No one knows. It's a mystery. Call me, and stop putting me through this.*

Gwyn called, pressing the phone to his ear and pulling the sheets up to his chin. He stared at the window. Even with the blinds closed, it still let in a lot of light. Gwyn found it strangely comforting, like the world was alive outside of his bedroom, and it kept going even while he slept. Back at his parent’s place, all the windows were fitted with light-blocking curtains, which meant night was dark, and Gwyn felt lost in it.

‘How was nightfill?’ Augus said, Gwyn turned to his side.

‘Good. Did you have nightmares?’

‘Nightmares are scared of me,’ Augus said. ‘I kick their asses.’

‘But you did?’

‘I did,’ Augus said. He sounded soft and tired, and Gwyn knew that he was in bed. He could just tell. He reached out with his other arm and smoothed the place where Augus had slept in the past. Then he rolled onto his front and pressed his nose to the mattress and tried to see if he could smell him. He couldn’t.

‘Court was shitty, wasn’t it?’ Augus said.

‘Yeah.’

‘It always is. Even when it’s not, it’s still shitty. Did you think of all the things I can do to you, to distract yourself?’

‘No, actually,’ Gwyn said. ‘I thought about fucking you though.’

Augus went silent, Gwyn would have laughed except he knew how careful he had to be. He still had no idea if it was even a good memory for Augus. He had, after all, broken down and cried like a kid
afterwards, and while Gwyn knew it was complicated, he still wondered if the whole memory left a bad taste in Augus’ mouth.

‘You know that’s never happening again,’ Augus said, but his voice sounded different enough that Gwyn risked pushing.

‘I thought about how warm you felt around me, and tight, even though I stretched you out a lot.’

‘Ah,’ Augus breathed. ‘We’re not doing this.’

‘I thought about how you had to stop talking, even though you normally never shut up during sex. But you had to, because it was so much for you, and I was the one who was doing that to you.’

Augus next exhale was shaky, trembling directly into Gwyn’s ear, and Gwyn felt himself getting hard and pushed his hips down into the bed. He’d fucked Augus on this bed. Gwyn rolled his hips up and pushed down again.

‘I don’t ever want to hurt you like you hurt me,’ Gwyn said, ‘but I want to fuck you again.’

‘Yeah. Gwyn, it hurts,’ Augus said. ‘I’m not a size queen.’

‘You’re not?’

‘Shut up,’ Augus muttered. ‘No.’

‘Really? You don’t ever think about it? Ever? Me opening you up and then keeping you open? You don’t ever think about the sounds you made, and how you’ve never made them at any other time?’

‘Shit, I hate you,’ Augus said quickly, then Gwyn heard the sound of blankets moving and pushed up on his forearm, staring down at the pillow. Was Augus…?

‘Do you remember when we found the right angle?’ Gwyn said. ‘It was bad up until then, and then I just got really deep? It aches, doesn’t it? Even when it’s a good angle?’

‘I’m not doing this,’ Augus said to himself, and Gwyn could have punched the bed in triumph. Augus was absolutely jacking himself off. Of course, it never took much to turn Augus on, but Gwyn knew this meant that Augus didn’t hate it.

‘Would you put a finger in yourself? Right now?’

‘No,’ Augus hissed. ‘Because I couldn’t hold my fucking phone anymore, and because that’s gross, idiot. Only you do things like that. My ass is pristine, it’s not made to be…violated.’

Gwyn pushed the phone away as he giggled into the bed. Slowly, the worries of the day began to vanish, one by one, and Gwyn undulated into the mattress several more times, thinking of Augus beneath him, his taut waist, how good his hips felt to grab and manoeuvre.

‘I’m going to fuck you again,’ Gwyn said, as soon as he had the phone back against his ear. ‘It’s only fair.’

‘It’s not fair,’ Augus breathed. ‘The only reason I’m hard is because I’m hard like sixty times a day.’

‘Yeah, you’re not touching yourself thinking about my dick in you at all.’

‘I would never,’ Augus said, and then his voice cut off, like he was stopping himself from moaning.
‘Now that we know it fits,’ Gwyn said, ‘I could be really rough next time. We could get you wet enough with lube, and then I could make sure you felt me when you sat down for like, I don’t know… a day? A week? You’d get all glary about it. I could make breakfast the next morning and force you to sit down and you’d give me that look.’

‘What look?’

‘The one where you’re mad and think that I’ve betrayed you, just a bit, cuz I made you come from something that hurts so much later.’

‘Oh, oh you… you— I’m going to fucking destroy you,’ Augus said. ‘This wasn’t what I wanted to happen tonight. Goddamn it. Damn you.’

‘Maybe we could watch TV and I’ll just make you sit on my dick and stay there.’

‘Ha, no, that was my idea first, thanks, and if anyone’s going to be sitting on anyone’s dick and keeping it warm, it’s you. Just because you fucked me, like, once, don’t get ideas that you’re not some masochist sub who needs a regular quota of being fucked up by me, thanks.’

‘I wouldn’t do that,’ Gwyn said, tucking his knees under him and arching his back to get hips up, all so he could slide his hand between his legs and shove them into his boxers. His palm was too dry, it wasn’t great, but he couldn’t be bothered moving his hand away from himself long enough to lick his palm.

‘Trying to get above your station,’ Augus muttered.

‘Above your station?’ Gwyn said, laughing. ‘Did you get assigned Jane Austen this year?’

‘Some people speak English, Gwyn, look it up.’

‘I can’t, I’m too busy thinking about violating your pristine asshole, apparently.’

Augus made a choking noise, and Gwyn bit his lower lip and fucked carefully into the tight grip he had around himself. It was nothing like being inside Augus.

‘You’re mean sometimes,’ Gwyn said. ‘Maybe, when you get mean enough, what you need is some dick to calm you down.’

‘A dickjection,’ Augus said, and then burst into laughter.

Gwyn rolled his eyes, and only a few seconds later Augus was gasping.

‘Keep going,’ Augus said, his voice serious. ‘Keep going.’

‘I could get a ring around your dick and balls,’ Gwyn said, throwing caution to the winds. ‘I could make it harder for you to come. And then I could just fuck you at my leisure, as long as I want, getting so deep that your back does that cramp thing. Remember? Like your whole lower body didn’t know what to do. I felt it through my fingers. You shook like crazy, but you still took it all.’

‘Ah, no, I hate you,’ Augus breathed, his voice higher than before. ‘No, shit, shit.’

‘Which part are you thinking about?’ Gwyn said, voice rough. ‘The part where I pushed into you the first time and you realised how much I was going to fuck you up? Or the part where I figured out how to get deeper into you, and you couldn’t handle it? Or the part where I came in you, and you just let me, because you loved it, you loved it, right?’
He could hear Augus’ breathing, unsteady, strained and muffled. He knew Augus wasn’t even holding the phone properly anymore.

‘Or are you thinking about next time,’ Gwyn said urgently. ‘The part where I get to go harder, be rougher, because we know you’re just that good at taking it now? The part where you’re a sadist, but you like it to hurt just a bit, too? The part where that made you come?’

A harsh breath with a whimper at the top of it, and then Gwyn knew, he knew Augus was coming on the other side of the line, even though it was only telegraphed in the stops and starts of his breathing.

‘That’s good,’ Gwyn breathed. ‘That’s good, Augus. I am so fucking you again.’

‘You are so not,’ Augus said between gasps.

‘I so am.’

‘I need to give you a good dicking like at least ten more times before you fuck me again,’ Augus said, his voice lax, his breathing beginning to calm. ‘Ah, shit, I’ve made a mess. Fuck you. Have you come yet?’

‘No,’ Gwyn said.

‘God, get a move on,’ Augus muttered. ‘Some of us need to sleep.’

Gwyn couldn’t help but grin at Augus’ griping. He wished he could get another hand between his legs, but instead he focused on jacking himself off faster, thinking about fucking Augus, thinking about the sounds he made. Whatever they had between them, it was amazing. He’d let Augus do nearly anything to him. But he wanted to do so much to Augus as well. He was fairly sure Augus would allow it, in the right mood.

‘Are you thinking about fucking me?’ Augus said, his voice tireder than before, like he wanted to just turn over and sleep. There was something tender about it, him staying on the line, seeing this part through.

‘Yeah.’

‘You liked it a lot, didn’t you?’

Gwyn nodded. His balls were drawing up, he could feel the pulling sensation all the way up his lower back and he arched deeper, losing the fantasy in favour of imagining Augus fucking him. He groaned softly, turning his ear closer to the phone.

‘I’ve already thought about it, you know,’ Augus said, yawning. ‘Making you sit on my dick while we watch a movie or something. Like, it can be edging for me, because I won’t make you move, and it’ll just be a pain for you. I doubt we can find the right angle to make it super comfy. And then you’ll just lean back and be full and we’ll watch like…I dunno, it doesn’t matter. Maybe I can pull on your nipples, or torment your dick a bit. But just idly. You can’t come for the whole movie, Gwyn. But you can now, if you want.’

Somewhere during all of that, Gwyn shoved his face into the pillow and moaned as he shot his release into his boxers, his thighs shaking, his calves and feet flexing. His fantasies piled on top of each other, collapsing like a tower of cards all at once. He heard Augus through the other line, sounding like he was smiling as he said:
‘Just like that, sweetheart. I wish we lived together.’

It took about a minute for Gwyn to realise that Augus had said he wished they lived together. He almost said something, but decided to let it slide. Augus was tired, and everyone said things they didn’t always mean during sex. Or…mutual wanking sessions.

‘Fuck, I can’t…go to sleep like this. I have to go clean up,’ Gwyn said.

‘I know, right? Go do that. Keep me on the line. You can put me on speaker, right?’

‘Mmhm.’

Gwyn took Augus with him into the bathroom, not caring that Augus heard him cleaning up, or pissing into the toilet, or getting changed. They talked about small things – Augus’ upcoming job, what nightfill was like, school. They avoided the case.

Gwyn then took Augus back to bed with him, curling up with the phone against his ear and Augus off speaker so his voice sounded more intimate.

‘Hey,’ Augus said. ‘I’ll tell you when I’ll let you fuck me again. You want to know?’

‘Yeah,’ Gwyn said, his eyes closed, warm beneath the blankets.

‘I’m gonna let you fuck me again in your dreams, Gwyn.’

Gwyn laughed sleepily, and Augus did the same a few seconds later.

‘But also maybe in a month or something, I dunno,’ Augus said. ‘Let me think about it.’

‘You going to sleep?’

‘Yeah. You? You want to stay on the line?’

‘Can you afford it?’ Gwyn said.

‘Unlimited calls to a few numbers, it’s not a bad plan given it’s cheap as shit. I can stay on the line. Let’s do that. It’s really stupid, let’s never tell anyone we did this.’

‘Okay, Augus,’ Gwyn said.

‘Yeah,’ Augus breathed. ‘Okay.’

Gwyn fell asleep listening to Augus’ breathing steady out and turn heavy and even. He wished Augus was there with him, dimly thinking it would be nice if they lived together. One hand rested on his belly, the light from the outside world creeping in. The world was alive, it kept on going, and it was safe for Gwyn to let himself get some rest.
The Smoking Gun

Chapter Notes

Four chapters remain after this one O.O

Augus

School was getting on top of him. He looked over his latest grade on a calculus paper – one of his strongest subjects – and grimaced. He’d never gone under seventy percent a day in his life, and it turned out he really didn’t enjoy the feeling. He placed the paper back on his desk and looked around his bedroom.

From the bathroom came the sound of the shower shutting off, Ash getting ready for nightfill while Augus got ready for…nothing.

Oh, he was working. But the manager – Marika O’Caoimh – was disturbed by the amount of hours he’d been eager to do, and when he insisted he could work for a reduced rate on weekends, she stared at him blankly and said:

‘Just how much overflow bookkeeping do you think there is, in a real estate firm?’

‘I can do anything, really,’ Augus said.

‘I’m sure you can,’ Marika said, staring over his resume. ‘You come highly recommended, but you attend Murdock, don’t you?’

Augus nodded slowly, and Marika nodded with him, raising her eyebrows until he had to look away.

‘Listen, I’m aware that you need a paying job,’ Marika said finally, placing his resume on her desk and laying her hand on it. ‘But we have occupational health and safety markers that we need to adhere to, especially for teenagers. I don’t know what laws your previous bosses found loopholes in, and I don’t want to know. As a mother myself, I’m not comfortable putting you to work nearly every day after school and on weekends. We’ll start you off with six hours a week and go from there. All right?’

‘Yes, of course. Thank you,’ Augus said. Inwardly he seethed, and he suspected she knew it too. Marika, it turned out, was a fair boss, almost impossible to read otherwise, and while she frequently told him he was doing a good job, she wasn’t exactly what he would call warm in personality. She was still a million miles up from all his bosses at McAllister, Bride and Zhou. She paid better, too.

But it wasn’t enough. Without Ash working nightfill – and he had no idea how long that would last – they would struggle to cover their expenses. Even with Gulvi’s mother giving them an apartment for nothing more than a token payment, Ash’s car still needed fuel, they still needed to eat, they needed various bits and pieces for school, shampoo and conditioner and soap and razors couldn’t be stolen every time.

So far it was working out, Ash was working hard, but that didn’t bode well for his schooling. It
wouldn’t last. Augus hated that Ash was doing better than him. More cheerful, more well-adjusted, working more hours, making more money, successful.

‘Hey, why’re you just sitting here in the dark?’ Ash said, a towel around his hair, already wearing the shirt and pants of his uniform.

‘Hm?’ Augus looked around. The sun had set and his room was dim. He shook his head and reached for the lamp, switching it on.

‘I don’t have to leave for like another thirty minutes. You want to chat or something?’

‘About how you’re going to lose this job any day now?’ Augus said, spite and anger at himself lending a horrid bite to his words. ‘It’s the longest you’ve lasted, isn’t it?’

Ash’s expression twisted and he opened his mouth, closed it, then swung away like Augus wasn’t worth talking to.

*Good. I’m not. Fuck off.*

But Ash came back and leaned against the doorway, staring down at him, a puzzled, troubled look on his face.

‘You have to stop doing that,’ Ash said. ‘If it was as easy as someone just telling me to stop stealing, I would’ve stopped a long time ago. You know that, right? But I don’t want to take shit where I’m working, and so far, so good. But can you not…act like it’s a foregone conclusion?’

‘Isn’t it?’ Augus said.

Ash closed his eyes and Augus had to look away, the hatred bubbling inside crawling tarry up his chest until it choked him. He placed a hand over his mouth and hated that he was like this. He hated it.

‘I’m so bad for you,’ he said through his fingers. ‘Aren’t I? I know I got you out of that house, and I got you away from them, but it was basically the only good thing I did, wasn’t it?’

Augus laughed and thought that maybe Ash obviously had this job in spite of him, because it wasn’t like he ever offered much genuine encouragement. Augus was nasty, he had a mean streak, and Ash took it every time. Except now, because of course, that would be another thing falling apart in Augus’ life.

Ash came into the room and sat on Augus’ made bed. He sighed.

‘You’re kidding, right?’ Ash said. His voice deeper than before. How it got when he was completely serious. Augus couldn’t tell if it was the lead-in to a lecture, or if it was something else. He shrugged.

‘I’m not even making enough money to support us,’ Augus said. ‘You know that if my emancipation was challenged right now, I could lose it? I think about it every day. I don’t make enough money to support us.’

‘Good thing no one wants you back in the system,’ Ash said. Augus laughed bitterly. No, no one did want the older ones back in the system once they were out of it. ‘We’re family anyway. They can come after you, but I can support you right now, we have a home, we have income, we have the things they require for us to be emancipated together. It wasn’t like I was working when you got custody of me, okay?’
Augus stared at him, glad for the shadows that the lamp threw, glad he couldn’t see Ash’s face properly. Ash, who was spending his time dealing with Augus’ bullshit, instead of chatting to friends, or doing whatever he did before work.

‘I’m so bad at this,’ Augus said. ‘I’m failing my classes.’

Ash saw the paper on the table and made a beckoning motion, wanting Augus to hand it over. Reluctantly, Augus did, and Ash stared at the circled grade and whistled.

‘Wow, man, sixty eight percent. It’s the end of the world.’

‘Fuck you!’ Augus said.

‘I just wish you’d stop giving me such a hard time about this stuff,’ Ash said, dropping the paper on his lap. ‘You can’t tell me once in a while that it’s a good thing that I’m trying really hard? You really don’t think it’s good?’

‘I didn’t say that,’ Augus said. ‘Look, I’m… I don’t know what you want from me. I’m so bad for you, I don’t even think- God knows you probably need therapy as a result of living with me, let alone living with everything before.’

Ash went silent, and then breathed in slowly. ‘What the fuck?’

‘Think about it, I-’

‘No, Augus,’ Ash said, voice gritty. ‘Sure, sometimes it’s not easy, we’re brothers, we’re not meant to be parents. But, Augus, how can you say you’re bad for me after what we got out of? How can you say that? So you fuck up sometimes, so what? So do I! I keep stealing, and it makes you scared as shit for our future! I know you’re shit-scared of me going into juvie or something, and I know I stress you out too. But you sacrificed so much for me, man, so much I can’t even wrap my head around it. And sometimes I think you started being such a dick to me in the first place, so I wouldn’t feel indebted to you.’

Ash laughed.

‘And then I realised you were just a dick.’

Augus smiled weakly, rubbing at one of his eyes, feeling like all he did lately was cry a lot and fall apart.

‘I don’t talk about it much,’ Ash said urgently, ‘but I remember everything. Everything. I remember meeting you. I remember telling you that I was going to die, and I was kinda looking forward to it, but that I wished you could be my real brother. Remember that? I remember you hand-feeding me and begging me to eat more. I remember when Stacey came home that time and beat the living shit out of you because she found out that you were going to try for legal emancipation and she yelled at you for trying to cheat her out of her state payments. I remember her saying that if you were going to take the money anyway, she might as well kill you.’

‘Stop,’ Augus said.

‘I remember you reading law in your bed, under the covers, with broken fingers splinted with one of those little sticks from an ice-cream, because she wouldn’t do it, so you had to do it yourself. And I remember you telling me not to get my hopes up, over and over again, and how you looked when you said it, because you were so scared? I remember the first time you said we were brothers, real brothers, and that you were never going to leave me, no matter what. And then you know what?'
You never fucking left. Never. Not when I got impossible. Not when I lost job after job. Not when I fucked my way through half the town and then some. Not when you came home to that stoned orgy we were having that one time and all fifteen of us invited you to join us.’

Augus laughed. God, the old, termite ridden house had stunk for a week after that. It was like a locker room gone horribly, horribly wrong.

‘I remember everything,’ Ash said, scooting forwards until he could grab one of Augus’ hands. ‘So if you’re a bitch sometimes, or if you lose your shit, I’ve got you. I’ve got your back. I’m just asking, please, with this one fucking thing, can you stop being such a pill about it? Can you like, let me try and take care of you for once? Please?’

Blinking rapidly didn’t really help with how wet his eyes were.

‘Of course I think you’re doing well,’ Augus said, his voice scratchy. ‘I can’t not think it, because you’re doing so much better than me at the moment, and I fucking hate you for it. It’s awful. I can’t relax. I’m fucking up at school. I’m fucking up with work. I’m fucking up with you, with giving us a place to live, with having a proper income. I can’t-’

Arms folded around him and half-dragged him up from the chair he was sitting on. Ash was strong when he wanted to be.

‘What the hell?’ Augus choked.

‘Shut up,’ Ash said. ‘I dunno why you expect to be perfectly in control of everything when your life was so much worse than mine, but like, this stuff with Gwyn brings it up, man. In both of us. And it won’t last forever. And you’re fucking some things up, but not everything. That’s normal, asshole.’

‘Fuck you,’ Augus muttered into Ash’s shoulder, tentatively hugging him back.

‘Just let me help us,’ Ash said desperately. ‘Please. I just want you to let me do something for you, even if it’s nothing compared to what you’ve done for me.’

Augus shook his head, and Ash squeezed him tighter until it started to ache. It somehow made it easier to breathe, and Augus pressed his forehead against Ash’s neck. He smelled like Augus’ deodorant. Of course he did. The fucker never used his own.

‘I’m not good at this part,’ Augus said.

‘No shit.’ Ash drew back and smiled at him.

‘I can try harder,’ Augus said. It felt awful, admitting that he could try harder at being less mean. That wasn’t the kind of thing most people ever had to do, was it? He rubbed at the back of his neck and then dragged his fingers through his hair, careful when he came across minor tangles.

‘You just need a nice game of brockey to calm things down.’

‘Brockey,’ Augus said, eyes narrowing.

‘Yeah, you know, broom hockey?’ Ash said, sitting back on the bed again and grinning. ‘When you get the brooms from the cleaning section and get a tin of tuna as your hockey puck, and then you play? Gwyn wins all the time, like for someone who has only ever done wrestling, that boy is good at like all the fucking sports.’

‘Brockey. Get out,’ Augus said, pointing at the door. ‘Get out and go to work and don’t get fired for
‘You got it, bro,’ Ash said, standing and winking at him. ‘But it’d loosen you up real good! We’re gonna play it, I promise.’

‘No.’

‘What if Gwyn asks you?’

‘Get out!’ Augus shouted, and Ash laughed loudly as he went and swiped his keys off the counter, and even though they were back to their regular bantering, it felt like something had lightened between them.

A few minutes later, when Ash had driven away and Augus was left sitting in his room by lamplight, he got out his phone and sent a text.

I’m so proud of you, Augus wrote, it drives me nuts. A nicer person would be happier about it, but you know my blood is filled with liquid spite. I don’t want any other brother except you, asshole.

The response came minutes later, perhaps when Ash was stopped at traffic lights, or walking into the grocery store. It was just a lot of heart emojis, and Augus smiled, then slumped against the table and tried to work up the willpower to do his homework.

*  

‘Your grades are slipping, Mr Each Uisge,’ Mr Prince said, and Augus leaned back in the uncomfortable chair and closed his eyes. Mr Prince’s office window was open, a warm breeze blew in, bringing that quickening sense of summer on the way. He’d been summoned to Mr Prince’s office after first period, and now he was missing English Literature for this. He felt like he’d had a grinding headache for about a year.

‘Yes, I know, Sir,’ Augus said.

‘Fascinatingly, the grades of several other students have been conspicuously slipping too. They’re not giving you any trouble, are they, Augus?’

‘I don’t know what you’re talking about, Sir,’ Augus said.

‘Please, could you pretend I’m not stupid? If I was going to report you to Albion, I would have done it long before now.’

Augus’ eyes opened and he met Mr Prince’s black gaze. Mr Prince looked good today, as he often did. A lot of students crushed on him, but Augus mostly found him intimidating. He’d seen how Mr Prince fenced, and that was someone who possessed an extremely calculating mind. Besides, Mr Prince didn’t give off a remotely sexual vibe, and Augus thought he’d be more likely to murder someone who flirted with him rather than return the favour.

‘No one’s giving me a hard time really,’ Augus said. ‘Gwyn’s cousin has been…I mean it’s nothing really. And understandable with the case. As for everything else, I think they’re all a bit too scared of me to come at me directly.’

‘Make sure they’re not giving young Terho a hard time either, since he does so much of your dirty work,’ Mr Prince said. ‘Do you need to access the school counsellor?’

‘No,’ Augus said, face creasing.
‘Augus…’

‘Really,’ Augus said. ‘It’s fine.’

‘And yet your grades would indicate that things aren’t fine.’

‘It’s temporary,’ Augus said. ‘After the case is over, everything will go back to normal.’

‘Oh? Is that so?’

The doubt was damning, and Augus sat there trying his hardest not to squirm. Here was someone he couldn’t just swear at or be rude to, and as a result he was forced to actually think about things and give level-headed answers. He hated it.

‘I’m going to schedule another chat with you,’ Mr Prince said. ‘Far be it from me to get a reputation for neglecting my problem students.’

‘I’m not a problem student, Sir,’ Augus said.

‘You’re a student with problems though. Like all of them, I suppose. Listen, I’ll leave it for now and see you again in a few weeks, but please come and talk to me if you need to.’

‘Of course,’ Augus said. ‘Thanks, I appreciate it.’

‘Mmm, I’m sure you do. Very believable.’ Mr Prince actually smiled at him, and Augus almost smiled back. It was the same smile Mr Prince had on the piste sometimes, when he was pleased with something Augus had done. But Augus hadn’t properly attended fencing for weeks. Mr Prince was being surprisingly good about it. Augus couldn’t decide if it was pity, sympathy, or the Head of House not wanting Augus to fuck up his fencing class.

Maybe Mr Prince had been through enough of his own shit to kind of get it. Augus had never considered that before, and he left Mr Prince’s office thinking of his Head of House in a new light. Because there was no way Mr Prince would have been nearly so soft with him about all of it – by Mr Prince’s standards anyway – if he wasn’t trying to be sensitive to Augus’ situation, and the thought of it helped.

*

After fourth period, the siren for lunch rang and Augus twitchily looked for Efnisien before setting off downstairs. His chest felt warm with relief, knowing Gwyn would be there today. Seeing everyone at their customary group lunch table made school a lot easier. When he first started out at Murdock he’d been determined to make friends with no one. Slowly but surely, Ash had started inviting people into their lives.

Not all of them had worked out, and Augus was the most surprised that Gulvi – who was so obviously infatuated with Ash when they first met – turned out to be the most robust friend. Kayla came along later, and they’d already told Gulvi to her face that if she and Kayla ever broke up, they were keeping both of them as friends. Gulvi said she’d keep Kayla as a friend too.

Augus thought back to the beginning of semester, when he’d hated Gwyn from a distance for all his privileges. His fancy family, his fancy home, his better clothes, his better supplies. Augus swallowed the breath of laughter and shook his head. Gwyn, who turned out to be quietly respectful of all of them, who tried to learn and every now and then showed his wry, dark sense of humour like showing an ace he’d been hiding up his sleeve all along. Kayla said it was so obvious, sometimes, why Augus and Gwyn were together.
Hopefully Augus could catch the bus home with Gwyn after school. Gwyn didn’t have nightfill, butAsh did, and Ash could always swing round and pick Augus up on the way home.

‘That’s a nice smile,’ Efnisien said. ‘Who’re you smiling like that for?’

Augus froze, looking up. He took in a mass of details at once, even as his body chilled with fear.Efnisien’s blue eyes – darker and prettier than Gwyn’s in their own way – were bloodshot and red-rimmed. He smelled of heavy alcohol. His hair wasn’t perfectly curled like normal, flyaway pieces ofit all over the place. Augus could see the lunch table across the quadrangle in the corner of his eye. No teachers were nearby.

Efnisien was drunk.

‘It’s cool,’ Efnisien said, swinging up to him. ‘I know.’

The blow came so fast that Augus only had his hand halfway up before he staggered back, unable toabsorb the hit. Efnisien caught him by the tie and yanked him forwards, keeping him standing, andthen his hand slid deep into Augus’ trouser pocket even as students around them shouted in alarm.

Efnisien didn’t talk as much as usual, he breathed heavily. He sobbed with effort as Augus tried tokick him out of the way. Augus aimed for the shin, the crotch. Efnisien slapped him across the face repeatedly, Augus had to hold his hands in front of his face and focus on defending himself. Footsteps thudded towards them from all directions and Augus knew it was a miracle someonehadn’t started shouting: ‘Fight! Fight! Fight!’

It was so incredibly juvenile he could have laughed. He grabbed a pen out of his pocket even thoughhis head was ringing. He stabbed forwards with the pen. Efnisien swore, the pen catching in his shirt.

‘That’s smart,’ Efnisien said.

Augus saw the glint of silver first, then heard the snap of heavy, fabric scissors. Efnisien grabbed hisponytail, and Augus knew it shouldn’t have made him so frightened, not after everything else, but hiswhole body turned to liquid.

‘It’ll grow back!’ Efnisien said in glee, but Augus screeched and got his nails into Efnisien’s cheek,blood welling in the skin and Efnisien’s face screwing up.

‘EFNISIEN!’

Augus was shoved away so hard it was like a punch to the chest. He still heard the crunch when theheel of Gwyn’s hand made contact with Efnisien’s nose.

Everything turned to chaos and violence. All Augus knew was that he had to stop Gwyn. He pushedhimself up, stared in alarm as Gwyn seemed intent on demolishing his cousin, landing two gut punches and then dragging Efnisien into a headlock when he started to collapse. Efnisien wheezed with laughter. Ash was near Augus, reaching out to pull him away.

‘Stop him!’ Augus shouted at Ash. The rage in Ash’s eyes looked like nothing more than satisfactionthat Gwyn was destroying Efnisien, until his gaze cleared and turned to horror.

They couldn’t afford this. Not now, not with the case. Efnisien would press charges, this was exactlythe kind of trouble that Fenwrel warned Augus against starting.

‘Gwyn!’ Augus shouted, and then he grabbed Gwyn’s shirt, expecting to catch damage just for trying. But within only seconds, Gwyn let go of Efnisien and held his hands up, breathing hard, as
Efnisien fell to his knees. A gout of blood streamed from his nose, over his lips, down his chin and throat. The red was stark against his pale face, splattered near his blue eyes.

One of Efnisien’s hands hovered over his nose, and his strange, breathless laughter had turned into sobs, his eyes shutting, from the pain, or from being attacked by his cousin, Augus didn’t know.

‘Gwyn,’ Augus said urgently. ‘We can’t stay.’

‘What?’ Gwyn said, staring at Augus. ‘Are you hurt? Did he hurt you?’

But Augus looked past him. He’d seen students running in the direction of the teacher’s lounge. They were fucked.

‘You’ve got blood on you,’ Augus said, gesturing to him. ‘We have to go.’

‘Yeah, yeah, go!’ Ash said, shoving them both. ‘I’ll do damage control.’

‘Don’t hurt him,’ Augus said, shoving Ash for good measure. ‘If you get yourself in the shit over this I will never forgive you.’

‘I know what’s on the line, man,’ Ash said. ‘Besides, Gwyn did good enough all on his own.’

Efnisien’s sobs had changed timbre, and Augus couldn’t help but look over his shoulder as they bolted. None of the students tried to catch them, parting easily to let them go. As Augus ran, struggling to keep up with Gwyn, he couldn’t tell why, but he didn’t think Efnisien was crying from the pain of his nose. He didn’t even try to figure it out. Efnisien was a monster, even if Gwyn said he could be okay sometimes. What the fuck did Gwyn know?

Augus swung them away from the carpark, realising that’s where the teachers would expect them to go. They headed down the music corridor, slowing quickly to a walk, and then down the corridor where all the English classes were held. There, they went into a blessedly empty bathroom and Augus felt his knees weaken as he leaned against the wall. Gwyn had blood on his hands and forearm, but not as much of it as Augus expected.

‘Are you hurt?’ Gwyn said.

‘No,’ Augus said, and then walked to the mirrors and looked at the reddening patches on his face where Efnisien had punched and then slapped him. ‘Ah, maybe. You have to clean up, and we’ll lay low for a while. They’ll send teachers to the carpark.’

‘Augus.’

Augus flinched a little when Gwyn turned to reach for him. Only then did Gwyn seem to notice the blood on his hands, and he quickly turned back and washed them, saying nothing, breathing hard. Augus could see he was shaking, but he knew what adrenaline did to a person, he’d lived that before too.

When Gwyn turned back and placed his wet fingertips on Augus’ cheek to examine them, Augus said:

‘Your hands are cold.’

‘I have to go back,’ Gwyn said. ‘You have to go back and press charges against him, and then I’m going to add him to the VRO and fuck him coming back to Murdock, I can’t believe-’
‘Stop,’ Augus said, hearing his voice tremble. ‘Just stop. Efnisien’s going to press charges.’

‘He started it!’ Gwyn shouted so loudly that Augus pressed his fingers to Gwyn’s mouth. Gwyn shook them away. ‘He started it!’

‘Shh, please,’ Augus said, looking towards the exit. ‘We have to be quiet. We have to think. He wants to ruin the case, remember?’

‘Augus,’ Gwyn said, staring at him like a disappointed parent. ‘God. Shut up.’

‘Don’t fucking—’

‘He hurt you,’ Gwyn said, turning Augus’ head, cradling it in his fingers like it was made of glass. ‘He’s done it before, hasn’t he? Do you even care about yourself enough to tell me? Not everything’s about the stupid case.’

‘He’s never done much,’ Augus muttered, trying to scowl at Gwyn and finding it hard. The angle was ruining everything. He still felt shaken. His skin still stung. The aches hadn’t fully bedded in yet. ‘I’ve had worse.’

Gwyn’s jaw worked as his teeth ground together, and then his broad hand slid behind Augus’ head and pulled him in until Augus had no choice but to collide into Gwyn’s chest, arms coming up automatically. He thought he’d push away, but he ended up holding onto Gwyn’s shirt. Gwyn didn’t let go, the hand on the back of his head keeping him close, an arm around his shoulders. Augus could feel the tremors in his muscles, could feel all the violence bound up in him.

‘You broke his nose,’ Augus said.

‘Be quiet,’ Gwyn said. Even though his voice was less loud than before, it was still loud amongst the tiles and concrete. ‘Was he trying to stab you with the scissors?’

‘No,’ Augus said, smiling grimly. No wonder Gwyn flipped out, if that’s what he’d assumed. Augus had thought it for a whole second before Efnisien had crowed: ‘It’ll grow back!’

‘What do you mean ‘no?’’

‘He wanted to cut my ponytail off.’

‘Fuck,’ Gwyn breathed, and then he moved his hand over Augus’ hair, trailing it down the ponytail without pulling, as though making sure it was all still there.

They stood like that for so long that Augus felt himself starting to calm down. He still couldn’t wrap his head around what had happened. He didn’t want to think about the fallout. He wanted to go back to about twenty minutes earlier, when the most stressful thing he had to worry about was whether Mr Prince would force him to see the school counsellor or not.

When they drew away, Augus’ face was beginning to throb. He looked back at himself in the mirror, the red stronger than before.

‘Ah,’ he said. ‘I should get ice on this.’

As he stepped towards the mirror, he frowned as something poked into his thigh through his trousers. He reached into his pocket to readjust his phone, but his fingers fumbled over something else next to it.
He brought out a large, pen-style hard drive. He remembered Efnisien sliding his hand into Augus’ trousers and had just thought it had been some manic attempt at sexual harassment.

‘What is it?’ Gwyn said.

‘Efnisien slipped me this,’ Augus said, staring at it. ‘What…do you think it is?’

He felt sick. He didn’t want to know what animal cruelty, crimes or other things Efnisien might have put on there, and he gave it up easily when Gwyn reached for it. Gwyn looked thoughtful, and then looked around the bathroom like he could see beyond it.

‘I don’t want to open this at home or at Gulvi’s in case of malware. We should probably go to the library.’

‘One of the computer labs,’ Augus said. ‘The library has too many students in it at lunch, but the photomedia labs are normally empty at this time.’

‘Okay.’

Augus stumbled, disoriented, as they left, and Gwyn caught him carefully. He slid an arm around Augus’ waist, and Augus was grateful for it, even though he didn’t technically need it. It was warm, and Gwyn was strong, and Augus couldn’t stop seeing the look on Gwyn’s and Efnisien’s faces as they’d fought.

Ash was right. Everything about Gwyn’s life reminded him of the past, and he hated it.

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The external hard drive, once connected to a lab computer right at the back of the empty classroom, opened to reveal two folders. One was filled with over two hundred mp4 files, the other was filled with meticulously labelled word documents.

‘This could be anything,’ Gwyn said, mousing back to the folder with the video files. Augus leaned over his shoulder, staring at the sequential way all of them were dated. He pointed to one from about ten years ago, according to the date.

Gwyn clicked on it.

It took a little while for the file to load – the school lab computers were only so good – a grainy CCTV image started up. It had a clear view of one of the nicest kitchens Augus had ever seen. It was all black and white, but he could still almost imagine how nice that place would be to cook in. There was no sound.

‘That’s home,’ Gwyn said, shocked.

A woman who looked like a slightly older supermodel came into the frame, drew out a bowl and poured cereal into it, then walked off-screen and came back with a carton of milk. Instead of pouring that over the cereal, she poured it into a glass. Then she drew out a large box that had FIRST AID KIT printed on it, and drew out a small, brown glass bottle.

‘Is that Crielle?’ Augus said, breathless.

‘Y-yeah.’

Crielle measured out some ingredients into the glass of milk, stirred it, and then poured it over the
cereal. Augus thought his body was done with freezing with horror, but dread hooked into him.

A minute later a tiny Gwyn came into view. His hair was much shorter than it was now, but Augus could still see the strong curls in it. He covered his mouth with his fingertips, staring as Gwyn – who wasn’t older than six or seven – walked off with the bowl of cereal, out of screen, presumably to a table. Crielle leaned back against the table, and even through the grainy CCTV, it was possible to see the way she smiled.

She turned and put away the first aid kit, her box of poisons, and Gwyn clicked to a much more recent file before Augus could ask to see the end of the video.

The CCTV footage from two years ago was in colour, the sound was clear. The surveillance system was clearly upgraded to the newest technology. This time, Crielle had a syringe and was injecting it straight into a steak. Several other plates of food rested nearby, but she only doctored one of them.

Augus looked down at Gwyn, at the unblinking, fixed way he watched the screen.

As Crielle called for the Gwyn of two years before, the Gwyn next to Augus clicked open another file.

‘Hey,’ Augus said.

‘I don’t believe this,’ Gwyn said, but he didn’t seem to be talking directly to Augus.

The next file opened, and this one was a conversation between Crielle and Gwyn. This time, Gwyn looked younger, his hair was longer than it was now, but completely unstyled, a mop of hair over his head. Augus wondered if it drove Crielle up the wall, for Gwyn to neglect his hair like that. Gwyn leaned heavily against the counter, drinking glass after glass of water directly from the tap. He looked unwell. Augus could hear the way he gasped between each glass.

‘You’ve been so ill,’ Crielle was saying, one hand stroking up and down Gwyn’s forearm. ‘You know you need to eat to gather your strength. You can’t purge everything you have lately, and not eat.’

‘It’s okay,’ the past Gwyn said. ‘I’ll eat later.’

‘How old were you?’ Augus said.

‘Twelve maybe,’ Gwyn said.

‘I could make anything you wanted,’ Crielle crooned to the Gwyn of the past, and Augus felt goosebumps crawl across his arms. Twelve year old Gwyn turned and looked at his mother for a long time, and Crielle kept stroking his arm, over and over, soft and gentle.

‘Mama,’ Gwyn whispered. Augus had to strain to hear it.

Crielle froze, then walked away quickly. The sound of a fridge opening and closing, and then Crielle came back with a sandwich on a plate.

‘I made this just for you,’ Crielle said, her voice warm and loving. ‘Please eat it, Gwyn? It’s important to keep your strength up. You know I just want you to be at your best.’

Gwyn didn’t reach for the plate, even as Crielle held it out to him.

‘Darling,’ she said, ‘I really must insist. You’re getting so thin.’
‘Mama,’ Gwyn said, his voice plaintive. Augus wanted to take the plate and throw it against the wall. ‘I’m not hungry.’

‘Gwyn,’ Crielle said. ‘Do I need to call your father? You know how he feels to be interrupted at work.’

Still, Gwyn hesitated, and then he wrapped an arm around himself, and from the angle, Augus could see Crielle smile down at him when he did it. He felt like the contents of his stomach were curdling together.

‘Oh my god,’ Augus whispered.

‘All right,’ Crielle said, ‘I’ll call your father.’

The Gwyn in the video reached up and took the plate with both hands, and Crielle kept her own hand underneath it, like she didn’t trust Gwyn’s grip.

‘Because you’ve kicked up such a fuss, you’ll have to eat it right now, in front of me.’

Gwyn pulled the plate close to his chest, his head bowed over the sandwich. Augus couldn’t see his expression at all. But Crielle stared down at him, cruelly pleased, her voice sweet. Augus didn’t think that Gwyn would still have to eat the food so often once he’d realised it was poisoned. It just hadn’t occurred to him that Crielle would use the threat of Lludd’s violence as leverage.

‘Eventually,’ Gwyn said, closing the video before the younger him started eating the sandwich, ‘like a year later, maybe less, I called her bluff, and she called Lludd, and he lost his shit. It worked for a little while, but after a while I was just…way more scared of what she did to the food than what he did to me.’

‘Gwyn…’

‘I think these are all… There’s hundreds.’

He closed the folder and clicked open the other, with its word documents. Augus weirdly wanted to watch all of videos, wanted to see what Gwyn-the-boy had experienced so he could know exactly what he needed to protect him from, what demons he had to shelter him from.

Gwyn opened one of the word documents, and then pushed the chair backwards so fast that he bumped into Augus. He got up and walked away.

‘I can’t read that,’ he said.

Augus stared at him, then looked at the words, poring over them quickly.

_Ipecac is still the most effective, but causes no real long-term damage. It’s the easiest flavour to mask, but dosage is unpredictable. Sometimes it does not seem to make the boy visibly ill, and other times it impacts his breathing too noticeably._

_I am going to try culturing salmonella or something similar next, and injecting that directly. This will be easier to mask, and the boy can always go to the hospital. It will be a good test to see if they notice anything, though Lludd does so hate taking him to the hospital for anything._

A date. A time signature. That was the whole of the document. Augus closed out and looked at all the other notes and turned to look at Gwyn.
But Gwyn had his phone out, staring at it.

‘He’s blocked my number,’ Gwyn said, sounding so shaken that for a moment Augus thought that Mikkel or someone like that had blocked his number.

‘Who has?’

‘Efnisien.’

‘You’re contacting him?’

Gwyn looked up, eyes too wide, face too pale, clutching the phone like it was a lifeline. ‘Don’t you understand?’ he said, his voice shaking. ‘Don’t you understand what he’s done? What he’s done for me?’

Augus looked slowly back at the word documents. The mouse cursor hovered over a new document, but Augus couldn’t bring himself to open it. He started to shake. He could still feel the way Efnisien had shoved the hard drive into his pocket before slapping him. He could hear the sobbing noises Efnisien made, and Augus thought at the time it was effort, but maybe he’d been upset. Maybe it was something else. Augus didn’t understand Efnisien at all.

‘He blocked my number,’ Gwyn said quietly, and Augus hated how desolate he sounded. Because Efnisien was dangerous and toxic and Augus had seen the scars on the soles of Gwyn’s feet. Because Efnisien had nearly cut Augus’ hair off. Because Efnisien slapped him hard and mean, and Augus couldn’t fight him properly. ‘I just wanted to thank him.’

‘We have to take this to Mikkel and Fenwrel. Like…right now,’ Augus said. ‘Gwyn.’

‘She taped it all,’ Gwyn said, looking up and staring into space. It hurt to watch. It reminded Augus of the time Gwyn had sat on the bench outside his parent’s estate, after his father had beaten him, and he’d just seemed resigned to it, and so, so tired.

Augus pushed away from the computer and walked over. His face still hurt, but it felt distant, he’d always been able to tune that stuff out when he needed to. He took Gwyn’s phone out of his unresisting hands and tucked it back into his pocket, then clasped Gwyn’s hands with his own. ‘She taped everything. She wrote about it.’

‘She either never expected to get caught,’ Augus said, ‘or she trusted Efnisien with access to this material.’

‘You don’t understand,’ Gwyn said. ‘When she finds out… Efnisien’s in trouble.’

‘If he presses charges, we’re all in trouble.’

‘I don’t think he will,’ Gwyn said, looking down at Augus, his voice dreamlike.

‘He could have just given you the hard drive,’ Augus said.

‘No.’ Gwyn looked down at Augus’ hands where they cradled his. ‘I know it sounds stupid, but, that’s not like him. And he’s upset.’

‘He’d been drinking.’

‘You don’t understand,’ Gwyn said. ‘Crielle loves him more than anything, but if you go against her, she… She’ll want to kill him. I don’t know. Maybe. He blocked my number.’
‘We have to take this to Mikkel. Let him decide what to do next. He’ll know, won’t he?’

Gwyn nodded, but he didn’t look up. Augus couldn’t believe how fast the mood had changed. One moment, Gwyn was protective and strong-willed and checking on Augus, the next he’d shrunk in on himself, he seemed so much smaller, even though he was broad and tall. Augus looked at him, saw the six year old in him that he’d seen on the video. There’d been so many separate files. So many incidents. Over and over again, and Gwyn had never done a thing except stop eating.

Augus hated that he knew it might have saved Gwyn’s life. Eventually, he must have gotten stubborn enough to refuse all food from her, she would have hated it.

‘I don’t understand why he did this,’ Gwyn said.

‘Maybe…’ Augus bit down on what he’d been about to say. He tried, frantically, to think how the videos and documents Efnisien had given them would ruin the case, but he couldn’t think of a single way. It was the clincher in a case where Gwyn had no evidence against his mother. It proved that the ap Nudd family was wholly toxic and abusive to their single son, with demonstrable evidence more reliable than witness testimony. Efnisien must have found the time to get a hard drive, find the files, compile them all and then give them to Augus. He’d been drinking heavily, he’d looked…distraught.

Augus squeezed Gwyn’s hands, closed his eyes and let the words free, even though they hurt to say.

‘Maybe he loves you after all,’ Augus said.

‘God,’ Gwyn breathed. ‘I can’t deal with this.’

Augus tugged him closer, murmured something about taking it all to Mikkel and he could sort it out, and then wrapped his arms around Gwyn’s shoulders. He stared protectively towards the door, daring anyone to come in and stop them, but it was still lunch time and the corridor was deserted. There, amongst the humming of the lab computers, he held Gwyn as tightly as he could, wishing he could make the world stop for both of them.
Chapter Notes

Holy shit 11,000 words batman, I blame Augus' extreme amount of 'no no don't fuck me I can't handle it /flutters eyelashes/ you couldn't possibly do that to me I've never liked it /presents ass/ but Gwyn who would violate me this way /takes off pants/ YOU'D BETTER NOT" routine.

Three chapters left. THREE CHAPTERS!

Gwyn

*

The hard drive changed everything.

Mikkel had clicked through the videos rapidly, as though double checking that they were what they seemed to be. He stared with an intent look that Gwyn would have interpreted as anger in the early days, but that he now knew as a kind of excitement. Mikkel was less excited about Crielle’s journaling.

‘They’re easier to doctor,’ Mikkel said, somewhat apologetically. ‘Though we’ll have forensics go over them just to be sure. But these videos, god, they’re all date and time-stamped. Why would Efnisien give this to you?’

Gwyn looked back to the door. Beyond it, Augus was waiting in the foyer of the building where Mikkel was based. His office was dingy and dim, and covered in stacks of folders, printed evidence each representing a client he might or might not take on one day.

‘We’ve been talking,’ Gwyn said. ‘Messaging each other. But he’s given no real hint he’d do something like this, except that he started drinking, and he’s been upset.’

Mikkel made a face and went back to looking at the videos, and Gwyn avoided looking too closely, and thought that for Efnisien…the signs had been there. Gwyn wasn’t sure what motivated him. He had a bizarre attachment to Gwyn, but that was just as likely to make him vicious and vindictive. More likely, even. He might be angry at Crielle and Lludd too. But while the signs were there, Gwyn didn’t know how to interpret them. He only knew he was worried about him, and Augus wouldn’t like it, and Gwyn didn’t like it either.

It was hard to be worried for someone when he simultaneously wanted to punch Efnisien’s face in and murder him for how he’d hurt Augus. The fact that it had happened more than once was horrifying. Augus refused to speak about it, but that on its own spoke volumes.

Some of Gwyn’s anger was set aside for Augus, too.

‘I have to get this to the right people,’ Mikkel said, shaking his head. ‘I can’t… This is too good to be true. This is too fucking good to be true. Pinch me and I’ll wake up.’

Gwyn reached out to pinch him and Mikkel smacked his arm away with surprisingly sharp reflexes.
‘Pinch me and you’ll have to take me to court next,’ Mikkel said snippily, and Gwyn only smiled. That seemed to piss Mikkel off even more, but Mikkel’s excitement about the evidence was contagious, and Gwyn knew the strange feeling in his chest was some bubble of hope and not nausea for once.

‘I have to go, though,’ Gwyn said. ‘And nothing’s sorted out with school. Like, we just took off and came straight here. Principal Albion’s going to kill me.’

‘I’ll call,’ Mikkel said. ‘I’m your liaison, I can smooth things over and explain. I can’t stop Efnisien from pressing charges though. And that could make things a lot harder for you, at least at Murdock. They’re under no obligations to keep you there if he presses charges.’

‘I know,’ Gwyn said. ‘He won’t.’

‘He’ll have everyone leaning on him to do it, especially your parents,’ Mikkel said. ‘It doesn’t matter if he gave you this, you still broke his face. Anyway… Look, you head out and go home, and I’ll be in touch in a few hours to let you know what’s happening. Don’t answer your phone if it’s the school, okay?’

‘Yeah,’ Gwyn said, nodding. As if he wanted to talk to anyone from the school. ‘Okay.’

He left, and Augus stood as soon as Gwyn exited the elevator, looking wired and exhausted and several kinds of messed up. He had a nasty bruise on the outside of his right eye, and several red patches on his face. His hair wasn’t as put together as normal. Gwyn shuddered at the protective surge that went through him, like electricity.

‘We’re going back to my place,’ he said, realising that he was angry with Augus, but it could wait.

They spent the night watching television. Augus made some big talk about getting into Gwyn’s pants but he’d fallen asleep within an hour of resting against Gwyn on the couch, and he didn’t wake up until Ash came to fetch him after his nightfill shift finished.

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Efnisien didn’t press charges, which was the second miracle. Though Gwyn wasn’t surprised, and he had a niggling feeling in his chest about Efnisien that he couldn’t dispel. Even when he’d been beating Efnisien down, furious at how he’d hurt Augus, he could feel how Efnisien wasn’t even trying to fight back. He took every hit, he went limp the way Gwyn used to with Lludd in the past. He just…took it.

The third miracle was that none of the students who witnessed the fight had anything to say about it to the teachers, especially to the Principal. Ash was gleeful as he said that all of them hated Efnisien so much – and everyone knew about the court case and Gwyn’s emancipation attempt – that they’d all pretended nothing had happened. Apparently ‘I didn’t see anything, Sir,’ was the stock response everyone had agreed upon. It was hard to take any action against Gwyn, when according to everyone, there was no event to suspend or expel him over in the first place.

At work, Gwyn listened to Ash talk about all of it in a way that indicated he’d clearly leaned on some people to get the response he wanted. Probably, Ash was so popular that if he fluttered his eyelashes, the majority of the school would do what he wanted anyway. Gwyn had seen it himself, the way some of the students would walk slowly past their lunch table, and then slowly back the other way again, trying to catch Ash’s eye.

Every now and then Ash would look up and beam at one of them, and then keep grinning as they
ran off, flustered. Ash thrived on attention, even though he said he had a ‘no students at the same school I’m at’ policy. Which he’d instated after having a lot of sex with the students at the school and it blowing up in his face repeatedly.

‘The upshot is,’ Ash said, unpacking a box of tinned chickpeas, ‘that with him not pressing charges, and the students saying *nothing* happened, they can’t even suspend you. As far as anyone knows, Efnisien’s nose mysteriously broke because he ate some pavement, and the only one out of all of us who has any bruises is Augus, and like…the teachers aren’t stupid. I bet they can put two and two together and figure out Effles was harassing him. Speaking of, has he said anything to you about it?’

‘Nothing,’ Gwyn said, sliding chickpeas onto the shelves and moving ones with older best before dates forward.

‘Me either,’ Ash said. ‘He just changes the subject. I want to know like… Because Efnisien brought Augus to our table that time, remember? And we *all* thought something bad was going on.’

‘Yeah,’ Gwyn said, discomfort curdling in his gut. Should he have pushed harder? He’d had his suspicions, but Augus brushed them all off.

But that was what Augus *did*.

‘You know…’ Ash said.

‘What?’

‘He does this shit to protect other people. All the time. Like, all the time. He doesn’t know how not to and he doesn’t care how hurt it gets him in the process. He’ll shove it aside and never think about it again. You watch how he talks about all the other kids in foster care, but he *never* talks about what he went through, or if he does, it’s only to show how much better he had it than the other kids.’

Gwyn paused, feeling sick. Initially, the idea of Augus being hurt when he was younger was abstract, something that he understood, empathised with, hated, but didn’t feel viscerally. Now – especially after seeing the way Augus had been beaten down so easily, so quickly by Efnisien – it made his muscles tense to think about it.

‘The thing is,’ Ash said, looking around first. ‘Gwyn, it’s not true. I dunno what happened to him in the past, I just know it was a million times worse than what he says about it. I don’t even know if he remembers how bad it was. He tells me these things about…where we both lived together, and I swear I remember stuff happening to him that he doesn’t remember, or he just refuses to remember. And if he does that with me, when I was *there*, what the fuck is he not telling me about the rest of his past? And he will put himself in front of the most dangerous people, if he thinks it’ll help someone else. Even if Efnisien doesn’t press charges, I don’t like…I don’t like them both being at school together.’

‘Do you think Efnisien will do something?’ Gwyn said. He hadn’t even thought about that. For some reason, he thought the door was closed after Efnisien had given him the hard drive.

‘I think Augus won’t stop him if he tries,’ Ash said. ‘I don’t fucking like it.’

‘Neither do I,’ Gwyn said.

‘Yeah,’ Ash said, turning and opening the next box. ‘Yeah.’

That seemed to be the end of the conversation, and Gwyn forgot all about the unexpected miracles in his life, worried for Augus instead.
It was, for the first time in his living memory, easy to eat tinned food. He was the one unpacking it from the boxes, he checked it out himself at the register, he got to take it home. He started with staples like tinned spaghetti and baked beans, and then branched out when he realised that if it was in a tin, and he unpacked it, he could try it. He even had a jar of gross-looking stuffed peppers that he knew he wouldn’t ever be brave enough to eat and maybe he’d just leave the jar for whoever stayed in the house after him.

None of his fellow workers knew who he was, except when Madge had said:

‘Oh, ap Nudd? Like the hospital wing!’

All in all, it was nice being treated like an inexperienced worker, which was exactly what he was. He didn’t know he was meant to collect and keep all his payslips until one of the other workers reminded him – apparently Ash was terrible at collecting his, so Gwyn reminded him too. He had to read a million occupational health and safety documents, only to watch everyone ignore most of them, especially when there was a push to get a whole heap of stock out before a sale. Rest breaks were for people who were fairly paid in fair circumstances, not for the lowest rung of the grocery store ladder.

Others informed him that the grocery store he currently worked at was better than most anyway, and that it could be worse. Gwyn liked his colleagues, and he felt better and more effective at this than anything at school except wrestling and sports. Between the case and work, sometimes school felt like that one extra thing he just didn’t want to deal with.

He was eating rinsed chickpeas, spooning them up out of the colander, when Mikkel called.

‘It’s official,’ Mikkel said, ‘they’re desperate to fucking deal. Saturday morning I’m gonna come pick you up at about seven in the morning, and we’re going to nail everything down with Fenwrel.’

‘Does this mean no trial?’ Gwyn said. He closed his eyes, pushed away the chickpeas. It wasn’t that they tasted bad – he rarely cared about the taste of food as long as it didn’t taste like detergent or chemicals – but just hearing about his parent’s existence made him feel like he could have been poisoned. He walked away from the sink, into the lounge, pressing a hand against his stomach.

‘This is what we’ll discuss on Saturday.’

‘Do you think we should go to trial?’

‘I think we should do whatever you want to do, that gets you out of their household,’ Mikkel said firmly. ‘Fenwrel may push for a trial, because she’s very confident of a win and she knows it’ll be a feather in her fucking cap to put Lludd and Crielle ap Nudd in prison. But, Gwyn, you have to remember that this is your case, and we work for you. Okay? So have a long, hard think about what’s more important to you.’

‘Augus is staying over Friday night,’ Gwyn said. It seemed stupid to say it, but he was desperate to get Augus alone to talk to him about what had happened with Efnisien, and their schedules kept never matching up.

Mikkel was silent in that ‘God, I hate your boyfriend’ way that Gwyn was familiar with, before he sighed.

‘Do you want him to come?’
‘What?’ Gwyn said, shocked.

‘Do you want him to come to that preliminary meeting?’

‘He can come?’

‘Would I fucking ask? Do I seem like the kind of person to joke about this shit to you?’

‘No,’ Gwyn said. ‘Pretty sure you don’t have a sense of humour.’

‘Oh, I do,’ Mikkel said with relish. ‘I do, it’s just really fucking dark, and it’s not the kind of thing I share with lads like you. You want him to come on Saturday? If he can behave himself, you could do with the moral support. Fenwrel’s gonna lean on you hard, man, and she terrifies the shit out of me.’

‘She really wants to go to trial?’

‘Look,’ Mikkel said. ‘She will sell you a billion reasons on why they should be locked up for child abuse. A lot of good, justice-based reasons that will sound a lot like ‘think of all the other children you could save.’ I’m here to tell you, friend, that they will be able to scheme and plot and seethe in prison in a way they won’t if they just have to start their lives over after a payout. And after watching that footage of Crielle, I want to say as respectfully as possible, I think your life will be in danger if they go to jail. But I don’t think it will be if they just get to cut you out of their life and never think about you again.’

‘But Fenwrel-’

‘Listen to me, Fenwrel doesn’t care what happens to you after she’s done with your case. It’s her greatest gift and her greatest curse, or whatever, she won’t give a single fuck. If they come kill you after, who cares? She won her case! Have Augus there, he drives me nuts, just the very mention of his name makes my hair fall out, but I think Augus was stubborn enough to do what he wanted and drag Ash out of hell with him, I think he’s stubborn enough to stop you from being railroaded by honestly one of the scariest women I’ve ever met. And I watched those videos of your mother.’

‘Fenwrel got Augus his new job though,’ Gwyn said.

‘What?’ Mikkel exploded. Gwyn almost laughed, but he swallowed it down, feeling a little hysterical. ‘She did? How come I didn’t know?’

‘She didn’t tell you?’

‘No, she fucking did not,’ Mikkel said. ‘I’ve got to go. That little-! Nevermind, I’ve got to go, I need to make a call.’

‘Are you going to call Fenwrel?’

‘None of your business.’

The line went dead, and Gwyn stared at it, wondering if Augus would end up coming with him on Saturday morning for ‘moral support’ or not. He clutched the phone to his chest and walked upstairs, then faceplanted on his bed. Tomorrow night Augus was going to sleep over, and that was all that mattered.

*
On Friday night, Augus turned up with his hair in a complicated braid, wearing eyeliner and the leather boots and jacket that made Gwyn’s cheeks flush.

‘Uh,’ Gwyn said, staring at Augus on the doorway.

‘So,’ Augus said, pointing at his hair and looking sideways. The eyeliner made his eyes so green. ‘So it turns out, when you sort of live adjacent to a whole bunch of women with mostly long hair, who all know how to braid…you get offers. You get a lot of offers from girls who just want to braid your hair.’

‘It’s…’

‘I know, right? So gay.’ Augus pushed past him into the house and Gwyn stared at the back of Augus’ hair and wondered if it would be sacrilege to untie it all and feel it in his fingers. He’d been flipping back and forth on wanting to top Augus since talking him through it on the phone. But seeing him in person, wanting to peel his clothing off him, mess up his eyeliner, undo the braid…

‘I’m fucking you tonight,’ Gwyn said hoarsely, then winced at his complete lack of gentle lead in. He’d also spoken it out into the night, and an old woman pushing a walker stared at him like she wanted to murder him as she continued to slowly walk by, and he hurriedly closed the door and stared at it, scraping his teeth over his bottom lip.

‘Consent means you have to make that a question, at least,’ Augus said, walking straight into the kitchen, which seemed to be the place he felt most comfortable.

‘Augus?’ Gwyn said. ‘I’m fucking you tonight.’

‘Ha,’ Augus said, opening the fridge. He closed it, then looked at the counter. ‘Canned food? That’s progress, isn’t it?’

‘Yeah,’ Gwyn said, walking into the kitchen, walking up to Augus and staring at him. He reached out to touch Augus’ braid, but Augus batted his hand away. Then he grasped Gwyn’s wrist, his fingers unforgiving.

‘You don’t want me to hurt you?’ Augus said, staring at him with that flinty, delicious gaze that made Gwyn want to do anything for him. But…

He stared at Augus’ face. Carefully, he reached up and turned Augus’ jaw until he could see the shadow of the bruise under the cold kitchen light. Probably, it wasn’t a nice thing to want to do, take Augus apart until he couldn’t think of anything else, couldn’t pretend to be anything else, couldn’t lie or protect anyone. But Gwyn wanted to lay him low, then do what Augus hardly ever let him do and just hold him. For the whole night, if Augus allowed it.

‘What’s up with you?’ Augus said, looking wary.

‘Augus,’ Gwyn said, tipping his chin up and pressing his lips gently against Augus’, a kiss soft and closed-mouthed. Augus’ lips parted after a few seconds, his breathing shallow. Gwyn slid his hand to the back of Augus’ neck, feeling the impossibly soft hairs at his hairline. A longer breath brushed against Gwyn’s mouth. He slid his other arm up the leather over Augus’ shoulder, then around to his back. The jacket was buttery soft, felt almost as nice against his palm as Augus’ skin did.

He continued to kiss him, Augus’ lips yielding after a longer period of time, a reluctance in it. His mouth would tense like he wanted to talk, or take control back, and then he’d relax as Gwyn just rubbed his lips over Augus’ to feel the softness of both of their mouths together. It was warm and Augus’ breaths touching his were soft and fragile.
‘You really want that?’ Augus said. Gwyn nodded, fingers tightening against Augus’ back. ‘I have a condition.’

‘Okay.’

‘We share a meal together,’ Augus said.

Gwyn froze, and Augus stepped back, flashing a wicked grin before turning away and touching the tips of his fingers to his mouth.

‘Can I cook it?’ Gwyn said. He didn’t even know if he could do it. But he had gotten a little better about eating sometimes when Augus was around. He’d never gotten sick around Augus, and that alone was something Gwyn hung onto, battered himself with like it was a stick of positive reinforcement. It was hard to get his broken brain to understand, to override the thick fear that drove all his decisions in that moment.

‘Yes?’ Augus said, turning back to him. ‘Why wouldn’t you be able to cook it?’

‘Do we have to eat all of it?’

‘Seriously?’ Augus said, staring at him. ‘You’re seriously taking me up on this? What, I’m so hot? You want to fuck me that badly?’

Gwyn could see the way he tensed, the uncertainty he had. He doubted Augus would ever be fully comfortable bottoming for someone, and in a weird way, he liked it. Liked that Augus was happy enough as a top that it was a challenge to switch, even if he could enjoy it. Because Gwyn was submissive, he liked to bottom, and he didn’t want a relationship with someone who wanted to be topped all the time. It just wouldn’t work.

But sometimes…

And the wariness was appealing in its own way.

‘Yeah,’ Gwyn said. ‘You’re hot and I want to fuck you that badly.’

Augus’ eyes widened, and his cheeks coloured faintly. He looked around the kitchen like it would give him an idea of what to say, but eventually he just looked back at Gwyn and said nothing. The fact that he wasn’t protesting every second meant he was considering it. Gwyn took a moment to feel proud of himself, because it meant he’d done okay last time. Okay enough that Augus was having conflict over whether he wanted it or not, instead of outright hating the idea.

‘So do we have to eat all of it?’ Gwyn said, staring at him.

‘No,’ Augus said slowly. ‘You have to eat more than I’ve seen you eat before though.’

Gwyn pressed his lips together and thought it over. He could do chicken and salad, because it was easy, and Augus eating from the same plate as him really did help. Sometimes he became struck with a need to watch Augus closely to make sure he wasn’t going to be poisoned, which was bizarre, and actually helped crack through the worst of the fear.

‘Okay,’ Gwyn said. ‘I’ll cook chicken.’

‘Wow,’ Augus said, dumping his backpack onto the floor. ‘Just…wow. Sure, Gwyn, I mean I don’t even really have that much of an ass to begin with, so-’
‘I want to be in it,’ Gwyn said, taking chicken and salad ingredients out of the fridge. ‘So that’s fine.’

‘What?’

Gwyn almost laughed, but he bit his tongue to swallow it down. Augus did not like being laughed at, even if it was affectionate.

‘You don’t like my ass?’ Augus said.

Gwyn stared at him for so long that Augus scowled, then looked away. It was too easy to put him on the back foot once he knew how, and that bothered him too, because it meant Efnisien would have known. Efnisien would have found it easy.

Gwyn didn’t like thinking of any of that. But he had to, denial wasn’t going to help anyone.

Augus sat at the table as Gwyn cooked up some chicken and cut up the ingredients for a salad. He wondered if he could handle some kind of bottled salad dressing if he got it from the store he worked at, if he was the one to unpack the sealed box. The tip of his tongue stuck out between his lips as he thought about it, trying to imagine it. Seeing it in his head always made it seem easier than it was in practice.

As the chicken fried, Gwyn got the plate he used for himself and Augus, and set it down on the counter. He looked at it closely, touched its dry surface, checking it for invisible, impossible things. He saw the way Augus watched him and forced himself to stop. He wasn’t as scared as he’d been in the past anyway. He was determined that Augus not get the upper hand, not today, and he knew Augus had only thrown this challenge out because he didn’t think Gwyn was up to it. Which was rude, really.

‘When did Efnisien start harassing you?’ Gwyn said as he turned over chicken pieces with the tongs, so they’d brown on both sides.

‘It doesn’t matter,’ Augus said.

‘That’s not what I asked you.’

Gwyn turned and saw how uncomfortable he was, and glared at the chicken. This was something he should have pushed on the first time Efnisien had brought him over to the table like that.

‘Was it before we started hooking up?’ Gwyn said.

‘No. He didn’t give a shit about me. I don’t think he’s really my type.’

‘You can be tortured. That’s his type. So it was after we started hooking up? What kind of shit did he pull?’

‘God,’ Augus said, sounding truly exasperated. ‘It was like three times in total, and it was nothing. He just wanted you to drop the case, and thought I’d be the best one to convince you. Obviously, he was wrong.’

‘He wouldn’t have liked that,’ Gwyn said, hating that he could imagine Efnisien’s reaction to being told no.

‘Well, he just gave us something that’ll nail your parents to the wall, so he’s had some crisis of conscience or whatever, and it’s fine, so-’
‘Be quiet,’ Gwyn said, turning the burner off once the chicken was done. He placed it all onto a paper towel so it could rest and drain, and placed the salad on the plate. ‘Augus, he’s a sadist, and not like you are. I don’t know what made him give us that hard drive, but it won’t cure his need to hurt people and animals, and it won’t fix him. He might even get worse. He could target you.’

‘I doubt it,’ Augus said. ‘He wasn’t even as bad as he’s been in the past when he gave me the hard drive, like at first I thought he’d…’

Augus seemed to realise what he’d given away, because he clammed up and his hands clenched into fists on the table. Gwyn forced himself to take a slow, silent breath as he placed the chicken on the plate, and then raised the whole plate to his nose and sniffed it. Nothing. Of course there was nothing. He’d bought and cooked the food himself. His mother wasn’t allowed anywhere near him or where he worked.

He placed the plate on the table with no cutlery, they tended to eat with their fingers when they ate together. He liked that it was nothing like eating at home, he liked that their chairs had to be close together, and he liked the way Augus tried to get all of the cherry tomatoes before Gwyn even had a chance to eat one.

‘So he’s been worse in the past,’ Gwyn said. He picked up a piece of carrot and stared at it, heart beating hard. He told himself he was so unsettled because of Augus and Efnisien, told himself he had a challenge to win, and he ate it with the same determination he felt before a wrestling bout.

‘What are you going to do?’ Augus said. ‘Go kill him?’

‘No,’ Gwyn said. ‘I wouldn’t have done that anyway.’

‘I would’ve thought you’d be so overprotective that you’d kill him or something,’ Augus said, sounding almost annoyed that Gwyn wouldn’t kill him.

He forced himself to pick up a piece of chicken and eat it while he thought it over.

‘I’ve been wrestling for as long as I’ve been allowed to do it at school,’ Gwyn said slowly. ‘I used to get like- I used to get the thing where my vision would go red, and I’d lose my shit, and it made me win some bouts in the beginning but later it just made me lose. You can want to wrestle someone, or fight with them, and still not lose yourself in the moment. You can have like, I don’t know, bloodlust or whatever they call it, and still think something through. That’s something my father’s never learned, but I learned it.’

He wondered how much he’d have to eat in order to top Augus. What was the most he’d ever eaten in front of him? He probably needed to eat about four of the chicken strips and some more of the salad. He picked up another piece of chicken and then reached for a glass of water and drank deeply, because everything felt stuck in his throat for a moment.

He kept eating and watched Augus, who seemed thoughtful.

‘He liked grabbing my hair a lot,’ Augus said softly. ‘He spat in it once. He grabbed my crotch. Everything else was just designed to get me listening to him, like…punches and stuff. Nothing major.’

‘Nothing major,’ Gwyn echoed, feeling like that wasn’t anything major for Efnisien, but seething all the same. He ate a carrot in two bites, forgetting to chew it properly, and then rolled up some lettuce into a little cigarette shape because he liked it that way.

Gwyn looked away, trying to gather the threads of it together. Efnisien reached for Gwyn’s crotch all
the time when they were growing up, usually to hurt him, sometimes just to touch him, like he had to own all of him. But he never tried to jack him off, and he usually just grabbed and let go again. It never felt like that much of a violation, because Efnisien’s presence was intrusive enough that by the time he actually started in on hurting him, Gwyn took it all in his stride. But for Augus…

He dropped a piece of cucumber on the table and had to focus on breathing. He couldn’t tell if his gut hurt because the food was poisoned, or because he couldn’t stand the idea of Efnisien hurting Augus at all.

‘You know,’ Gwyn said, feeling strangely spacey. Maybe he shouldn’t have started talking about this while eating. But Efnisien had never hurt him with food. Efnisien was the one who offered to get him food when Gwyn hadn’t eaten at home for days on end. Efnisien probably would never have hurt him with it, even though he was compelled to hurt him in other ways. ‘He graduates at the end of this year.’

‘So?’

‘So, if you withdrew…and deferred your studies, or like, took a year off to work or sort some stuff out or whatever…you could go back to Murdock and he wouldn’t be there.’

‘I couldn’t go back to Murdock,’ Augus said.

‘Why not?’

‘The grant doesn’t work that way. The scholarship is… It’s very generous financially, and so it’s stricter than average. I have to keep up a certain grade point average, and I have to set an example for future students, and I can’t take a year off. I wouldn’t. Gwyn, it’s fine. Why are you talking about this?’

Gwyn made himself pick up another piece of chicken. He’d started strong, but he was flagging fast with the whole eating thing. But he knew he was doing well, even for him.

‘I’m winning,’ Gwyn said, staring at Augus while eating more of the chicken, ‘by the way.’

‘I hate you.’

‘You will later.’

‘God, I hate you,’ Augus said, laughing weakly. ‘No one should be proud of whatever you’re being proud of right now. That’s like, gross machismo shit.’

‘So what is it when you’re taking me apart? That’s not gross machismo shit?’

‘No,’ Augus said primly, rolling some of the chicken in the lettuce, turning it into a tiny lettuce wrap. Gwyn did the same thing, because it looked good. ‘It’s never gross machismo shit with me. I’m ethereal and a bit femme and I wear eyeliner, so me taking you apart and enjoying it is just sadism. Simple.’

‘Uh huh,’ Gwyn said. ‘You’re a dope.’

‘I can’t be a dope, you and Ash have the market cornered. There’s no room left for anyone else. You’re the one percent of the one percent, and there’s no trickle down idiot economy. That’s capitalism for you.’

‘If I eat one more piece of chicken, that’s the most I’ve ever eaten in front of you and I’ll get to nail
your ass.’

Gwyn ate the chicken wrapped in lettuce, feeling a little triumphant, and then Augus took a deep breath, stared Gwyn in the eyes and said:

‘Sweetheart, I poisoned your food.’

Gwyn choked, but on laughter instead of the fear that pulsed at hearing those words. Because Crielle never admitted to it, and he knew what Augus was doing, and even if they were talking about hard things it was nice having Augus over to stay the night. He clapped his hand over his mouth, swallowing down laughter and food, and Augus stared at him, angry.

‘You don’t believe me?’ Augus said.

‘You’re an asshole! That’s such a low move from you. I thought you wanted me to eat more.’

‘I want my ass to survive!’ Augus cried out. ‘I thought I was playing dirty, and you just find it funny?’

There was an amused glitter in his eyes, almost like he was happy, impressed. And Gwyn forced himself to swallow the little wrap of chicken and lettuce and then placed his hands down because he didn’t want to make himself eat any more.

‘Hey, Augus,’ Gwyn said, gesturing to the plate. ‘You want to go upstairs?’

Augus scowled.

‘It turns out you really can leverage sex to help with an eating disorder,’ Augus said. He threw down a piece of cucumber and looked annoyed, and Gwyn resisted the urge to grin.

‘You know, as far as strategies went, it wasn’t a bad one. We could do this again,’ Gwyn said. ‘I could top you in exchange for eating.’

‘No! Oh my god, no, you’re the worst. You’re obviously getting better if I can tell you that I’ve poisoned your food and you’ll just fucking laugh in my face.’

‘You wouldn’t poison my food.’

Something shifted and softened in Augus’ expression, he smiled in a way that wasn’t caustic or savage, and he leaned forwards and placed his lips against Gwyn’s.

‘No,’ he said warmly, against Gwyn’s mouth, ‘I wouldn’t. I would never do that.’

The kiss was messy, because Augus wasn’t soft and chaste like Gwyn when he kissed, he wanted mouths open and tongues touching. It tasted a little of carrot and cucumber, but Augus’ tongue was gentle as it slipped over his, and Gwyn reached up and cupped the back of Augus’ neck and drew him closer.

When Augus drew away, Gwyn dropped his hand between Augus’ legs and slid along the inside of his thigh until he could mould his palm to his hardening dick. Augus’ breath stuttered, one of his hands grasped the table, he looked up at Gwyn from beneath his eyelashes, and Gwyn realised he was wearing mascara, too.

Gwyn leaned in and pressed his forehead to Augus’ cheek.

‘Go upstairs,’ he said. ‘Wait for me.’
Augus was still enough that Gwyn knew he didn’t like it. Being told what to do didn’t come easily to him. He didn’t yearn to give into someone else, didn’t ache to fulfil orders, and while he tried to please all the people he cared about, he did it in terrible ways. Gwyn waited to see what would happen.

Abruptly, Augus pushed his chair back and gave Gwyn a look, before picking up his backpack and stalking up the stairs. Every step precise and angry. Gwyn smiled, put the food away, and thought it was probably a good thing he hadn’t told Augus to undress.

He went upstairs a couple of minutes later after washing his hands and drinking some water. Augus wasn’t sitting on the bed, but standing with his arms folded, looking less hostile and more uncertain.

Gwyn sat on the bed and took his shoes off, then his shirt, leaving it piled near the bedside table. He turned the lamp on, turned off the main light, and then walked over to Augus, reaching up and sliding the leather jacket off his shoulders.

‘This is really nice,’ Gwyn said. ‘Have you always liked leather?’

‘Mmhm,’ Augus said, watching as Gwyn went and draped it over a shabby chair in the corner of a room. ‘I really like it when it’s cheap in second hand stores. If it’s been looked after, it still looks expensive.’

‘It does.’

Gwyn took him by the waist, moving him towards the bed and pushing him until he sat down on the edge of it. Then he knelt down and stared at Augus’ boots. He placed his hands on the laces, before he caught sight of a zipper along the calf and reached for that instead. He drew the zip down, could feel Augus’ fixed, focused gaze. He drew one of the boots off, put it aside, and then pressed his thumbs into Augus’ ankle.

‘I don’t need this shit,’ Augus said.

Gwyn almost smiled. No, Augus had a tetchy relationship with sensuality at the best of times, but Gwyn was sure that was less to do with Augus hating it in general, and more with him being too anxious to appreciate it.

‘Okay,’ Gwyn said, smoothing his palm up Augus’ calf, over his pants.

‘Suck me off instead.’

‘Nice try. How can I say no when you put it like that?’ Gwyn took off Augus’ other boot. He stood and leaned over Augus, taking up the hems of his shirt with his fingers until Augus had no choice but to lift his arms. He dropped the shirt over Augus’ boots and then lowered his hands and undid the button fly of Augus’ pants. Each button popping open, Augus breathing unevenly.

He yanked the jeans down, and Augus made a soft sound of surprise as his jeans slipped forwards, and Gwyn pulled them off in one movement. He smoothed his hands up over Augus’ shins, feeling the hairs beneath his palms, the knobs of his knees, digging his fingers carefully into Augus’ thighs.

He thought Augus would say something, heard the stop-start of his breathing. Gwyn placed his palm against Augus’ bare chest. His nipples were already hard, the room wasn’t that cold. Gwyn stroked the side of his hand over one of them and Augus held his breath.

‘I didn’t know anyone hated foreplay,’’ Gwyn said.
‘I don’t hate it,’ Augus said, and then pressed his lips together. ‘You don’t have to like, be nice to me, to get in me. Just do it.’

Gwyn almost scoffed, but he had to be careful. Any wrong response around Augus when he was in this mood was liable to set him off like a firework. Instead, Gwyn looked at him, face serious.

‘All right, lie back on the bed then.’

Augus stared a challenge back, then rolled his eyes and wiggled backwards on his hands, throwing himself back on the pillows and looking deeply unimpressed as he stared up at the ceiling. Gwyn moved over him, straddling his hips, reaching for the bedside table and opening the drawer, pulling out the lubricant Augus had left at Gwyn’s house. He could see how tense Augus was, and wondered if he should be more concerned with stopping.

He had no intention of stopping unless Augus told him to stop.

‘Are you scared I’m going to hurt you?’ Gwyn said, stroking Augus’ neck, his shoulder, down one of his long, wiry arms. The muscles he used for fencing were more obvious here, but lean and strong, not bulkier, like Gwyn’s arms.

‘It did hurt last time,’ Augus said.

‘I mean,’ Gwyn said, ‘it does, sometimes. Are you scared I’m going to really hurt you?’

‘Uh, no,’ Augus said, rolling his eyes. ‘That’s my domain, shithead.’

‘You’re such a romantic,’ Gwyn said against Augus’ mouth, having lowered himself down. He bit Augus’ lower lip carefully, then kissed him, bracing himself on one arm and trailing the other down between Augus’ legs.

He was going to fuck him face to face today. He wanted to see him fall apart. Wanted to see all of it. Even being able to breathe Augus’ stuttered breaths as Gwyn slid fingers between his briefs and wrapped his hand around Augus’ half-hard cock was really good. He could feel all the strung up tension in Augus’ pelvis and thighs, like he wanted to just fuck Gwyn’s hand until he fell apart.

After making sure Augus was fully hard, he hooked his fingers into the hem of his underwear, pulling down, liking the way Augus’ dick lay stiff against his hip. He pressed his fingers into the underside, massaged, and Augus made a cut off sound and closed his eyes, eyelashes dark smudges against his face.

‘Wait there,’ Gwyn said, and ran off quickly into the bathroom. He grabbed two towels and rolled them up until they looked like massage bolsters. Augus had his eyes open, lidded, and then his expression turned to suspicion.

‘What are those for?’

‘Lift your hips,’ Gwyn said. ‘It makes it easier.’

‘No,’ Augus said, staring at him. ‘I don’t want to make it easier for you.’

‘Well…’ Gwyn frowned. ‘Tough.’

He lifted Augus’ hips easily, sliding the rolled up bolster of towel beneath Augus’ hips. Then he slid the other one underneath, and Augus watched him like he was torn between apprehension and irritation. It was a good look on him, even as Gwyn tugged Augus’ legs apart. It felt amazing, being
stronger than Augus.

Because like this, it was okay to be stronger than Augus. He suspected there was a part of Augus that liked to be pushed around sometimes. Not meanly, not violently, not like anything he’d experienced before, but Augus shoved so hard at the world sometimes, and Gwyn knew how to lean into that, knew what to do with it. He’d known ever since Augus had cornered him in the library and Gwyn had gone down on him to stun him enough to get his phone back, and Augus had dissolved in a minute, desperate and beautiful and unable to remember how to be cruel.

‘Don’t look at me that way,’ Augus said.

‘What way?’

Gwyn spread his closed knees between Augus’ thighs, forcing them wider, and Augus’ cheeks were definitely flushed now. Even his ears were. Gwyn leaned down and pressed his lips to Augus’ cheek, and then the softer skin beside his eye, near the hairline. He lifted his hands and looked for the pins and ties in Augus’ hair, finding them slowly, taking them out carefully.

Bit by bit, the braid came apart. Augus had to turn his head to the side to allow Gwyn to do it properly. At first, he stared at nothing, but as Gwyn continued to drag his fingers through Augus’ hair, unlooping the complicated weaving pattern and getting the hang of it, his breathing slowed, his eyes closed. He liked it, and Gwyn liked being able to watch him so closely before turning his head to the other side and starting again.

‘Did you always have long hair?’ Gwyn said.

‘No,’ Augus murmured, eyes still closed. He reached up at one point to slide a bobby pin free that Gwyn hadn’t seen, and that made everything suddenly easier.

‘Thanks.’

‘I used to have to keep it short,’ Augus said. ‘I think I was only ever in one household where the person wanted me to grow it out. And…I didn’t want to grow it out there, so I cut it myself.’

Gwyn almost asked why the foster parent had wanted Augus to keep his hair long, and then he felt sick and his fingers hesitated in Augus’ hair.

‘Yeah,’ Augus said, like Gwyn had replied. ‘Pretty much.’

‘Was every home bad?’

‘No,’ Augus said, his voice soft, lulled, like it didn’t bother him at all. As Gwyn started up with his hair again, Augus sighed and his shoulders relaxed and Gwyn wanted to make a note somewhere: *Play with Augus’ hair and he loosens right up.* Which was nice, because Gwyn liked doing it. ‘I mean… No. There were places where we didn’t stay long because the people were nice but they couldn’t handle the reality of it. It must be hard, you know, to want to help children, but then realise that because of the foster system, because of… a lot of things, you get children with bad habits. Ash is great, you know, but he used to steal stuff, and that alone zoned him as a problem child as soon as he was in the system.’

‘That sucks.’

‘It does,’ Augus said. ‘I think he only started because he missed his family – his birth family – so bad that he would take like, mementoes and stuff from foster houses, and pretend they were from his real family. He’d make up these stories… that like, they left these objects with him and they were going to
come back for him one day, even though they’re all dead. By the time I met him, he didn’t really do it anymore, but he gets sentimentally attached to certain objects and if they get lost or broken, he gets really upset. I dunno. You’ve never seen that side of him, but from the way he tells it, he got in big trouble a few times. Because taking family heirlooms, even if they’re basically worthless, that makes people upset. He’s a lot better about it now.’

‘Because of you,’ Gwyn said.

Augus tensed, his eyes opened briefly, before he rolled them and closed them again. ‘He’s worked hard.’

‘Because you gave him a home.’

‘Shut up,’ Augus said. ‘Anyway, the thing is, if you’re zoned as a kid with bad habits, there aren’t as many houses that’ll take you… And, they want parents who have specialised training. We can’t go to sort of normal foster homes anymore. They save those for the nice kids, or something?’

‘Why were you a problem kid?’ Gwyn said.

‘Oh,’ Augus said. ‘Well, ah... There was one house where I didn’t like to do what I was told, and I think the foster parent lied about me. Like, big time lied.’

‘You didn’t like doing what you were told? What, like chores?’ Gwyn said.

‘No,’ Augus said, turning and looking at Gwyn with some strange, amused expression on his face. ‘Like, I didn’t want him to fuck me, actually. And I didn’t want to touch him either. We were sort of at a stalemate pretty early.’

‘He didn’t just make you?’ Gwyn felt like he’d been doused with cold water, but Augus seemed calm, far more relaxed than usual. He thought of Ash telling him that Augus lied about his past, and he wondered how many layers deep it went. Was Augus only telling him this, because he could tell it in a way that sounded like he was never really hurt? Or was he still molested anyway? How old was he? Eight? Ten? Gwyn stroked Augus’ hair to give himself something to do, because he had to try and soothe Augus, even though he looked fine.

‘The thing is, Gwyn, I was a bit of a biter,’ Augus said, his lips curling up. ‘Anyway, he- Fuck, I don’t know what he told them. I think he told them that I was ‘touching’ some of the younger kids, because like, they kids had signs of it, because of living with him. And so I got zoned as a juvenile sex offender. After that, I got really shitty houses for years. And some forced counselling and social work. It was all bullshit.’

Gwyn stared at him, petting Augus’ hair absently.

‘That’s terrible.’

‘I mean, I got to leave his house,’ Augus said, shrugging, pressing his head down against the pillow. ‘And no one else reported that I had those kinds of habits, so eventually it was either taken off the record or they just assumed it was something I did when I was like six, and then grew out of it.’

Six years old.

Gwyn took a deep, cold breath. ‘Uh, we don’t have to do this. You know that, right?’

‘Yeah,’ Augus said softly, and then tensed. ‘Wait- I’m not talking about this stuff to stop you.’
'Really?' Gwyn said, squinting at him. 'Because if this is one of those situations where I was supposed to be reading through the fucking lines, I think-

Augus’ hand clumsily pressed against Gwyn’s lips and nose. He looked at Gwyn seriously, frowning.

'I don’t have the right filters,’ Augus said. ‘There’s no part of my brain that reminds me that it’s a mood killer to talk about this stuff for other people. Which is why I just never talk about it. Um. I kind of like being able to bitch about you topping, that’s not… That’s not me telling you to fuck off. But if you’re not in the mood anymore…'

Gwyn thought about it, bit the inside of his lip, and then shrugged. He was still, surprisingly, good to go. Maybe he didn’t have the right filters either. He felt obligated to check in, but he didn’t feel obligated to stop.

‘Honestly,’ Gwyn said, ‘I think it’s good for your brain to be turned off for a while.’

‘Most people recommend meditation.’

Gwyn laughed. ‘I can’t even imagine you meditating.’

‘I’ve tried it,’ Augus said, laughing as he reached up and touched his own hair. ‘I think I imagined murdering people. Look, it was kind of relaxing?'

Gwyn was still laughing when he pressed his lips to Augus’. The kiss was only sweet for a few seconds, and then Augus bit down on Gwyn’s lower lip, and Gwyn grunted at the flash of pain and slipped his tongue between Augus’ teeth, keeping his mouth open. He liked the way Augus hung onto one of his arms, the other hand coming up and pressing into his back.

His smile vanished as heat began to lace through him. He felt it spreading through his gut and chest, down his arms, into his cock. He broke the kiss and bit gently at the side of Augus’ neck, and then moved lower until he could lick across Augus’ collarbone, and then down further. Augus made a soft, appreciative noise, and then tensed again when Gwyn reached for the lubricant.

But Gwyn wasn’t remotely distracted, and he coated his fingers liberally, even as Augus made a sound of annoyance.

‘You act like it’s a chore,’ Gwyn said.

‘It is,’ Augus muttered. ‘It’s exhausting!’

‘Good,’ Gwyn said. He looked up even as he pressed his fingers beneath Augus’ balls and placed his other hand on Augus’ hip to stop him from twisting away. He dragged his fingers down Augus’ taint, the skin there ridiculously silky.

‘Fuck that’s cold.’

‘It warms up,’ Gwyn said. ‘It’ll warm up a lot when it’s inside you. Augus, I like fucking you.’

Augus made a face, and twisted like he wanted to hide his face in the pillows. But because Gwyn had him on his back, it wasn’t possible. Gwyn liked that a lot.

The lubricant warmed up, and Augus’ cock twitched as Gwyn began to stroke further down, over his entrance. He was still so tight, and Gwyn didn’t have many points of comparison, but he felt like his own hole was easier to get into because he knew how to relax better. But he stroked gently, each
pass over the sensitive skin turning Augus’ breathing a little more uneven.

‘Hurry up,’ Augus whispered.

‘No,’ Gwyn said.

He wasn’t like Augus. He didn’t want to tie him up. Didn’t want to spank him or hurt him or give him orders. But he did want to wreck him. He wanted Augus speechless, and he knew he was closer than before. When Augus was in charge, he never shut up. But when Augus was like this, he held his barrier of words close to him until Gwyn smashed it all away.

He probed at Augus’ hole carefully, and then when it seemed open enough, he slid all the way in with his index finger. There was enough lube that he didn’t stop when Augus clenched down as though to stop him.

Augus made a face, the kind of face Gwyn hadn’t been able to see last time. He looked a little pained, very uncomfortable, and then he opened his eyes and blinked up in some surprise, like he didn’t expect Gwyn’s face to be right there. He didn’t expect Gwyn to be watching him.

‘I want to be on my stomach,’ Augus said.

‘No.’

‘What?’ Augus exclaimed.

‘No,’ Gwyn said, beginning to fuck his finger back and forth. Augus hissed on an inhale, and then covered his face with one hand. Gwyn smirked, grasped Augus’ wrist and carefully – but firmly – dragged his hand to the bed and pinned it there. The outraged, dazed look he got for that was great. Gwyn fucked into him harder, and Augus clenched down automatically. ‘Relax.’

‘You fucking relax!’

‘Relax, Augus,’ Gwyn said, wanting to grin at him. He could feel the tension release around his finger, clamp down again, and then it went back and forth for several seconds, and he knew Augus was doing his own head in. Even in the dimness of the room, the shadows around them, Gwyn only wanted to see Augus’ face. ‘You feel good, by the way.’

‘I don’t want you to see my face,’ Augus said.

‘Yeah, I know.’

‘You’re doing this on purpose?’ Augus said, plaintive. ‘What’s wrong with you?’

‘I want to see the moment you remember how much you like it. Being fucked like one of the models in those videos you watch. What would the title be? Something like: Summer Fling, Gwyn Raws Augus?’

Augus made a sound that could’ve been a hiccup, and Gwyn looked down between them and pressed his middle finger into Augus, feeling for room, pushing past the tightness and loving how Augus gloved his fingers. God, he was tight. He remembered this from last time. Fucking him was impossible. It felt so good.

He looked up in time to see Augus gasping, his wrist jerking beneath Gwyn’s hand. Then he winced and covered his face with his other hand.
‘Okay,’ Gwyn breathed.

He slid his fingers free of Augus and grabbed that wrist too, and Augus glared at him, twirling ineffectually as Gwyn pinned both of his wrists together, clamping a single hand over both. And as Augus’ fingers curled like he wanted to scratch or get free, Gwyn slid slick fingers back into him, two at once.

‘Fuck,’ Augus managed, choking. ‘That’s enough. This is enough. I’m not doing more.’

‘You are,’ Gwyn said.

‘Seriously,’ Augus said shakily. ‘Is it possible to get like…tighter? My ass is shrinking.’

Augus was definitely thinking too much, if he was managing gems like that. Gwyn fucked in a bit harder, feeling heat against his knuckles. He curled up and in, towards Augus’ gut, and felt it as soon as he hit Augus’ prostate gland. The bump was faint, small, and Augus reacted instantly.

His mouth opened on a gasp, his eyes squeezed shut, head tilting back. Augus was so sensitive it was crazy. Gwyn stroked over it again, and then kept doing it, keeping the touch slow and light. Anymore and Augus would probably hate it.

‘How’s that?’ Gwyn said.

Augus panted, said nothing, and Gwyn squeezed Augus’ wrists as a wave of new, dark hunger moved over him.

‘How’s that, Augus?’

Augus’ mouth opened, he managed a soft noise, but he still said nothing.

‘You’re way more sensitive than I think most people are, here,’ Gwyn said, pressing in harder.

Augus groaned and shook his head and then turned his face sideways, but he couldn’t hide properly, and Gwyn went back to fucking him with his fingers. He’d withdraw quickly, push in just as fast, but then curl up and in over his prostate, finding a good, rhythm that made his own cock as hard as Augus’ had become.

He bit the inside of his lip as he withdrew his fingers to their tips, and then pushed in his ring finger. Augus’ knees raised, he shook his head, but he said nothing as Gwyn slid in. It wasn’t even about stretching anymore, Gwyn just liked putting more inside of him and watching the way he reacted to it.

This was harder for Augus. Gwyn couldn’t tear his eyes away from the way Augus breathed, or that furrow between his eyebrows, way his lips thinned and then he moaned thickly as Gwyn pushed deeper, forcing his way through the resistance. He moved his fingers back and forth, corkscrewing them in to spread the lubricant thoroughly, and Augus’ fingers curled, his breathing heavy and strained.

‘You can’t fuck me,’ Augus said, sounding desperate.

Gwyn wondered if Augus was actually this sensitive all the time, and that’s why he was so irritated and anxious, like the world was just too much for his high-strung nerves.

Augus’ voice broke on a whimper when Gwyn started stroking over his prostate again. He had to press in hard to get the right angle, and he had to focus, because all he wanted to do was yank his
fingers free and shove his cock in. But no, better to do this first, because it was as good as he
imagined – better even – to see the way Augus’ face screwed up at first, and then smoothed, his
eyelashes fluttering, breaths trembling in his lungs.

He wasn’t sure how long he dragged it out for. Long enough that Augus felt looser around him, had
actually started to relax. Long enough that Augus’ forehead was sheened with a light layer of sweat,
his hair messed up already from tossing his head back and forth like he couldn’t contain what was
happening to him. His fingertips dug into his palms. Every now and then he’d strain upwards, almost
like he couldn’t help it, as though trying to get friction for his cock.

Gwyn gave him none. Augus could have that when they were fucking.

Gwyn withdrew his fingers when he couldn’t take it anymore, let go of Augus’ wrists to reach for
the bottle of lubricant. He wiped his other, slick hand over his cock, mouth opening on a hard exhale
as he dripped more lube onto himself, warming it up by jacking himself off. It didn’t take long, and
then he was grasping both of Augus’ wrists again – Augus hadn’t even moved them – and pressed
them back down to the bed.

When he notched into place, he felt the way Augus twitched down against him, like he was trying to
close up. But Gwyn pushed forwards anyway, enough pressure that as soon as Augus relaxed
enough, he would-

There, the head of his cock slipped in, and Augus made a faint, sobbing noise and then shook his
head.

‘No,’ Augus moaned. ‘You’re illegal.’

‘Your ass should be illegal,’ Gwyn said.

‘Shut up.’

‘Why do you get to say the worst shit during sex, and I don’t? Besides, don’t you like it? Look, I
have more.’

‘No, I- Ah…’

Gwyn pushed in deeper, making space for himself, glad for the lubricant. He used his free hand to
take up Augus’ cock, holding it still and tight as Augus quivered around him. Augus’ breathing was
harsh now, and Gwyn knew it was a lot, and he pressed forwards and resisted the urge to just buck
in as deeply as possible, all at once. That would be stupid.

He withdrew an inch, closed his eyes at how good it felt, and pressed back in. Augus moaned
brokenly and then one of his bent knees suddenly went limp, slumping to the bed.

Gwyn took it slower, much slower than last time, and could tell the exact moment he was deep
enough that Augus didn’t want to take anymore. He tensed, hissed, and Gwyn jacked Augus’ cock
slowly and withdrew, then pushed back to that point where Augus’ breathing changed. He kept
doing it, playing with the depth of penetration, Augus’ cock, and then Augus sobbed and squirmed
and Gwyn watched his face, gritting his teeth and clamping down on himself to stop himself from
just fucking him.

‘Is the angle bad?’ Gwyn said.

Augus made a sound that could have meant anything. Gwyn pressed forwards again, a bit deeper
than before, and felt Augus’ abdomen tense against the backs of his knuckles where he held his
‘Not like…not like before,’ Augus managed. ‘It’s still… Fuck, Gwyn.’

Gwyn pushed deeper still, didn’t stop until he bottomed out, and then he couldn’t stop himself from groaning. Augus breathed light and shallow, and Gwyn couldn’t stand how tight Augus was. Even when Gwyn pulled back, it almost felt like he was supposed to stay in him, so he thrust back hard enough that Augus yelped.

Augus opened his mouth to say something, but Gwyn bit down on the inside of his cheek and decided he didn’t want Augus to speak at all. The rhythm he set up was fast, hard, and he kept hold of Augus’ cock but hardly jacked it, just liked being able to pin him by his wrists, keep him in place, make sure he couldn’t escape it.

At that point, Gwyn couldn’t watch his face anymore without being too close to coming, his head dropping as he focused on anything other than how fucking good it felt. It was nothing like jacking himself off, this was so hot, so slick and tight, Gwyn breathed harshly and started moving his hand roughly over Augus’ cock. He wasn’t going to last that long himself – longer than Augus, but that didn’t mean much.

‘Please,’ Augus managed, the word ragged in his mouth, hips arching into Gwyn’s hand. He made a choking, low sound, and then whimpered, and Gwyn felt the way his ass clamped down hard and it didn’t feel intentional. But Gwyn kept fucking into him, and he relaxed again, shaking.

Gwyn felt the tensing in Augus’ cock, he was squeezing it hard enough to know the exact moment Augus was going to come. Then the ripples, the muscles contracting, expanding, and Augus was making desperate, helpless sounds that he never made at any other time, ever, and Gwyn groaned and stared at Augus’ screwed up face and the way his mouth was open like he wanted to scream.

He dropped down and bit whatever he could reach, his teeth marking Augus’ shoulder. He tasted salt and nothing else, hips working like he could push even deeper, even though there was no more room left to make for himself.

As soon as Augus’ hips twisted – his cock overstimulated – Gwyn let go and grabbed his thigh with his other hand and pushed it up to Augus’ shoulder.

‘Shit,’ Augus choked. ‘Gwyn, I can’t- You gotta- You better fucking come.’

Gwyn nodded, he was close enough anyway, but he liked the way the feel of Augus’ ass changed a little now he had come. Looser, a bit more relaxed, it was so good. He liked the way his breathing changed but was still needy, he liked the way Augus’ wrists still twisted before going limp.

Eventually, the raw sensation of it all slammed through him and he came hard, letting go of Augus’ wrists and pinning his shoulder to the bed instead, keeping Augus’ thigh in place by his shoulder.

Augus’ hands were already on him, clawing across his back, and Gwyn swore and rode out the last of his release in stuttering thrusts, before slumping down as much as he allowed himself. He had himself braced on one arm, letting Augus’ leg slide back down again.

Augus breathed raggedly, nails still pressing into Gwyn’s back, but he didn’t say a thing.

Gwyn lifted up just enough to see his face. His eyes were shut, but lightly now, not pressed tight. His mouth was a little open, he breathed unevenly. Gwyn pressed down and kissed him, and Augus responded clumsily, before turning his head to the side. He looked like it was taking all of his energy to focus on breathing.
'Out,' Augus managed.

'Not yet.'

Augus made a face, and Gwyn rolled his hips forward, smirking when Augus pounded his fist down into Gwyn’s shoulder. It didn’t even hurt.

'I hardly ever get to do this,' Gwyn said. ‘Let me have another minute. That’s all, Augus. Shhh, relax, okay?’

Augus didn’t respond, but his eyes didn’t open and Gwyn took it as bitter acceptance, and knew this was a little mean, but he liked being warm inside of Augus, liked feeling the way the muscles would flutter sometimes. He bent down and licked across Augus’ neck, then gently kissed his jaw, liking the way Augus sighed through his nose.

Eventually, he was so soft he slipped out naturally, and Gwyn pushed backwards and kissed Augus’ belly, before sliding off the bed and going to the bathroom. He cleaned himself up first with water that was far too cold as he waited for the tap to heat, and then pissed into the toilet. He made sure the little hand towels he got were soaked with warm water before wringing them out and bringing them back, cleaning Augus up.

Augus just allowed it, though his eyebrows lifted in something like uncertainty when Gwyn pushed the cloth between his legs. Probably from the intimacy of it, or no longer having arousal to balance out how sensitive all the skin was. Either way, Gwyn was careful, thorough, cleaning off Augus’ pelvis and belly, folding the handtowel over to make sure he got the clean side.

He went back to the bathroom and rinsed the clothes off, wringing them out and leaving them on the side of the sink to wash properly later. He went to the cupboard and pulled out one of the spare blankets.

It felt sinfully good to crawl back onto the bed and unfold the blanket, and then pull it over them both. He dragged Augus towards him, and Augus let him.

‘You want to go watch some TV?’ Gwyn said softly, pulling Augus until his back was pressed hard to Gwyn’s chest. Until Gwyn could nose into Augus’ loose hair and stroke it.

Augus shook his head. Gwyn stroked down over Augus’ arm, and then slid beneath it so he could rest his hand on Augus’ belly.

‘Are you sore?’ he said.

‘A little,’ Augus said, his voice far more muted than usual. It had no more of its bite, and he didn’t sound angry. Gwyn tightened his arm around him and traced patterns over his ribs. A spiral first, and then circles, and then wavy lines. Augus sighed and relaxed into him, achieving a level of laxness that was almost liquid.

Yes, this was what he wanted. Exactly this. His chest felt so warm, and he smiled as he pressed his cheek against the back of Augus’ head.

‘It’s not bad,’ Augus said, his voice sleepy. ‘Just feels like…a battering ram…turned me into an internal organ smoothie.’

Gwyn burst into laughter, half-horrified, and Augus made a gentle, sleepy noise that was more of a hum than anything else. His hand came and stroked over Gwyn’s where it rested on his belly.
‘Hey,’ Augus said. ‘Can we just do this for a while and watch something later?’

‘Yeah,’ Gwyn said. ‘Just relax, okay?’

‘Yeah,’ Augus said, yawning and pressing back like he could disappear into Gwyn.

Gwyn was overwhelmed for a long time with how good it felt. It was like a strange, grounded giddiness. The sense that everything was in its right place, he was exactly where he was supposed to be. Augus didn’t take long to start sleeping in his arms, and Gwyn continued to pet him and stroke him, mapping out the feel of Augus’ body. No one would call his life one of luck or fortune, but Gwyn felt both, and they glowed warmly.
Holiday

Chapter Notes

I guess this the first time I've ever done something like a Christmas episode? In August? Seems legit. Er. Man there are so many feels in this chapter you've been warned.

2 to go!

General note: Fairy lights are an Australian way of saying 'Christmas lights' or 'string lights.' And I think it's the best way of saying it, so I'm gonna keep calling them that.

Augus

*

Gwyn didn’t tell Augus that Mikkel wanted to see them both for negotiations over a settlement until the next morning, when all Augus wanted to do – desperately – was sleep in and feel sorry for his lower back, his ass, and his thighs. He couldn’t even think why his thighs were sore, until he remembered the way Gwyn had wrenched one of them up easily to get better access, and the other… well, Augus had braced against the bed a lot.

It turned out that Fenwrel scared everyone except Gwyn. Even Mikkel shook Augus’ hand like he was an ally for once, instead of the spawn of Satan, which was how Mikkel treated him the rest of the time.

When they were shown into the room with its large table, Fenwrel already sitting at the head of it, Augus reached for Gwyn’s hand and grasped it automatically. Fenwrel noticed, her eyebrows lifting, before she stood and briefly hugged Mikkel. She nodded in greeting at Gwyn and Augus.

Fenwrel opened her mouth to speak, and Gwyn cut across her so easily that everyone stared at him in shock.

‘I’ve been thinking about it,’ Gwyn said, ‘and if we can get my terms met, I don’t want them to go to jail. I don’t want this to progress to a full trial.’

When, exactly, have you been thinking about it, Gwyn? When you were balls deep in me last night? Or in the last two hours when you grabbed my ass like it belonged to you? I’m gonna tan yours to kingdom come, you fucking little weasel.

‘Firstly,’ Fenwrel said, after a pause where she stared at Gwyn like he’d grown another head, ‘I think you should know that Efnisien is in hospital. He’s in a stable but serious condition, and is likely to be there for the next two weeks, possibly longer. I have been informed that his parents are returning from what seems like two decade’s worth of living on cruise ships.’

‘What?’ Gwyn said, pale, his voice no longer as robust as before. ‘What did he do?’

‘As far as we can tell, nothing,’ Fenwrel said, shuffling some papers. ‘But our suspicion is that Crielle retaliated for his evidence leak. It seems like he was the only one who had access to the files, aside from her.’
'Oh my god. Can I see him?'

‘You want to see him?’ Mikkel said, staring at him. Then he raised his hands as Gwyn opened his mouth. ‘No, no, don’t. I’m used to it. Whatever. Probably not while negotiations are underway, right?’

‘Yes,’ Fenwrel said. ‘Until a settlement has been agreed upon, I’d prefer you stay away from him. Who knows what his attitude will be now that he’s in a hospital bed.’

‘You don’t understand,’ Gwyn said urgently. ‘He doesn’t have anyone. Like, at all.’

‘Maybe he shouldn’t have killed all those cute animals then,’ Mikkel muttered.

‘We all know he’s fucked up,’ Gwyn said angrily, ‘but I could’ve been too. Crielle loves – loved him more than anything. It was one of the reasons Aunt Penny and Uncle Euroswydd left in the first place, because they knew Crielle would dote on him. But you’ve…you’ve seen the tapes, right? Crielle encouraged him, like, she actively encouraged him. He’ll have no one. What did she do?’

‘Efnisien won’t say what happened, according to one of my sources,’ Fenwrel said calmly. ‘But he was stabbed five times in the gut. Knife wounds are nasty, and knife wounds to the gut represent a longer recovery than many clean gunshot wounds to the same region.’

Gwyn fell silent, clearly upset. Augus wasn’t sure what to think. Efnisien was an awful turd of a human being, and Augus used to fantasise about him suddenly dying and never returning to Murdock all the time, even when Augus had nothing to do with him. He still had bruises from Efnisien fading on his face, and Gwyn had scars that would never fade away completely, no matter how much time passed.

So Augus didn’t know how to explain his complicated feelings over the situation. But Gwyn’s made sense, it was easy to see he had a soft spot for his cousin.

‘Now, let’s talk about the trial.’

‘There won’t be a trial,’ Gwyn said, taking a deep breath as Fenwrel glared at him. ‘There’s not going to be a trial. I respect and appreciate all you’ve done for me, but I don’t think a trial is in my best interests.’

‘Gwyn, you have to consider—’

‘I don’t,’ Gwyn said, staring at her levelly. ‘I’ve wanted to get away from them from the beginning, but my goal was never to get them jailed, even if that’s what everyone else wants. I think I’ll be safer if they’re allowed to rebuild their lives somewhere else, than if they’re in cells, stewing over what I did to them.’

Fenwrel looked pointedly at Mikkel, and if Augus had that look directed at him, he’d scurry under the table. Instead, he shifted his hand in Gwyn’s strong grip, and Gwyn looked at him apologetically. There, now maybe Gwyn wouldn’t break Augus’ fingers while he stood up to Fenwrel.

‘All right,’ Fenwrel said smoothly, looking back at Gwyn. ‘We’re going to be looking at this from all angles this morning anyway. If you change your mind, you’ll have the opportunity to let me know.’

‘Really?’ Gwyn said weakly. ‘I thought you’d…get angry at me.’

‘Two things,’ Fenwrel said, smiling. ‘First, everyone is going to know what I did to the ap Nudd family regardless of whether they go to prison or not. Second, I won’t get angry at you. But you are
going to hear some convincing arguments over the next couple of hours, and I’ll remind you, I am
very good at convincing arguments.’

‘That’s what I was afraid of,’ Mikkel said, sinking his head onto his forearms.

‘It’s all right,’ Fenwrel said, reaching out and petting Gwyn’s free arm where it rested on the table.
‘I’ll be gentle.’

She winked at him, and Gwyn smiled back, and Augus thought she was fucking terrifying,
squeezing Gwyn’s hand so hard that he hissed.

Okay, maybe they were both trying to break each other’s fingers.

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‘That went well,’ Mikkel said later, on the way to Gwyn’s place. ‘Actually, that went really well.
Fenwrel’s shooting high so the other guys are going to lowball, but she wants that. Negotiations
might drag out, which is a pisser, but what can you do?’

‘You really don’t want them to go to jail?’ Augus said, looking at Gwyn. They sat across from each
other in the passenger seat.

‘I just want to not have to live with them,’ Gwyn said, ‘and for them to leave me alone. Everything
else is…everything else. I don’t know. They still raised me and paid for my schooling and stuff.’

Mikkel scoffed from the front seat. ‘Regardless of whatever bullshit you’re spouting, we have them
by the balls and that’s a nice feeling. They’ll do anything to avoid the threat of a long prison
sentence, and Fenwrel’s going to go in pretending that settling is the last thing she wants to do. God,
and they can’t even financially fuck Fenwrel, because she can fuck them back. You should see the
family she came from, they own like…I’m not gonna say half the city, but like, a bit of the city.’

‘That sounds nice for Fenwrel,’ Augus said mildly.

Gwyn had his eyes closed, Augus knew he was exhausted. A couple of hours talking about how
they could leverage evidence of shocking child abuse to make sure Gwyn had financial support in
his future wasn’t light conversation, even if it was productive. Augus knew how hard it was, how
frightening, to go from being financially dependent on parents – or foster parents – to working to
support himself, needing to find accommodation, wondering what the rest of his life was going to
look like. Augus had been there, and he suspected it was far more intimidating than Gwyn liked to
let on.

‘If it’s okay,’ Augus said finally, shifting his backpack on the floor between his legs, ‘can you drop
me back at Gulvi’s?’

‘Sure thing,’ Mikkel said. ‘I’ll do Gwyn first because he’s closest, okay?’

‘You don’t mind?’ Augus said to Gwyn. ‘I have to get back anyway. Homework.’

‘Oh, yeah,’ Gwyn said, sounding despairing. ‘God, homework.’

‘I know, right?’ Augus said. ‘School’s killing me at the moment.’

‘Same,’ Gwyn said.

They reached out, fingers brushing together on the backseat, and Augus saw the way Mikkel looked
at them both in the rear-view mirror and ignored him. Augus was becoming increasingly convinced that he and Gwyn were an island, and as long as they were together, nothing else could hurt them.

*

Augus sat in the front seat, across from Mikkel, and stared ahead, feeling nervous.

‘So,’ Augus said. ‘Is there a reason you asked me to sit here instead of letting me stay in the back?’

Mikkel looked at him sidelong, and then looked back at the road. His phone map showed the directions so that Augus didn’t need to call them out.

‘I owe you an apology,’ Mikkel said. ‘And I fucking hate apologising. So that was it. But from what I can tell, you just… You know you have a reputation?’

‘What?’ Augus said. ‘From what?’

‘From being a teen who decided to take on some of the nastiest lawyers out there, only to get a job offer from them later on? Like, they used to talk about you, I mean come on, your bosses used to take pride in the fact that they were raising a tiny little sociopath. The joke was that you went from all these shitty foster homes to their company, the shittiest foster home there is.’

Augus stared ahead blankly, not seeing a single thing through the windscreen, and then he laughed because he didn’t know what else to do.

‘I needed money,’ Augus said. ‘They gave me a job. And, okay, maybe for a while I thought it’d be cool to be a lawyer, because they got shit done.’

‘Yeah, I get that,’ Mikkel said, merging into another lane. ‘And now?’

‘Fuck knows.’

‘Don’t ever go into social work,’ Mikkel said, easing to a stop at the traffic lights. ‘Not you. It’ll kill you.’

‘What? Why?’

‘Your boundaries are for shit, that’s why. You’ll serve yourself up for your clients and not leave enough of you for what really matters.’

‘Do you leave enough of yourself for what really matters?’ Augus said, squinting at Mikkel, because it seemed like he really didn’t.

‘I try,’ Mikkel said earnestly. ‘It may not seem like it, but I fucking try. But I know your type. Anyway, that’s… Look, I know Prince from way back. And I know he’s worried about you. So I wanted to give you some free advice that I think he thinks would be better coming from someone like me.’

Augus had just about forgotten that the only reason Mikkel was involved in this in the first place, was because Mr Prince had called him in specifically. Talked to him like they were more than acquaintances, even. He tried to imagine them both sitting in the same room and not snarking at each other and couldn’t. But maybe that was the foundation of their friendship, god knew it was the foundation of enough of Augus’.

He also felt a small little glow that Mr Prince was worried about him, even though that wasn’t fair,
and it wasn’t very useful. But…

It still felt strangely good.

‘You are going to stress yourself into an ulcer by the age of nineteen, at the rate you’re going. If you drop out, fuck the scholarship, you can still do bridging units at any university to complete your high school requirements. But if you don’t know what you want to do at university, and you stream into law ‘just because’…sometimes being good at something isn’t enough of a reason to spend the rest of your life doing it. Do you even know what other things you really like? You only know you’re good at law because – with all due respect – you had to fucking learn it to save your life, so that means dick for what you actually think about it. You’ve probably projected some weird emotional entanglement into what it means to be a lawyer or have power or whatever, and it’s not reality.’

‘Um…’

‘Like what are your hobbies? Aside from like, every guy’s hobby at your age?’

‘Gross.’ Augus winced. It was true though.

‘So, what are they?’

‘I fence,’ Augus said.

‘How did you get into that?’

Augus flushed, sinking down into the seat. They were nearly at Lija’s house. He hated this.

‘Mr Prince wanted to ‘redirect my energy into something productive,‘’ Augus said, using the scare quotes and hating the smug way Mikkel looked at him.

‘So you have a hobby given to you by your Head of House, and a prospective university degree driven by something you might not even care about, if you gave yourself a chance to like literally anything else.’

‘Did I even ask?’ Augus said, voice muted as Mikkel pulled into the shining driveway of the Dubna Vajat’s with a car that looked like it was going to fall apart Flintstone’s-style at any moment.

‘No,’ Mikkel said, ‘no one fucking does. But you’re not the little rat I thought you were, so-’

‘Come on,’ Augus said, and Mikkel grinned at him in a way that reminded Augus so much of Ash, he forgot what he was upset about.

‘Augus,’ Mikkel said, ‘seriously, I’m telling you adult to adult, man to man, however you want to see it – there’s no shame in taking some different paths in life, or just trying them out for a little while, and seeing where they take you. You were a victim, and then an adult. You’ve never had a childhood, and your adolescence has been filled with the kind of shit that practically mandates therapy for a good long while. You’re great at surviving. But you have to learn how to have a life. And this is selfish of me, but you have to learn, because Gwyn needs to learn too.’

‘I like fencing,’ Augus said, but even his defensiveness was lukewarm. He never planned to take it to any kind of competitive level like Mr Prince did. He didn’t want to do it at university and he didn’t want to compete. He liked how graceful it was, but he couldn’t even imagine sticking with a club outside of school for long. ‘I have a life.’

‘I’m not saying you don’t,’ Mikkel said. ‘From what I can tell, you’ve filled it with law, working too
hard, rorting the school system, and giving yourself an ulcer.’

‘Most ulcers are caused by a bacterium and my stomach is fine, thanks, I don’t even get heartburn.’

‘Give it time, champ,’ Mikkel said.

Mikkel then made a gesture with his hand, indicating that Augus had been in his car for way too long just sitting there, even though Mikkel was the one who’d been delivering the lecture. Augus scowled at him, and Mikkel winked in a way that was faintly roguish. He drove off as soon as Augus got out of the car, leaving him there rankled about the idea that he didn’t actually have a life, when his life had felt pretty fucking full for years.

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The first thing Augus saw at the cottage where he and Ash now lived, after walking past Lija’s house, lost in thought, were Christmas decorations. Fairy lights were strung around the edge of the gabbling, the windows, and large, wooden, painted candy canes had been set into the ground either side of the front door. He turned slowly and realised some of the trees in the garden had tinsel in them, and lights, and that there were more ceramic Santas and elves than he had ever seen in his entire life set all around the garden.

‘What…the fuck?’ Augus whispered.

He ended up dropping his backpack and wandering through the sprawling grounds, and saw more awfulness. There were Santa gnomes all over. Some of them were painted with the same kind of white-on-red patterns that looked like the embroidery he’d seen on some of the fabrics in the house. Some of the shrubs had ornaments hanging from them, red and green and gold.

In a distant sort of way he knew that Christmas wasn’t far away, but this was…like nothing he’d really encountered before.

He ended up walking along the pool, and saw snowglobes and golden metal deer on the glass table, along with a red plastic tablecloth. He stared wide-eyed into the house through the giant floor-to-ceiling glass windows and stopped dead.

‘Oh my god.’

He had no idea that they’d decorated, or when they’d decorated, but this was like something out of a children’s movie special or a retail store with a lot of money to burn. He kept staring, and then almost staggered back when he saw Lija walk past holding so much tinsel in her arms that it came up to her nose.

In that miraculous way she had of knowing when he was there, she turned and saw him and paused.

‘No, come on,’ he whispered, taking a step backwards.

Maybe she just always looked out the glass window, admiring her pool and her garden filled with Santa gnomes.

Lija had already placed the huge pile of thick red tinsel on a table already covered in a Christmas runner and candles and a bowl of baubles. Who knew so much Christmas shit existed? He vaguely remembered Ash mentioning something about it, some family dinner, and Lija had kind of invited them both and said it was compulsory but like, this was not what he expected at all.

The glass door slid open and Lija leaned against the doorframe, and she was wearing Christmas
'So…' Augus said.

Lija’s eyes were deeply amused, even if her face looked serious.

‘So, as a surgeon…’ Augus said slowly, ‘can you get like, whatever this decorating thing is removed or something? Because it’s really- It’s…a lot.’

‘Do you want to help me?’

‘Noooo,’ Augus whispered.

‘I think you want to help me,’ Lija said, beckoning him over.

‘Don’t you have four hundred daughters to like-? Because, I had Gwyn’s case stuff today and I’m like, um-’ He swallowed and realised her tiny Christmas tree earrings were flashing. They were battery operated and were flashing. He didn’t think anyone wore those except for the retail people who were forced to wear them at gunpoint.

‘You don’t like Christmas?’ Lija teased. ‘You’re going to love it here.’

‘You decorated the cottage!’ He nearly said ‘our cottage’ and realised that actually, he’d better never say that to the person who owned it and let them stay there when it didn’t belong to him in the first place, and she could kick him out anytime she wanted.

‘I did,’ Lija said. ‘Just the outside though. Do you want me to decorate the inside too?’

‘The inside?’

‘The girls have some Christmas quilts that-’

‘Quilts?’

Lija laughed and walked over, grasping Augus by the hand and pulling him inside her giant, airy, open home. God, she’d gotten a real architect to design it, he just knew. A Big Deal Architect. And now it was ruined with red and green and gold and cream stars around the place and cross-stitch and rugs replacing tasteful paintings, showing all kinds of Yuletide festivities. He had a sudden urge to burst into laughter and swallowed it down.

‘Come on,’ she said, ‘you’re part of the family this year, you can help me decorate. How did things go with Gwyn’s case this morning?’

‘Good,’ Augus said, absently taking the pile of tinsel she handed him. He was surprised at how soft it felt. He thought it would feel spiky and gross, but it was way softer and he looked down at it, and had to resist the urge to press his face into it, to see what the bits of foil felt like against his skin.

‘Gwyn’s parents are going to deal properly now, and like, it’s hopeful. It’ll take a while, I guess.’

He passed the big formal lounge which had a tree so large that he backtracked to stare at it in awe.

‘This is so much work,’ Augus said, staring at it. ‘And aren’t you super busy? You’re so busy. How come you do this?’

In the distance, he realised he could hear Christmas carols. A coffee table had a bowl of unshelled nuts on it, and a nutcracker next to it. He’d never unshelled a nut in his life, but he suddenly wanted to know if it was hard to do.
‘This is something I inherited from my mother,’ Lija said warmly. ‘I come from a family of strong matriarchs who all worked hard, but believed in celebrating the good times. I suppose what I celebrate now is a mix of Yule and Christmas and the more traditional Ziemassvētki. For my mother, she loved Jāņi more than anything, but ah, harder to celebrate here. Though we still do, of course.’

‘Of course,’ Augus said.

‘Didn’t you ever celebrate Christmas?’

‘I mean…’ Augus shrugged. He tried really hard not to think about it. Christmas always seemed to bring a strange, wistful nostalgia with it for something that had literally never existed in his life.

‘No?’ Lija said.

‘There were…’ Augus stopped in the second lounge and saw yet another Christmas tree, this one decorated far more cosily. Some of its ornaments were clearly items made by Lija’s daughters when they were in primary school or kindergarten. He looked around at all the items on the mantel over the fireplace, the doilies on the couch decorated with holly, there was even a large straw deer standing in the corner. ‘God.’

‘I love it,’ Lija said.

‘So it’s like…it’s like a hobby?’

‘I guess you could say that,’ Lija said speculatively.

‘Are you super Christian?’

‘No!’ Lija said, and then she laughed so loudly that she had to place a hand on the mantel. In that moment she looked like the warmest person he’d ever met. She was shorter than him, and much rounder, and Augus thought she’d probably give nice hugs. He already knew what it was like to have her hand in his hair, have her arm around his shoulders.

Abruptly, he looked at another point in the room, because a bitter yearning hooked into him and cut him up inside. He didn’t want her to see. Not when she was laughing like that.

‘No, we’re rather pagan, actually. I’ll tell you about it sometime. You’ll never see a Nativity here, love. I suppose, for me, this time of year is a time where I focus more than ever on trying to be open and loving. It’s an expression of a philosophy. It matters more than ever, with the work I do. I rarely get to know my patients, it’s not like with Internal Medicine. The deepest conversations I have with people are sometimes when I have a Gigli saw or a costotome and I’m breaking or sawing into people’s bones and willing them to survive the trauma of saving their life.’

She walked over to the tree and inclined her head, so that Augus would join her. She started looping some of the tinsel at the top of the tree.

‘You start at the bottom, and we’ll meet in the middle.’

‘Oh, are you sure you shouldn’t do it? You’re really good at it.’

‘It’s Christmas, not an exam,’ Lija said.

‘I guess.’ He thought about what she’d said as he knelt to put the tinsel on the tree. ‘Why did you want to be a surgeon?’
'It’s the most brutal form of healing that exists,’ she said. Augus stopped, trying to process that, even understand what it meant. Did she like it because it was brutal? He looked up at her, but she was concentrating on what she was doing. ‘It’s a boy’s club, which pissed me off. But I loved it when I did it on rotation. I knew that I would give too much to my patients if I went into Internal, or even Psych. In the end, I had to pick something that would leave a lot of myself free for my family. I mean I still chose to be a surgeon, there’s not a lot of me leftover at the end the day, or night-shift, depending.’

‘Have you ever killed a patient?’

Lija hesitated and looked down at him, and then nodded soberly. Augus felt his cheeks burn.

‘Sorry,’ he said. ‘I mean-’

‘I don’t want to say it’s inevitable,’ Lija said, ‘but…I’ve taken some very risky cases that other surgeons wouldn’t take, because a lot of surgeons don’t want to mess up their statistics because that can affect their employment opportunities. Or even just – for personal reasons – it’s hard to take on a risky case, sink eighteen hours into a surgery and still lose someone. Anyway, I don’t know if I’d phrase it exactly like that, but people have died on my table, and some of those deaths I ask myself over and over again if I could have done something better.’

‘Fuck,’ Augus said with feeling. He cringed. ‘Sorry for swearing.’

‘You summed it up,’ Lija said, sighing. ‘Ultimately, it makes me a better surgeon, but it hurts. I always think of them as someone’s child. Even if it’s a seventy year old on the table. That’s someone’s child.’

‘Not everyone cares about their kids though,’ Augus said.

He wasn’t sure why he said that, because it was obvious that wasn’t the sentiment Lija was going for. But he couldn’t shake loose the bitterness that had settled into him. He stupidly wanted Lija to love him, and to love him in a way that meant she never asked him to leave. And he knew how stupid it was, but some tiny thing inside of him had grown spikes and kept wounding him with it, over and over.

‘How did you end up in the foster system, Augus?’ Lija said.

Their tinsel met in the middle, and Lija didn’t criticise how he’d placed it, but it still didn’t look as smooth and neat as hers. He wanted to fix it, but he wasn’t sure how. Instead, he followed her back into the kitchen, thinking about how to answer. He didn’t want to lie to her, but it wasn’t actually a story he told very often at all.

‘I was adopted first,’ Augus said. ‘Because I was a baby when I was given up.’

‘Adopted?’ Lija said, surprised.

‘Babies don’t really go into the foster system properly, because so many people want babies,’ Augus explained. ‘I mean there’s some exceptions, but babies are like, I guess the easiest to imprint onto, and don’t come with a sack of shitty habits for someone to fix of whatever.’

‘What happened?’ Lija said. ‘Why aren’t you still with the people who adopted you?’

Augus smiled, shrugged, thought her flashing earrings were so stupid. Who just wore them and didn’t care what people thought of them?
‘I don’t know,’ Augus said. ‘I was young. Four, or five, I don’t really remember. One day someone came and took me away, and they were crying, but they’d packed some bags for me. That’s all I remember, really. I think they told me I was going to the garden centre.’

Augus frowned, trying to remember, but there were only the faintest threads of it in his mind. The sense that no one needed that many packed bags to go to the garden centre. The way she clung to him, and the way they’d leaned into each other, and the strange person who had patted his small hand with their larger one, over and over, while rock music played in the car.

‘The garden centre?’ Lija said. ‘Why…there?’

‘Oh,’ Augus said, smiling to remember. ‘I think I used to really like um, plants and stuff. I don’t know why. I don’t know anything about them now. But I think when I was like, fussy, they’d take me to the garden section of wherever they were. Or they’d find one. I used to have a pet cactus. I stuck myself on it so many times.’

‘Do you like gingerbread?’

A platter of it appeared in front of him, obviously homemade and beautifully decorated.

‘You’re literally not bad at anything, are you?’ Augus said.

‘I mean, I have very steady hands,’ Lija said, her voice dropping in pitch as she arched an eyebrow at him. She stole a tiny gingerbread dog and ate its head off, and Augus took a Christmas giraffe. He laughed at it, and then tried some, deciding he liked it a lot. ‘There’s lots of things I’m not good at. My kids will tell you all of them with great enthusiasm if you ever ask them.’

‘Yeah,’ Augus said.

‘And you’re coming to Christmas dinner? And Gwyn as well?’

‘Um, probably,’ Augus said. ‘Yeah. I don’t have like- I haven’t gotten anyone presents or anything.’

He felt strangely muted after their conversation, and he ate the rest of the gingerbread giraffe biscuit in silence. He didn’t really think about the people who adopted him much. It was easy to be given up by strangers. And it was easy to be abused by strangers. Sometimes he forgot that there was this strange, idyllic time that ended the way it did. He told everyone he’d been in the foster system forever, he said it enough that he believed it.

He couldn’t remember if he’d ever told someone what he’d told Lija.

He was still lost in thought when Lija stepped up to him. He hadn’t registered Lija walking around the counter, and he couldn’t stop himself from startling when she touched him, but she ignored him and wrapped her arms around his waist and rested her head against his shoulder. Her hair smelled nice, and he felt one of the dangling earrings brush against his shirt.

He was right. She gave amazing hugs. He always knew she would.

‘The more you live here,’ she said, ‘the more we like you living here. You and Ash both. Do you want to help me keep decorating?’

‘There’s more to do?’
‘Yes,’ Lija said, then laughed and squeezed him tighter, before stepping back. ‘Come on, I’ll show you.’

She held out her hand and he took it carefully, knowing those hands were so important to so many people.

‘I still think you have a disease,’ Augus muttered. ‘It’s gross. Christmas is gross.’

‘It’s cheesy,’ Lija corrected as she drew him up the stairs towards her daughter’s bedrooms. ‘And cheesy isn’t always bad, love.’

He grimaced, his heart hurt and he wanted to cry. He made himself swallow it all down, telling himself to suck it up, because for fuck’s sake, he wouldn’t get to have something this nice even adjacent to such a large family, ever again. He wasn’t going to fuck it up.

*

The next two weeks unfolded with a frenetic energy that left Augus flopping onto his bed at the end of the day quietly hoping the next day would be easier.

It never was.

School was ramping up and getting harder. Studying became impossible. Even when he found a spare five minutes to look something over, he knew it would never be enough to keep up his grade point average. He’d never been the kind of person to get away with not studying, especially with the calibre of classes he was taking. Meanwhile, negotiations with Gwyn and his lawyers continued for what seemed like ages, and Gwyn talked to Augus about it a lot, and that was tiring too, because Augus was having to research things he’d never needed to consider or look at or know about before. After all, when he emancipated himself, he didn’t have to do any negotiations with the state. On top of that, he had work three days a week, which didn’t seem like much in the beginning, and wasn’t actually that stressful, except how it took time away from everything else.

Ondine was a great boss, but she constantly called Augus out for being too cynical.

‘It’s not a problem that you’re a cynical nihilist who has lost just about all faith in the human race,’ Ondine said gently one day, as he was about to leave. ‘It’s just not going to make you happier.’

‘Because you care about my happiness,’ Augus said bitterly.

‘Well,’ Ondine said, smiling at him. ‘Of course I do. I’m not a cynical nihilist who has lost just about all faith in the human race, after all.’

More and more, he found himself strangely looking forward to the Christmas dinner at Lija’s.

Sometimes he risked coming over and letting himself in through the glass door, sitting at the counter with a hot cocoa – he never used as much as Lija did, that stuff was expensive – and sometimes chatting to whichever of Gulvi’s many siblings came to talk to him. They all seemed to like him, and Augus suspected that this had a lot to do with Ash and how he talked about him. Because Ash made everyone sound good and loveable and fun.

Not only that, but for all Gulvi went on about her sisters as though they were all younger than her, only Galina and Maruta were younger. Iveta, Julvia, Alva and Liene were all older, though their maturity varied. Augus knew that Iveta was struggling with finding a place to move into, because she didn’t want to leave home, but she also wanted to know what independence felt like. He knew that Julvia loved embroidery and did a lot of fabric work with Lija, and they bonded over it. Alva was
obsessed with birds and was away a lot at a raptor training facility, where she did falconry classes and ‘meet the raptor’ sessions with schoolkids. Liene sang a lot when she was in the kitchen, and she and Augus had quickly realised they found a lot of the same celebrities attractive, and she was always showing him pictures of models and celebs on her phone, asking what he thought about them all.

Galina was twelve and had a voice like a whisper, and floaty, fluffy blonde hair that was never tamed or braided or tied back – Gulvi told him that she didn’t like certain kinds of clothes or textures and that she didn’t like short hair either, and it was sometimes difficult to deal with. She only cared about a cartoon that Augus didn’t mind watching, so he watched it with her while staring at his homework and pretending he was doing it.

Maruta, at eight, was level headed and adored Ash. She was also the first to badger Augus into getting his hair braided, which had started all of the sisters that had been there at the time into hounding him until he had no choice but to let them, or literally run away. They were terrifying when they all ganged up on him at once. Normally they were quibbling with each other and left him alone, but every now and then they decided on a common target, and it was always Augus.

Sometimes, though, it was Ash. But Ash loved it. He let them play with his hair. He played video games with them, watched Galina’s show with her and even knew the character’s names, and sponged up every family moment he could get. Augus watched him and wished he could give him that, because it was obvious Ash needed the sense of a large family. Ash wanted grandparents and parents and children and grandchildren, he wanted cousins and second cousins and friends who came round to share in family moments.

He needed something much more than what Augus could provide, and he soaked it up so effortlessly, like his time in foster care had been a mere blip in his life’s trajectory.

Ash was still working, and they liked him at the grocery store, and he hadn’t stolen anything from there. They trusted him, gave him more shifts. With the extra responsibility, something in Ash evolved, and he was still silly and an asshole, but he flourished around people who expected more from him and believed in him. He packed the shopping away for Lija. He offered to clean their pool. He cleaned Augus’ room sometimes, and just smiled when Augus thanked him.

He was maturing in a way that was almost graceful, and Augus watched him and felt more and more like the cynical nihilist that Ondine said he was.

Ash insisted that Augus was the only family he needed, but Augus felt ashamed that he couldn’t offer more. Still, he was grateful that he’d found a way to have Ash in his life, that they were family, that Ash stuck by him no matter what.

Augus loved him so much that staring at the truth of it was like stabbing himself in the eye. It just hurt. It hurt to know that’s what he should have had from the beginning, with more than one person. It hurt to see Ash easy with Gulvi’s family, and it hurt to be around all of it, and feel like the black cloud in the corner of the room, making a pall of things until Maruta came up with butterfly clips and insisted on braiding his hair.

*  

Mid-afternoon on Christmas day, and carols were blaring from Lija’s Spotify playlist. Every now and then one of her daughters would go up to the phone hooked into the sound system, and queue up something completely different. No one batted an eyelid when Rammstein screamed into the room after Gulvi touched the phone. It slid not-so-smoothly into Michael Buble crooning about Christmas, before Julvia rick-rolled them all, laughing when Liene launched at her, screaming something like:
The smells in the house were rich, meaty and appetising. Augus watched everyone – Ash included – stealing from any available platter and getting their hands smacked in the process.

Augus didn’t dare. And he stared with wide eyes when Lija came up and handed him a small sausage wrapped in bacon.

‘Careful,’ she said, as he took it in his fingers. ‘It’s hot. You get one for free, because you’re being so polite.’

‘Oh,’ Augus said. ‘Um. Thanks.’

He was still licking his fingers when the doorbell rang. He froze, and then just about ran to the front door, ignoring the way a flock of girls behind him started doing their best approximation of wolf whistling. He hated them all.

He hurriedly wiped his fingers on his jeans and opened the door, feeling something horrendous happen in his chest when he saw Gwyn standing there, looking as lost as he felt. Gwyn held a cardboard box in his arms, filled with small, wrapped presents.

‘Uh,’ Gwyn said, standing there. ‘I didn’t have- I don’t have a suit, you know, so I’m sorry I’m…’

He indicated his shirt by tilting his head towards it, but Augus didn’t care. Shirts did obscene things for Gwyn’s shoulders anyway. But Augus was distracted by the presents.

‘It’s not much,’ Gwyn said. ‘It’s really not much. I just- I mean-’

At that point he seemed to notice all the Christmas decorations past Augus and just stared in shock.

‘Wow,’ he said. ‘Mama was always…tasteful.’

Augus hated it when Gwyn forgot to refer to his mother as ‘mother’ or ‘Crielle’ and slipped into saying Mama like that. He would have placed bets that Gwyn had been thinking about his family all day, and he stepped back and waved Gwyn inside quickly, taking the box from him and setting it down by the tree with the presents.

Gwyn wandered into the kitchen and waved. Augus had learned from Gulvi that Gwyn already knew Lija, Apparently Gulvi used to drag him back to his mother during rich people events, and they’d hide out at her table together, away from Efnisien and Lludd and Crielle.

‘You have a really nice home, Ms. Dubna Vajat,’ Gwyn said politely, his voice painfully respectful. ‘It’s very festive.’

‘Thank you,’ Lija said warmly, walking up to him and clasping his hands in hers. Gwyn’s smile relaxed, and she seemed happier for it, before walking back into the kitchen.

Gwyn looked far too tired, and Augus dragged him over to the large dining table and made him sit down. Gwyn stared at some of the food on the table – platters of fruit, gingerbread, hulled nuts – with a dull kind of horror.

‘You don’t have to eat,’ Augus reminded him for the hundredth time.

Gwyn nodded, and Augus reached under the table and squeezed his knee. He’d warned Lija about what to expect from Gwyn, and she’d been fine with it in a way that suggested she was no stranger
to eating disorders and children with horrible histories, and he wondered why that was. Surely her job as a surgeon didn’t prepare her for some of the things he and Ash and Gwyn brought into her life? Yet she seemed unflappable and prepared, she was giving Augus hugs freely, sometimes just pulling him into her arms and holding him.

‘You look really tired,’ Augus said softly.

‘I’m just…’ Gwyn said, and then bit his bottom lip. ‘I’m withdrawing from school before the beginning of next term. I’m leaving.’

‘What? But I thought with the payout, you wouldn’t have to do-’

‘I just need to work for a bit,’ Gwyn said. ‘It sounds stupid, but it’s predictable and easy and I make money for it, and I never ever knew what I wanted to do at school. Not once. I’m not that smart, and I’m not that-’

‘You’re smart,’ Augus hissed.

‘You know what I mean,’ Gwyn insisted. He looked up and then rubbed at his face, and Augus saw the way Lija looked at the both of them from the kitchen and wondered if he should drag Gwyn outside to talk about this instead. ‘I don’t even know if I’m smart. Mikkel said I can go back to university later, you know. Or I can try distance ed. Or online courses. But…I can’t do school and living alone and working. One of them has to go for now. And it can’t be living alone and it can’t be work. I don’t really want to leave, I just- I can’t…I can’t stay.’

Augus wanted to reply, but he fell silent when Maruta walked up to both of them, inspecting them like she wanted to make sure they were Christmassy enough. Finally she looked at Gwyn and stared at him for a long time.

‘Do you put curlers in your hair?’ Maruta asked.

‘No,’ Gwyn said. ‘It just does this.’

‘Because I would need to put curlers in my hair to make it look like that,’ she said with the imperiousness of an eight year old. ‘It’s very pretty. Do you ever wear clips?’

‘I’ve never worn clips,’ Gwyn said, smiling.

‘Would you wear clips? Because it’s Christmas? And I’m very young and you should be nice to me?’

‘Don’t listen to her,’ Lija called warningly from the kitchen.

‘What kind of clips?’ Gwyn whispered.

Maruta ran off, and Gwyn watched her go, looking a little bewildered.

‘Well,’ Augus said. ‘You’re fucked.’

‘Augus,’ Lija said.

‘What?’ he called back. ‘You let Liene call Julvia a ‘fucking bitch.’ We all heard it.’

‘I pick my battles wisely,’ Lija said, turning with a wooden spoon in her hand coated in gravy. ‘I can win against you.’
‘You—’ Augus stared at her, Lija smiled sweetly back, and Augus ducked his head and felt his cheeks burn.

He waited a few seconds until he heard her turn back to her pot of gravy and then muttered: ‘Fucking girl central.’

Gwyn snorted, and inched closer to Augus until their knees were touching.

Maruta returned with about ten butterfly clips. Augus grinned, because they weren’t the regular plastic ones, but actually had thin, delicate plastic wings protruding, and a lot of glitter, and they were all pink and purple and blue.

‘Bend your head down,’ Maruta said.

Gwyn stared at the clips, stared at Augus, and then bowed his head. As Maruta fussed with his hair – exclaiming over how soft it was – Augus couldn’t help but smile when he saw that Gwyn’s ears were colouring.

When Gwyn lifted up, he had far too many butterfly clips in his hair, but Augus actually liked it, and couldn’t stop smiling.

‘You did a great job,’ he said to Maruta.

‘I know,’ Maruta said, running off to see what her sisters were up to.

‘Never had clips in your hair, have you?’ Augus said, sliding his phone out and taking a photo before Gwyn could turn away. The end product was a slightly dazed, wide-eyed Gwyn looking at him in the photo, and Augus smiled at it.

‘Blackmail material?’

‘Maybe,’ Augus shrugged. He sent Gwyn a quick, secretive text.

Gwyn’s phone dinged, and he looked at his phone. Augus laughed loudly when Gwyn punched him in the shoulder. But he supposed anyone would after what he’d written.

‘That’s not allowed. This is a family thing,’ Gwyn hissed.

‘It’s Christmas,’ Augus said plaintively. ‘You’re supposed to be even nicer to me at Christmas.’

Lija scoffed from the kitchen, and Augus looked over quickly to make sure he wasn’t in trouble, but she wasn’t even facing them. After a while, Gwyn reached up and touched the butterfly clips in his hair, and then asked to see the photo Augus had taken. As Augus showed him, he realised this was maybe what Christmas was supposed to feel like, year after year.

He’d never felt like this. Not once.

*

Later, when Kayla was there, they all commandeered the smaller lounge – Ash, Augus, Gwyn, Kayla and Gulvi – and Augus tried his hands at shelling nuts for the first time in his life. He learned that walnuts were tricky, almonds were easy, hazelnuts were the easiest, and no one liked brazil nuts. Soon, he was on ‘shelling duty,’ passing around nutmeat to everyone who held their hands out for it.

Kayla brought over some dumplings, and a box of pre-packaged lychee jellies for Gulvi’s sisters. She lounged with her head in Gulvi’s lap, legs over the armrest of the smaller couch. Gwyn sat in an
armchair, and Augus sat on the floor between Gwyn’s legs. Ash had the longest couch to himself, Santa hat on his head and bracelets made of tinsel on his wrists and ankles. He looked absurd, but Augus knew he was happy.

‘You’re really leaving?’ Kayla said. ‘You’re close to graduating.’

‘Not really close enough,’ Gwyn said, sighing. ‘And I don’t want to just…barely scrape by in everything. I can’t do- I mean I’ve been trying, but even with negotiations and stuff going my way, I’ve missed a lot of school.’

‘Flip Albion the bird when you leave!’ Gulvi crowed. ‘Oh my god, take a shit on his car!’

‘What? No!’

‘I’d do it,’ Gulvi muttered.

‘You’d do it even if you weren’t leaving,’ Kayla said, reaching around to pet Gulvi’s shin clumsily. ‘That doesn’t count.’

Augus scraped his teeth over his lower lip, and then turned a hazelnut in his fingers a few times before eating it. He didn’t bother offering any of the nuts to Gwyn, because it would just embarrass him. He wasn’t ready to eat around groups of people yet.

‘I’ve been thinking about it too,’ Augus said finally, picking up a walnut and distracting himself by trying to set it between the teeth of the nutcracker properly. ‘My grades are dropping a lot, and I don’t know… Ondine might not go for it though. She wants me to complete school.’

Ash looked at Augus seriously, and then pursed his lips. ‘But doesn’t that mean she’d support you going back when you were ready?’

Augus shrugged. He’d have to talk to her. But maybe it would be good to have a year away from school, to just work and…maybe spend time with Gwyn, and figure out what his future was going to be. Mikkel’s words weighed on him, day after day Augus tried to figure out what he wanted to do with his life, and the only conclusion he’d come to was that he really didn’t want to be a lawyer.

‘I have no parents to disappoint if I leave,’ Augus said with false lightness.

‘Talk to Mr Prince about it,’ Ash said. ‘Didn’t he take like a gap year for his fencing? If anyone would have some decent advice about it, it’s probably him.’

Augus realised that was true, and he nodded. The subject changed to whether Mr Prince had a soul or if he sold it to be that good at fencing, and Augus kept cracking nuts. He shivered when Gwyn touched his back gently. It wasn’t enough for the others to notice, but Gwyn’s hand was warm, and Augus closed his eyes and leaned back into the touch.

_This doesn’t have to be a Christmas thing. This could be an anytime thing. When we’re not working. Couldn’t it?_

Gwyn’s fingers moved slowly over his upper back, and Augus felt it like a dream.

*  

After a dinner filled with too much food, the right amount of laughter, and stuffed cabbage things that Augus had never seen before but tasted good, Augus dragged Gwyn up the stairs with a single gingerbread biscuit in his hand. He’d offered to do the dishes – even tried insisting – but Lija said
he’d already helped a lot in the lead-up to Christmas, and they had a dishwasher.

Gwyn and Augus stood in the shadows, Augus leaving Gulvi’s light turned off, the curtains closed, letting only a bit of the late afternoon light in. He didn’t know where Kayla and Gulvi were, probably down in one of the lounge rooms.

‘Have you had gingerbread before?’ Augus said, holding the iced Christmas tree up.

Gwyn shook his head.

Augus smiled and snapped off some of the trunk.

‘We’re going to eat some at the same time,’ Augus said. ‘Okay?’

Gwyn hesitated for a long time, and Augus waited for him to think it over. In the distance, the muffled croon of Frank Sinatra played through the house. Gwyn looked at the gingerbread, then he sighed heavily, looking around the room. Augus wondered how much he had to remind himself that he wasn’t home, that Crielle wasn’t here.

‘Um, okay,’ Gwyn said finally.

Augus placed the very tip of the trunk between his teeth, letting his lips close around it. Then he tilted his head up and waited. He hoped Gwyn would lean in before it disintegrated in his mouth.

In less than a minute, a shaking breath brushed his lips before he felt Gwyn’s teeth tenderly bite into the trunk and take some. Gwyn’s lips brushed his, and Augus opened his eyes and watched as Gwyn leaned back and ate the tiny bite he’d taken. Augus finished off his quickly, he was stuffed, and he already knew how good it was.

‘That’s nice,’ Gwyn said, sounding surprised. ‘It’s like, a bit spicy? But good?’

‘Do you want more?’

Gwyn nodded. Augus knew he could probably give Gwyn some and he’d eat it, but instead he snapped more off, placed the end of it between his teeth, and watched as Gwyn leaned in, trusting him.

*

Later still, they gave gifts to each other. Lija and her daughters had already given each other the bulk of their presents in the early morning when Augus and Ash were still fast asleep. Now, Lija, Kayla, Gulvi, Augus, Gwyn and Ash sat together giving out small presents to each other.

Augus didn’t have anything, relieved when Ash said he’d cover it. He was mildly horrified to realise that Ash was giving everyone a hideous diamante skull keyring of the kind that he’d given to Augus at the Royal Show – that Augus had then given to Gwyn. This time, Ash promised in an undertone that he had a receipt, but they were still awful.

Gwyn passed his to Augus with a half-smile. ‘Got something for you.’

‘Goddamnit,’ Augus muttered.

‘Ash, darling?’ Gulvi said. ‘Do you take constructive criticism?’

‘At this point in my tender, formative development, that’s a hard no, Gulvi,’ Ash said with a winning smile. ‘Get back to me in like a year.’
Gwyn had gotten everyone homemade-style cookies from the store where he worked, and Augus couldn’t tell if he was embarrassed, or flustered, or fine about it. This was his first Christmas away from what seemed like the worst family on the planet. Surely Gwyn didn’t have good Christmases there. But Augus didn’t know if Gwyn was really enjoying himself or not, because Gwyn had this impeccable façade around people who were rich and lived in nice houses, it turned out.

He’d have to talk to him about it later.

Gulvi made them all playlists, messaging them links to their own personalised list of songs.

‘Look, Augus,’ Gulvi said. ‘Yours doesn’t even have any metal on it, because I’m pretty sure that’s what the inside of your head sounds like anyway, so I gave you nice songs.’

‘I don’t know any of these,’ Gwyn muttered, scrolling down his phone.

‘You don’t know music,’ Augus said.

‘I mean…’ Gwyn squinted as he looked ahead, thinking it over. ‘Okay. That’s true.’

‘Oh, hey,’ Ash said. ‘Lija? Nicest Christmas ever. Like – the best.’

‘I’m glad,’ Lija said, beaming like she was genuinely pleased, even though she had to know it was true. Augus nodded, but didn’t know how to be so effusive about it. Ash would probably tell her how great it was for weeks to come.

Lija reached for a box of presents at the back of the tree, and then got up, groaning a little and mumbling something about being ‘too old to sit on the floor,’ and walked off.

‘Share those out between yourselves, your names are on them. You can start opening them! I just need to get something,’ she said.

Ash rolled off the couch and crawled to the box, and started handing out presents. He handed Gwyn a thick, heavy rectangle wrapped in silver paper, and Augus’ was a thick, heavy rectangle bound in gold paper.

‘Books,’ Gulvi said, rolling her eyes.

Kayla laughed as she took her wrapped book and started tearing the paper immediately.

Kayla had a large hardback book on fashion design that she stared at wide-eyed, before diving into immediately, ignoring everyone else. Ash’s book was on automata and mechanical toys, which shocked Augus, because he thought he was the only one who knew of Ash’s interest in old robots and metal toys. Gwyn’s book was a large hardback about the world’s calligraphy and writing styles. Gwyn looked a bit perplexed, but within a few seconds he was absorbed.

Augus opened his last and felt a frisson of some unknowable emotion move through him when he realised it was a hardback on botanical wonders. His thumb moved over the cover carefully. His heart was pounding. He felt locked in something he didn’t have a name for, and it was breathless and strange and he didn’t know if he liked it.

Lija’s footsteps sounded softly as she returned.

‘Yours is a two-part present, Augus,’ she said.

Augus looked up and saw the maidenhair fern in the ceramic, white pot. His eyes widened, the
feeling inside of him got larger, and he stared down at the book and thought that he was going to cry? He was crying? Was he already crying?

A tear dropped onto the cover and he smeared it away, not wanting to ruin the book, unable to understand what was happening.

Lija sat down on the armrest next to him and placed a warm hand on his back. Augus was blindly grateful for the mercy of the rest of them talking while he stared at the maidenhair fern that she placed on the cover in front of him. He reached out and touched the delicate leaves and felt a whisper of something he hadn’t felt since he was four years old.

Augus walked the fern down to the cottage, and Lija accompanied him. The rest were inside. Most of Gulvi’s sisters were in bed, and their little group was playing Mario Kart, because apparently they hated each other. Mintie the cat followed Lija, meowing hopefully for a second dinner, even though everyone had been feeding her scraps all day, and she’d already eaten her own food too.

‘You’re too nice to me,’ Augus said, letting them both into the cottage. ‘But, thank you.’

‘I think you should stay,’ Lija said, leaning against the doorway. ‘I want you to stay.’

Augus stared at the fern where it rested on his small work desk, then looked up at her. He didn’t know what to say.

‘I want you to stay here with all of us,’ Lija said. ‘And I want you to move out only when you really want to leave us. Not when you can afford it. Not when you think you should. But when you want to. It’s really no bother – no bother – having you both here. You’re both self-sufficient, you do your own chores and offer to help with ours, and I like you both. It’s selfish of me, but you feel like my children already. You’ve both been so grounding for Gulvi, in your own ways, even if you haven’t realised it. My kids love you. I think that speaks for itself.’

‘You’re going to make me cry again,’ Augus threatened, laughing weakly.

He wanted to stay so badly. It hurt his entire body when he thought about it. He had to brace himself on the table, because he felt like it would take him out at the knees.

‘Stay,’ Lija said. ‘Please.’

He pressed the back of his hand to his eyes, his next laugh a half-sob. ‘Never, in my entire life, have I been like this. Ever. Not…’

‘Maybe you cry when you’re happy,’ Lija said, walking over and wrapping her arms around him. ‘Or maybe it hurts to get good things. You know, Augus, I can heal so many patients with my hands, but it still hurts them. And many of them still cry when they come out of surgery, and in recovery, and even later on, too. Sometimes something that saves your life still reminds you of what you lost. You don’t even have to stay, if you don’t want to. Maybe you don’t want to stay.’

‘I want to,’ Augus choked out, his voice breaking. ‘I want to so much.’

‘Good,’ Lija said warmly, petting his back. ‘Then it’s settled. There, wasn’t that easy?’

Augus nodded, crying into her shoulder, thinking that nothing about it felt easy at all.

Ash had called it a nice Christmas, but this didn’t feel nice. And he’d called it the best Christmas,
which wasn’t far off the mark. But for Augus, it was something else, a tectonic shift that he had no words for. He knew he needed to get back to Gwyn and the rest of them, was even looking forward to it, but he clung to Lija greedily and wondered if she knew the gift she’d truly given him.
Gwyn

* 

Gwyn stared at the single piece of printed paper in his hand. In his backpack he had a novel’s worth of legalese, but Fenwrel had written down the finalised points of settlement in plain language so that Gwyn could understand it better. He read them over and over again as he waited for Mikkel to finish talking to Fenwrel in her office.

1. You are a legal adult, emancipated from the care of Lludd and Crielle ap Nudd.
2. You must work to maintain your costs of living, you are now responsible for all of your own expenses, lodging and healthcare costs.
3. Lludd and Crielle ap Nudd have agreed to pay settlement, releasing a substantive 25% of their entire holdings, as secured by forensic accountants, to care for ongoing healthcare costs, and for damages inflicted.
4. As per the settlement, they must leave the state and respect the now indefinite Violence Restraining Orders against them.
5. You may speak about your history to anyone you like with caveats, you may write about it online. You may not contact news agencies, newspapers or news blogs directly about your history. If, however, news agencies gain access to information about your history, you will not and cannot be held culpable.
6. You agree to pursue no further legal action against them regarding any actions preceding today’s date.
7. You agree to make no efforts to contact them, and should you wish to contact them in the future, you must do so through Vallakali, Dhanial and Permanu or associate organisations.

When Mikkel came back, he smiled at Gwyn, looking tired but relieved.

‘It’s done,’ Mikkel said. ‘Also, you’re rich. Congrats.’

‘So…’ Gwyn said, staring at the piece of paper. ‘Does that mean I can pay you?’

‘Huh?’ Mikkel paused before he pressed the button of the elevator and then turned back to Gwyn. ‘Man, I get paid, I couldn’t work like this if I didn’t. You don’t need to pay me.’

‘After everything you’ve done for me, I really think I should.’

‘No,’ Mikkel said, pressing the button of the elevator and then stepping back so Gwyn could walk in first. ‘Here’s how it’s gonna work. We’re going to go get some celebratory burgers, and you’re
going to watch me eat them. And then we’re going to talk about getting you a real estate agent, and Fenwrel’s given me some numbers for accountants and real estate agents and stuff because you’re gonna need them. And then I’m gonna let you live your life for a good damn while, and if – if – in about a year, you still want to pay me, you can buy me a new car.’

‘Deal,’ Gwyn said.

‘I didn’t tell you what car I wanted,’ Mikkel said.

‘You saved my life,’ Gwyn said. ‘And like you said, I’m rich.’

Mikkel was silent as they exited the elevator. He was silent as they walked to the car. But once Gwyn was buckled in and Mikkel was driving, he cleared his throat and said:

‘Look, I didn’t save your life, and Augus didn’t save your life, and Fenwrel didn’t save your life. We helped. But this was you.’

Gwyn didn’t want to say anything to that. It didn’t feel like he’d done anything except turn up to far too many appointments and have a single MRI. He had only a faint idea of how much work Mikkel and Fenwrel had done behind the scenes on his behalf, and he knew it was more than he could imagine.

‘It doesn’t feel real,’ Gwyn said. ‘That’s kind of clichéd, isn’t it?’

‘Yep,’ Mikkel said. ‘It might never feel real. You’re always gonna be a kid that was atrociously abused, and it doesn’t matter how glossy and good your life gets, you’re still going to get arthritis early, your body and mind will bear the scars of what happened to you forever. Sucks.’

Gwyn nearly said that it would be easy from now on, but he bit the words back. Efnisien was in the hospital, and Gwyn knew no one else cared, but he couldn’t stop thinking about it. Now that the case was officially settled, he was going to visit Efnisien. Tomorrow, as soon as he could.

He thought about Augus, and how Augus’ life was definitely easier than it used to be, but how he was still deeply wounded, carrying his trauma in some chamber inside of him, slipping out during sex, or popping up in conversations at the strangest times. Gwyn could see it like the image of an iceberg in a science book. What Augus shared and had dealt with was the tip, it was all Gwyn could see. What was left to deal with, to cope with, was underneath.

Was Gwyn’s life going to be like that too? Easier…but not easy.

Gwyn smiled when Mikkel asked him if he was okay, but he didn’t feel cut loose from his parents, he didn’t feel free, and for the first time in weeks, he felt shame at disappointing them like this. Everyone told him he was right for doing what he was supposed to, he’d held onto it to get him through everything.

Now it slipped through his grasp and he felt the fact of his betrayal like a bubbling, overflowing pot inside him.

*

‘Hey,’ Mikkel said, once he’d dropped Gwyn off at the small apartment. ‘It’s not going to be the last time I’ll see you, but…it also kind of is, because outside of getting you out of here and a new person in, we won’t have much to do with each other anymore.’

‘Yeah,’ Gwyn said, feeling desperately awkward.
He was so grateful to Mikkel, even wanted to stay in touch with him somehow, but he knew Mikkel didn’t work that way.

Mikkel stared at him pensively, his light brown eyes critical as always. Gwyn had never met anyone like him. He wasn’t sure he ever would again.

‘Don’t waste it,’ Mikkel said, holding out his hand.

Gwyn grasped it, started to shake it, and Mikkel drew him in sharply and hugged him close, too tight, too much, smelling a little of the celebratory burgers he’d had only thirty minutes ago. Mikkel was warm, round, and short enough that Gwyn could feel his curly hair brushing against his jaw.

‘Don’t waste it,’ Mikkel said. ‘You worked hard for a chance to actually like, live your life. Learn how to eat a pizza or something.’

Gwyn laughed helplessly when Mikkel stepped backwards, brushing off his chest automatically. Gwyn had the strangest feeling that Mikkel had given Gwyn the hug as a gift, and that he didn’t actually like them at all.

‘Thanks,’ Gwyn said.

‘Hey, yeah,’ Mikkel said, grinning. ‘Whatever, you’ll get me a car in like a year, right? Hopefully you’ve forgotten about me then. I mean that’s the dream, isn’t it, sunshine? That you’re living a full enough life that you forget about this and me completely? A guy can hope. A guy can hope.’

Mikkel tilted his head, studying Gwyn’s face thoroughly, and then lifted his hand in a wave and walked back to his car.

Just like that, he drove out of Gwyn’s life to go save someone else’s.

*

That night, Gwyn went to Augus’ place to celebrate. It was Augus’ and Ash’s idea, but Gwyn felt flat. He handed them the paper that explained the settlement, and they both read it, and then Ash went to show it to Lija and Gulvi and whoever else wanted to know about it.

He and Augus lay on Augus’ bed together. They lay on their backs, side by side, staring up at the ceiling, arms touching, and Gwyn closed his eyes and tried to tell himself the case was over. It was over. He’d never have to see his parents again.

‘I’m going to see Efnisien tomorrow,’ Gwyn said.

Augus held his breath, then sighed it out. ‘Do you want company?’

‘No.’

‘I can wait in the car with Ash, or we can wait in the waiting room.’

‘No,’ Gwyn said, shaking his head. ‘He’s been stabbed. He can’t hurt me. He hasn’t even been released yet. They said only two weeks but…there were complications? I don’t know. He’s been there for Christmas, he’ll be there for New Year’s.’

‘Poor him,’ Augus said drily.

Gwyn said nothing. Augus was right to loathe him, and it was sweet of him to even offer to come to the hospital. But Gwyn’s feelings for Efnisien were not the same as Augus’ feelings. Gwyn was in
some new space since Efnisien had sold out Crielle and gotten stabbed for it. He needed to see him. In some ways he hoped Efnisien would be just as awful as always, and Gwyn could stop feeling so bad for him.

‘Oh hey, I got you a Christmas present, but we can’t use it here,’ Augus said. He rolled over and reached beneath the bed, drawing out a shoebox. He lifted it up onto the quilt, opened it, and showed Gwyn the paddle and the butt plug inside.

The paddle looked wicked. Black, and clearly rubber or silicone. Gwyn reached out and touched it, and Augus watched him.

‘This looks like it’d hurt,’ Gwyn said, then frowned at Augus. ‘A lot.’

‘I mean, okay, I probably jumped straight towards like, the more extreme end of things that cause pain,’ Augus admitted. ‘But I can always use my hand to warm you up, and then when my hand feels like it’s about to drop off, we can switch to this.’

‘I know how to take out a VRO now. You’re next.’

‘Your ass might need the restraining order,’ Augus said, taking the paddle out and handing it to Gwyn. ‘God knows, with the things I’ve done to it.’

Gwyn felt his ears warming, turning the paddle in his fingers. He had a scar from what Augus had done to him, and Augus liked to touch it whenever he topped. He was obsessed with it, fascinated with it, and insisted that massaging it stretched out the scar tissue. It was probably true, but he wondered sometimes if Augus liked that he’d left his mark on Gwyn, even if he hated the way he’d done it.

Gwyn hated the way he’d done it too, but he liked the scar. He liked the way Augus touched it, and he liked the way Augus didn’t let it stop him anymore.

Still, the paddle filled him with trepidation.

‘Don’t worry,’ Augus said, ‘we can’t use it here. I have nightmares of any one of Lija’s four thousand children hearing the sounds and coming inside and asking what’s wrong. And then in my fantasy I literally die on the spot.’

‘God,’ Gwyn said. ‘That’s a horrible thing to think about.’

‘Yeah,’ Augus said. ‘Public sex is fine at school? And probably in cars and in parks. But here, we’re never going to get further than kissing and like furtive blowjobs and handjobs and shit, I hope you know that.’

‘Oh no, how will I ever manage.’

‘I hate you,’ Augus muttered. He took the paddle and thwapped it against his hand a few times. It made a loud, meaty sound, and even Augus winced. Then he smiled at Gwyn in such a sweet way it was horrifying.

‘No,’ Gwyn said. ‘Just…no.’

‘I’m going to love using this on you, god, you’re going to cry so much.’

‘That’s not hot!’ Gwyn hissed.
’I mean it’s a little hot,’ Augus said, grabbing Gwyn’s wrist and yanking him forward. ’Here, look. I bet if I do it once, none of them will come to see what’s going on.’

They ended up wrestling with each other, Gwyn trying to get the paddle, and Augus using his long, lanky arms and surprisingly quick reflexes – probably from fencing – to keep it out of reach. Before long they were out of breath, panting, and then Gwyn reached too far over Augus, didn’t realise how close they were to the edge of the bed, and they both fell off.

The air was knocked out of Augus’ lungs, but he started laughing, wheezing at first. Gwyn laughed too, even as he held out a hand and pulled Augus up.

As he crawled back onto the bed, a blow sounded against his ass, over his jeans, and Gwyn yelped.

’Augus!’

Augus did it again, and then Gwyn turned quickly onto his back and stared, scandalised, as he slipped a hand over his ass because the sting was terrible even through his jeans. Augus hadn’t held back at all.

’That’s so much nicer on my wrist,’ Augus said, staring at the paddle in wonder. ‘And I wasn’t hitting lightly either. This is such a game-changer.’

’The game-changer is you’re never hitting me with that thing again. That was over jeans! It hurt!’

’Well you’re not warmed up, are you?’ Augus said, dropping it back in the shoebox as he smiled. ‘It’d be like fucking you dry with no warm up- Okay, let’s not talk about how I’ve basically done that. But you’ll like it a lot more once you’re warmed up. I mean not like it. I don’t want you to like it. But you’ll tolerate it better.’

Augus talking in such a matter-of-fact way about how he’d clearly thought about many different ways to hurt Gwyn was disarming. Gwyn felt like he couldn’t breathe properly. He felt like inviting Augus back to his place – for however long it would remain his place – and telling him to do his worst.

Self-preservation stopped him. Augus was going to do his worst anyway. His sadism was real, and it was thrilling. A part of Gwyn leaned towards it like a vine, desperate and determined, even as it intimidated him.

His ass still stung. He wanted to look in a mirror and see if the skin had already turned red.

’Hey,’ Gwyn said. Augus rolled him over onto his stomach and rubbed Gwyn’s ass where he’d hit him, some kind of apology – or maybe he was just turned on – but it was nice enough that Gwyn immediately went limp.

’What?’

’So, I want to ask you something, but it’s complicated, and I don’t want you to get mad.’

Augus’ hand slowed, but that just made the touch more sensual through the denim. Gwyn sighed. He was getting hard now. Lying stomach down and wearing jeans was the least comfortable position for getting a hard on.

’Go on,’ Augus said.

’Wait, about that furtive handjob…’
‘Tell me first,’ Augus said.

‘Okay,’ Gwyn said, exhaling heavily. ‘Okay. Firstly, I’m…um, I think I’m a millionaire? Or- God. The thing is, we’re both really young, and so, at first I wanted to buy us a house. Like for Ash too. Because that seemed like a good idea.’ Augus had stopped rubbing the curve of his ass cheeks and was still. ‘But then I thought about it more and it’s like, what if you decide you don’t want me anymore? Or, I don’t know, we don’t all live together well? So I thought I could like…buy you both a house, and then get me a place to live, but that way you wouldn’t have to worry about a mortgage or anything, and even if you decide you hate me, you could keep that, as a way of saying like, thank you, or-’

‘Stop, stop, stop,’ Augus said, and Gwyn bit down on his lip. ‘I don’t want a fucking…thank you house.’

‘No, but, if you think about it—’

‘Just shut up for a second. Give it more than thirty seconds before deciding what to do with that money, okay? I mean I am very…I am really touched, I guess, that you want to do that for us, but Lija is already letting us stay here basically rent free. I like living here, believe it or not, even though that makes scenes really fucking hard. Whatever, we’ll do them at your new place, wherever that ends up being. Make sure it’s got good soundproofing. You’re going to need it. But Gwyn, you don’t need to get me anything? I mean I don’t know if you remember, but me helping you on this case was basically an apology for fucking you up in the first place.’

‘I mean, helping me emancipate myself is a pretty insane way to apologise,’ Gwyn said.

‘Well, idiot, buying someone a house is a really dumb way to say thank you!’

Gwyn laughed in spite of himself, and then he rolled to his side and opened his jeans and got a hand around his cock, because it seemed like the conversation was over and he didn’t want to wait any longer.

‘God, not like that, hang on,’ Augus said, scrambling to get tissues, clambering back on the bed and dragging Gwyn’s hand away. He replaced it with his own, jacking him roughly, thumb pressing hard over the head of his cock, and Gwyn shuddered and gasped, eyes slamming shut. The last thing he saw was Augus’ intent gaze, playful and dark.

‘Look, not for nothing, but I think it’s telling that you got hard after I paddled you,’ Augus said softly, a counterpoint to his rough jerking, Gwyn’s cock feeling chafed and harder than ever. Gwyn nodded absently, even though he thought that might not be a good idea, and focused on breathing. ‘It’s a nice word, isn’t it? Paddle. Like, giving you a paddling sounds really sweet compared to caning the fuck out of you. It doesn’t sound at all like it feels.’

‘Please, shut up, you’re ruining it,’ Gwyn breathed.

Augus leaned down over him and bit so lightly at his cheek it felt more like teeth scraping. His hand squeezed mercilessly at Gwyn’s cock, treating the sensitive skin with no care, and Gwyn’s hips began jerking into it, away from it, his lower belly pulling together, the muscles tightening.

‘You’re going to let me spank your cock one day,’ Augus said. ‘Like, really spank it.’

Gwyn opened his mouth to say no, but there was no point. He’d say yes to just about anything right now, and Augus was obviously learning the difference between words that were aggravating, and words that drove Gwyn closer to coming.
‘You’d hate it,’ Augus said. ‘I mean, kind of. You’d kind of hate it. I’d make you come though, while your poor cock was all red and bruised, and I bet that’d hurt, but I think it’ll still feel good. Fuck, you’re close aren’t you?’

A frantic nod, and then Gwyn’s hips arched up, and his ass spasmed like it needed to be filled. He dug his hands into the bed as he came, bunching up the quilt, mouth open, and Augus’ rough hand almost cruel as it forced him through his orgasm. He felt like he spilled more than normal, then jerked away all at once when pleasure jack-knifed into oversensitivity. Augus let him go, and Gwyn felt a whole lot of soft fluff between his legs and realised there were about twenty bunched up tissues there.

He chuckled tiredly, brushed his forehead with his forearm, then looked blearily at Augus.

‘You said…’ Gwyn caught his breath. ‘You said furtive blowjobs too, right?’

‘Oh, fuck yes,’ Augus breathed, undoing his jeans so quickly that Gwyn laughed.

He cleaned himself up, balled up the tissues and got off the bed. He stuffed them all into the wastepaper basket and then walked over and grabbed onto Augus’ shirt as he got down on his knees.

He looked up, and Augus stared at him with that expression that was half lust and half disbelief, like he still couldn’t believe that Gwyn would willingly do this for him.

But Gwyn liked it, and he took Augus’ cock in his hand and opened his mouth, taking in the first half of it and liking the taste and weight of Augus on his tongue. Above him, Augus groaned gutturally, the sound almost animal, and then two hands sunk deep into his hair, scratching slowly at his scalp.

‘Don’t mock me…’ Augus breathed, ‘when I last like two minutes.’

Gwyn couldn’t smile, just took Augus’ cock deeper. It was nice that Augus didn’t last forever. It wasn’t as hard on his throat, and it was flattering, how quickly Augus was taken by his own arousal.

Augus breathed heavily, and then at once his breath strangled to a stop, and Gwyn heard it too: the sound of footsteps approaching the cottage.

‘No,’ Augus whispered as he pulled back – out of Gwyn’s out – and looked horrified. ‘No, no, no, not now.’

He shoved his cock back into his jeans, squeaked – Gwyn knew it wouldn’t have felt great – and then dragged his fingers through his hair. Gwyn rubbed clumsily at his mouth and sat back on the bed, heart pounding.

The doorknob for the front door jiggled, then opened.

‘Hey…guys?’ Ash called. ‘You decent?’

‘Kill me,’ Augus mouthed, staring down at his open fly. He ground the heel of his hand into his cock and bent over, and then stopped, straightening and looking like he was trembling. Gwyn knew he’d been close.

‘Listen, guys? Lija got Gwyn like a celebration cake and it looks dope, so you should both stop fucking or whatever it is you’re doing and come get some cake. Gulvi’s already betting that one of you is naked so please tell me one of you isn’t naked.’
'Goddamn it. We’re not naked,’ Augus ground out, but he looked up at the ceiling in a kind of agony as he coughed to hide the sound of zipping up his fly over his cock. Gwyn couldn’t help laughing, and Ash sighed audibly from the doorway. ‘We’re not naked!’

‘If you think I didn’t hear you zipping up your fly though…”

‘Get out!’ Augus shrieked, his voice jumping at least an octave. Gwyn snorted, covered his mouth to hide his laugh, and Augus stared at him like he could eviscerate him with his eyes.

‘First you get me a place to live,’ Ash said mournfully, ‘and then you kick me out of my own home. Life is really hard sometimes.’

‘I hate you! Get out! We’ll get some goddamn cake in a second.’

‘If I come back without you, I think Lija’s going to join in on the bet and, look, I just…think…it’s best for everyone that you come now and not wait for Lija’s entire family to come down to see what you’re both getting up to.’

‘I’m fucking dressed,’ Augus snarled, and Gwyn stood and petted Augus softly on the shoulder and walked out into the small hallway.

‘Hi, Ash,’ Gwyn said.

Ash looked profoundly relieved that Gwyn was dressed, but he took a closer look at Gwyn’s face, blanched and then made a gesture to the corner of his own lips. Gwyn reached up and wiped away some excess saliva and flushed.

‘It was so much nicer,’ Ash said, turning away, facing the garden, ‘when I was the one getting caught out all the time. So much nicer. Augus, stop getting laid!’

‘Fucking- It takes me two seconds to come, you couldn’t have waited like a minute? A fucking minute?’

Gwyn laughed so hard he had to grasp the doorframe, and Ash was laughing a second later.

‘Dude,’ Ash said. ‘That’s so sad.’

‘This whole situation is sad,’ Augus said bitterly, walking out of his room and staring at them like he was daring them to even try looking down at his jeans. But Ash was still facing the garden, and Gwyn was just trying to hide his mirth because he knew Augus would find some way to turn it into a punishment later and he wasn’t ready for that paddle.

‘Yay! Cake!’ Ash said with a kind of ebullient glee that made it clear he was going to ignore the fact that Augus had ever made out with Gwyn. He marched off with determination towards the house, Gwyn followed, and Augus caught up, walking slower, with a slightly uneven gait.

‘The bluest motherfucking balls,’ Augus hissed into Gwyn’s ear.

Gwyn laughed.

*

The next day, Gwyn caught the bus to the hospital and felt more nervous than he’d felt in weeks and weeks. He’d bought some puzzle books and a true crime novel about serial killers, which probably wasn’t a good idea, but he knew what Efniisien liked to read. His chest felt like it was bubbling,
every breath shallow and scared. Efnisien still had Gwyn’s number blocked, and Gwyn knew this could turn so ugly.

At reception, he was told where Efnisien’s floor was, and then they said his cousin was lucky enough to have a private room. Gwyn didn’t know if it was lucky for Efnisien, but it was probably lucky for the other patients. Though Gwyn had no idea how he was behaving here. He could be so exemplary to others in public. Like Crielle, he had a charming façade when he could be bothered maintaining it.

Gwyn stood in the elevator next to a member of staff in blue scrubs holding onto an empty hospital gurney who paid no attention to him. Gwyn waited for them to exit at another floor, and then he continued up towards the right ward. He got out of the elevator and stood there for a moment, staring at the counter and the nurses behind it. He was so used to hospitals as a patient, and so out of his depth as a visitor.

Eventually, a nurse asked if he needed any help, and she told him Efnisien’s room number and hesitated before taking Gwyn there.

‘He’s only been visited once. It’s not common, given he’s got a room to himself, and private insurance. People like that get visitors.’

‘Who visited him?’

‘Uh…I wasn’t there that day. I think his parents?’

‘Yeah, they came back. They’ve only visited once?’

‘That’s what I heard,’ she said. ‘Anyway, you can see him. Stay as long as you like. He’s on bedrest, but he’s not giving us much trouble. Except… Well, it doesn’t matter. Excuse me.’

She left him outside the entrance to the private room, indicating that Gwyn could go inside before she walked away to attend to other patients.

Gwyn stood there, took a deep breath and walked into the room.

The first thing he noticed was that the room was large, and the gurney up against the wall looked small by comparison. Efnisien looked even smaller, tucked underneath thin white blankets and hooked up to two different intravenous lines. His hair was unkempt and he was asleep, shadows beneath his eyes. There was a plastic jug of water on the hospital tray that could be wheeled over his bed, and a glass, and that was it. No books, no flowers, no notepads or get well cards, nothing.

Gwyn carefully placed the book and the puzzle magazines on the tray and realised he hadn’t bought a pen, and hoped the nurses would give Efnisien one if he asked.

There was a single chair and he got it and brought it round so that he could sit facing Efnisien, by his side. He felt so cold, and he wondered if that was the temperature of the room.

After a few minutes he got up and took Efnisien’s patient clipboard out of its holder at the base of the gurney, surprised at how substantial Efnisien’s notes seemed to be. He flipped through the pages, not able to understand a lot of the terminology. But one line leapt out at him, on one of the earlier pages:

*Patient has opened own wounds. Four point restraints advised for twenty four hours. Obs every 30.*

He knew there had been complications, but it hadn’t occurred to him…
He’d never really bothered to think about what life was like for Efnisien, because he’d always seemed so happy and joyful, the only anger he showed came when he was thwarted from tormenting someone. He’d never seen Efnisien sad or really upset until Gwyn started the process of emancipation from his parents.

But now that it was no longer a matter of survival for Gwyn, he realised that it wasn’t normal for Efnisien to be the favourite of someone like Crielle. It wasn’t healthy for his mother to encourage a tiny child to hurt animals and people and her own son. When Efnisien leapt cheerfully into Crielle’s arms as a toddler, as a primary school kid, he was often only praised for his appearance, or for how good he was at hurting someone.

Efnisien’s parents were never there, and Crielle wasn’t a good parent even to the people she loved.

Gwyn was flipping through the book on true crime, sitting back in the chair, when Efnisien woke half an hour later. He shifted, his breathing stuttering, and then as Gwyn lowered the book, Efnisien’s eyes cracked open. He stared ahead for a few moments, and then his eyes rolled to the side and he saw Gwyn.

They stared at each other for a long time. Gwyn couldn’t say anything, and Efnisien just turned to look at him and didn’t say a word. He didn’t look happy. After a while he turned back and stared ahead again.

‘I can’t come hurt you or your whore like this, so just go away.’

‘She stabbed you,’ Gwyn said. ‘Penny and Eurowydd only saw you once?’

‘Yeah,’ Efnisien said, then smiled to himself. ‘Here.’

He moved the hand that wasn’t attached to intravenous tubes under the blankets and brought out a pamphlet. He handed it to Gwyn, and watched with sharp eyes as Gwyn took it. But he didn’t try a thing. Gwyn thought he had to be in a lot of pain, or maybe he just didn’t want to hurt someone. Sometimes Efnisien didn’t want to hurt anyone.

Gwyn looked at the pamphlet for the residential treatment facility. It was a private facility, designed for ‘emotionally disturbed young citizens’ and the pictures looked nice enough, but it was still – judging by its lengthy description of the available top notch security – a place designed to keep Efnisien from leaving once he was there.

‘Are you going?’

‘I mean,’ Efnisien said, shrugging a shoulder, staring ahead. ‘They’re cutting me loose, you know. Parents are already back on a ship. Crielle said goodbye with a knife. You know how she is. Sweet.’

‘They said she stabbed you five times.’

‘I think it would’ve been more,’ Efnisien said, ‘because once she started I don’t think she wanted to stop. Like, that’s…relatable. But yeah. Twice in the liver, once in a kidney, once in the spleen, and one…I don’t fucking know. But I still have all my guts. And…seventy five percent of my liver. I asked them to show me the mess they cut out, but they don’t keep it.’

‘They’re putting you in what…a treatment facility?’

‘They’ll pay for it,’ Efnisien said. ‘But they said they’d only pay for me to live somewhere without them, if I went there first. Sociopath detention.’ Efnisien snickered. ‘Like I can improve! Like there’s any point.’
His voice turned flat at the end, and his whole face because so lifeless that Gwyn thought if Efnisien died, that’s how his eyes would look.

‘I think you can improve.’

‘Good for you,’ Efnisien snapped.

‘You got me the USB, it changed everything for me.’

‘Fuck you!’ Efnisien said, like Gwyn had insulted him and his moral fibre. His voice broke, his face screwed up and he looked away. Then his hands dropped onto the thin blankets and pressed into his gut, and Gwyn didn’t really pay attention at first, until Efnisien hissed a breath. Gwyn stood and wrenched Efnisien’s wrist away from his own wounds. Efnisien’s hand twisted quickly, pulling Gwyn’s finger back until it nearly broke.

Gwyn got away, stepping out of reach. Efnisien watched him with fever bright eyes, his breathing shaking.

‘I could kill you,’ Efnisien said hoarsely. ‘I fucking get off, thinking about it.’

But his eyes were sheened. He looked desolate.

‘I fucking hate you so much,’ Efnisien said. ‘For everything.’

‘The facility says it has therapists trained in all kinds of things,’ Gwyn said. ‘Maybe they could help you.’

‘What’s the point?’ Efnisien said. ‘There’s no point. What do you think my choices are, Gwyn? There’s no cash settlement for me. I can’t go back to them. Penny never gave a shit. You think I don’t know what my life would be like? Imagine, because I’ve had a lot of time to think about it. Imagine me deciding to feel bad about everything I’ve ever done, and then imagine what kind of life I’ll have. Because I’m not brave enough to live in some fucked up eighteen-hundreds-style purgatory. I’d rather die. There’s no one who wants me, and there’s no one who will. Which is exactly what someone like me deserves, isn’t it? There’s nothing waiting for me but jail-time. I like hurting things too much anyway. I like- I can’t stop. Just go back to your whore boyfriend.’

Gwyn thought Efnisien already did feel bad about it. There was no cruelty behind his decision to give Gwyn the evidence he did. It had been the most selfless thing Efnisien had ever done for him.

He also knew Efnisien’s real feelings for him. He’d always known, awkward and uncomfortable about it, Efnisien gazing at him while torturing him with a deep, bright, blistering love in his eyes, only knowing how to express it in ways that hurt. They’d grown up together, and Efnisien liked to spend time in his room ‘just because,’ he liked to ask about Gwyn’s day at school, and while he was compelled to hurt him, just as often he seemed to only want to be close to him.

Gwyn knew why Efnisien didn’t want him to leave the family, and he wasn’t above leveraging it now.

‘I’ll come visit you,’ Gwyn said. ‘If you try. I will come and visit you.’

Efnisien’s eyes widened a fraction, and then he stared at Gwyn for a long time. Gwyn expected him to spit poison in response, realised that Augus’ viciousness was so easy to take because Efnisien had taught him how to deal with it. They weren’t the same, but there was a sadism that took root when Efnisien felt vulnerable and Gwyn waited for it.
‘If you try,’ Gwyn said, when Efniisien still said nothing, ‘and they let you out, I’ll keep visiting you. Not with Augus. I don’t want you around him. But… You did more for me than they ever did.’

‘You hate me.’

‘I’ve never hated you.’

‘You should, you fucking shit-for-brains dipstick. You’re just a victim with Stockholm syndrome. So boring.’

‘I think you do feel bad.’

‘So?’ Efniisien rasped. ‘So what? You think that stops me? You think that makes me want to stop? You think I don’t think about shoving the fucking IV pole up a nurse’s cunt to watch her scream? You think I’m cured because Crielle stabbed me?’

Gwyn wasn’t shocked by it, and he wasn’t surprised by it either. ‘I know you’re imagining torturing me right now.’

‘It would be so good,’ Efniisien breathed, sagging back into the pillows. ‘God. They don’t give me much to do here, and I hate watching TV. So…I just daydream.’

‘If you try, at the centre’ Gwyn said, ‘I’ll keep visiting you. Thinking about torturing people isn’t doing it. Daydreaming about it isn’t doing it.’

Efniisien sighed out a breath that sounded more like a sob. ‘I can’t change.’

‘You’ve already changed.’

Efniisien stared at him, eyes still wet, the delicate skin beneath bruised.

‘You already decided to change,’ Gwyn continued, ‘and that’s why she rejected you. You made it clear you weren’t on her side.’

But Efniisien’s face was blank now, erased of all emotion, and Gwyn suspected he’d had enough. Gwyn stood, rubbing at his neck, feeling the scars on his feet. The day Efniisien had given them to him, Gwyn screamed so loudly that his throat had bled, and they’d been in the attic, and even Crielle had seemed shocked at Efniisien’s daring. She’d stitched Gwyn’s feet herself, and cautioned Efniisien against doing anything that might require hospitals in the future.

But two days later, Efniisien brought two of his favourite stuffed toys into Gwyn’s room and tucked them around Gwyn’s head while he still couldn’t walk. He brought Gwyn water, even if he did sometimes pluck at the stitches at his feet like he couldn’t help it. Efniisien was just like that.

‘My life wouldn’t be worth it if I couldn’t hurt things,’ Efniisien said.

Gwyn felt drained already, overwhelmed, a strange hope warring with the memories that came from spending too long around Efniisien.

‘It didn’t feel good to help me?’ Gwyn asked.

Tears spilled down Efniisien’s cheeks.

‘No,’ he said, laughing harshly. ‘Most painful thing I’ve ever done in my whole life. Go fuck yourself.’
There was nothing else Gwyn could do. Not today. He knew Efnisien wasn’t lying. He knew what it meant, what Efnisien had sacrificed for him, and Gwyn couldn’t make it better in a day.

‘I’ll come see you in a week,’ Gwyn said. ‘Unblock my number.’

‘Yeah.’

As he walked out, he heard Efnisien’s voice break on a sob, then another, and if it was anyone else he’d return and comfort them. But Efnisien was still too dangerous, and he wouldn’t respond to comfort with anything but violence. Gwyn only hoped that the visit itself would count towards something, that Efnisien would try, that Gwyn wouldn’t lose every member of his family and that healing – in whatever form it came – might be possible for someone like his cousin, too.
Fortunate Fool

Chapter Notes

I wanted to have this done sooner but I got smacked with 'virus from hell' and it turns out head/neck radiotherapy from last year makes viruses really hard now! BUT, oh my god, I started writing this as soon as I could, and I have so many feels, and I'm so glad we finished with Augus' perspective honestly.

I can't believe this started in 2014, it's been the longest running serial I've ever written, it's had multiple hiatuses and you guys have been so patient with it through thick and thin. Thanks so much for believing in this weird side story, and I hope you enjoy the end! You can always come find me on Tumblr and scream at me about it.

A huge thanks to my beta, Silvia, who is an actual hero. And thanks to all of you for reading! Whether you left comments, kudos, bookmarked the fic or lurked, I appreciate you all. <3

Augus

*

In the end, they all pulled out of Murdock. Gwyn withdrew first, then Ash, and Augus went last, when he was sure he and Ash could afford life without the scholarship. Augus realised they all needed a break, school was the only thing that could give when they needed to work to survive.

Yet, despite the year that had preceded them, three months after Christmas, life was the best it had ever been. Augus refused to say how good it was aloud, to anyone, just in case he jinxed it.

Ash was promoted to store supervisor and started seeing a therapist who offered addiction and kleptomania counselling for free after stumbling across an initiative provided by the state. He only went once every few weeks, but that alone was enough to help him, and while it didn’t stop him from pilfering things from other stores every now and then, he was stealing less often and he was taking less valuable items. The sessions had the strange side effect of making Ash more affectionate than ever.

‘You love me, right?’ Ash said one night, as Augus spooned a beef casserole over pasta. Ash sat at the small table, in their cottage that felt more and more like home, and Augus held his breath.

It wasn’t the first time this had happened.

‘Of course I do,’ Augus said.

‘Because I love you a ton.’

Augus smiled, looked at Ash, and wanted – desperately – to say something mean and biting, but he had a suspicion that Ash’s increased bursts of open affection were directly tied into trying to get control of his stealing. Maybe, instead of stealing, he was supposed to seek approval just by asking for it. Augus didn’t know, but it had the uncomfortable side effect of forcing Augus to be open too.
Because otherwise it made him seem like a total asshole.

‘You’re good for me,’ Augus said, looking down at the bowls of pasta, a weight in his chest.

‘Yeah?’

‘Mmmh. Now come get your bowl of pasta. I’m not bringing it to you, goddamn it.’

Ash bounced over, grabbed the bowl, and then walked back to the table and sat down, digging in immediately. Augus stood there, unused to living in a world where people just outright asked if they were loved, and got positive answers for it. He didn’t mind it, but it jarred him, like falling from a great height only to realise the landing might be soft every time.

*

Two days later, Augus took the bus to Murdock, wearing business attire instead of his school uniform. It meant he looked more casual than when he’d attended, because the Murdock uniform required a tie, and Ondine would laugh at him if he ever wore a tie to work. She’d do it nicely, but she’d still do it.

He walked through the campus, up the stairs, and then knocked on Mr Prince’s door before looking at his watch. He was five minutes early, but he had an appointment.

‘A second, please,’ Mr Prince called from within.

Augus waited, looking out across the school, already feeling so separate from it.

Since he’d withdrawn, Mr Prince insisted on fortnightly visits, which at first seemed normal until he realised that teachers – even Head of Houses – didn’t do this for their ex-students. But as awkward as it could be, he was growing to like the meetings. Mr Prince treated him a little differently now that Augus wasn’t officially a student anymore.

The door opened and Mr Prince impatiently waved him inside, like Augus was late.

But there, at Mr Prince’s desk, was a tray with a teapot and two teacups on it already, and a plate of bourbon biscuits. Augus had never had them before Mr Prince had offered him some, and now he was developing a taste for them.

‘Did you end up looking through the prospectus that I gave you?’ Mr Prince said, sitting down and gesturing for Augus to fill his own cup. Augus filled Mr Prince’s first, then his own, and waited before picking it up. Mr Prince could drink a near-boiling cup of plant-water, but Augus had to wait a couple of minutes until he didn’t feel like it would burn his mouth off.

He liked it though. He always thought he’d hated tea, but it turned out it was nice when it didn’t have anything added to it.

‘Yes,’ Augus said. ‘But… Work is important at the moment, and…’

He sighed, rubbing his forehead. The prospectus seemed like it had been specifically designed for someone like him. He knew from casually mentioning his growing interest in plants and botany, that Mr Prince had been inspired enough to suggest tertiary education once more.

‘Augus,’ Mr Prince said, ‘you are not banned from ever applying for a scholarship again.’

‘Most of them don’t cover—’
—Are you most people?’ Mr Prince said archly. ‘Do you think I am doing this for my other students?’

Augus pursed his lips. Mr Prince wanted him to continue his education, and Augus secretly wanted it too. Even Lija seemed open to it, offering to support him in any way necessary, and Gwyn would probably bankroll the whole thing if Augus so much as looked at a particular degree. But Augus was proud, and he couldn’t see himself doing this unless he had access to a scholarship that would cover not just the cost of his materials, but also living costs.

It severely narrowed his options.

‘They’ll let me finish out my secondary requirements on the campus?’ Augus said. ‘Really?’

‘You’ll enjoy it far more,’ Mr Prince said. ‘You get to call the teachers by their first names and most of them will be far more hungover than you. In all seriousness, completing your secondary qualifications at university streamlines you directly into the degree you choose. High schools don’t talk about it very much, because they’re very much about keeping you within their system, so that your fantastic grades will increase their ranking and attract more students with rich parents. They don’t really care about you as an individual, or what suits you best. Even a place like Murdock has its bottom line.’

‘Presumably a university does too.’

‘Absolutely,’ Mr Prince said. ‘But it’s still a different atmosphere. I think you’d rather like it. Did any of the degrees appeal to you?’

Augus nodded. He picked up the teacup, sipped the tea and realised it was still too hot. He gingerly put it back down. Mr Prince was already a third of the way through his cup.

‘There’s one… I looked at Botany, which seemed straightforward, but then I found Ecosystem Management, and Environmental Management and Ecology, and I liked them. I looked up the units for each and I have to admit I am curious.’

‘Excellent,’ Mr Prince said. He reached into a drawer and brought out a folder. ‘In that case you may wish to look these over.’

Augus took the folder and opened it, and saw information on scholarship applications and almost rolled his eyes.

‘I can’t help but feel you have a very specific direction you want my life to go in.’

‘I’m manipulating you into a better future,’ Mr Prince said candidly, smiling quickly and brightly before picking up a biscuit. ‘Listen, if you want to spend your life doing bookkeeping, you may. But I’m not going to pretend that I don’t think you’re better suited to something more challenging. Maybe you’ll hate university, and perhaps you’ll hate the degrees you choose, but I am determined that you realise it’s still an option.’

Augus almost pressed the folder to his chest, but didn’t want to seem that vulnerable. Truthfully, he was excited. He was still tired and world weary, but even these few months away from school had made him realise how much he missed learning, even if he was too smart for most of the material Murdock provided.

‘Also,’ Mr Prince said, ‘I think you should start fencing again. There’s a club I attend, I’d like you to consider joining me once or twice a month.’

Augus thought of his conversation with Mikkel, and hesitated.
'I don’t love it like you do.'

'But you like it, don’t you?' Mr Prince said, raising an eyebrow. ‘Until you can find something better, I think you should attend. I really must insist.’

‘You just want to flog me on the piste,’ Augus said, laughing.

Mr Prince’s smile was like a secret, and he shrugged lightly as the curtains behind him blew a wind far too cold into the room.

Augus picked up his teacup and drank the tea, trying to hide how good it made him feel to have Mr Prince’s regard. Probably, he just wanted to keep an eye on Augus, but there were lots of ways to do it, and they didn’t involve being invited to Mr Prince’s fencing club.

‘I appreciate you looking out for me, Sir,’ Augus said.

‘You should,’ Mr Prince said.

Augus smiled ruefully into his cup, and dared to think of a future that might hold more than just survival.

*

Friday morning, and Lija had the afternoon off because she was working night shifts. She slept through the morning and woke around two in the afternoon, and Augus was used to her coming down through the garden to see what he was up to. Mintie – her cat – was often at her feet, trilling happily whenever she saw Augus, tail raising like a flag when he petted her.

‘How are the usual suspects?’ Lija said.

She referred to his growing plant collection. The maidenhair fern was thriving after he’d looked up more articles on how to help them grow. He also had a finicky Bromeliad, an Anthurium, a Cutlass Aglaonema and a large Philodendron that Ash had – in a fit of inspiration – called ‘Phil the Green Guy.’

‘Alive,’ Augus said.

‘You know if you ever want to add things to the garden, you’re more then welcome. The gardener will just factor it in.’

‘Ah, thank you,’ Augus said awkwardly. It wasn’t the first time she’d offered.

He was still getting used to the fact that one of the first things she liked to do after a night shift and sleeping, was come down and visit him. At first he’d been suspicious that she didn’t trust him, though with his background, he wouldn’t blame her either. Then he was sure it was the novelty of him living there, and she’d get bored. Now he thought they might actually get along as people, and it stunned him, because he always felt unbearably warm and nervous in her presence.

‘Not yet?’ Lija said, smiling at him as she sat down at the small dining table.

‘Not…not yet,’ he said.

‘Do you like the idea of a garden? Of having one?’

‘I think so?’ Augus said, nervously bringing out two cups and spooning coffee into one for Lija, and staring at the other, because he didn’t want coffee or tea or cocoa, and had really just brought it out to
give himself something to do. He set the kettle to boil and added cold water to his own mug, hoping that didn’t look silly. ‘Did you…? Did you always want a garden?’

‘Oh no,’ Lija said, laughing. ‘I used to see my parents spending all their weekends in the garden and it seemed like such a waste! But I wanted my kids to have a garden, and I got this big house and I learned to love it through osmosis. I have an analytical mind that remembers things well, and there was a fun kind of maths in thinking about what kind of plants needed what fertiliser, at what time, and how much, and when they needed pruning, and which could handle tip pruning and which couldn’t. But in the end it still wasted my weekends and I like that we have a gardener.’

He still saw her out there sometimes, but only with certain plants. He’d learned that she was attached to roses and azaleas, and a wisteria on the other side of the house that she adored.

‘Did you always want to be a surgeon?’ Augus said.

‘I don’t know many young children that dream of cutting into people,’ Lija said, smiling. ‘Don’t tell Efnisien that.

‘I don’t even think I wanted to be a doctor. I don’t really remember. I looked into astrophysics as a degree and remember feeling overwhelmed! But I think I would have liked it. I have that kind of personality. I like a lot of jobs if I apply myself to it and learn how to do it well. That brings me more joy than the thing itself. Even surgery…I do it well, very well, and while I always have more to learn, for me the satisfaction is in the pure competence it requires.’

‘And it’s the most brutal kind of healing,’ Augus added, and Lija’s grin was so warm that he felt special and precious, and stood there at odds with his entire understanding of what life was supposed to be.

After a while the kettle clicked off, beeping at him, and he turned and poured the water automatically, adding milk afterwards. His fingers felt clumsy, he watched everything he did closely. He could deftly make a coffee without thinking about it, but he’d spilled half a jar of instant in front of Lija, and that was only the beginnings of how he could fumble around her.

Eventually, he joined her at the table, pushing the coffee towards her and holding his mug of water in his hands. He always felt a bit guilty giving her instant coffee when she had a fancy coffeemaker and everything. But she seemed to like it.

‘I wonder if it will ever be easy for you,’ Lija said, sipping her coffee straight away. She had the same skill Mr Prince had, evidently. ‘I make you uncomfortable.’

‘No,’ Augus said quickly. ‘You don’t.’

*Please don’t stop visiting me.*

‘I don’t mean in a bad way,’ Lija said, looking at the coffee. ‘It’s just very obvious that you’re not used to adult figures being kind to you. Sometimes I think you’d be more comfortable if I was mean, or neglectful, or passed you over.’

Augus’ chest was tight.

‘Okay, *this* part makes me uncomfortable,’ he said, and then laughed at the same time she did.

‘This part would,’ she said. ‘But I mean the rest of the time. I wish I could make it better. I pretend sometimes that I found you when you were a child. But if I did that, you’d never have met Ash. I’m
not one of those people to say that life has a plan, because life is a cruel mistress and we are all under her thumb, and karma is a fanciful dream. I just wish I could have made it better somehow. That’s my own fanciful dream.’

‘You make it better now,’ Augus said, turning the mug in his fingers. ‘You didn’t have to. You still don’t have to.’

‘I’m a selfish soul,’ Lija said. ‘My life looks selfless, but it’s not. I had daughters because I knew I’d be a good mother to them, so they are beautiful, independent beings, but they are also a sign of my competence. They are lovely to spend time with, each in their own way, and so I have made friends for life. I save people’s lives, but deep down it is the rush of working against the scythe of death and doing it well that feeds me. And perhaps I make it better for you, Augus, but I don’t think of it that way. I think that I have two, young, pleasing men who are like my own sons, who are easy to spend time with, who I adore increasingly as time passes. I see you not to make your life better, but to enjoy my own.’

She drank half the coffee at once, hissing at the end from the hot water. But she still smiled at the mug.

‘And that, to me, is the sign of a life well-lived. I’m not an altruist, I just happen to like you. But liking you makes me want to help you, and of course, then I end up nostalgically thinking of all the things I could have done.’

‘I hope it doesn’t make you feel guilty or anything.’

‘It doesn’t,’ she said.

‘Are we really…?’ Augus cleared his throat. ‘Because you can’t just say something like that lightly, that we’re like sons—You can’t just—’

‘I wouldn’t,’ she said. ‘I would never say words like that lightly, and definitely not to you, Augus.’

It didn’t help with the thing that knotted up in his chest when she talked this way. He leaned back against the chair and tried to work out what to say, but he didn’t have the words. He knew even most good parents weren’t like Lija.

‘I wish you…’ Augus started, and then stopped, choking up. ‘I just wish you could be… You know, if you were my mum, or—Which I know is stupid, and impossible, but I still wish—’

‘It’s not impossible.’

‘What?’

‘It’s not impossible. You’ve been living with me and you’re not yet eighteen. At any point in your life, if you want to formalise it, even the law could recognise me as your parent, and you as my child.’

‘What?’

‘I looked into it.’

The air was very thin, Augus’ fingers clenched on the mug.

‘It’s a lot to think about,’ Lija said apologetically. ‘I was going to wait longer before bringing it up. I just wanted you to know that on my end, I’m willing? I know it’s serious, but the idea of you calling
me when you’re thirty, needing my help for something, or wanting to visit – I like that, very much. Don’t you?"

Augus couldn’t think about it at all. He nodded, his mouth open a little, before his jaws snapped shut.

‘Come on,’ she said, standing and bringing her mug over to the sink and rinsing it out. ‘I wanted to go to the nursery today. I need to get some stakes. Maruta has been going on and on about snow peas and I think she’ll enjoy growing some for herself. Do you want to come?’

Augus nodded, then forced himself to drink some water.

‘Excellent,’ she said. ‘You go and get ready, then.’

Augus nodded and stood, staring at her for long moments, wanting to hug her or bronze her or something, but in the end he just fled to his room and changed his clothes, tying his laces with trembling fingers while a fluttering, happy thing lodged deep in his chest.

*  

On Saturday evening, Gwyn visited. He looked exhausted, and Augus sat with him in the lounge in Lija’s house, massaging the top of his head and messing up his fluffy, pale hair. Gwyn sat on the floor between his legs, leaning back against the couch, and they watched a show about home renovation that neither of them really cared about. Ash was out with Kayla and Gulvi at some concert where the music mostly sounded like a single person dedicated to shredding his vocal cords as quickly as possible, while frenetic electric guitars celebrated that fact.

‘How is he?’ Augus asked.

‘Okay,’ Gwyn said.

Gwyn never talked about Efnisien, or the fact that he visited him every few weeks at a residential treatment facility that was like fancy juvenile detention with a focus on therapy and medication. Augus had to bring it up, and gently prod. At first Augus thought that Efnisien was hurting him, but later he realised that something about seeing Efnisien made Gwyn sad about his whole family in a way that being beaten by his father hadn’t.

‘Really? He’s doing okay?’

‘He’s stopped self-harming. At least, that’s what he says,’ Gwyn said. ‘He’s not as out of it as before, so the meds they’ve got him on seem better. He seems more himself? They’ve diagnosed him.’

‘You mean like, not as just a ‘shitty psychopath?’’

‘No,’ Gwyn said, his voice soft. ‘Primarily Obsessional Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder. Or Pure-O. His treating psychiatrist – you know, Dr Gary, the really tall one who looks way too friendly to handle someone like Efnisien – took me aside and talked to me about it, with Efnisien’s permission. Basically he doesn’t have the obvious compulsions as much – like the things you think of with OCD, I guess – but he’s got severe like…aggressive and violent intrusive thoughts?’ Gwyn laughed sadly. ‘In any other family he would have been diagnosed, medicated, treated and he’d be okay. He’s not even a…a real sociopath. He just thinks he is, so he plays up to it. And because they said like, avoidance is a core part of the disorder, he’s just always avoided thinking about anything hard or anything that challenges it.’

‘What did Efnisien say when you talked to him about it?’
‘Not much,’ Gwyn said. ‘Hardly anything. I don’t think he can talk about it. I mean he wants me to know, but I don’t think he wants to think about it. But from what the psych said, that sounds like maybe part of the disorder.’

‘So Crielle basically encouraged a mental illness. Do you think she has it too?’

‘No,’ Gwyn said. ‘I was talking about it with Dr Gary, and he agrees that Crielle is something else entirely.’

‘Yay for the both of you then.’

‘Yay for us,’ Gwyn said, sighing. ‘I think he’s really unhappy. He’s avoiding making friends, and he won’t participate in any group stuff.’

‘At least he’s not killing small animals.’

Gwyn was silent, and Augus knew he’d said the wrong thing. But Augus was privately glad that Efnisien wasn’t inflicting himself on other people, or taking his gleeful, carefree cruelty and assaulting anyone.

‘I think he’s happy that I visit,’ Gwyn said. ‘But I’m not allowed to bring true crime books for a little while. So Efnisien asked for some reference books.’

‘On what?’

‘Anything, he said he didn’t care. I don’t even think he wants to read them. He just wants me to bring him things. I think he wants proof that I visit.’

Augus dragged his fingers over Gwyn’s scalp, one hand followed by the other, and watched with satisfaction as Gwyn went limp against the couch, his head tipping back.

‘That’s so good, Augus,’ Gwyn said, a groan in his voice.

Augus continued to fuss over him, liking that Gwyn let him pet and stroke and caress him, and then torture him when they had private moments together. But there were times for fucking and bondage, and there were times like this, when Augus could see how Gwyn carried the weight of the world on his shoulders and wished he could bear some of it.

‘I’m so sorry,’ Augus said. ‘I’m sorry for what she did to you both.’

‘It’s fine,’ Gwyn said, sounding like it was fine in a sort of philosophical way. ‘He’s safe, and I think he knows he’s in the best place he can be. Say what you will about Penny and Euroswydd, but they did find a good place to throw their money at. It’s just… I wish I’d known. Maybe I could have helped him.’

‘While he was torturing you?’

‘Maybe,’ Gwyn said.

‘You’re too good,’ Augus said, leaning forwards and placing a kiss on the top of Gwyn’s head. ‘You know that? You’re so good.’

Gwyn leaned back until he could look up at Augus, and he smiled, and Augus thought that people talked about ‘young love’ and how it couldn’t last and how older people were fucking idiots. Augus knew it wouldn’t always be easy, but he also knew what it was to love someone, to be willing to
grow for them, evolve with them, work with them to build something better. He’d had practice with Ash, both of them creating their own family for themselves out of the broken bones of not quite understanding what they were supposed to be.

But with Gwyn, everything made sense.

* 

Gwyn’s new house was near a nature reserve, and it was modest in size, but very well made. It didn’t scream rich, but Augus knew it was one of the nicest on the street. Better yet, the windows had double glazing and the insulation was incredible, and Gwyn had laughed and said:

‘You said we needed good soundproofing so…I made sure it had good soundproofing. I lied and said I liked to produce music in my spare time and I didn’t want the neighbours to hate me.’

Augus thought Gwyn was probably lonely in his home, but he seemed happy to live on his own, as long as he could see Augus and Ash regularly. Aside from buying furniture and food, as well as some new clothing, Gwyn wasn’t doing much with the settlement from his parents. He’d invested some of it, put some into a trust, and had no idea what to do with the rest. He still worked nightfill at the store where Ash was now supervisor, and no one would guess that he didn’t have a mortgage because he’d bought his house outright, and technically could buy the store if he wanted to.

Gwyn didn’t like to think about it, and Augus thought he was embarrassed to have so much when Augus had come from so little.

‘It doesn’t work like that,’ Augus said one day. ‘I want you to be happy. I mean I want us all to be rich, but I’m just glad you won. Because fuck them.’

‘Yeah,’ Gwyn said, sighing. His bed was a queen size, and he’d specifically gotten a headboard and footboard that were sturdy and could have ropes or cuffs attached to them. Even Augus hadn’t thought that far ahead – who thinks of buying a bed on the basis of ‘must handle four-point restraints for bondage?’ – but Gwyn had. ‘Just…I don’t want to be that person, you know, who everyone hates. Because of money.’

‘And you still have no idea what you want to do, do you?’

‘None,’ Gwyn said. ‘I get books out at the library sometimes, you know, non-fiction and stuff and read through them. There’s lots of interesting things in the world but nothing pulls me really hard. I don’t think I’ll go back to wrestling.’

Instead, Gwyn had signed up at the local gym. He lifted weights, and he walked on a treadmill. He started running, but soon stopped when he’d learned that the high impact sport was too hard on his many poorly healed fractures.

He was getting better at eating. Still reluctant to see a therapist, he’d looked up articles and videos, and found blogs of people dealing with disordered eating. He had good days and bad weeks, but he’d eaten once in front of Ash now, and it was becoming normal for Augus and Gwyn to share a meal together. They still had to eat off the same plate, but Augus looked forward to that, because it had become an intimacy between them and one he’d never have found otherwise.

‘You know it’s okay if you don’t know what you want to do,’ Augus said.

‘I’d like to know though.’

‘I know, but give yourself some time. You have time, right?’
Gwyn said nothing for a few minutes, and then sighed. ‘I suppose. I’m still getting used to that. I honestly expected to kind of be dead by now. I always told myself I’d wait until I was old enough to get out of there, but deep down I was just- It’s just weird to have so many choices. I don’t like it.’

‘I know,’ Augus said. ‘But none of us can pick for you. Are you going to do that calligraphy course?’

‘The inks are expensive.’

‘You can afford them,’ Augus said, rolling over on the dark blue mattress and lying across Gwyn’s chest. ‘Have you thought any more about getting a puppy?’

‘I can’t look after a dog,’ Gwyn said. ‘I don’t know anything about them.’

‘But we looked up those breeders, remember? They’d help you. Come on, you know that Alder would sell his soul to help you. I can totally see you with a deerhound. It’ll need training, but that will get you out of the house more.’

Gwyn sighed, but his eyes were peaceful. He liked the idea of a dog, and Augus thought it would be good for him to have an animal to care for, a friend to come home to.

‘I could email Alder, I guess. He’ll probably tell me why I can’t have a dog.’

‘I bet he’ll just tell you what dogs are a good fit for you. But you love walking yourself every day so you might as well have a dog go with you. And you’re right by a nature reserve.’

‘You just want a dog,’ Gwyn said, laughing.

‘No, I want you to have a dog, so I can pet it sometimes and then disavow myself of all responsibility towards it.’

‘Do you really think I could have a dog?’

Augus rested his forearms on Gwyn’s chest, then rested his chin on his wrist, looking down at him. Gwyn’s hands came up and stroked down Augus’ back, long and slow, and Augus went from idly thinking about fucking him to being one hundred percent sure they were going to fuck in about five minutes. He could tell Gwyn knew it too.

‘Yeah. No one’s stopping you, and you can afford the vet care and all the other stuff. You’d be really good at it. Ash and I will help you. Gulvi and Kayla will help you. Alder will help you.’

Gwyn’s hands tightened on Augus’ flanks, he swallowed, and Augus realised his eyes were sheening over.

Augus shifted so that he could move up Gwyn’s body and kiss him gently, their lips brushing.

‘It’ll take a while,’ Augus said, ‘but family is helping each other out.’

‘If I get a dog…’ Gwyn said slowly, his voice rough, ‘it’s going to be really loved.’

‘Now you’re getting it,’ Augus said. ‘And that’s all a dog wants. So you’ll be fine.’

Augus grunted as Gwyn pulled him in tight, his arms like immovable bands around Augus’ back. Augus smiled anyway, because there was a power in being there for someone, in making sure they knew they were cared for.
‘Okay, okay,’ Augus said eventually, voice strained. ‘I’m dying. You’re worse than Ash. Fuck.’

Gwyn rolled them both over and kissed him, and Augus slid a leg between Gwyn’s and felt like they weren’t quite ready to live together, but one day they would be.

It was a lovely future to look forward to.

*

A fake ID got him into a shop that sold ‘adult toys,’ and from there, the very helpful assistant who knew in approximately five seconds that Augus shouldn’t be there, said she’d be happy to help Augus out with advice. A bubbly woman who was only in her first year at university, with hair as bright and large as her voice, had shown him to a wall of corporal implements and then talked about them in a way that made it obvious she had real experience.

‘It’s hard,’ she said. ‘Like I get why no one online is helping you. Everyone on Fet wants to be safe, except for the predators, and then like…but how are we supposed to learn? My partner and I, we started when we were still in school y’know? We figured it out together, but we made some mistakes.’

‘That’s familiar,’ Augus said sheepishly.

‘You’ll make a ton,’ she said with a surprising amount of enthusiasm. ‘But seriously, I know what it’s like to kind of be outside of it all and too damned stubborn to wait until you have…’ She whispered under her breath: ‘A legal ID.’

‘Normally I just buy things online, it makes everything a lot easier.’

‘That hurts my heart and soul,’ she said, then laughed. ‘Well, it’s not my store, but I like it here, so please sometimes buy a tickler or something and bring your boy here so that we don’t close down because online stores are killing us etcetera. I should be paid commission every time I say that.’

In the end, she’d given him her store discount when he purchased a whip, and her mobile phone number, and he’d hedged on texting her. But eventually he started texting her every now and then, learned her name was Bianca, and that she knew about every queer and kinky event in the city and more besides. She was extremely excitable, but he liked that, and she had a way of talking about all the different toys that made it clear she had a submissive’s experience with them, and that gave Augus an insider’s perspective when he tried to think about how Gwyn might react to different items.

Augus learned that Gwyn reacted in the most satisfying way to being spanked or paddled. He didn’t seem to find flogging or whipping or cropping humiliating, and while it was still great to see his skin flush and bruise, or hear his voice break, Augus liked the way Gwyn squirmed when he was over Augus’ thighs and the tips of his ears were red.

He’d learned that Gwyn was very sensitive to nipple clamps of any kind, and Augus went on Youtube to learn how to change the tension in the ones he’d bought. Though it still took a weeks for Gwyn to trust them again.

Gwyn had no interest in electroplay of any kind, no matter how Augus tried to sell it to him, which Augus thought was a crying shame. But he’d seemed surprisingly amenable to trying pissplay one day, which shocked Augus, who then spent a shameful amount of time wondering how to overcome his own issues with bodily fluids just to humiliate Gwyn with them.

He’d learned that Gwyn wouldn’t tell him when certain kinds of pain were too bad, because he
couldn’t often recognise it, which made sense given his upbringing. It was alarming the first time Gwyn’s entire arm stopped working for two days after Augus tried a new bondage tie and Gwyn just didn’t seem to think the numbness or pain was something he should tell Augus about. Augus had spent two days panicking that he’d done permanent damage, and Gwyn promised to do better, but afterwards Augus developed a habit of checking in and asking direct questions more often.

Gwyn was more likely to say if something hurt if Augus was literally holding his hand and saying: ‘Can you feel that? Does it hurt?’

Augus still came quickly, but he’d lost his sense of embarrassment over it. He thought about training himself to last longer, but there were dildos and vibrators and fingers and any number of other things he could use to wear Gwyn out, and it was blissful to fuck Gwyn when he was slick and open and oversensitive and his face was screwed up and his cheeks were wet because Augus had already wrung him out with toys and his voice and his hands.

It was more fun than he thought it would be, more fun than it ever seemed to be in pornography. There were times when Gwyn burst out laughing, or started making jokes, and no matter what Augus did, he couldn’t get Gwyn to be obedient and it still ended with both of them sated.

He loved the skill of dominating someone, he loved learning about it, even reading history articles on where certain kinks originated. There were times when it was very serious, very intense, and Augus would hold a shaking Gwyn afterwards and feel like he’d seen into the very heart of what it meant to be alive, to love someone. Mikkel said Augus didn’t have any hobbies, but it was hard to tell people that the tools, psychology and art of domination fascinated him. It was a hobby he loved, and it enriched more areas of life than he expected it to.

* *

The five of them – Gulvi, Kayla, Augus, Gwyn and Ash – sat together in the smaller lounge at Lija’s on a Sunday afternoon. Ash plaïted Augus’ hair, he’d gotten really good at it, and joked that he was going to become a hairdresser so he could talk to lots of different people and make them feel beautiful and confident in themselves. Augus loved the idea, because it seemed to suit him so well. Gulvi and Kayla jumped on it immediately, talking about traineeships and how great it would be, and Ash laughed.

Augus could tell he was considering it.

‘Hey, Augus,’ Kayla said, looking up from painting Gulvi’s nails. ‘Remember when you used to rag on Gwyn all the time, and talk about how great it’d be to like, get him expelled?’

‘I do remember that,’ Augus said.

‘I took you all down with me,’ Gwyn muttered.

‘You weren’t even expelled, drama queen,’ Augus said, wincing as Ash pulled his hair tightly to get the pattern he wanted. He was still gentler than half of Gulvi’s siblings. He was beginning to suspect that some of them thought of him as a tall fashion doll. Maruta had already asked to see his wardrobe, and then chosen a jacket for him to wear.

She had good taste, at least.

‘God, you can throw a punch though!’ Ash said to Gwyn. ‘I mean come on, I only pissed in his car. And keyed it. And put some manure in there. But only like a handful!’

‘I knew it!’ Gwyn shouted, sitting up. ‘I knew you did! You’re such a liar! Coach Davix didn’t
deserve that.’

‘You want to know why I did it?’ Ash said.

‘Because you could?’ Gwyn sounded annoyed enough that Augus was mildly alarmed they were about to have a falling out.

‘Because he told me I was trash,’ Ash said with an ease that surprised Augus now, given how upset he’d been at the time. They’d both wanted to report him, but couldn’t, knowing that Principal Albion wouldn’t do a thing. ‘Because he grabbed my shoulder really hard just because I joked around in class sometimes and said that it was unfair that people liked me but that it didn’t mean anything, and then said that no one would ever give a shit about me, and that he could do anything he wanted to me, and I couldn’t do dick. He joked that he could rape me, if he wanted to, and I couldn’t do dick. I don’t think he really wanted to rape me, but he meant the rest of it. So I showed him what I could do.’

Gwyn was so still, Augus reached out and rubbed his thigh automatically.

‘Oh,’ Gwyn said.

‘When you took his side, I lost it,’ Ash said. ‘I thought you felt the same way, I guess?’

‘Oh.’

‘And now I never have to see him again and it’s so good. What an absolute dickhead. I was good at sports too, but you’d never know it. He marked me down all the time just for having fun.’

‘Did you know?’ Gwyn said to Augus.

‘Yeah, of course. Why do you think we were both so angry at you in the first place?’

‘Ah, nostalgia,’ Gulvi said, smiling at them.

‘I mean it is,’ Kayla said. ‘But sharing is caring.’

‘I mean the blackmail plan would’ve worked,’ Ash said. ‘Gwyn’s family just turned out to be the worst.’

‘The blackmail part did work at first,’ Augus muttered. ‘I got a blowjob out of it.’

He’d thought it would be worth the embarrassment to mortify Gwyn, but when he looked over – Ash making a ‘tch’ sound at Augus’ head moving – Gwyn just smiled.

‘God,’ Gwyn said, leaning back in the chair and looking at Augus with a lazy confidence that sent a thrill down Augus’ spine. ‘You were such a virgin.’

‘Oh my god!’ Gulvi cried. ‘You can’t just say that! In my mother’s house! But how could you tell? Please tell me specifically the ways in which Augus behaved like a virgin.’

‘This is weird,’ Ash said under his breath.

‘I mean it is,’ Kayla said. ‘But sharing is caring.’

‘I just think,’ Gwyn said, ‘if you’re going to blackmail someone to keep your secrets with sex, maybe don’t act so surprised when they go along with it because getting laid with a pretty Prefect is nice.’

Gulvi shrieked in a combination of satisfaction and excitement. Kayla nodded like that was perfectly
reasonable. Ash’s fingers had drastically slowed down in Augus’ hair, like he couldn’t concentrate. Augus just stared at Gwyn.

“You were scared,” Augus said.

“A little scared,” Gwyn admitted. His lips quirked up in that tiny smile that was self-deprecating and made Augus want to do terrible things to him. ‘But you were the best thing that had happened to my life in a while.’

“That’s sad though. I couldn’t believe how easy you were.’

‘Blowjobs are easy,’ Gwyn said, shrugging. ‘I don’t know why everyone acts like they’re such a big deal.’

‘You say that, but you struggle to eat literally anything that isn’t cock,’ Augus said.

Ash choked. Gulvi burst out laughing, and Augus followed suit a moment later. Their conversations were best when they were trying to embarrass someone, and if it wasn’t Gwyn, it might as well be Ash.

The conversation shifted when Gulvi asked Kayla something about the nail polish she was using, and Ash perked up and asked if Kayla could paint his hands too. Soon, they were all talking animatedly about different styles and lacquers and hand art.

Augus’ hair was finished, and Ash walked over to dig through Kayla’s box of nail polish, cooing over all the pastel tones. Augus sat further back in the chair and leaned into Gwyn, liking the smell of his aftershave – apparently that was one of the things he really missed from home, and he’d bought it almost as soon as he could – and the feel of him.

“I still can’t believe you said you’d get me out of there, and you did,” Gwyn said, his voice a soft counterpoint to the animated conversation happening on the other side of the room.

‘Is that when you knew you loved me?” Augus joked quietly.

‘Maybe,’ Gwyn said. Augus went still. ‘But I don’t remember when I knew I loved you, because it’s happened over and over again. No one told me it would be like that. I can’t remember the first time, which is probably bad, but I like that it keeps happening.’

Augus swallowed, couldn’t think of a single thing to say.

‘There’s a lot of things you do that are just like that,’ Gwyn said. ‘I hope it’s like that for a long time. Maybe that’s foolish.’

‘Is it?’ Augus said, a little breathless. ‘Can I be foolish too?’

He leaned into Gwyn hungrily, marvelling. Gwyn loved him. Gwyn had fallen in love with him over and over again. Even though Augus was rough and caustic, crude and mean, bitter and virginal and sometimes so angry at the world he felt incandescent with it. He pressed closer to Gwyn, closing his eyes, thinking that Gwyn made him softer and kinder, but it was better than that; being with Gwyn was like being able to spend his life with a tangible embodiment of hope.

Maybe he was a fool, he’d been falling in love with Gwyn over and over again for so long, he couldn’t remember the first time he’d fallen in love with him either.

He thought it would make him feel guilty, but instead it made him feel warm. Life was already good,
but he was beginning to trust that it was going to get better. It was too overwhelming to think about, so leaned his head against Gwyn’s shoulder and smiled at his friends, his brother, and thought that the world might be worth falling in love with too.

Works inspired by this one: Augus by knups

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