is it the truth (or merely a description)?

by kindofdazzled, malir0t

Summary

*Brakebills TV Listings*

**IS IT THE TRUTH (OR MERELY A DESCRIPTION)?** (NEW Holiday Segment, 9 PM)  
**Starring:** Eliot Waugh, Quentin Coldwater

Eliot Waugh, co-host of a nationally broadcast talk show, didn’t think his argument with interviewee and small town mayor Fen would lead to a weekend of professional exile. When he finds himself putting together a piece in the Midwestern holiday destination of Fillory, will he be broken down in ways all too reminiscent of his youth? Or will a partnership with his longtime producer, Quentin Coldwater, show him that vulnerability, when derived from empathy, can be a strength?

Featuring: a giant straw sheep that gets burned down repeatedly in the town square, the strategic use of killer outfits as protection against the mundane, and a series of devastatingly quiet, meaningful moments of connection that will make you believe in life and love again.

Set your DVRs.

Notes
Hello, MHHE! Kind of dazzled here. Thank you for letting me take a Lori Loughlin movie and turn it into a meditation on all things Eliot Waugh, and Also With Kissing.

A few things before we get started with the Eliot and eventually the kissing -

**AN IMPORTANT CONTENT NOTE:** It’s been a rough year for the Magicians fandom. Though no Major Archive Warnings apply, I do want to be extra gentle in noting some elements of this story in advance, especially since this is meant to be a happiness-based event. I’m happy to answer any questions you might have, and I also guarantee you that everyone is supported by someone along the way, no one dies, and once Eliot and Quentin are together they never break up and are happy with each other forever.

It may be helpful to some readers to know that there is *depression / anxiety / negative self-talk* throughout, and then, particularly near the end, a lot of *metacommentary on the sometimes painful relationship between professional and amateur creators* (The Salt Jumped Out), as well as *discussion of daddy issues*. Once again, everything is ultimately met with some kind of listening ear and with support, but, given the year we’ve had, I wanted to be very cautious with any heads-ups that I could think of. Everyone’s mileage varies!

**THANK YOUS:** To Evey Porter, for beta-ing, and for making sure there was active epiphany. To AprilReign, for the grammar notes, and for loaning me her laptop when mine stopped working on deadline day. To L, for seeing me.

To Eliot Waugh, who is made up. To Eliot Waugh, who is the realest.

**THE MOST SPECIAL OF THANK YOUS** to Maya, for the PHENOMENAL art. Every detailed and thoughtful outfit visualization, every composition that understood the themes better than I did, every Friday Update – it was all a real joy. Thank you for your teamwork throughout this creative conversation. Thank you for bringing this fic to life so spectacularly!! Everyone please luxuriate in Maya's six wonderful pieces of art within the fic, and also please do go check out all of her work on tumblr [here](#)!!

**SHEEP CREDIT:** The sheep is based on the Gävle Goat in Sweden. It is a very real thing, and gets burned down in ridiculous ways most years. Highly recommend looking into it.

**OTHER CREDITS:** The framework is from Hallmark’s *Every Christmas Has a Story*. The sheep/goat joke is from *Holiday* (1938). The title is from David Byrne’s “Here.” (But I wouldn’t be mad if you listened to Harry Styles’ “Lights Up” and "Golden" at some point while reading this.)

Anyway. Here there is something we call elucidation -

*Is it the truth (or merely a description)?*
Eliot Waugh was looking at a wall, though it didn’t feel that way.

It used to be a wall, sure. And technically, it still was. But if you fixed a projector to the opposite wall and loaded it with the right footage…well, a little bit of electricity and light, and a regular beige wall was now something more transporting. An ever-shifting window into another world. Somewhere better.

Not that the room hadn’t been adequate as it was. More than adequate – an upscale restaurant, tastefully muted color palette. Surprisingly high ceilings for New York. The kind of canvas that he and Margo could work celebratory wonders with. And they had, spending weeks finding pieces that provided richness and specificity. Mostly in the iciest of blues – a concession to the season, though not any holidays of the season. Acknowledging the chill of winter, and finding warmth in that, avoiding in particular any horseshit about the most wonderful time of the year.

Even his suit was in defiance: a blue floral pattern. The color least found in nature. Exuberance on his own terms.

The finishing touches were all in place – buffets set, bars stocked, every item in the room not a millimeter shifted from where it should be. He’d only needed to test the projector one last time.

And he needed to be alone for that.

*The most wonderful time of the year.* Not likely. But if anything could be called wonderful here, it was what Eliot had achieved with this wall.

He’d intended for it to be a focal point. A way of featuring the work they’d all be here to celebrate in just a few hours. Fifty episodes of *The Beauty of All Life* segment, completed and broadcast within Eliot and Margo’s talk show.

When Quentin had gone beyond his producing duties with an idea – “What if, once a week, we found some small thing, any real-life thing we found valuable or special or something, and featured it? Just a celebration of, I don’t know, the world?” Eliot was sure he was immediately going to say no. His inner skeptic – and, let’s be honest, his outer skeptic – demanded it.

*The world?*, he remembered thinking. *Oh, only just. You want to take on the whole goddamn fucking world, to celebrate it?*

But he heard himself say yes. And in following through on that yes, through the research and filming and editing of fifty ten-minute segments on whatever goddamn thing Quentin found worth celebrating –

Well, it had been frustrating and enlightening and a real goddamn growth experience. And though only he and Quentin could know what the real *Beauty of All Life* process was like, he’d wanted a way to convey to tonight’s guests how transporting it had been. To centralize its meaning. If they were going to celebrate the celebration, they’d better well fucking do it.

Hence the wall-that-was-not-a-wall. And now that he’d hit the power button, what a thrill to see that it worked.

There was the old woman, a chess champion, feared by all opponents. A close-up of her hand, confident in her next play. Just one part of her, larger than Eliot was. Quentin still had lunch with her once a month; sometimes Eliot would go along. They’d sit in the park and she and Eliot would beckon dogs with broken-off pieces of sandwich and all of their collective charm while Quentin
laughed. She always brought old fashion magazines to give to Eliot, whether he was there or not.

A wall of keys in an escape room. One of the rare times Quentin also made an appearance in a segment. They’d argued bitterly over which key the clues were alluding to, but they made it through with seconds to spare. They’d also argued over whether to include the argument footage or not. Margo broke the tie and Quentin won, and the footage made it in.

Eliot’s interview with restorers of early airplanes – the last segment that Quentin’s father had seen before passing away earlier that year. Eliot had kept late hours with Quentin in the edit bay to ensure it was finished in time. Ted Coldwater never got to see it broadcast, but Quentin brought the final edit to his hospital bed. Eliot would never forget Quentin’s face as he emerged from his father’s room back into the lobby.

The camera panned past a worker on a ladder, restoring nose art – the wall now looked riveted, made of metal.

The details were small, they always were. But Eliot had always been surprised at how big they ended up feeling. Quentin’s footage belonged at that scale. It had always been beyond him.

The supercut kept going. A sidewalk chalk drawing competition. They’d hooked up that evening, hands covered in chalk from attempting their own masterpieces. An art installation of a very long table – a child lost in the maze of the museum had wandered by just as the sunset was reflecting on the table through the window, and they had to interrupt their long-awaited camera set-up to reunite her with her mother. A lightning storm. The other time they’d hooked up, safe indoors after ill-advisedly filming in the rain. They hadn’t talked about it since.

A basket of peaches at a farmer’s market. Teens at a political protest. The algae left behind when the tide went out. This is what Quentin meant when he said the world.

And this wall was exactly what Eliot had intended to convey it.

There was nothing like seeing the vision you’d intended become a reality.

“So that’s what you needed this edit for.”

The tide came back in. And Quentin Coldwater was in the room.

In a grey button-down, sleeves rolled up, he wasn’t dressed for the party yet. Eliot hoped he wasn’t. Most likely he’d arrived directly from shutting down the control room after the show. Eliot would guess that Quentin was doing the same thing he was, taking in the space before anyone else showed up.

He was only a few steps into the room, looking up at the wall, hands in pockets. Some of his hair had escaped from the front of his bun, and as he kept looking, he tucked it behind his ear.

There he was. Quentin Coldwater, standing there, his work projected large in front of him. He was still just looking at it, and Eliot was looking at him, and he couldn’t tell what Quentin’s expression meant.

Eliot breathed out. “Surprised?”

“If I say not really, does it lessen my appreciation?”

Quentin’s eyes cut over to Eliot. And, yes, appreciation was the right word – even from this distance, Eliot could see appreciation in them, carrying over from the footage. Though he was still,
the movement from the screen was reflecting in his eyes. He was smiling.

Eliot smiled, too. Good. He’d wanted Quentin to like it. The effect was for everyone, but really it was for Quentin. Quentin was the one who deserved it.

Eliot’s smile sharpened. “You probably knew what this edit would be for before I even asked for it.”

Quentin nodded. “As grand gestures go, you’re kind of predictable.” There was warmth in the statement. The same piece of hair had escaped again, but he didn’t bother to tuck it back this time, focus having returned to the wall. He started walking nearer, reflections still in his eyes. “I figured it’d be something atmospheric, rather than a straightforward presentation. But I wasn’t sure exactly what.”

“You’re saying an entire projection wall isn’t a straightforward presentation?”

Quentin stepped closer to the wall, into a pixelated snowfall. The texture of the flurries fell across him. “Not really. Once the room is full of people, it’ll be probably be a talking point, a way of bringing people together, but it won’t be like a mandatory, let’s sit down and watch this thing. It’ll add to the space, but not overwhelm it.” Having walked through the snowfall, he touched the plaster. “Overstated but somehow subtle. That’s the Eliot Waugh way.”

Eliot’s ribcage tightened.

Quentin had turned around, leaning against the wall. The storm was raging, but Quentin was calm. His smile had deepened.

“Hey,” he said.

Eliot’s smile remained, but some part of him placed a foot behind his ribcage.

Quentin was looking at him like he’d been looking at the wall. Like he understood everything.

In an instant, two things happened. First, without thinking, without breathing, the rest of Eliot crawled into that space behind his ribcage and curled up to hide.

Second – and in defiance of logic, as he was now even more without thought or breath, being a shell without a soul to occupy him – Eliot’s body had somehow gotten very near Quentin’s.

Even from its distance, the thing within him could tell that as Eliot stood closer, a tension in Quentin released. Quentin hadn’t moved, but everything had shifted. Brushed by digital snowflakes, there was a revelation in his openness, a light in his eyes that went beyond projection. What had seemed calm before had nothing on this.

And there was a gravity in it. So as the hidden part of Eliot curled in tighter, made itself smaller, Eliot’s hand was on its way to tuck back that damn piece of hair, to better see Quentin’s eyes –

The thing behind his ribcage reached out its hand and held back his own.

Eliot’s gaze shifted just past Quentin’s head. He saw the storm disappear into his own shadow.

“Uh,” he said. His expression held, even if his voice didn’t. “You’ve, uh, got snow in your hair.”

He’d landed it conspiratorially, like a joke. But the only response, he could see outside his vision, was Quentin tucking back his own hair again. The quiet calm became more tentative. It was
holding open, but Eliot knew that it could shutter.

He risked looking back again, and saw something new reflected over Quentin. A forest at dawn. The camera was tilting up – away from the trees, toward a softly glowing expanse.

“Now there’s a whole sky in it,” Quentin said. Going with the joke, but there was a question in his eyes. “A lot harder to get that out.”

Eliot nodded. “Skies don’t melt.”

Quentin’s brow furrowed. “That’s…a factual statement, I guess?”

“What do you want, Q? You get a sky trapped in you, there’s no getting rid of it. It’s your burden to bear, carrying a sky around all the time. Now, snowflakes? That we could have dealt with – ”

Eliot stopped talking, because Quentin had taken his hand.

He couldn’t look away. He wanted to. His ribcage was twisting with it. But Quentin had laced their fingers together, and the calm had entered him with the contact.

“Ok,” Quentin said, quietly. “Here, hang on.”

Where would he go? He was already gone. Quentin’s skin was infused with the sun. Whatever remained of Eliot had condensed into a small spot that had devoured itself. There was nothing left.

Oh god, there was nothing left.

“Eliot?”

Quentin was still looking at him.
He willed out words. Any words. Anything. “Listen, Q, I –”

“Eliot.” Quentin was intent. His thumb brushed once across the back of Eliot’s hand.

There was nothing to do but feel it.

“We keep ending up here,” Quentin said. “Next to each other.”

The sky had become a crowded street.

“I’d like to stay that way.”

“What?” Eliot said.

“I think we should – you know. Do this for real?” A sea of people was walking through Quentin. “Or, honestly, we should at least talk about it.”

“Talk,” Eliot said. There was a roaring in his ears. “Q, I don’t think –”

“You literally talk for a living. I know you’re capable of it.”

The roaring got louder.

Eliot held his head higher, but looked down at their hands. The crowd had become a quilt, but the patchwork was only on Quentin. Eliot’s hand was just outside the projection.

So was the rest of Eliot.

“I just don’t think there’s anything I can say.”

There wasn’t anything at all. There wasn’t. Except, this feeling – this lack – it wasn’t what he wanted.

And now Quentin was painted in red. And he was closing himself off, but he was still so loud, and the roaring became a shrill blaring, and everything was overlaid with 11:00 AM –

Eliot Waugh woke up.

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The goddamn alarm clock was so fucking loud. It was immaculately designed – it had a digital face, but was shaped like an old-school analog alarm, complete with two bells on top that could ring the fucking dead back to fucking life, and then kill them again with that ringing, what the fuck. One part forward-thinking technology, one part summoning what sounded like an ancient necromantic demon every morning to bellow at him.

Margo gave it to him for Christmas last year.

The hour was blinking, he knew it was. Keeping his eyes resolutely closed, he flung out a hand toward the side table, in what he assumed was the direction of the off switch. It was like radar, right? How could he not make contact with a target declaring its location so intensely?

But the clock’s intensity was too wide-ranging, and so was his – instead of an efficient click and silence, there was a singularly horrifying clatter, a wavering blare traveling through the air, the thump of metal on the rug, and the alarm, unaltered, continuing out of reach.
He covered his eyes with his other hand, as if that could somehow block the sound.

The bellowing continued.

“*Fuck,*” he breathed.

He threw the covers back, swung his legs to the side of the bed, and covered his eyes with both hands.

He could feel the vibration traveling through the floor to his toes. But he could feel it more directly in his head, which was pounding in time with the alarm. The circumference of the headache was getting wider with each ring.

He planted his feet. Kept his eyes shut tight, but massaged his temples. Counted to ten.

Then he opened his eyes, bent down, and switched off the alarm.

“Good morning to you, too,” he muttered to the rose-gold monstrosity on the floor.

The time turned from 11:02 to 11:03.

How much had he had to drink last night? He could recall the evening, but a precise count of glasses imbibed wouldn’t line up in his mind. It was more than he’d planned – the pulsing in his head was carrying on in the absence of sound.

He hadn’t had a hangover like this in a long time.

Though he couldn’t count the ghosts of glasses past, he could still visualize the exact composition of their contents – gin, lemon, Cointreau, Kina Lillet, absinthe. His preferred form of necromancy, and one that had failed him last night, despite its best efforts.

But this was knowledge he could always maintain, even under the worst of conditions.

He wrapped himself in a silk robe and wandered into the kitchen, pouring water for himself and water for his double espresso. On a morning like this in another season, he’d consider ordering from the coffee shop on the ground floor of his building, but they’d be playing Christmas music, and exposure to that would make his headache worse.

Eliot drank the water as he watched the coffee drip from the machine. Controlled environment. Measured steps. Whatever attention he can muster. That’ll soothe the strain.

He took a cold shower, then applied leave-in conditioner. Then shaved his face with warm water. Every movement of his limbs was incremental. He was existing in slow motion.

Silk robe again. Coffee again. Water again, slowly. Eggs and toast, also slowly, and he gave himself the unheard-of luxury of leaving the dishes in the sink for later.

Diffusing his hair. Putting on sunglasses so he could open the curtains, so he could open the window to lean out and smoke a cigarette. Closing the window, slowly. Closing the curtains, more quickly than anything else he’d done. Taking off sunglasses. Brushing his teeth.

Then clothes. Lighter colors today, easier on the eyes. Embroidered lavender suit, plum-colored vest, a button down in such a pale purple as to be almost white. No tie – another luxury. Styling his hair. A bit of eyeliner.

Something resembling Eliot was now in the mirror. The infinite process was complete, at least
until those who were paid to do hair and makeup got to him.

Scarf, cashmere. Coat, wool.

The last thing he did before leaving the apartment was return the alarm to the side table.

He had his sunglasses on again before he was out of the building. And he had the driver of the car he called change the radio away from Christmas music before he was fully inside the vehicle. Now some slow, generic acoustic rock was emitting from the speakers –

He also had the driver turn the volume down.

Music barely audible and engine now in gear, the city blurred by him. If he glanced out, it’d make him dizzy. He didn’t glance out; he didn’t need to. He could sense it in a whirl around him, as if it was the thing that was moving, and not him. This was the least nauseating and most comforting thing about his morning – about every morning. New York was faster than him. It was the only thing faster than him – well, he thought, the only thing faster than me on a good day. New York worked at a pace beyond his own usually quick spirit.

His skull leaned against the headrest. New York was the opposite of a controlled environment. It was the only thing he would permit to have its own fucking way. He allowed this because it was beyond him, and they were the same. He couldn’t improve New York, and New York couldn’t improve him, and neither of them would try with each other. They would look the other way and keep going – that was the arrangement. Unspoken, of course. Because New York understood. New York understood, and neither glass nor metal nor the sensation of floating above its foundation could separate him from the knowledge of their being separately together. He was safe in the hollow core of the whirlwind; he trusted it. It was the truest feeling he’d ever known.

So his eyes stayed on his phone screen.

A text from Margo, time-stamped 11:00 AM: five red question mark emoji.

Not five regular question marks. Five red question mark emoji. She’d taken time to go into the symbol category and select it five times. No pedestrian question marks today.

A reply from Eliot, time-stamped right now: twenty-five skull emoji in a row.

A reply from Margo, near-instantaneous: well, at least you’re awake.

Eliot waited for the reappearance of the writing bubble. But those three dots never showed, and he was left with the one sentence, stagnant in its post-delivery, post-reading form. well, at least you’re awake.

New York kept going. well, at least you’re awake.

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The great thing about hosting a live evening television program was the late call times. Which meant later wake-ups, and – as in the case of last night – later nights out. The morning news crowd could never.

The bad thing about late call times was that it gave employees like Todd extra time to simmer in their daily chipperness before Eliot had to interact with them.

And given the look on Todd’s face as he emerged from the rush of people in the studio lobby, his
cup of chipperness was positively boiling over.

Todd was grinning at him. Todd was waving at him. And in that waving hand was a stack of mail.

Eliot made a sharp left toward the hallway, almost running into the tinsel-covered lobby Christmas tree. His headache pulsed out of time, but even with the jolt he managed to execute an almost-fluid turn. He pushed his sunglasses higher up on the bridge of his nose –

And saw Quentin at the far end of the lobby, leaning against the wall.

Eliot rotated back around the tree in an even more fluid turn.

His brain, he found, was suddenly wide awake. There was precedent for this. Quentin is leaning against the wall. Which means I’m late for the production meeting. Which means Margo was talking to Quentin about something he didn’t want to talk about. Which means that he left to find me to avoid her –

And within the second those conclusions were formed, Todd in all his ugly-sweater glory had caught up to Eliot.

Todd waved one smaller wave with the stack of envelopes, then clutched them to the front of his chest in a gesture of what Eliot could only assume was meant to be excitement. “Afternoon, Eliot!” he chirped. Eliot’s headache spiked again. Christ, Todd was loud. “Happy next-to-last Friday before the holidays!”

Tinsel was poking at the back of Eliot’s neck. An ornament was stabbing his side.

Todd was smiling at Eliot, as still as a person whose molecules vibrated at a puppy-like frequency could be. The envelopes looked completely devoid of kinetic energy in comparison.

Eliot exhaled. “Happy Friday, Todd.”

Todd’s smile was taking over his whole face. Even behind lenses, it hurt to look at. “Amazing party last night, Eliot. Like, just so magnificent! Those little sandwiches, and the way your suit matched the tablecloths – and the projection wall thing –”

“Todd,” Eliot began in the most indifferent tone he possessed. Todd was no great reader of tones – the perpetual cacophonous output of high-key enthusiasm kept his attention away from input, absorption or interpretation, so Eliot never wasted nuance on him. “Your feedback on last night’s sandwiches and tablecloths is obviously crucial to our functioning as a studio –”

“Are we having a secret tree meeting?” a different voice asked.

It was Quentin, leaning around the artificial pine branches.

Eliot turned toward Quentin and stage-whispered. “What’s the password?”

The corner of Quentin’s mouth turned up. He made a small show of squinting his eyes at Eliot’s face. “Sunglasses indoors? Seriously, Waugh?”

Eliot maintained a blank expression. “Insulting the Grand Chairman of the Christmas Tree Club is an unorthodox technique for entry, but we’ll allow it.”

“Who says you’re the Chairman?” Quentin asked as he stepped a couple of high, dramatic steps around the tree, as if ascending into the clubhouse. “As a newly indoctrinated member of the club,
I demand a new vote. Todd for Chairman. He’s been P.A. long enough, it’s time he took a leadership role.”

Todd looked delighted. He clutched the envelopes tighter to his chest. “I could be Chairman.”

“There, see? Todd can do it. Two against one, Eliot, them’s the rules.”

Eliot took a moment to fake-prevaricate before giving his last decree. Then he perched his sunglasses on top of his head.

“Much as it…pains me to depart my post and leave this realm,” he said, touching the edges of some plastic pine needles and crinkling his nose at their crunchy texture, “I suppose it must be done. Very well, Todd, you may have this tree.”

Quentin’s eyebrows raised at the Chairman’s magnanimousness. And Todd nodded like he genuinely admired Eliot – oh god, not that. Eliot had spent months building up the necessary boundaries, and they were probably knocked down in one go. Best to flee.

“Alright, Todd, meeting adjourned – ”

And then Eliot fucked up. Because part of fleeing apparently involved wrapping his hand around Quentin’s wrist to pivot them both out of there, and they hadn’t touched since –

Well. Since Eliot rejected him.

Eliot stepped away from the tree, but Quentin’s feet didn’t lift, and when Eliot turned back to look Quentin didn’t tuck his expression of surprise and panic away fast enough for Eliot not to see. Eliot’s stomach dropped. Fuck. There was this awful half-second where neither of them moved, and Eliot was certain they’d stand adjacent to this tree and Todd for eternity, or until the ground opened up and swallowed Eliot for his stupidity.

Here was the thing about Quentin Coldwater. When Quentin respected your wishes, he genuinely respected your wishes. If you indicated to Quentin that you didn’t want a relationship, he’d maintain the former terms of your interactions so well that you’d forget things like the fact that you rejected him. It was so easy for everything to feel the same, to the point that they’d made it through a fucking party in their honor last night.

It was easy until it felt too easy. Then it felt like a trick.

And there it was. Evidence for Eliot not to trust it – the expression that Quentin had tried to hide.

We keep ending up here, Eliot thought.

Then Quentin started walking, and Eliot looked away and started walking, fast, but his hand was still around Quentin’s wrist, holding on tighter, and he could feel Quentin’s pulse in time with their steps, and fuck Eliot was so stupid fuck fuck fuck fuck –

“Hey! Christmas Tree Club!”

They stopped as Todd looped in front of them.

“I can’t let you go without saying congratulations! You deserved that get-together.”

Eliot let go of Quentin’s wrist.

“The party?” Todd said. “You worked hard, you deserved it.”
Eliot should never have given Todd Grand Chairman.

“Thank you, Todd,” said Quentin, very, very neutrally.

The look on Todd’s face – what was it? It was too grounded to be in his repertoire –

Oh. Real admiration.

It wasn’t possible that Todd was looking at Eliot with admiration before, because this was it, directed at Quentin. Just from a single thank you.

No, not a single thank you, Eliot thought. Despite Quentin’s neutrality, he’d somehow also spoken with the same baseline warmth he always directed toward Todd. Eliot couldn’t fathom how he managed it – both in this moment and in general.

Seeing Quentin now, Eliot felt sure that Quentin wasn’t sure how he managed it. Not because of Todd – Quentin’s toleration of whom Eliot found unfathomable in its own way – but because what Quentin really wanted to send out was being rerouted back in. Eliot recognized the technique instantly. For Quentin, an explosion had happened, but the blast doors were down, and the kindness-as-defense screen was up. It was practically automatic – must have been, because Quentin looked surprised at himself. Like he wanted to be mean, but the meanness had bounced off those blast doors, and was headed back to its source. In the wrong direction.

Or, to Quentin, probably the right one. Shit.

Todd only saw the smoke screen, and was opening his mouth to keep talking to it, to keep earning more thanks. To, Eliot supposed, continue his compliments – it was going to be something about Quentin’s choice of subjects or editing ability, blah blah blah – but to Eliot, the conversation couldn’t continue. To Eliot, the screen was thin. The blast doors were goddamn visible.

Quentin might be able to trick him sometimes, but Eliot could see through a smoke screen. He’d invented the concept.

Todd got a fraction of a syllable out before Eliot interrupted him.

“Todd, coffee.” He tilted his head in the direction of the commissary.

Todd swallowed his words. He blinked. Quentin’s back was tight with tension. Todd, resetting, glanced down to the floor, past the clutched stack of mail –

Eliot didn’t wait. He reached his arm in the direction of Quentin’s back – about six inches behind it. Started maneuvering around Todd and down the hallway, his hand a phantom guide behind Quentin, who, mercifully, walked.

“Oh! Eliot!”

Eliot didn’t stop. “Todd!” – his headache pulsed again at his own volume – “Coffee!”

“Your office?” Eliot murmured to Quentin, hand still hovering behind him as if moving him forward without contact. “We do need to talk.”

“We’re late for the meeting,” Quentin said, but changed his trajectory toward the hallway where the office was, quickening his pace. “I’ll text Margo.”

He took his phone out of his pocket, starting to type as they walked. Eliot looked over. The sleeves
of Quentin’s black sweater were pushed up – work mode again. His hands were slightly illuminated by the phone screen – but his skin was just his skin. He was just Quentin. He was holding the delete button and starting over.

“I’m lying to her,” he said. “I’m saying you’re not here yet.”

“Scapegoat me.”

“Baa,” Quentin said, distractedly, as he typed a few more words.

“That’s a sheep,” Eliot said.

Quentin held the phone out and Eliot took it without brushing any fingers. He looked over the phrasing while Quentin unlocked the office door. Office now occupied and door closed, he handed it back. “Yeah, that’s plausible.” He stationed his hands in his coat pockets.

Quentin looked it over one more time – all this for a two-sentence text? One arm was tight across his stomach, the other holding the phone close to his face – the glow didn’t quite reach him. He looked up as if to say something – his eyes went to Eliot, the burning was held back. “Funny with the sheep joke, given today,” he said. His face was just his face, he was just Quentin, and Eliot was just –

Quentin hit send. He set his phone on his desk, leaned back against it.

“What?” Eliot said, having lost the thread.

The annoyance started seeping through. The blast doors were lifting. Quentin lifted his arms to either side in a sharp shrug. Just Quentin. “You tell me.”

Eliot leaned against the door. He took his sunglasses off his head. Almost tucked them into the top of his scarf, then held them instead. “Nice try.”

Annoyance was now the most prominent thing on Quentin’s face. “Nice try?”

“Holding it in,” Eliot said. “If you feel bad, feel bad at me. I deserve it. Don’t hold yourself as collateral damage.”

Quentin had pulled his sleeves down to his wrists. He was holding on to one of the ends.

“Who says I feel bad?” he said, slowly.

“You didn’t say. You were holding it in.”

“Sometimes people don’t say things,” Quentin said, staring at Eliot, “because they prefer not to talk about them.”

Eliot swallowed.

“I’m not mad at you,” Quentin said. “If that’s what you’re asking. If we want different things, we’ll work through it.”

“I’m not asking anything,” Eliot said, looking at the corner of Quentin’s desk.

“I’m aware of that. Sort of.”

“Just sort of?”
“Not all questions are…well, questions. It’s not just verbal?” Quentin paused. “Maybe we shouldn’t go out in any storms until we figure out what our boundaries are.”

Eliot focused on the texture of the doorway behind him. Sturdy. His fingernails tapped against the grain.

“Rainstorms, definitely not,” Eliot said.

“Fake snowstorms are out, too, apparently,” Quentin said.

Eliot looked up, catching Quentin’s eye without meaning to. “Can we joke about this?”

Quentin exhaled, almost a laugh. “I don’t know. We probably shouldn’t? But I don’t think we’re at the place where words like ‘collateral damage’ feel contextual, either.”

“So weather,” Eliot said. “We just avoid weather altogether –”

“What place are we at, El?”

Eliot wished Quentin’s door was one of those revolving, secret-passageway ones, so he could rotate out of here without budging.

“This is an actual question I’m asking,” Quentin said, holding onto the ends of both of his own sleeves. He wouldn’t look away.

This look of determination had been turned on many a subject. As a producer, Quentin never stopped researching until he felt he’d obtained the core of the story. Eliot didn’t know what it was here, but he more than owed Quentin some kind of data.

Quentin’s gaze hadn’t wavered. Eliot allowed himself a couple of slow blinks to see the blank backs of his eyelids instead, then took a breath. He kept his eyes on the desk corner, on the walls, on the ceiling.

“We do good work. We’ve accomplished a lot professionally, with Margo and with The Beauty of All Life on the show. We’ve always had good work chemistry. We have good chemistry – we have a good rapport, and we’ve worked closely together for a while, and wires can get crossed. And when wires get crossed – I mean, Q, that’s what my wires do.”

“Yeah,” Quentin said. “You do like your electrical current.”

“I do.”

“So what I’m hearing from both of us is indeed avoiding weather.”

“No lightning storms. Metaphorically, we stay indoors.”

“Does that affect us professionally? We spend a lot of time on projects every week.”

Eliot gave the question some weight in his mind before answering. As the conversation kept going, he was finding it easier to consider, easier to answer. “I don’t see that it has to.”

“I’d like for it not to. Like you said, we do good work.”

“We do.”

“Ok,” Quentin said. “We proceed as normal, then. Except for a little more caution.” Eliot heard
him take his phone off the desk and put it back in his pocket.

He internally sighed in relief. They’d made it through. He unfolded his sunglasses and put them back on the top of his head. “Checking forecasts. Deal – ”

Quentin had gone missing again. He’d shifted back into neutrality a while ago. In his effort to show up, Eliot hadn’t seen it. But seeing Quentin now – it was like looking out the window to find it was nighttime.

Quentin was unlooping the office key from his keyring. He set it on the desk. “I’ll give you a two minute head start, then you meet up with us, yeah?” He was on his way to the door. Eliot stepped aside, opening it.

Quentin crossed the threshold.

“Hey,” Eliot said.

Fingers on the doorframe, Quentin looked back. Some of his energy – some of his Quentin-ness had returned. He waited for Eliot to speak.

“It has nothing to do with you.”

Eliot felt a single lightning bolt pass between them. He kept going.

“You – you should know. Has anyone ever told you? You’re a catch, you know that?”

“Eliot – ”

“I just don’t think you realize. Whoever you’re with will really be in for something goddamn good. I’m sorry it’s not me. You’ve been kind when you don’t have to be. Nobody would have had a conversation like this. I’d hope that everyone would be as kind to you, or that you could be as kind to yourself.”

Quentin was – it was odd. There was more of Quentin and less of Quentin standing in front of him at the same time. Eliot didn’t know what to do. Should he say more? Should he say less? Should he – there was ozone in the air, crackling –

Quentin’s phone buzzed.

“Why is Margo all-capsing me?” Quentin said, reading the text. “You’re the one that’s late.”

“Believe me,” Eliot said. “I’ll get the brunt of it soon.”

“Two minutes,” Quentin said, and left.

Eliot closed the door. Leaned his forehead against it. He’d almost forgotten he had a headache.

He turned around. Kept leaning against the door. The desk was still in front of him. No Quentin was in front of it.

The office was as neat and clean as it usually was. Quentin could have a twitchy disposition, but somehow a calm undercurrent – and really, all of that energy was drawn from a deep well, much of it derived from caring. He cared so fucking much. When Quentin cared about something, he took care of it, and then some. Quentin cared about his job, so his office was organized. Not according to function (or aesthetics, as Eliot’s was), but meaning – it was full of mementos from pieces he’d worked on, each placed in relation to the others.
Quentin cared about everything.

Eliot’s brain was knocking on the inside of his skull, trying to get out.

Quentin cared about the core of the story. But there was no story here. Quentin cared, and Eliot was addicted to electricity, and neither of those were news.

Quentin was just Quentin. Eliot was just Eliot.

And Eliot was –

Eliot was specificity, not meaning. He was the clothes he was wearing – their price and texture and juxtaposition. He was the chemical composition of the alcohol still cycling through his bloodstream. He was the tonics he chose to apply to himself, within and without. They were who he was. He didn’t have a core – he had a collection of methods and materials, the curation of which was both a science and an art. Whatever fit the standards of curation, he incorporated completely.

A relationship would never pass the curation process.

Quentin had set the key to the office next to the escape room key. Eliot took the former, and banished the latter from his mind.

The two minutes were up.

***

Eliot swanned the fuck into the production meeting – if he was going to be late, he was going to be the embodiment of doing it fashionably.

So Eliot made a six-course meal out of:

1.) hanging his coat on the antique brass coatrack he and Margo had selected as an accent piece for the meeting room,
2.) hanging his scarf on the very same coatrack,
3.) unbuttoning and smoothing down his suit jacket,
4.) alighting onto his ergonomic chair,
5.) gliding it closer to the luxurious wooden table he and Margo had selected as the centerpiece for the meeting room, and
6.) steepling his fingers beneath his chin, businesslike.

“Hey kids,” he said. “What’s the show today?”

Julia, Margo, and Quentin were speechless.

Julia, their production manager, looked noncommittally bemused. Her pen was poised, halted partway through some combination of a note and a doodle on top of her stack of call sheets. Quentin was a bit hunched, mostly keeping his eyes on his own pages, and very much not on Eliot.

And Margo –

Margo was smiling at Eliot without teeth. Her eyes were flashing a warning sign that read, *I’m going to murder you, and I’m going to enjoy it.*

Eliot made sure his face responded in kind: *I’m immortal, bitch.*

Margo spoke. “Well,” she said, drawing it out, “my entertainment so far today has been taking bets
on how many future shows you’re going to miss due to your overachievement in avoiding this one.”

“I’m here,” Eliot said, slow and smiling. “So…who won?”

“No one,” Julia said, having resumed the motion of her pen. “We’re all behind schedule. I’ve had to push back my check-in with the crew.”

Eliot nodded. “Apologies,” he said to Julia and Julia alone. “Let’s get to it.”

Quentin cleared his throat, then addressed the team: “Ok. The Fillory interview.”

Eliot suddenly felt like he was made of cardboard. His eyes went to Quentin. “That’s today? Fuck.”

Everyone was speechless again. Quentin looked like he was trying to figure out whether Eliot was serious. And in Eliot’s peripheral, he could see that Julia’s pen had stilled again. In his other peripheral – well, he didn’t even have to see this, he’d know in his gut, in his soul – that Margo was now siphoning all of her being into pinning down why the fuck Eliot was late, if the Fillory interview wasn’t a factor.

His Bambi had angled her chair toward his, arms folded, a hunter on the high ground. Eliot, the real deer in the woods here, made no sudden moves. He glanced over carefully –

Behind her camouflage, the glint of Margo’s doe eyes read, I am still going to murder you, the instant I’ve confirmed what my actual motive is.

Shoot your arrow, his posture said. It won’t do a thing.

“A small town,” Eliot actually said. “Conceptually? My favorite. Had I realized, I would have been here sooner.”

“Fillory’s really fascinating,” Quentin said. “Built recently as a winter destination, though it’s meant to evoke the quote unquote quintessential American holiday experience of days gone by –”

“The picture postcard stuff,” Margo said, eyes still on Eliot.

“Well, exactly,” Quentin said. “Some people like that stuff, especially this time of year. They find it a comfort – a way to literally be somewhere else for a while, to forget the hardships of their lives. Or, um, even just the mundanities of their lives.”


Julia, smiling seriously, looked up at Quentin from her drawing of a log cabin, complete with smoke billowing out of the chimney. “You sound like the back of a picture postcard, Q.”

Quentin smiled a small, serious smile in return, then pretended he was writing. “Dearest Julia,” he said. “The weather outside is frightful, but the fire is so delightful –”

“And that’s the real draw,” Margo said, finally looking at someone that wasn’t Eliot. “Fucking arson. The profane all up in that sacred.”

“We’re not going to sensationalize that,” Julia said.

Quentin nodded firmly. “We’re going to give their mayor a chance to acknowledge the arson, and redirect the narrative away from the incidents so she can reclaim the town’s original intention.”
“Are we sure she doesn’t want to sensationalize it?” Margo asked. “It’s got to be bringing them more traffic, not less. All the looky-loos counting down to the next conflagration.”

“In the pre-interview, she seemed pretty firm on her angle, and I’m inclined to believe it’s the truer one. She doesn’t want the sheep to burn down again.”

“Pardon?” Eliot said. “The –”

He knew he’d been blocking out the Fillory thing, but…the sheep? Surely he’d misheard.

_I mean_, Eliot thought, _blocking out anything to do with something like Fillory –_

What could be expected, in the face of actual priorities? He’d had a party to plan, shows to host. Remembering anything as inconsequential as –

Oh. He remembered. _Oh_, did he remember.

How could he forget the only memorable thing about Fillory?

Eliot barked out a laugh. “Sheep! There’s a sheep!”

Quentin had his I’m-not-sure-if-you’re-serious face on again.

Eliot pointed at Quentin. “Oh, wait, Q, ok – fuck, I made that sheep joke –”

“Well, technically, it’s a ram, there’s the horns and everything –” Quentin indicated their curled shape on either side of his head – “but the overall term is sheep, yeah. The animal that –”

“Baa,” Eliot supplied.

“Hmm. That one’s a goat. Better workshop it.”

Eliot lifted a middle finger. Quentin laughed.

“This is the best,” Eliot said, genuinely. “This is just the best.”

“What the fuck, El?” Margo said, looking between him and Quentin.

“Bambi, it’s so fucking weird, it’s the only reason this interview’s worth doing. They build a giant straw – what, sculpture?”

“Yeah, sculpture works,” Quentin said.

“Giant straw sculpture of a sheep, every year, put it in the middle of the town square, every year, and it keeps getting burned down –”

“Every year,” Margo said.

But she wasn’t matching his humor – she was speaking like someone who was mirroring what he was saying, waiting for him to catch up –

And step right into her snare.

Because the look in her eyes now said, _I know the reason you were late. And the reason was Quentin Coldwater._

Bambi had caught her prey. Or she thought she had.
Eliot ignored it completely. “It’s the dumbest thing I ever heard.” He took his sunglasses off his head, ran his fingers through his hair.

“Sounds very pagan,” Julia said. “Burning down a straw sheep.”

“It’s meant to be nondenominational,” Quentin said. “Its display is a general expression of togetherness and plenty – ”

Eliot laughed again. “A refreshing – but still incredibly dumb – change of pace. Who doesn’t have a Christmas tree in the town square in these kinds of square towns?”

“Pagans,” Julia said.

“Careful,” Quentin said to Eliot. “Don’t let the Christmas Tree Club get wind of your opinions, they’ll never invite you back. And it’s not supposed to get burned down,” he said to the table at large. “They’ve never ID’d who keeps starting it – ”

“Doesn’t matter,” Margo said. “Self-fulfilling prophecy, after a certain point. You burn something stupid like that down once, people have the idea in their heads.”

“What a fucking exercise in futility,” Eliot said, impressed. “Building it up to have someone burn it down again. It’s like Greek hell. The perfect metaphor for small town life.”

“See,” Quentin said. “It’s saying things like that that make me worry about this interview.”

“Don’t worry about me,” Eliot said. “I’m a professional. I won’t forget myself – ”

ELIOT WAUGH

His name was floating in front of his face, in very familiar handwriting.

“Eliot! Mail for you – ”

He stood up, colliding with Todd, who’d just held an envelope – an envelope with Eliot’s name on it, in that handwriting – out to him.

He also collided with the cup of coffee Todd was holding in his other hand.

Hot coffee seeped into the front of his jacket. Ceramic shattered on the floor. And Eliot was out of the room.

His name echoed after him. “Eliot!”

ELIOT. His footsteps were echoing, too. Or was that – was that his pulse moving that fast? The rhythm kept repeating. The pulse. His head hurt. God, he needed a cigarette.

He was out on the smoking patio – he must have gotten himself there. He was sitting on one of the red plastic chairs. New York was in front of him, grey and hazy in the distance. He was on a level with it, streets above the ground.

He looked at the buildings and breathed.

He tried to light a cigarette – his hands were shaking. He was – shivering? He was breathing; he could see it. It was cold.

He kept trying to get a spark. Click – click – his hands were fucking shaking. The tiny bits of
brightness refused to catch – and there was something on the front of his jacket, the left side, a bloom of red, a bloom of – no, a coffee stain, on the light purple of the fabric –

Still no spark. He dropped the lighter and cigarette on the table. Closed his eyes. Kept breathing.

He felt so hollow. He couldn’t get in enough breath. He was hollow, he was a chasm, he was a void, he didn’t exist, he couldn’t light the *fucking cigarette* –

“Eliot.”

He opened his eyes.

Quentin was crouching on the concrete facing him, about a foot away. His posture was calm – gentle, even – like he’d been approaching an animal in his backyard. But his breath was coming fast. Eliot could see it hitting the cold air – Quentin must have rushed after him –

Was he breathing? Eliot. He couldn’t hear himself. It was near-silent. The sound of midday traffic
was far away, muffled by the shroud of winter mist. The buildings loomed behind Quentin like ghosts.

“Eliot,” Quentin repeated. “Are you ok?”

Quentin was breathing. Eliot could see the words float up and out, into the spectral cityscape.

He wanted to kiss him. He wanted to close the distance and catch that breath, claim it for his own. He wanted resuscitation. He wanted to forget. He felt so – he wanted – something, he didn’t know –

“I’m going to wait right here,” Quentin said. “Margo’s on her way with your coat. Can you breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth for me?”


“You have nothing to apologize for,” Quentin replied. “Keep breathing.”

The patio door swung open. Margo’s heels clacked on the concrete. Bundled in her own coat, she was indeed holding Eliot’s – and the envelope.


Quentin turned to Margo. “I’m going to give you guys a minute?”

Margo nodded, her eyes on Eliot. “I’ve got him.”

Quentin stood, touched his palm to the side of Margo’s arm in support, then gave them their privacy.

Margo dropped Eliot’s coat in his lap. “You’re gonna freeze to death.”

He made no move to put it on.

“You’re not a crop to be harvested.”

She tilted the cigarette toward him again. He took it.

“Technically I am,” he said. More smoke in his lungs. He blew it out in a steadier stream. “What is
a son but the seed of the next generation?"

“Excuse me while I vomit all over the patriarchy.” Margo flung the letter onto the table.

Eliot almost smiled.

They sat without speaking, passing the cigarette back and forth, drag for drag, until it had almost entirely done its purpose. The smell of tobacco blending with the frigidly smoggy air. Heat building in increments. Eliot had limbs again. He could feel junctures at all points of his body – his joints, his tendons, his veins. He could feel the cold prickling at his skin, unable to gain true access. He was a person again.

While Margo was smoking, he rolled the sleeves of his stained jacket up, to feel the temperature contrast more clearly. Who the hell cared if it wrinkled.

When Margo passed the last pull of the cigarette over to Eliot, she cast an admonishing glance at the letter, in case it was even thinking about launching itself back at her. “We could put a hold on your mail.”

Eliot internally thanked the cigarette for its service. Exhaled. “That’s not necessary. The worst is over. This year’s outreach has done its damage.” He stubbed it out in the ashtray. “This is now only a problem for next year’s Eliot.”

“We could do next year’s Eliot a favor and put a hold on it then.”

“It’s one letter. I don’t want to draw attention to it.”

“How’s that working out for you?”

He paused only a fraction of a second in the process of freeing another cigarette from the carton. “Just grand, thanks.”

He picked up the lighter. Click – click – click – there, a flame.

“Do that again,” Margo said.

Eliot, now-burning cigarette in his mouth, turned in her direction, ready to fend off whatever quip she had coming about the number of times it had taken him for the lighter to work. She was resting her head in her hand, a glint in her eyes –

And she was holding the letter above the ashtray. Dangling it down longways from three fingers. Covering the return address with her thumb.

_Christ_, he loved her.

He positioned the lighter underneath the closest bottom corner.

_Click_. A flame.

The envelope caught.

A singed point formed at the corner that became a line, lengthening as it gained surface material, urged forward by its corresponding line of fire. Both began sweeping their way upward at a leisurely angle, leaving nothing in their wake but a few fully charred curls that dropped into the ashtray like dead insects.
Eliot and Margo sat placidly on either side of the now half-envelope, observing the progress of its unmaking as if they were roasting marshmallows at a campfire.

Eliot kept complete charge of the second cigarette, a more complete infusion of nicotine. He focused on the new concreteness of his body, sitting on a plastic chair on a concrete patio attached to a network building in New York. He focused on the diminishing letter. He could see the spindled shadows of the internal lettering – partial strokes of vowels and consonants unrevealed. The flame, glowing blue at its edge now, reached the external lettering – C/O BRAKEBILLS TELEVISION, gone. ELIOT WAUGH, melting away.

You might know where I am, but not who I am. I know who Eliot Waugh is.

And Eliot Waugh is immortal.

Margo maintained her grip until the flame touched the return address, at which point she released the final corner into its resting place in the ashtray, where Eliot witnessed Indiana burning away into unrecognizability.

He handed her the last third of the cigarette. Leaned back. Surveyed the office building windows across the way. Every one near-identical. Same dimensions, same fluorescents peeking through the haze –

“So,” Margo said. “You and Coldwater.”

He pinpointed a single window. Kept his eyes on it. There was a potted plant resting inside the sill – from this distance, it was less than half an inch in scale.

“Nothing to talk about,” he said.

“That is, conveniently, also what Coldwater said.”

“Of course he did.” Eliot wanted that cigarette back. He made no indication. “Because there’s nothing to talk about.”

“Ah, but see –” she paused, theoretically to take another drag of that precious cigarette, but really for dramatic effect. “That’s what he said. But, Eliot, he got the fuck out of there as soon as I really started pushing. And we both know actions speak louder than words, especially when it comes to Coldwater. The boy can be the most un-navigatably loquacious of books, but when you account for physical subtext, the reading experience is infinitely more streamlined.”

Eliot said nothing. Margo would start laying out her evidence in three, two – “You were with him before the meeting.”

Eliot nodded. “I was. You knew that.” She never texted Eliot after Quentin sent his. He knew she wouldn’t even before Quentin sent it, he wasn’t stupid. “But not only is there nothing going on, it’s also none of your business.”

“Oh, El,” – another dramatic-pause drag – “you’re always my business.”

Eliot ran his tongue along his teeth. Pressed his jaw upward.

The cost of friendship.

Normally he wasn’t required to say anything to Margo at all – she inherently comprehended more than he would ever have expected a single person to, and the instant shorthand they shared had
been honed beyond perfection with time. But sometimes –

The price of comprehension was *comprehension*.

He didn’t want to pay it. But he did want that cigarette. He held out his hand.

She took another pull, unblinking, *smirking* at him.

The chill was re-encroaching. He could put his coat on – he tapped a fresh cigarette out of the carton instead. Made sure he lit it in one click.

He looked right at her. Ran his tongue along his teeth in the other direction. Waited for her to continue her list –

“Do you know how many times I saw you standing across the room at the party last night, downing a new drink, looking at Quentin like he’d teleported in from another dimension?”

He’d been braced for whatever volley she had. “How many,” he said, evenly, just before sliding the cigarette between his lips.

“*Five*. One entire hand’s worth of counting. Get a new poker face, El, yours has gone threadbare –”

Eliot breathed smoke out fast, to get to his words faster. “Quentin’s production skills – which we were there to laud, by the way – are impressive. He isn’t of this world. I’m allowed to respect him without wanting to fuck him.”

“But you have.”

“I have.” He tapped ash into the tray. He never told Margo, but her knowledge was always assumed. “So? I’ve fucked a lot of people.”

“Does he know it didn’t mean anything? If anyone would have their picture next to *fervent* in the dictionary –”

“He knows.”

Margo tilted her head back and forth, small motions. Eliot would say it was in thought, but he knew she’d already reached her conclusion. “No. He doesn’t.”

She’d been ignoring her cigarette. She set it at an angle in the ashtray, let it keep smoldering.

“Bambi, it’s fine. Nothing is going to happen.”

Her arms were folded again. “How do you know?”

“Because that was what we decided –”

“Which implies that *something* to decide was on the table –”

“Only because Quentin put it there.”

“Quentin –”

“We hit a milestone. There was adrenaline, probably. He…miscalculated. We cleared it up. It’s fine. He knows.”
“No,” Margo said, firmly. “He doesn’t.”

Eliot felt a sharp snap on his fingers – a spark had flown onto his skin. “Fuck,” he said. He dropped the stub, pressed it under his shoe, while pressing his thumb against the burn.

“You talked yesterday?” Margo asked. “This morning?”

He sighed, weary. He pressed harder against the point of contact. Adjusted his ring – the metal felt freezing. “We’re not dissolving the segment. We’re not letting go of our friendship. We’re just not letting it go any farther than that.”

“Eliot, he doesn’t know.”

“Margo, I’m not – ”

As soon as he heard his voice quaver, he stopped talking. Glued his teeth together. Looked for that plant again.

Margo permitted a few seconds of silence. Then: “Put your fucking coat on.”

Eliot did. He didn’t bother about the stained jacket, the coat went right over it, surely it was dry by now. He’d get it all dry cleaned, he didn’t fucking care. He pressed his hands into his pockets, as far as they could go –

Quentin’s key was in the left pocket. He needed to give it back.

“Now,” Margo said, stressing every word. “Quentin may have miscalculated. But so have you. I thought this whole thing was background noise, but you’re fucking plugged up about it. So: this is the melody, isn’t it?”

Eliot said nothing. The wool weighed him down. There was ash beneath his foot.

“So,” Margo said.

“It’s – ”

That thing behind his ribcage pulled his words back in.

“It’s what?” Margo said.

It was –

What was it?

It was like there was nothing there. When he tried to think about it. It was like – as soon as he attempted to contemplate the question, it disappeared. You and Coldwater. The question didn’t exist. How could there be an answer if there was no question?

The key was at his fingertips – he hadn’t realized how cold his hands were until he touched it.

He needed to give it back.

“It’s…what it is,” he heard himself say.

He heard himself again: “I don’t know what it is.”
Margo exhaled, a low whistle over the faint thrum of traffic.

“It’s what I’ve got,” he said.

The traffic continued. Margo kept a few beats of silence over it before replying.

“I changed my mind,” she said. “He does know.”

Eliot glanced over, brows uplifted. “What?”

“Knows more than you, even.”

Her eyes seemed to go through him. And her words – it was like they were being received by the right station, but the signal was weak, or jammed –

“Anyway,” Margo said. “I don’t think you should do the interview.”

“Pardon?”

That part came through loud and clear – but Eliot wasn’t sure he heard it right.

“I don’t think you should do the interview,” Margo repeated.

Eliot opened his mouth to speak –

Margo held up a finger. “You’d have to attempt lying about not hating a thing you loathe, after your yearly reminder of the loathsomeness you’ve left behind. Pretending under pressure never led to anything but the truth. And you’re already – ” she clacked her painted fingernails on the red of the table – “you’re a mess today, El – and acting otherwise? That way lies a bigger mess. A goddamn scene, and a nationally broadcast one at that. Don’t be a hero about this.”

Eliot was fighting the urge to bury himself inside his coat. He kept his head above his collar, settling for pushing his own fingernails into his palms inside his pockets instead. He could feel his ring more intensely this way, an inflexible band of ice at the edge of his fist.

“I’m not missing the show,” he said.

“I’m not saying miss the show. Miss the interview. I’ll handle that solo. It’s the last segment. Of the night, of the week. We’ll do what we do best – being our fabulous selves together, publicly – for as long as we can, and then you bow out for the weekend before we get to mayor what’s-her-face.”

He unflexed his hands slightly. He could feel the burn mark scraping against fabric. Closed his hands again. “I’m not saying I’m agreeing to this, but how do we explain my absence?”

“We don’t,” Margo said. “We literally run this show. We don’t owe anyone shit.”

Eliot nodded a few times. Then, he stood up, collecting the cigarette carton and lighter as he went. Freeing his hands to the elements again, for just a moment. “I’m gonna head in.”

“I’ll give Q a heads-up that you’re skipping the interview.”

The window with the plant in it now had another occupant – someone sitting behind the desk there. “Sure.”

“Eliot.” Margo was standing now, too. She was holding her arms out.
He walked the two steps to her. She wrapped her arms around him. Her head was on his chest.

He’d been having trouble acknowledging most of his body since yesterday – parts of him had been floating independent of each other, or were absent entirely. He was a ring finger or a stab of pain in a single nerve or lungs that refused to do their work. As with the cigarettes, it took time to reconnect the circuits again, if he could locate them at all.

But when Margo held him, he was a whole Eliot. Or he was at least all available pieces of Eliot, working together. The solidity of Margo comprehended him, and he could comprehend himself in that.

He cradled the back of her head in the hand that wasn’t holding the cigarettes. “Bambi,” he said.

He didn’t have to say thank you. She knew.

Margo hummed a single tone. You’re welcome. He felt it in his ribs.

***

Eliot had three wardrobes: the main one in his apartment, but also two satellites, one at Margo’s and one at the studio. He donned a new outfit, then arranged for dry cleaning with a very apologetic Todd, whose behavior indicated he was choosing to assume that Eliot merely startled easily, and therefore Todd might (emphasis on might, knowing Todd) approach Eliot with less zeal in the future.

Eliot handed Todd every single major piece of the outfit to be sent in. The jacket was the only component with visible grime, but he wanted the entire fucking day cleaned off those clothes. It was an opportunity to close the loop with Todd, who would apologize forever in his sincerity otherwise.

However, Eliot couldn’t trust him not to fuck up the laundry order. Eliot barely even trusted himself today, though he trusted the expertise of the dry cleaning service he’d pledged himself to. However, if Todd did fuck it up – and Eliot couldn’t believe he was thinking this –

The outfit would be no loss if he did. It had absorbed whatever negativity the day had held, and Eliot wasn’t sure it would be reusable after that, symbolically speaking. Or functionally, for that matter – can anyone remove curses from fiber? His dry cleaning service was good, but no one was that good.

Besides, Eliot was already decked out in more than worthy replacement material – black and gold brocade. A force field of influence strong enough to repel curses.

Hair and makeup was almost done with him. They’d been playing Bowie in the room while getting him ready, loud in a way that tested Eliot’s headache agreeably. Each pulse that registered meant he was still, however tenuously, back in his body.

He needed that knowledge. He focused on it. While they gilded his reanimated corpse, he did the invisible work – re-cataloging the pieces he’d regained, checking the connections, reinforcing them. He wasn’t as visibly ruined as the jacket, but he’d sustained some damage. More than he’d liked, frankly.

A good outfit could only do so much to protect him, despite his confidence in it.

He needed to make sure the reconstitution followed through – which should have been easy. He’d built himself from the ground up long ago; he should be capable of completing repairs. But this
time it was a real fucking ordeal.

Too much had shifted apart.

He was better than this. He needed to locate all the gaps and seal them. To become airtight again – nothing getting in, nothing getting out.

Except what he wanted to get goddamn out.

With great effort, he could feel his aura returning. His eyes gleamed behind his eyeliner in the mirror. The Eliot he saw projected a sublimity that far surpassed his context – this average room, these mediocre lights. He dazzled despite them. He dazzled because he made himself dazzling.

He was Eliot Waugh. He was immortal, no matter what he endured. He wasn’t of this world. And once he was in the studio under stage lights –

How real he would feel in the bright unreality of it. How like an event. How very much like exactly what he intended.

And nothing – *nothing* – was like seeing the vision he’d intended become a reality.

Quentin Coldwater appeared in his mind’s eye. Unassuming. Perceptive. Reaching to touch a nonexistent snowfall –

Eliot asked for the music to be turned louder.

***

Though Eliot looked fine now, Julia checked in with him under the guise of looking over production notes.

“*We’re worried about you,*” she said while pointing to a workflow page with her pen. “*Should we be?*”

*We.*

From his place next to her on the interview couch, Eliot looked past the unpowered cameras to the control booth and the shadow of Quentin within. Head down, hair up, headset on, absorbed in pre-show equipment checks.

Quentin hadn’t followed up with Eliot after the patio – Eliot neither expected nor wanted him to. But Julia was Quentin’s confidante – whether he’d tasked her with checking in or if she’d pulled an Eliot-and-Margo and made a decision without consulting him first, the *we* was surely accurate.

Julia knew Quentin’s perspective. Eliot always interacted with her assuming that just as he and Margo never talked but could infer an intrusive amount about each other, Julia knew an intrusive amount about Quentin *because* they talked. Though a different way of oversharing, it was terrifying in its equivalency.

But its efficiency was the true terror. One would think taking time to talk would slow things down, but it seemed to be the opposite for Julia and Quentin. Yes, the talking took time, but it provided them a formidable – and formidably accurate – mutual knowledge base from which to draw. He’d seen them make the correct calls for each other faster than anyone he knew, he and Margo included.
Eliot and Margo’s shorthand was indeed beyond perfect, but Eliot could admit that shorthand had its limitations as a form. That they had chosen it with those very limitations in mind. The longhand verbosity of Julia and Quentin’s friendship rejected things like limitation. Combined with how many years she’d known Quentin and her particular powers of observation, Eliot would bet that Julia was more up to date on Quentin that Quentin was.

He didn’t need to ask her to check in on Eliot for the impulse to be true.

_We’re worried about you._

“You can tell him it’s just a hangover,” Eliot replied. “And sudden moves taken by P.A.s named Todd during said hangover.”

Julia pointed her pen further down the page. “Is it just a hangover? Or sudden moves?”

“Of course not.”

He wasn’t going to lie to her. She’d call his bluff. He’d wasted too much energy disrespecting her powers of observation on previous occasions, and knew better now.

She started underlining. “Do you want to talk about it?”

“Under no circumstances,” Eliot said, mildly, eyes on words he wasn’t reading. He could respect her powers of observation, but that didn’t mean he was required to give her more to observe. He’d just barely gotten airtight again.

“Well, whatever it is – we can provide support if you need. You only have to say the word. We’re your friends. We care about you.”

“Thank you,” he said, sincerely. He realized the _we_ included Julia. Whatever her motivations (and whether or not it was really needed), he supposed it was nice of her to go through with saying these things. “Truly, I’ll be fine. I just need to finish out the day.”

She kept her eyes on the page, but rotated her pen grip so she could touch her palm to his shoulder, a gesture that reminded him of Quentin passing Margo on the patio.

He lifted his far hand and rested it over hers, ends of the pen sticking out on either side.

As soon as they’d really settled into the contact, Julia asked another question.

“Anything else you want to talk about?”

Eliot tensed.

This one was all Julia, though she’d adopted Eliot’s technique for it – shorthand, for his benefit, just as pretending to be at work had been. Even the physical grounding was, he realized.

She planned this. She was adept at more than communicating with Quentin – she was fluent enough in Eliot’s language to sneak up on him.

He couldn’t answer the ambush. He didn’t want to – _Quentin_ wouldn’t want him to, for fuck’s sake, what was Julia thinking? Maybe she wasn’t adept after all. Quentin valued private conversations, but he hated expanding their range, especially if his own privacy was involved.

She’d already had the private conversation with Quentin, of course. The first time Eliot had seen her that day, she’d been focused on her notes (and the drawings on them). She didn’t have the same
question marks Margo did. She’d known something had happened. She knew it was no longer happening. Eliot had rejected Quentin.

If it was clear to Quentin, it was clear to Julia. So why would she –

Unless. Unless, as Margo had argued, something was still unclear to Quentin.

There was still a question.

“Is there?” Julia asked.

Eliot was tense. Less because he was being asked to talk for the millionth time in the last twenty-four hours, and more because –

He suddenly found he wanted to.

If he chose to answer, whatever he said would get back to Quentin. It suddenly felt like an opportunity – if he hadn’t been clear with Quentin before, maybe he could be clearer with Quentin by being clearer with Julia.

Then everyone could leave him alone.

But he didn’t know how to be clearer. He certainly wasn’t going to puzzle it out with Quentin directly. Julia was a safer person with whom to attempt it. She was adept at communication. She could mold a mess of thought streams into one single, accurate force – it’s what made her such a good production manager. It’s what made her such a good friend to Quentin. If Eliot fucked up, she’d know how to translate…whatever it was Eliot would say to be clearer.

So…what the fuck would he say?

He could find the words – maybe. But it would require diving into that sea of silence, that nothingness inside him. He’d just sealed the walls, and getting behind them was risky –

But with a little risk, he’d never have to take the risk again.

He’d almost survived the trash fire of the day. What was one more bag on the heap? It could galvanize him. Put him on the path to immunity, or something.

In the meantime, he had that black and gold brocade – his force field, his diving bell. He hoped it was enough.

He would take the risk.

He would try.

He lifted Julia’s hand and lowered it, to keep it safe in both of his. Leaned down as if to continue pretending to read, then leaned back, then almost spoke –

But as he dipped a toe inward, the silence felt like it would burst up from underneath his skin.

It was so much. Surely Julia could sense it through his hands. Surely Quentin could –

He glanced up to the shadow in the booth again, he couldn’t help it –
Quentin was absorbed in the control panel, oblivious.

*Quentin knows,* Eliot thought, nonsensically.

And it *was* nonsensical. *Quentin is doing his job. He doesn’t care about you right now.*

Eliot almost spoke again – then thought better of it all.

Letting go, looking down, sitting taller, holding his space.

But the silence was still *shouting.* He’d been mic’d up already – could its volume read on the displays? Quentin’s posture hadn’t shifted, in realization or alarm –

No. It was *nonsensical.* Silence didn’t work that way. Even if Eliot *spoke,* the mic wasn’t on, the red audio light over the cameras wasn’t on, the cameras themselves weren’t on – none of them would be until closer to showtime. Quentin and the crew were thorough about technical standards. *They’re doing their jobs. They don’t care about you right now.*

The fringes of the studio were bustling with employees on task, but the couch wasn’t a focal point yet. The proverbial spotlights were off. Only Julia’s attention was with him. And it truly was – she hadn’t bothered to make any of her own leading glances.

But she knew where he’d looked.

“He wanted to help you,” she said, quietly. “He’s holding back.”

“He shouldn’t be worried,” Eliot said, automatically.

“He’s your friend,” she said.

Quentin’s outline was backlit.

“He helped me breathe,” Eliot said, quietly.

Julia nodded. Pen still in hand, she found his nearest hand again and clasped it. Squeezed it once. “Sometimes breathing takes effort.”

He squeezed her hand back. He made sure he breathed right then, at least once.

Then he mentally pinched his nose and leapt in.

He felt small, crowded in with himself like that. Stuffed inside his own ribcage. But somehow, despite that, the distance between his thoughts was –

Vast.

He reached into the darkness to see what he could grasp.

He took another breath, slow and quiet, and began to gather himself to Julia.

“You already know what I said. He already told you.” Another breath. “Just because I said no doesn’t mean I don’t care.”

“I know,” Julia said.

“He’s better off without me.” Another breath. “Not – we’re friends, of course we are, he’s one of
the best friends I have. I wouldn’t give that up.” Another. “I can’t do something that would destroy it.”

“So you think that by – you think taking him up on his offer would? Destroy your friendship, I mean?” Julia asked, even more quietly.

Eliot matched her volume. “Of course it would. I’m not cut out for what he’s asking.” Another. “The effort of – I couldn’t give him what he’s looking for. Quite the opposite. I’d destroy him. It’s flattering he thinks otherwise, but –”

“You know what he’s asking? You know what he’s looking for?”

“Yes,” Eliot said. It echoed in the darkness. “And I’m – we’re friends, I care about him, but I can’t be entrusted to care like that. I’m not fucking qualified.”

“He seems to be looking for you. I’d say that’s qualification enough.”

He was floating through the void without a tether. He would have let go of Julia’s hand, but somehow he brought his other hand to hers instead. He was shaking his head.

“Julia –”

“What if you are what he’s looking for? What if you’re the qualification?”

Talking was a mistake.

“Eliot?”

He made sure to breathe.

“I’m not,” he whispered.

“How do you know?”

“I know myself,” he said. “I’m not what he’s looking for. I won’t make the effort to care. Not like that.”

“Caring is scary.”

Eliot shook his head again, once. “Not for him.”

Julia smiled sadly. She set the workflow in her lap, to place her other hand on his.

All of their hands, gathered together.


“That’s Quentin 101, everyone knows that. Quentin cares.”

She nodded. “He does. Absolutely. Quentin cares. Too much, even. In ways that hurt him.”

“I’m not going to be one of those ways, Julia.”

“You’re so sure you would be?”

“I’d try not to be. And I would fail.”
“You’ve considered trying?”

“Yes,” Eliot said, surprising himself.

There was warmth at the core of him.

He laughed, once.

He didn’t trust it.

He resurfaced.

“Have you considered a job doing interviews?” Eliot asked, affecting calm. “I have a direct line.”

“Hell no,” Julia replied. “Not enough challenge.”

Eliot squeezed her hand one more time, then removed his from hers.

He stretched his limbs, subtly. Adjusted his ring. Exhaled.

“What now?” he asked.

“Up to you,” Julia said, tilting the pen back and forth between her fingers.

Eliot’s next exhale was a tired sigh.

“Correct me if I’m wrong – “

“Julia Wicker,” Eliot said. “If you thesis-statement this, I will never speak to you again.”

She was looking at him. Really looking at him. She was biting the side of her lip.

Then she pointed the pen to his chest, over his heart.

“What does this say?” she asked.

He looked down at the brocade.

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Why the fuck not?”

He looked at Julia. He blinked, once.

“I don’t know. But it doesn’t.”

She bit the side of her lip again. Then: “You’re a piece of work, Eliot Waugh.”

He shrugged. There was nothing else he could do.

“You know why he’s doing it?” Julia said. “Risking this hurt?”

He said nothing.

“Because sometimes, Eliot, you can’t get to what’s really valuable without that risk. Those are my notes, have a good show.”
Then she stood and walked away, calm as could be.

***

He’d felt nothing.

He’d finished the show – the part he was staying for – and he’d felt nothing.

On any other night, Eliot would have been able to declare that the high of hosting vastly outranked all others. No drugs, no booze, no command he’d held elsewhere compared.

But tonight, it hadn’t outranked anything, because there’d been no high to be ranked.

Because he’d felt fucking nothing.

His highwire act with Margo had been a breeze to walk, as always. The artfulness of their language was a golden thread between them. Margo Hanson and Eliot Waugh, aerialists of wit. They classed up comfortable topics, elevated the end of the day, made their shorthand soar.

On any other night, he’d have been aware of their distance above the ground. Would have felt more alive for their fuck you to gravity.

But tonight, he’d felt fucking nothing. He’d autopiloted his walk through the sky.

The only thing he’d been aware of – the only fucking thing – was the lack of a fucking high, because he’d felt fucking nothing.

Because he wasn’t there.

He was there – he’d been physically present, he’d been on the couch – but he wasn’t there. He fucking wasn’t.

He didn’t know where he’d gotten to.

Maybe he’d found a failsafe he didn’t know existed. Maybe he’d found a fucking parachute. Got the hell out after…whatever the hell that conversation with Julia was.

Either way, some other Eliot had been flying, and it hadn’t been him.

And it turned out it made no difference.

He’d tried so hard today. Turned out it didn’t matter. He didn’t need to fucking try today; he’d tried so hard over time, it was more than enough to cover it. More than enough to cover whenever, fucking probably.

He could do it without showing up. It ran itself. He didn’t need to patch the fucking holes, he could leave and leave them the hell open and it made no difference. The thing still flew.

He didn’t need to be there.

The other Eliot – or really, other Eliots, plural – they were the ones everyone looked up to. They were the ones that mattered.

On any other night, the idea that outside the vacuum of the studio, countless faces were turned toward his – it would thrill him. Countless faces looking at countless copies of him on their screens. Countless copies of him made up of countless pixels – colorful grids that, in juxtaposition
with themselves, represented him. Electric pointillism portraits of Eliot, mass-produced, preserved in living memory. Made iconic, made iconic, made fucking iconic –

He should have felt the effects of that multiplication. Been augmented by the presence of all those other Eliots. Been the most Eliot he’d ever been, as he was every weekday evening, nine o’clock eastern.

But tonight he wasn’t fucking there.

There was no original for all those other Eliots to return to.

And it made no difference.

The portraits were no fucking different for his not being there to pose for them. In posterity – and there would be posterity, the clips of himself and Margo simply chatting were some of their most viewed – they were him. They fucking were him, and they fucking lived without him.

He could make them live without thinking. Without feeling.

Without fucking being there.

 Fuck.

No one noticed he’d gone, probably. No one gave a shit where the real Eliot went.

He shouldn’t give a shit about it either; he should feel fucking free for it. This was what he wanted. He’d fucking gotten what he’d wished for. He’d done better than he ever could have imagined. And now he could do anything.

If only he knew where he was.

No one gives a shit, he thought. Not even me.

Not true, he amended. I can think of a few people who do.

He only let himself name one of them.

Margo.

Margo gave a shit. She’d known he was gone, she’d known he was low, she’d confirmed it with one look. As she arrived from greeting their – her – guest in the green room, she merely said she’d taken care of informing Quentin that Eliot would be leaving early. What she meant was – tapping out is definitely the right choice, if you’re going to be like that already.

Eliot didn’t have the wherewithal to say that he didn’t have a choice. That being like that meant he was long since tapped out, so she might as well do the show without him completely.

It was fine that he didn’t say it. Because if he’d said it, if she’d listened, and made him leave sooner than they’d planned –

He’d been afraid that if she’d made him leave, he couldn’t come back. He’d been afraid that in trying to carry him out, she’d push him over instead – and he didn’t know if he could find himself, fallen out of frame like that.

Then there’d been the bigger fear – of her trying to find him, trying to locate him before the show started.
He’d been afraid she’d rummage around. He’d been afraid of her turning him over even one inch more in a search. Of him having miles less of a chance of recognizing himself if – *when* – he returned.

But she didn’t do anything he was afraid of.

She’d known he was gone, and she’d known what to do.

She’d kept him in the show. Kept the order of things. Let him stay as he was – or rather, as he wasn’t.

She’d danced with the other Eliots in the stratosphere, knowing they were imposters. She’d kept some version of him from falling, knowing he couldn’t fly.

She’d kept the copies safe, so the original would have somewhere to return to.

So: he’d felt one thing.

And now that he’d finished, he could –

He didn’t feel one way or the other about it.

He would go home. Then look for himself, or get some sleep, or whatever.

There was nothing else to do.

He was out of the building. He’d put his scarf on. He’d put his coat on. He’d called a car. He had no need for gloves; it wouldn’t be long.

How long *would* it be? He reached into his pocket to get his phone – the left pocket, his keys were in the other one. The phone clinked against something on the way out. He double-checked the car’s arrival time – one minute from now.

Less than a minute from being fully away.

He would get his keys out now. Have them in hand, ready long in advance to lock him away for the weekend. Then there’d really be nothing else to do until he got back. The right pocket –

Well, wait. Maybe in his hurry, he’d put them in the left. There’d been a sound of metal against metal, some small declaration of presence.

He reached into the left pocket again –

He felt something – its shape within his grasp.

It was a key. It wasn’t one of his.

It was Quentin’s.

He hadn’t given it back.

He felt –

The key in his hand. The absence of a headache. How exhausted he was. His feet on the sidewalk. The rumble of a car pulling up to him, to lift him out.
Underneath it all, he felt something else –
That point of warmth at the core of him.
The car stopped. The window rolled down.
“Sorry,” Eliot said. “I have to cancel. There’s one more thing I have to do.”
***
So he walked back in, and down the empty hallways toward the studio.
What else was he supposed to do? Quentin’s coat was in his office, probably. His messenger bag, definitely. He couldn’t go home for the weekend without those.
Eliot wouldn’t leave him locked out of his own space. Even gone, he wouldn’t let himself be that much of a dick.
Just a quick return, and then he could be gone again.
He didn’t know if Julia had talked to Quentin, or what she would have said if she did. Maybe he’d be getting to Quentin first – he hoped he was. Maybe he could override the message, cut off the situation without saying anything at all. A symbolic gesture, rather than a verbal one.
Not everything was verbal, anyway.
He crept into the studio, and the darkness beyond the stage lights. He could hear Margo’s voice amplified through the monitors above him. He stayed as close to the wall as he could.
He opened the control booth door as quietly as possible, to let himself in.
To Quentin, in profile.
His headset was still on. He was calling the show. He was lit by the light of the boards – no, not quite.
He was glowing – but, really, reverse-glowing. It wasn’t the light from the boards, it was him somehow. The intensity of his attention to his work drew the energy from the room and transformed it into fuel.
There was only one Quentin, but he held everything within himself. He had infinite capacity for absorption. He could take in the raw materials of a moment and shape it before it happened.
He was anticipating what camera to cut to next. He glowed with the energy of possibility.
Eliot felt brighter in the presence of it.
Quentin’s hair was still up. It was falling out of his bun again, getting in his face again, but he was too focused to do anything about it –
Eliot didn’t want to sweep Quentin’s hair back this time.
He wanted to take the hair tie out. Wrap it around his wrist. Let the hair fall. Run his fingers through it. Rest his hands on either side of Quentin’s head, buried in it.
He wanted to be taken in.
The door clicked shut behind him.

Everyone turned to look – there were other people in the room, the whole control crew was there –

Fuck them. It didn’t matter.

Because Quentin was looking at him, too. And –

Ah, he thought. There I am.

Eliot hadn’t been gone after all.

He’d been here.

With Quentin.

His soul had flown away to Quentin and abandoned him.

Or something like that.

That must have been what happened. Because in this moment, with Quentin looking at him, it was like he was reunited with himself. Every part of him was present in a way he was certain he’d never been before, but that so suited his standards for existence he wasn’t sure he’d be able to downgrade from it.

The point of warmth had burst through him. His cells were spinning with the heat of it. It so fully outranked any other high he’d experienced, it was almost upsetting.

He almost choked on it.

He must not have, though – actually choked on it. The board operators’ attention was back to their work. No one had run up to him, trying to dislodge his emotion or anything.

But he still had Quentin’s attention.

Quentin looked – Eliot didn’t know how to define it, or describe it.

Quentin looked.

He looked like – well, he looked like he probably could see everything Eliot was experiencing, and was failing not to show it. He was so very still – but not the calm, open stillness Eliot had witnessed from him the previous evening. More like the stillness from this morning, without the control. He was frozen like a robber under a cartoon spotlight.

Like catching Eliot red-handed in feeling meant that he was the one who should be guilty.

You know so much, Eliot thought. You know how much of me you have?

Quentin looked more exhausted than Eliot had been. Like he’d been carrying a burden for both of them.

Collateral damage. We talked about this, this was one of the only fucking things we talked about –

He wanted Quentin to be angry at him. He was angry at himself.

Could he make it right? Could he take back the burden? Quentin had held back on comforting him
before. He wished he could comfort Quentin now.

Was that weird? Comforting someone when you were the cause?

He was the wrong person for this. He was the wrong person for all of it.

He needed to end it. If he gave back the key, would Quentin give back the rest? A key for a burden?

An uneven trade, but Quentin had had the bad end of it long enough.

So Eliot held out the key.

And Quentin blinked.

He blinked again, almost as if in realization, shaken out of the stillness to –

Turn back to the monitors, to keep calling the show.

“Stand by, Camera Two,” he said.

He turned back to Eliot, quickly, to hold out his own hand, palm positioned vertically. His eyebrows were raised in question. *Hold on a minute?*

Eliot felt himself nod.

Quentin held up a finger. *One minute.*

He looked at Eliot a moment longer, then turned back again.

“Camera Two, go,” he said.

Eliot could hear an unfamiliar voice being piped into the room along with Margo’s – he likely had been hearing it, somewhere in the background of his awareness.

It was a distastefully cheerful one. Sunshine sharp, made tinny by the control room speakers.

*It’s all made up,* he thought. *All of this. This high isn’t as real as any other one.*

He only wanted this because the rest had been so disappointing to him.

He *didn’t* want it – that’s what he meant.

He shouldn’t.

“And – go to commercial,” Quentin said.

He couldn’t face him.

So when Quentin took off his headset and headed toward Eliot, he put the key in Quentin’s hand and closed it without looking. Ignored the cry in his fingers as they left Quentin’s. Ignored the pull in his body as he walked away – it was like rotating a magnet to the opposite end, a fight to reverse the polarity, but he did it anyway –

And walked out to a small fist connecting with his sternum, knocking on Eliot where it had expected the door to be.
It belonged to the mayor of Fillory.

If the surprise of a figure blocking his way hadn’t jolted him into stopping, the mayor’s sense of style – or rather, lack of sense – certainly would have more than done the job. Seeing her was like hitting a bedazzled brick wall.

She’d outfitted herself in garish red and gold, and accessorized with some truly dismaying metallic earrings. Were they...homemade? Her honey-brown hair (it was well-conditioned, he’d give her that) was braided back to – better display the dismaying earrings?

Why would she want to do that?

Based on the exuberance of her appearance and an understanding that he’d already heard a voice to match, he could guess that as soon as she started speaking, he might never be justified in complaining about Todd ever again.

And, indeed, the instant she spoke –

Well, Todd, he thought, it’s your lucky day.

“Oh! Thought I saw you in there!” she exclaimed – almost sang, with how she rhythmically paced her words. She seemed surprised at the near-collision, but had repositioned her footing without losing ground. She was still close enough that she could pat him on the collarbone a couple of times with the hand that used to be the offending fist.

Which she did.

Eliot looked down at the contact as it occurred – it seemed it was the only thing he was capable of doing, instead of, you know, walking around her. Her hand was surprisingly calloused.

He shouldn’t have been standing in the threshold of the control room, watching the hand of someone he’d never met patting a there, there into him. He should have been moving the fuck through an empty network hallway, watching it get shorter and shorter.

He redirected his gaze toward the studio doorway, a few yards ahead of him. He could still see the mayor in a quarter of his vision – she was standing so directly in front of him that even with his height advantage it would be impossible to look anywhere and not see her.

There wasn’t a view without her. So he gave in and looked, to tell her to get out of the way –

She was waiting with some of the most direct eye contact he’d ever seen.

That was impressive, given that he knew Quentin.

Quentin.

Even if Quentin had followed him – and Eliot didn’t think he had – he wouldn’t be more than a handful of feet behind him.

And there was no way he didn’t know that Eliot had stopped.

“I was just...leaving,” he managed. Tilted his head toward the studio doorway, hoping against hope the mayor knew what a hint was.

Her eyes widened knowingly, but she didn’t budge. Her lips pressed together. She was nodding.

“Right. Family emergency. Margo mentioned.”
She said *Margo* like she was referring to an old friend, instead of someone she’d met a couple hours ago.

An old friend of both of *theirs*, even. She was speaking like she and Margo and *Eliot* had known each other forever.

“I hope everything’s alright?” she continued, obviously unaware how much she was overstepping. How oversolicitous she sounded. Actual old friends of his checking in on him – that had already been too much, and now this *stranger* was doing it.

“It will be,” he replied, shortly. “But only if I – ”

He finally scrounged up enough presence of mind to send a signal to his legs to go around her – but as he stepped at a diagonal out of the doorway she repositioned her footing again, reflecting his new angle with such unthinking grace that it stopped him in his tracks. Again.

That, and the fact that she was holding out a tiny – *thing*? – toward him, dangling from a ribbon loop.

It had a small eyeless face that, despite its eyelessness, felt like it was looking at him just as directly as she was.

A little straw quadrupedal eyeless thing, with a ribbon loop hooked onto its back. It had matching bands of ribbon glued around its torso, tail, feet, face, and…*horns*?

The decorations were incongruous with its impossible plainness.

“Yeah, of course,” she said. “Would this help?”

He was practically locked in a staring contest with the eyeless thing.

“How would…*that*…help?” he said, incredulously and entirely without tact.

“A talisman. Comfort and support,” she said, as if he already understood. “An ornament for your tree.”
It gave him the fucking creeps.

“An ornament,” he repeated. “For my tree.”

The…ornament – the ornament? – was still dangling between them.

“I don’t have a tree,” he said.

But he took it. Airlifted it by its ribbon to rest its feet on his hand.

His fingers curled up around the edges of its legs.

He felt like if he displeased it, it might curse him further.

But it cursed him further anyway – his acceptance of the gift gave her permission to tell him more about it.

“He’s just like the real one,” she said. “A skeleton covered with straw. Not, oh, not a real skeleton, but – more like a boxy metal frame to create the structure and support the weight. Though there’s not much straw required to coat something so small – matters more with the larger one. For both, the ribbon, or fabric – that’s really the thing that helps hold the shape on the outside. I did weld the skeleton in exact replica, though, so, if you were to unpeel the ribbon, and pull the straw off in bits –”

That was nightmare fuel if he ever heard it, no way in hell he’d be doing that.

She was unreal. Skeletons and straw? The real one? God forbid if it was ever more real than this. She spent time on this? She thought this was worthwhile?

Nobody, not even Quentin, would be this sincere over something this ridiculous.

Who would go out of their way to look at something like this?

“The famous sheep,” Eliot said.

He must have sounded as unenthused as he felt, because the mayor’s tone increased two-fold in cheerfulness.

“No,” she said, teeth flashing in a wider smile. “A much smaller replica.”

Now – that. She’d done something actually interesting.

Her tone had increased two-fold in cheerfulness.

She was regulating her response. Doubling down on her enthusiasm, because of his lack.

She’d realized he didn’t care about this.

She wasn’t as oblivious as she looked.

He was now looking at her carefully. At just how directly she was looking at him. At just how much work it took to hold her face like that.

It was good work, but he knew a smoke screen when he saw one.

“You made it yourself?” Eliot asked.
“I did,” the mayor said. Still smiling.

With his most cynical of smiles, he smiled back.

Nothing she’d shown him was real.

Nothing was real at all.

“Hey, Fen?” said Quentin from the doorway.

A new wave of that high smashed into him.

Quentin’s voice was only a footstep or two away – he must have moved to where Eliot had just been standing. Eliot somehow hadn’t heard him get there, or even sensed his approach – but upon hearing Quentin’s voice, and its **proximity**, his entire body was singing a triumphant chorus of awareness.

The **resonance** of it – he had to internally shout over it, to quiet it down.

Externally, he hoped it looked like nothing had happened. No response to –

“Quentin!” the mayor – Fen – said, like he was another of the many genuine and cherished lifelong friends she had in the building. Which in this case made even less sense – she didn’t have the parasocial excuse she’d have with Margo or Eliot as on-camera personalities.

“Commercial’s over in a minute, Fen,” Quentin continued. Every word was a fresh sunburst – Eliot felt like he was going to hurl. “We need to get you back to the couch.”

Why was Quentin standing so close? Why did he have to stand so **close** right now – Fen left them no room to stand otherwise and have a conversation, at least without Quentin speaking awkwardly from further inside the control room, but still –

“Sorry,” Fen replied, sincere but not apologetic. “I saw Eliot through the window. Gave him his gift in person after all, thought he might need it.”

“That’s nice of you,” Quentin said. Like he meant it, always like he meant it.

**Quentin cares.**

Fen smiled at Quentin – the same way, like she meant it. Like she’d smile at everyone, probably.

**Fen cares, too.**

**Fen is also a fucking liar.**

It was possible to be both.

Fen turned to Eliot – he saw something behind her eyes, a recognition of his hidden altered state. But mostly he just saw her smile widen further. “Nice to meet you! Good luck with everything.”

He smiled back, not bothering to match hers in amplitude. **You’re on to me; I’m on to you.**

Her expression didn’t change, not by an inch. Not by a fraction of a millimeter.

That’s how he knew she understood.
He lifted his hand, and therefore the ornament, up a couple inches. “Thanks for the….”

The thing she’d made defied words.

Her expression didn’t change. She nodded at him. Waved a goodbye to Quentin and darted back around the corner.

Then it was just the two of them. Standing much too close.

Eliot held on to the ornament with both hands. He couldn’t move further yet. He couldn’t let go of –

He couldn’t look at Quentin, but just standing near him – he had to keep feeling this. To keep processing it, to keep photosynthesizing this warmth. His whole being craved it. And it felt like his whole being. He was Eliot. He was Eliot, and he was here, standing next to Quentin. He’d never felt so nourished – nor, probably, so sun-poisoned. But the overindulgence of it, the sheer absolute height of it – right now was so overwhelmingly, unsurpassingly good –

All he’d wanted was to leave, but – he couldn’t. Not under these conditions, not when something as mundane as standing and existing was suddenly this intoxicating.

This peak would have a valley like everything else. Maybe he could stay at the top for just a minute. Just a minute. Quentin would have to go back in less than a minute, Quentin had to call the show, any second Quentin would be leaving him –

“She, uh – she made one for each of us?” Quentin said, more quietly than he needed to. Softer sunbursts. From the trajectory of them, he was looking away, too – Eliot still felt every syllable. “I was given mine at the pre-interview. Margo’s going to be given hers on air.”

Eliot was smiling – a real smile.

He could imagine how horrified Margo would be. “I’d like to see that,” he said.

He chanced looking at Quentin – he was very close, he was so close. The high spiked higher. Eliot’s breath caught at the altitude, and at – Q was still looking away, but when Eliot had turned toward him, he’d started smiling, too. A half smile, but one it seemed he couldn’t help.

Even dimmed, he was still impossibly luminous.

Did Eliot say Quentin had helped him breathe?

If they stayed like this, it could last longer. Eliot could – he could stay and count Quentin’s eyelashes while he looked away. Eliot would gladly hold his breath while –

The eyelashes moved, and the eyes turned up to Eliot – he exhaled without meaning to.

They could stay like this. He could just stay.

“Yeah. Well.” Quentin’s eyes were infinite, but his tone was contained. “You, uh – you need to go.” His gaze tightened. “Right?”

Did he? When Quentin was this close, it felt like it would be easy to stay. Like the heat would shield them. Like it could be real.

He could stay and watch Margo be a phenomenal host, even when being given the world’s worst present. He could stay and watch from the control room, stay in Quentin’s orbit. And then, when
the show was over –

He could stay. And they could – do this for real.

But nothing was real.

Right?

He’d leave, and watch it back later.

“Right,” Eliot said. “Right. I need to go. Thanks, Q.”

“Anytime,” Quentin replied.

And neither of them moved.

They’d just done it. Hadn’t they? Agreed to let this go. They’d just let it go. Quentin had given him back to himself. He was going to leave. He was going to leave, only it –

Quentin was gone.

He had closed the door. Eliot was looking at an afterimage where Quentin had stood.

And he was – reeling? His oxygen was thin.

But he was still Eliot, feeling those things.

He was himself.

It hurt. Coming back to himself like this. Coming down like this. But better to have done it now, before he didn’t have a prayer. Before he’d gotten his hooks so far into Quentin that Quentin didn’t have a prayer.

They’d caught it before they were inextricable.

So. Here Eliot was. Whole again.

Whole again and leaving –

Straw crunched under his shoe.

He looked down – the ornament was almost crushed in his hands. Some straw had floated to the ground beneath it. He didn’t realize he’d been holding it so tightly – there wasn’t much give at the center.

The ribbon around the torso had come unglued at the end. Enough straw was missing that he could see some of the skeleton underneath.

He slid the compromised ornament into his coat pocket, and tried to pick up as much straw from the ground as he could. There were no trash cans in this corner – he put the small collection of loose straw in his pocket, too. He was going to be dry cleaning everything forever, and that’s just the way it was.

Anyway, he could go home now –

He stayed.
He just said he wouldn’t stay.

Make up your mind, Waugh.

He couldn’t stay in-between like this.

He couldn’t stay in –

That place within himself, that cold, dark, cramped-yet-endless interior.

That’s where he was.

He felt himself burrowing in more deeply, despite himself. In defiance of the lack of sunlight. Or in defiance of the exposure to it.

Damn him. Returned to himself – and where else would he go?

It was the only place, probably, that was really his.

His, and no one else’s.

Better that Quentin wouldn’t get close enough to see him there – if he hadn’t seen it already.

He’d almost certainly seen it. It was Quentin. Quentin had inhabited more than enough of those places of his own.

He didn’t need one more.

Eliot should go.

He should stop standing in the shadows of the studio and finally, finally go home. He should lock himself in, lay down for a while, sleep it off. The shadows of unconsciousness would be more private shadows than this –

Well. Jesus. Trading shadows for shadows? Burrowing in further? Who the fuck was he to wallow? Would he really concede the definition of home like that?

Why languish in a shadow-realm, when there were other realms he could re-inhabit? If none of them were as real as anything else, he should take back a fun one.

Wouldn’t reclaiming the spotlight be a more productive use of the evening?

It wasn’t about re-establishing the high – those would always fade. It was about ensuring he didn’t fade. He’d done enough disappearing today. He’d watched enough from the sidelines.

Stop watching and start doing, Waugh.

The show could go on without him. But it didn’t have to.

He could coax himself out. Could stop looking inward and reclaim what was actually his. What he’d built. His blood, sweat, and tears. Reacclimating his actual self to his real home, as much as actual and self and real and home had any value beyond the conceptual.

He had an opportunity now. Why let it wait through the weekend?

Better to have done it now.
So he did move – he pocketed one last stray piece of straw from the ground, then made a beeline toward the studio proper, taking off his coat as he went.

He could hear Quentin’s voice through the monitors.

“Three – ”

Fen’s eyes were wide; Margo’s were wary and full of warning. “Eliot. You’re here?”

“Two – ”

Eliot sat down and kissed her cheek. “Just got back, Bambi.” He set his folded coat on the back of the couch. Unbuttoned his jacket.

“One?”

Margo placed a hand over his. “El. Honey. Not as much as you think – ”

The red audio light turned on over the cameras. So did the green on-air light.

“ – and we’re back with Fen, the mayor of Fillory,” Margo said in her most charming voice, though in these circumstances she didn’t avoid the tart undertone. “And by we, I mean that I’m rejoined by my cohost Eliot Waugh for the second half of this interview.”

“Pleasure as always, Margo,” Eliot said –

And – he didn’t hear his voice in the monitors. He’d forgotten he was no longer mic’d up.

In the corner of his eye, the fucking audio light was glaring at him. The pinprick of it stabbed at his vision, attempting to shame him back into submission.

He sat tall and cleared his throat. He would simply have to project –

“I got it,” Fen said, and proceeded to unclip her own mic, pulling it away from her clothing and toward Eliot’s face. If it weren’t for the length of wire stretched from underneath her shirt, it might look like she was only moving another closed hand in his direction.

The lapel mic held much closer than it needed to be, Eliot spoke softly and precisely, like he was on NPR or something. “I said, for the viewers at home who couldn’t hear it, the pleasure is all mine. This was a bit of a last minute return – ”

Fen quickly brought the mic back toward her – too close, again, in her enthusiasm. “Things are ok?” she asked at a regular volume. Eliot hoped Sound was on top of their levels.

Then, just as quickly, she directed the mic back toward Eliot – who, despite having been asked similar questions ad infinitum, all day, still did not feel prepared for answering.

He didn’t have to, not right away – she directed the mic back to herself again, for an additional, and characteristically proprietary, sentence. “We’re glad you’re here.” She nodded as punctuation, then directed the mic back to Eliot.

Now he needed to say something.

“Thank you, Fen.” That was all he could think of. That’s what he said. It kind of came out with question marks.
“It resolved itself,” he added, even if it wasn’t fully true. *Speaking it into existence.* “I’m glad I made it.”

She was looking so directly at him.

Question marks. Questions. That’s what they did. Use questions to get someone else to talk.

Eliot made himself smile. “And I think you made a present to give to Margo?”

Margo turned toward Eliot, her movement as acerbic as the sound of her voice. “A present?” she inquired at a regular volume, which surely remained at a regular volume in broadcast because her own mic was clipped on at an appropriate distance. She glanced toward Fen. *Pour moi?*

Fen smiled her widest smile yet. “Yes! Margo!” – Sound needed to be on their levels yesterday, they’d better have been on them – “I mean, I was going to wait until you brought up – but I’m sure we’re going to –” Fen gave herself a breath. “Let’s cut to the chase.”

“Let’s,” Eliot said, leaning only slightly toward the mic.

Fen was continuing, mic still in front of her, other hand gone into a pocket. “I brought Margo something that represents the most famous resident of our little town. Brought one each for you and Eliot and Quentin –”

“Our producer,” Eliot reminded the camera, and therefore the audience. He wasn’t a coward. “And co-creator of *The Beauty of All Life,*” he added, “of which we just aired the fiftieth.”

He wasn’t a coward, but he didn’t look into the shadows of the booth. He looked toward Margo instead –

Who was now holding her sheep. Her face said *confounded, yet in control* – even in Eliot’s imaginings, he couldn’t have thought up a more Margo-esque expression of displeasure. He could see her concocting an insult, and waited patiently to hear what she’d settle on –

“A short chase on those little legs,” Margo supplied, deadpan.

“Well, he’s an inanimate object,” Fen said. “So – no matter the scale, his legs can’t move.”

“You don’t say. I bet if they could, that’d keep him out of trouble.”

“He’s no trouble at all – not just because he’s small. Even the bigger one, who is much, much bigger than him, he’s – he’s also no trouble. It’s people that tend to be the trouble.”

“In what way?”

Before Fen got going, Eliot added an expository question. “The bigger one – it’s a large construction you display in Fillory’s square, every winter?”

“Yes,” Fen said, moving the mic back toward herself again, having moved it toward Eliot while he was speaking. “It takes a lot of effort and care to put him together. The whole town pitches in. And every year, once we’ve done all that work…some *criminal* sets him on fire.” She blinked, then shrugged. “Or…criminals.”

“So, this year,” Margo said. “How’s it going? The sheep is still – *not on fire* so far this year?”

“He is,” Fen replied. “He’s – *not* on fire, I mean. He’s standing with all his straw on. And we intend to keep him that way. We’re watching him at all times. Hashtag Keep Ember Alive 2k19.”
Eliot’s face must have been doing something, because she moved the mic toward him.

“…Ember?” he asked.

Mic toward Fen. “The sheep.”

Mic toward Eliot. “What?”

Mic toward Fen. “That’s his name. Ember.”

Mic toward Eliot, and Fen scooted closer so as to not have to keep moving it back and forth in as quite as wide of an arc.

“I’m sorry,” Eliot said, slowly, “you named the sheep…the sheep you don’t want to get burned down – you named him…Ember.”

Mic toward Fen. “That’s his name,” she said, just as slowly. “It always has been. I’m not going to change it.”

“Consider a hashtag without it, though,” Margo said, from outside the tennis match. “Point of advice.”

Fen nodded, almost as if for the mic to pick up as well.


“Candidly, we’re wondering if being here wouldn’t have the opposite effect,” Margo said. “Calling a fire hazard a fire hazard, and a forbidden one – wouldn’t it make people more likely to get hazarding?”

Fen’s eyes narrowed, ever so slightly. She exhaled through her teeth. But she was, of course, still smiling.

“People are…people. I’ve learned that. But my town is made up of people, too, wonderful people – ”

Eliot fought not to roll his eyes.

“ – and I’m here to protect their livelihood. I’d hope by putting a face to Fillory – not just Ember’s, but mine – my…people face – ” She retrenched on the smile. “I’m a person, and I live in Fillory. I’d hope that visitors could see Fillory as an escape, and not a destination. Does that make sense?” She didn’t wait for an answer. “I want people, residents and vacationers, to know that our town is safe. That our disasters are not what define us. That we believe in community and warmth. That’s what Ember stands for. Warmth. But not, like – not warmth at melting point, or anything! Comfortable warmth.” She nodded at her own answer. “I want people to know how hard we work to represent that, and what losing our symbol does to our morale. It takes so much to build, and then to maintain, and then to rebuild – ”

As her speech built, Eliot practiced at gauging the extent of her in-the-moment effort. It was probably all-consuming, though generally undetectable.

And long-standing, certainly. How long had she been straining to push the boulder up this hill? How many times had it rolled down on her?
“And,” Fen concluded, “we’d rather Ember not get burned down.” She looked right into camera with her winningest face. “Please.”

“Why build it at all?” Eliot asked.

“What?” both Fen and Margo said.

“Why would she build it, if – ” Eliot looked from Margo to Fen. “You care about this, right? You’re putting a lot into this.” Fen tilted the mic closer to him, still nodding. “You create it, it gets destroyed, you…create it again? It gets destroyed, one hundred percent of the time. Why not give it up? The best defense is not having to play defense at all.”

“The best defense is a good offense,” Fen corrected, into the mic. “Otherwise, you’re not in the game.”

“Is the game worth playing?” Eliot asked. “If you can’t…win the championship? Is that, how’d we even get on a sports metaphor here, I don’t even – ”

“You started it,” Margo said. Her tartness had taken on a more-than-cautionary bitterness.

“We haven’t won yet,” Fen said. “To, um, to continue the metaphor, we haven’t won yet. There are no guarantees. But we have no chance of winning at all if we don’t play.”

The mic was equidistant between them.

“Why this game?” Eliot asked. “Why is this one worth it? This sheep, and – ”

He saw a flash of steel behind her eyes.


“It’s my town,” Fen said. She spoke as if grounded in the simplicity of it. “I’m entrusted with its care. I don’t take the responsibility lightly. I’d do that much for anything I care about.”

“But – why care about this, out of anything? Does something so ordinary – does somewhere so small merit – ”

“Eliot,” Margo said.

Eliot closed his mouth. He swallowed, leaned back from the mic.

“He’s right,” Fen said, posture unchanged. “Margo, he’s right. It is small. It’s ordinary. But – ”

Her smile dropped completely.

“ – I thought he’d understand the value of that.”

“Why the hell would I?” Eliot asked, quietly.

“El,” Margo said. “Knock it off – ”

“Isn’t it your job?” Fen asked. “To see the ordinary and show how it’s already extraordinary? Isn’t that what you’re entrusted with?”

“I find extraordinary things and show them,” Eliot said. “That’s different – ”
“You’re wrong,” Fen replied. “I’ve seen The Beauty of All Life. It’s the most ordinary thing I’ve ever seen – I mean that as a compliment.”

“It wasn’t my idea.”

“But you carry it out. Why do that if you don’t care?”

Eliot kept his mouth shut.

“Watching you in it – it seemed like you did.”

“This interview isn’t about me.”

“No, it’s not,” Fen said. “It’s about me and my small, ordinary town – my town is the farthest thing from ordinary, Eliot. To me, it’s extraordinary. It’s mine, and I’ll fight for it.”

He saw the steel again. He heard it in her voice.

“I don’t believe you,” he said.

“You haven’t seen it. You don’t know what it’s like.”

He scoffed at her. “Don’t I?”

Her smile had returned, triumphant. “I don’t believe you.”

“Try me,” Eliot said, with venom.


“Ok – I will.”

Eliot sort of – did a double-take at his own words. Did he say that? Was he the one that had spoken?

He spoke again. “Ok. Ok, I’ll go.”

Fen’s lips were pressed together, but the corners were up – was she trying not to laugh? She leaned right up to the mic, still too close. “Great.”

“Yes,” Eliot said, unmoving and unmoved. “Excellent.”

“On that demonic pact forged,” Margo interjected. Bitter had progressed to sour, yet she still had enough tastefulness to give a can you believe this smirk to camera. “From this little guy – ” she held the sheep near the side of her face – “and me, happy holidays, have a good goddamn weekend.”

The green light turned off.

The red light turned off.

“And we’re…clear,” said a voice that Eliot never wanted to hear again.

Margo’s bearing somehow loosened and tightened at the same time. “What the hell, Eliot! What the fiery, brimstone-choked, never-ending pits of hell.”

Eliot was still locked in with Fen. I’ll see you there, he wanted to say.
He kept that one, blessedly, to himself.

Instead he said – what was he saying, what was he doing –

Instead he said: “So…Fillory?”

“Whenver you want,” Fen replied, quite seriously, into the mic – then did her own double-take as she realized that wasn’t necessary. She reached her arms behind her to unclip the mic pack, seemingly attempting to do so with as much gravitas as she’d just used for speaking. She was mostly successful – until the mic tangled on the edge of the pack, as she hadn’t let go of it, and the wire had looped back around her. She barely managed to not get knocked back by the sudden tension.

“I’ll have my people talk to your people,” Eliot said, with enough gravitas for both of them.

“I am my people, Eliot,” Fen said, untangling and unclipping and pulling the wire out from under her shirt. She was nearly free of the whole contraption. “I’ll talk to whoever you want – ”

She turned, then, and looked expectantly just past the cameras.

And he looked, too, even though he never wanted to see Quentin again.

Quentin. Quentin. Quentin, whose eyes were alight with – frustration?

Something else.

Potential? But not, like, the good kind. More like the ability to –

He did know. He absolutely did fucking know. Eliot had been right about that. Quentin knew exactly where Eliot was hiding, and was pissed off enough now to stop acting like he didn’t.

He knew exactly where Eliot was. He could have put his hands on the pressure points, cracked him open, extracted him. He could have done it at any time. He looked like he wanted more than anything to do it now, to confront the real Eliot face to face.

But he didn’t.

So Eliot did it for him.

“I’m gonna fuck this up,” he said.

“Uh – ” Quentin cleared his throat. The lights flickered. “What?”

“Future tense?” Margo said. “Really?”

“Probably?” said Eliot, unmoored.


“Probably,” Eliot said. He could feel the blood rushing to his face.

“Jesus Christ,” Margo said. “Right now?”

“I could try?” Eliot said to Quentin. It was almost a whisper.

“Hey,” Quentin said, gently. “Hey, ok by me.”
And then his pants started buzzing.

Quentin retrieved his phone from his pocket – a bit stiltedly, in order to not accidentally answer it on the way. “It’s Fogg.”

“Fogg?” Fen asked.

“Head of network,” Eliot said without looking away from Quentin.

Quentin picked up and put the phone over his ear. “Sir?”

“At ten o’clock on a Friday night?” Margo said, as if Eliot hadn’t done something that absolutely would have led to the head of network calling their producer’s personal cell at ten o’clock on a Friday night. As if she wasn’t pissed at Eliot herself.

Quentin was pacing in front of the couch, listening.

“What does he want – well, who’s he want to talk to, I guess?” Eliot asked Quentin, as if he hadn’t done something that – etcetera, etcetera.

“Uh, sure, absolutely,” Quentin said. “Let me – let me get him.”

Quentin put the call on hold, but kept pacing, keeping his eyes on the screen – in case the hold managed to undo itself? He was biting the side of his lip.

Then he stopped and turned to Eliot.

“You specifically,” Quentin said.

Eliot’s heart stopped. “What?”

“Oh,” Quentin said. “Oh. Uh. Answering your question. He wants to talk to you. Specifically.”

“Oh,” Eliot said, feeling his pulse again. “Ok. Yeah, alright, fair.” He reached toward the phone.

“More than,” Margo said, judiciously. She was balancing her ornament on the back of her hand.

“More than,” Quentin agreed. “But, maybe not, um – maybe not here?”

He looked away from Eliot and nodded beyond the lights.

Eliot could see the crew starting to strike for the weekend. Most of them weren’t paying attention to the set, in a way that indicated they were definitely paying attention to the set.

“Ah,” Eliot said, looking back at Quentin, whose eyes were already back on Eliot. Thank god. “Yeah. Meeting room?”

He almost stood up – then didn’t.

“Actually,” he said. “Well. I think I…probably forfeited the right to privacy on this one.”

Margo looked up from the tiny Ember, eyebrow raised.

Eliot looked between her and Quentin. “When I…did something so publicly?”

Margo said nothing – Eliot having dug his hole, she was probably going to let him venture as close as he wanted to the center of the earth, then use maximum vantage to shout down at him later.
Quentin shrugged, but also held the phone out to Eliot. “Ok. Here.”

Eliot nodded, renewing his reach. “Here’s as good as anywhere else.”

He took the phone – and very much did not avoid running his fingers over Quentin’s this time.

Warmth, again. At his fingertips. Climbing up his arm.

Quentin’s eyes lit brighter.

*Oh*, Eliot thought. *I want to see that again.*

Those bright eyes flitted down to the phone screen –

“Oh,” Eliot said. “Right.” He looked down at the phone, switched it into his other hand, pressed out of the hold. “Henry. This is Eliot.”

Fen spoke up. “Should I –”

“You’re fine,” Margo said, trying to tilt her hand without letting the sheep tumble.

“Mr. Waugh,” rumbled Fogg on the other end of the line. “How soon can you get there?”

*I’m already here,* Eliot thought.

He blinked. Flexed his free hand. “Pardon, sir?”

*Fillory,* Eliot. How soon can you get there?*

“You saw the –”

“Interview? Yes. Yes, I saw it. The *internet* seems to have seen it, too, as well as most of my acquaintance. Extraordinarily unprofessional. How soon can you leave?”

His brain raced to catch up. “I…well, whenever? According to the mayor.”

“I’m flying out tomorrow,” Fen said.

“She’s flying out tomorrow,” Eliot said.

“Good,” Fogg said. “Good. See if you can get on that plane. And Quentin, too, obviously.”

“Quentin?”

Quentin paused in his pacing. One hand was wrapped around the other. One sleeve was higher than the other. His eyes were still –

*Extraordinary,* Eliot thought.

“Yes,” Fogg said. “Quentin. For *The Beauty of All Life.* In Fillory.”

Quentin was waiting.

Eliot put his hand over the phone. “You free this weekend?” he asked, quietly. “New segment, on location?”

Though Quentin was stationary, it seemed to take a second for the question to reach him.
Then he smiled a new, small smile. “Yeah.”

“It, uh –” Eliot almost forgot to uncover the mouthpiece – “wouldn’t be, without Quentin. He’s in.”

Quentin’s smile widened.

Was he smiling, too? He was, wasn’t he?

“Make the arrangements,” Fogg was saying, somewhere very far away. “Let’s get ahead of this development. People are talking about it – we need to lead that conversation. I want to have a statement ready for the instant the show’s aired on the west coast. We’ll make this an opportunity.”

Focus, Waugh. He tried to picture what someone like Fogg would be wearing for these declarations, at home on a Friday evening. Was he in pajamas? An impeccable suit? Pajamas that looked like an impeccable suit?

He almost couldn’t think of it. He almost couldn’t think of anything at all.

This was happening. This was –

“An opportunity?” Eliot asked, barely aware of what he was saying.

“To make an event. To get ratings. We could build on our audience – no time to waste. Go out there, get a story, and be back with something in time for Monday’s show.”

Eliot ran his hand through his hair. “Monday. Quick turnaround.”

“A problem?”


Quentin shook his head.

“Not a problem,” Eliot reported, looking right at Quentin. “We can do it.”

“Indeed,” said Fogg. “Keep me posted.”

Quentin’s eyes were meeting Eliot’s with more determination than Eliot had ever witnessed from them.

Which was saying something.

“And,” Fogg said. “Eliot?”

“Henry?”

“Don’t you dare do anything like this again.”

Then he hung up.

Fillory, Eliot thought, distantly.

He was going to Fillory. Tomorrow.

With Quentin.
Quentin, who was –

Looking at him like that.

And Eliot was looking back.

Well. Whatever it was that was happening – and it *was* happening – they’d work it out.

*Oh god,* because his track record with that had been *great* so far –

Anyway, no need to get ahead of things.

No need to panic.

He handed the phone back to Quentin, who was still looking at him like – *well* – and who very much did not avoid running his fingers over Eliot’s.

*Oh.*

Eliot *wasn’t* panicking.

Which was – weird? Because – twenty-four hours ago. Twenty-four hours ago, Quentin had taken Eliot’s hand with what for him was probably a reasonable amount of intention, and for Eliot had been –

Anyway. Twenty-four hours later, after Eliot had spent *all that time* barricading himself to block Quentin’s hopes, there he was, having reached through the breaks he’d made in his own wall, offering hope in return, like an *idiot* –

And Quentin, like an idiot, was choosing to reach back and accept it.

On the surface, the contact was merely an echo. Quentin’s hand on Eliot’s, like Eliot’s on Quentin’s, like Quentin’s on Eliot’s – but there was power in the repetition.

It felt like the closing of a circle. The completion of a ritual.

*You’re choosing me? I’m choosing you.*

And Eliot wasn’t panicking.

He *wasn’t panicking at all.*

He would have expected to.

*After all –*

*After all that.*

But he wasn’t.

He just was –

They just were –

It was just happening.

He was *so relieved,* he could laugh.
But then he nearly jumped out of his seat – because *Margo* started laughing.

He’d quite literally forgotten about everyone else in the room.

Margo was full-body guffawing – clutching her sides, even. The ornament lay prone on her lap.

“Bambi…?” Eliot asked.

“Margo?” Quentin asked, at the same time.

“Don’t worry about it,” she said through her peals, as she picked up the sheep. “I’m not.”

She grinned and rested her free hand on the side of Eliot’s face.

“Ok…?” Eliot said.

She pinched his cheek.

As revenge, he rumpled her hair.

As revenge for his revenge, she rumpled his with her sheep-hand.

“You’re the worst,” Eliot said, with all the fondness in the world.

Margo *tsked* at him. “Talking to *yourself* again,” she said, just as fondly.

“Oh,” Fen said, behind him. “Careful with Ember – ”

“I’ve met the person who made him,” Margo said, picking a piece of straw out of Eliot’s hair. “I can get him repaired.”

*Destroyed, one hundred percent of the time*, Eliot thought.

“Oh, well! *True,*” Fen said.

Every boulder, rolling down the hill. Rolling away without her, every time –

“Fen,” Eliot said. “If Quentin and I – ” as he turned to her, he caught Quentin smiling in a way that was going to stop his words if he paused to take it in. So he didn’t pause.

Not much.

Only a little.

He did manage to look at Fen instead. Her face was a mask of amusement.

He started over. “Fen. If we – ”

*We.*

Huh.

He stopped. Took a moment to adjust his hair, catching his breath. Tried to keep his attention on Fen, and not take it anywhere else.

Certainly not to Coldwater.
Not yet.

“Fen.”


“If we – ” he made it through that time with casual aplomb – “go to your town tomorrow to film the next *Beauty of All Life* – ”

“Yes?”

“ – does that work for you?”

The mask of amusement stayed fixed, in a way that Eliot interpreted as *I’m actually shocked to be asked.*

“They want to air it on Monday,” Eliot said, to the mask. “That’s what was passed down. But if that timeline doesn’t work for you, I’ll call back and say *fuck it* to Fogg. Frankly, that’s true for any of this. Say the word, and we’ll hear you. We’ll work it out. You have input here.”

Fen, who had so frequently been looking at Eliot like she had him all figured out, let him see a glimpse of reconsideration in progress.

“But you will go,” she said.

“If you want us to,” he replied. “I’ll be honest with you, I don’t know how it’s going to go for me, on my end. But…if you want us to, I’m willing to be open to it. Are you willing to be open with us?”

Fen looked at him a few moments more, gears turning.

“I’ve been a dick,” Eliot said.

“You have been a dick.”

“It’s fine if you say no – ”

“I said whenever.” She held out her hand. “I meant it.”

They shook on it. Her grip was just as firm as he’d expect.

“I’ll draw up the contract,” Quentin said, and Eliot looked at him with absolute, unembarrassed directness.

Quentin let it happen, like *he* was the one soaking up sunlight. “I’ll arrange for the tickets, too. Eliot.”

“Let me do that,” Eliot said. “I’ll pay for it. The network shouldn’t have to.”

There was a pause. Quentin’s face was so –

Was Quentin listening?

Words. What were words?

“I’ll pay for it,” Eliot repeated.
“Sure,” Quentin said. “Sure.”

Words? Eliot should –

“Ok,” Quentin said, conclusively. “Go get packed, though, or something. Fen and I can arrange what we need to here?”

Fen was already standing. “Sure can.”

“I can stay,” Eliot said. “I can help.”

“No offense?” Quentin said. “It’ll take you longer than it will me. I’ll probably – tilt a drawer into my bag, then call it. And my gear’s always set for travel. Strategically, it’s the right choice.”

“Oh,” Eliot said, too thrown off by…everything to be offended by anything at all.

“The sooner we complete the checklist,” Quentin said, “the sooner we get started.”

“So,” Eliot said.

So, in the name of strategy, but very reluctantly, Eliot watched Quentin and Fen go.

“I’ll call a car for you,” said Margo, standing, holding out her hands. “And get you back there.”

“I can get myself back,” Eliot said, almost remembering to be offended now.

He took her hands. She lifted him up.

“Nah,” she said. “You’ve got too many stars, right here.” She swept a hand along his brow. “Can’t see past those. You’re gonna bump into something and die.”

He kissed her forehead.

She handed him his coat, and he put it on. She draped his scarf around his neck. She passed him her sheep, which he pocketed – he had the beginnings of a flock in there.

He helped unclip and remove her mic pack. She handed it to a waiting crew member.

How long had he been hanging around? There were still, Eliot realized, so many people here –

“Besides,” drawled Margo, as she pushed him toward the studio doorway, “the inside of a vehicle has the most intimate acoustics for yelling – ”

Coincidentally, as he was pushed toward the door, the door was pushed toward him, and quite rapidly. Eliot avoided slamming into it, but collided with the perpetrator – Quentin, who’d come barreling back in.

“ – I’ll go get my coat,” Margo said, swerving around the collision completely. “Night, Q.”

“Night, Margo,” Quentin said, unsteadily. His hands were on Eliot’s arms, to help him rebalance. “God, sorry.”

“What happened to bumping into something?” Eliot called after Margo.

“Beyond my help, obviously,” she called back, as the door swung closed behind her.

“Where’s Fen?” Eliot asked Quentin.
“On her way to my office,” he replied, a little out of breath. “*Luckily, I had a key I could give her.*”

“Lucky indeed. What happened to *the sooner we complete the* – ”

“Checklist, yeah. I’ll go in a minute, it’s just – priorities.” Quentin’s face shifted. His voice quieted. “You… really?”

He was *double-checking*.

“Yeah,” Eliot said, a little breathless himself. “Yeah. *I really.* I’m a liar. Don’t listen to me.”

Quentin exhaled. Very slowly, he placed his hands on either side of Eliot’s face.

Eliot exhaled, too, and closed his eyes. He rested his hands over Quentin’s. They were warm.

He felt… safe.

This felt safe.

Then Quentin asked, ever so innocently, “A liar now, or before?”

Eliot opened his eyes, smiling. “How dare you.”

Quentin was smiling back. “What? Conflicting narratives were released from the Waugh camp.”

“But you know the real one,” Eliot said, before he even thought to.

Quentin’s face was serious. “Do I?”

It wasn’t a question.

“You know you do,” Eliot confirmed.

He brought Quentin’s hands down between them, clasped within his.

Quentin looked away for a second – or really, still at Eliot, but level with his ribcage. “Yeah.” He took a whole breath. “I think I do.” He looked back up.

“Ok,” Eliot said.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah,” Eliot said, and kissed him.

They’d kissed before, of course. Eliot was prepared for the heat of it – but he wasn’t prepared for just how much warmth there would be. His chest almost broke open with tenderness.

And as it undeniably, painfully, gloriously radiated outward, some part of him finally set off a last-ditch attempt at a panic, an evacuation alarm. Some part of him cried, *too close, too much, run away –*

But some other part of him – some small, brave portion, that quite resembled Quentin – was ready with enough strength to soothe the rest of him.

*Shh. I’m choosing this.*

*I’m choosing him.*
So somehow (and maybe it was the bravest thing he’d ever done) – Eliot welcomed the feeling. Used it as fuel. Siphoned it into whatever circuit they’d created together.

Ever so gently, ever so stalwartly, he’d echoed Quentin’s most recent gesture, and framed Quentin’s face with his hands. Shared Quentin’s breath. And Quentin had tightened the circumference of the circuit – he was on his toes, hands encircling Eliot under his coat, skimming the brocade, then finding purchase there.

When their lips parted, so much of them was still connected. Their foreheads were almost touching. Eliot could still feel Quentin’s breath.

He chased it. They kissed once more.

Then Quentin leaned on Eliot’s shoulder, wrapped all the way around his torso, almost cocooned inside his coat with him. Eliot – he was holding on for dear life. Cradling the back of Quentin’s head, stroking back hair that didn’t need to be stroked back.

They stood, just like that. Bodies unified and breathing in time.

Then Eliot leaned down a bit. “I have an exclusive,” he whispered into Quentin’s ear –
Quentin sort of—jump-squirmed. “Sorry, it tickles—”

At that, Eliot couldn’t help but breathe out a soft laugh, which involved another puff of air, which only made Quentin jump-squirm again—“Oh, god—” which only made Eliot laugh again, though he remembered to tilt his head back this time.

It was the kind of laugh that took the remaining tension with it.

When he looked down again, Quentin was smiling up at him, eyes dancing.

That Quentin could make that expression, and that it could be directed at Eliot, was—

Really something else.

Eliot collected himself instantly. Glided his hand down to fit firmly around the back of Quentin’s neck, brushing his thumb in front of Quentin’s ear.

Quentin leaned into it, eyes closed. And Eliot leaned down to try again. He kept a little farther away, directing his words almost past Quentin, instead of to him.

“I was a liar before.”

Then he turned and bit Quentin’s earlobe.

Quentin exhaled. One of his hands gripped more tightly on Eliot’s waist. The other leapt up to Eliot’s neck—thumb skimming over his adam’s apple, a couple of fingers sliding under his collar, beneath the juncture between skin and fabric.

The heat catapulted past the warmth.

“That better?” Eliot asked, under Quentin’s thumb, languid and with triumph.

Quentin’s face was buried against Eliot’s shoulder. As he spoke, Eliot could feel the muffled words resonate. “Oh, you know—” another exhale. “Not really.”

“Priorities, though,” Eliot said, alluringly, scratching his fingers lightly along the back of Quentin’s scalp, beneath the bun. He very much wanted to take that hair tie out, still.

“Mm,” Quentin said.

They stood for a few more moments, knowing they couldn’t stand much longer.

“Ok,” Eliot said, in his best Conclusive Quentin impression. He kissed the top of Quentin’s head. “First item’s off the list. Time for the rest.”

“God. Checklist,” Quentin said.

“Well. The sooner we—”

Quentin lifted his head. “Eliot? Shut the fuck up.”

Eliot laughed, and kissed him again.

***

They’d gone through the studio door together, hand in hand. They’d walked down the hallway
together, under the fluorescent lights, bumping shoulders from time to time. When they reached the
divergence in paths – Quentin to his office, and Eliot to the front lobby – Eliot spun Quentin
against the wall first, and they kissed, and kissed, and kissed again.

“I’m glad you said something,” Quentin whispered, between kisses.

“Me too,” Eliot whispered back, smiling. “I’m glad you said something, too.”

***

“Do you think it’s strange,” Eliot asked, getting into the car, “that we talk for a living, but we don’t
actually – ”

Margo didn’t look up from her phone.

Eliot buckled his seatbelt. The car pulled away.

He saw the network building shrink in the darkness, then fade around the corner.

“Hm?” Margo said, still scrolling.

Eliot watched the pixels on her screen slowly march up and away, to be replaced by other pixels. “I
said. We talk for a living. But do we ever really – ”

“No, I’m kidding, I heard you the first time.” She clicked her phone closed, leaned back against her
headrest, looked at Eliot – and her mouth curled upwards. “Fuck. You’ve got it bad, don’t you.”

Eliot bit the inside of his already-bitten bottom lip. He was still smiling. “I suppose I do.” He
couldn’t stop smiling. “Fuck.”

“Keep singing that tune, it suits you.”

He looked out the window, at the headlights gliding by. The streetlights. The neon signs, pulsing
across him. “Yeah?”

“Better than whatever it was you were humming all day.”


He covered his face with his hands. “Ugh. I…just. He’s so – ”

He fanned his fingers outward, slowly uncovering his eyes and mouth. He curled them down the
sides of his face, feeling the drag of it. He kept the heels of his hands together on his chin.

He could still feel Quentin’s hands under his, somehow.

He still felt safe.

“I like him so much,” he said, to the back of the driver’s seat.

He said it like it surprised him. Like he was telling himself something he hadn’t thought about
until just now, despite having agonized, consciously and unconsciously, for the full rotation of a
day, over the concept of feelings and Quentin Coldwater.

He said it.
I like him so much.

It felt insufficient, but true.

Bizarre to articulate.

Kind of delicious.

He rolled his head toward Margo, eyebrows raised.

He wasn’t sure what he wanted from her. Validation? Approval? Confirmation that he’d spoken correctly about himself? That hearing it sounded as good as it felt to say?

“No shit,” Margo said, with sincerity.

Eliot felt another lock break, or hinge swing open.

He nodded. He nodded again. Covered his face again. Closed his features tight, then opened them, then breathed out, feeling the air bounce against his face. Then uncovered his face. Then folded his arms. Resettled his shoulders. Fixed his eyes on the small stretch of open seat between them.

“What am I doing, Bambi,” he said, almost inaudibly.

“Something you’re not used to,” she replied, measured.

He nodded again. He kept nodding. “Yep. I’d say so.”

“God,” she said. “I want to be pissed at you.” She touched the side of his arm; held it. “I am pissed at you.”

Eliot looked at her.


“I did,” Eliot agreed. “I did do it to myself – ”

“You got yourself into it. You were all, containment, and I let you. I let you stay there. I fucking helped you sew a fucking goddamn hazmat suit – ”

“And, Bambi, I’m grateful – ”

“But – fuck, you know? I think the pressure – ” She made a sound of frustration. “I think we were wrong.” She squeezed his arm. “El, we were wrong. I shouldn’t have backed off. I should have helped you break it open.”


“Yeah,” Margo said. “That’s not our way.”

She let go of him.

He returned his eyes to hers. “Hasn’t been.”

“We do talk,” she said, sincere again, and fierce.

“Do we?”
“We try to. Then one of us –”

“‘You’re being generous. Me.’

“Today? Fucking definitely. You.” The sound of frustration. “I try to talk, and you dig your fucking heels in, and there’s no moving you. Only thing to do, it feels like, is wait it out. Fucking annoying. Should’ve sledgehammered it, but I care about you.” She was speaking deliberately; she was talking like she wouldn’t get another chance. “I was trying to give you time.”

She curled her tongue on the roof of her mouth, considering.

Then: “Did I trap you in there with yourself?”

Silence sat between them. Eliot managed to keep eye contact through it.

“You did the best you could,” he said, eventually.

Margo’s eyes narrowed, searching. “Did I?”

“I don’t know.” He managed a small shake of his head. “I wouldn’t know what to do with me. I don’t know what’s going on with me. Something’s –”

He felt that blankness again. The lack of thought. His eyes snapped down to the comforting texture of the void between them, the same material as the back of the driver’s seat.

“I don’t know,” he repeated.

The taste of it was familiar.

He looked up. Margo was nodding, as slowly and deliberately as her words had been.

“But I think I can take it,” he said, suddenly. “I think I can –”

No thought.

“I don’t know,” he said. He looked down. He looked up. Shook his head again. “I don’t know what I’m doing.”

“Going to Fillory, I guess,” Margo said, still nodding. She smiled a partial smile. “Making out with Quentin?”

Eliot was still shaking his head. He didn’t know why. “What am I doing, Bambi?”

“Figuring things out. Making more of a mess, maybe.”

“Margo –”

“And it’s ok if you do. El, it’s fucking ok. Just – don’t let it keep eating at you. Turns out, masochism gets you wounded. Or somebody else. Let it fucking out, alright?”

Eliot laughed a weird kind of non-laugh.

“What?” Margo asked.

“That’s what I told Q,” he said, shaking his head again. Looking at the back of the driver’s seat again. “This morning. That’s basically exactly what I told him.”
“Well, El, I think you’re going to have to take your own advice.”

“Goddamn it,” he said, covering his face with his hands again.

“Hey,” Margo said. Her hand was on his shoulder. She was worryingly sincere now. “You ok?”

Eliot uncovered his face again. Turned toward her again. Looked at the seat again. Again again again. “Why does everyone keep asking me that? I’m – ”

He looked at her. Blinked. Felt tears there, unspilled.

“No,” he said. “Probably not.”

She looked at him, unwavering, through his blurred vision.

“I’m probably not ok,” he said.

Insufficient.

But true.

He kept trying. “I feel like I’m falling apart.” True. “Or – or like I’m trying to hold myself together, and it’s just not working.” Truer. “It…” He kept trying. “It doesn’t feel the way it used to. The way it’s supposed to.”

“Ok,” Margo said. “That’s where it’s at? That’s ok.”

“Is it?” Eliot asked, almost desperately.

“If it’s where you’re at, it is.” The fierceness had returned. “Better than acting otherwise.”

“I have no interest in shouting it down the street – ”

“Don’t you? What was that interview?”

No thought.

“I don’t know,” Eliot said, for the zillionth time, gritting his teeth. “I – Margo, I wish I had something better to say. I’m sorry. I’m really sorry.”

“Apology accepted. But – unclench or something, seriously.”

A few tears escaped, running down his face.

“You’re going to promise me something,” Margo said, quietly.

“Ok,” Eliot said.

“You are going to let yourself relax. You are going to let yourself enjoy what you can. And – Eliot, this is going to be the important part – when you’re not relaxing, or not enjoying something, you are going to talk about it.”

“Ok,” Eliot said, a little less distantly. “I’m – I’m not relaxing.”

“Ok, there you go. A real start.”

Eliot’s phone pinged in his pocket. He exhaled, and took it out. He wiped his face with his scarf –
dry cleaning for fucking ever and ever, amen.

He had – well, he had a lot of notifications, probably all regarding the interview. But the most recent one – the flight information – was from Quentin.

He clicked through to purchase the tickets. Margo sat with him while he did it. Selecting seats. Credit card information. Re-centering himself. The lights kept sailing through the windows.

He forwarded the confirmation to Quentin.

See you tomorrow xxx


“That’s the spirit.”

“Good talk,” Eliot said.

***

Margo had offered to stay with him and help him pack, but saying yes to one more thing felt too far out of his comfort zone.

And he was already – it was ridiculous to think, but he already felt so far out of his comfort zone. The few yeses that he’d managed to achieve, excruciatingly – to Fillory, to Quentin, to enjoyment – they’d consumed a great deal of his energy. He’d paid some kind of price in life force.

But…the price felt fair, he thought. It was an investment on which he was already seeing a return. A return that was…well, he lacked language for it.

A return that had potential proportional to his expense?

So, a lot of potential.

Potential. Potential. The closest he could get, metaphorically, was –

He’d purchased a seed.

He didn’t know how it could possibly thrive, or what exactly it would grow into if it did. This wasn’t his area of expertise – barring the very literal fact of his background. He’d striven to divorce himself from the notion of tilled soil, actually and spiritually. Being fallow was a point of pride. Any cultivation he’d done was stylistic and cultural –

Things they didn’t give a shit about. Things they’d never follow him to.

They never went beyond the actual. Beyond what they claimed was the real.

Which means the spiritual is still safely unclaimed, he realized, suddenly. Waiting for me to get back to it –

But thinking for more than a moment of his childhood (and in what was possibly a ground-breaking way) shoved him out of his reverie. He was still standing on the street outside his building, smoking a cigarette, looking into the late-night life of the coffee shop without processing it. A handful of people, nestled in that cozy space. On their laptops, or holding hands across tiny tables, unaware of what upheavals had been occurring in the life of Eliot Waugh.
The shop didn’t close until midnight – did he want to buy something? A taste, a texture, a temperature? Something for his senses?

There was tinsel taped around the windows. There was that dreadful music on the other side.

He’d skip it. Walking into a shop, buying something, *interacting*? Reverting to some social form of Eliot in order to complete a transaction?

And what form would that Eliot take? Another statue back on the pedestal, for the purpose of awe or ridicule? Even if the people in there were unaware of the upheavals, to go anywhere was to risk being recognized, which was to say: to risk being recognized as the copy. *How not lifelike at all,* their eyes tended to say. How wonderful, how horrifying to be a receptacle of dreams or superiority, to be the sort of person one could look at for the sake of looking – *He’s nothing like how he looks on t.v.,* or *He looks exactly like the kind of person who’d pull that sort of bullshit on t.v.* –

If he had to be Eliot, he knew what Eliot he’d have to be.

And he didn’t have it in him to pretend. Not right now.

He stubbed out the cigarette.

***

He also didn’t have it in him to pack, apparently.

He’d taken some clothing items off of hangers, setting them down in outfit combinations on his bed. Then he’d taken more clothing items off of hangers, setting them down in different outfit combinations on his bed, using some of the previous clothing items, and on top of the clothing items he was now not using.

He felt cold, even though he was indoors. He took a shot of whiskey. He counter-intuitively took off the brocade jacket, setting it on the bed, too. He loosened his tie – well, he tried to, then gave up on the intricate knot. He unbuttoned and rolled up his sleeves. He kept on the vest. He took another shot of whiskey.

He took even more clothing items off of hangers, creating a third set of outfit combinations atop the remnants of the first two.

Two days. He was only going for two days. He didn’t need this many outfits. He didn’t need this many *possibilities.* Was this supposed to be therapeutic? If so, it, like so many other things – like he’d told Margo, *god* –

It wasn’t working.

He flopped onto the bed, into a tangle of cotton and wool and silk and more brocade.

He peered over at the clock, that demon from the underworld. 11:55, it told him –

He rolled over. Stared up at the ceiling.

Quentin could recognize him.

Quentin could *see* him. What did Quentin see? How could Quentin seem sure that the two of them together were a good idea?
You seemed sure of it, too, not so long ago, he thought.

Maybe that was…momentum, though. Maybe it was their – chemistry? When they were next to each other, it seemed fine. But just because they worked well together didn’t mean they…worked well together?

He was sure of Quentin. Quentin, on his own. Quentin as a person.

And he was also absolutely fucking sure Quentin was someone worth working with. Not just in their careers. In this. Quentin was indeed a catch. He was someone who would work with Eliot, in the sense that he would do his best to help Eliot show up. As a…partner. Emotionally.

But he wasn’t sure of himself.

He’d fucked up today. He’d fucked up a lot. And worst of all – the moments he tried to not fuck up were the moments he fucked up more.

He’d eventually shown up, but – everyone had had to keep prodding at him. Quentin, Julia, Margo – even Fen. Was that what it would take every time?

He showed up today. Would he show up tomorrow?

Would it ever get easier?

Eliot would be lucky if he could keep showing up at all, through any means. And if he couldn’t, which was more likely, there was the danger that Quentin might show up too much to compensate, throwing everything off-balance. Would Q have to constantly be reminding him, or dragging him out, or worse, just waiting?

Quentin had already been waiting for him. What if, even now, that’s what he had to keep doing? What if that was all Quentin could ever do?

Eliot wasn’t suitable terrain for growing anything. He didn’t know why Quentin would try.

It’s not what he was intended for.

He scooped up some of the outfits around him, piling them on top of himself.

11:57.

Who was he, anyway? Honestly. A mess. He couldn’t even do his job right.

He dug his phone out from under the pile. Did a search on YouTube, easily finding a clip someone had uploaded of his part of the interview.

He didn’t look at the comments – he couldn’t bear to have a sea of voices crash into him, not when there was already so much in his own head.

He just loaded the page. Turned the volume up. Held the screen above him, and waited.

There it was. One more copy. One more small, fake Eliot, overreaching in an effort to be real. Failing. An imposter, acting like everything was alright. Acting like his presence was an emergence, instead of another loss, another replacement. Acting like he’d never smothered another version of himself for the sake of…what?

“It resolved itself. I’m glad I made it.”
A mockery of his voice, made in good faith.

Bullshit.

It was far from resolved. He had a long way to go, if he’d even started at all.

He was never going to make it –

The picture shifted. The phone rang. And BAMBI flashed onto the screen.

Eliot picked up.

“Don’t listen to yourself,” Margo said.

“What the fuck,” Eliot replied.

“Don’t watch the clip.”

“Jesus, Bambi, how did you know,” he said as he sat up, clothes falling around him.

His doorbell rang.

She hadn’t. Had she? Was she overriding his request? Was she wielding the sledgehammer?

“Ha,” Eliot said, getting up entirely, more clothes falling to the floor. “Got it. Great call.”

“Hang the fuck on. Were you really watching it right then?”

“Was I?” Eliot asked, in an intentionally unconvincing fashion.

Margo barked out a laugh. “Oh my god, the fucking timing! I am good. I must have sensed it.”

“Uh-huh,” Eliot said, unlocking the door and opening it. “I’ll be sure to tell you in person how good your intuition is –”

Quentin was standing in the hallway, a paper cup of coffee in each hand.

“It’s tomorrow,” he said.

“Eliot,” Margo’s voice cooed in his ear. “Is that enjoyment I hear?”

“So it is,” Eliot said, hanging up the phone and sliding it in his pocket.

Quentin.

“Oh my god, I love you,” Eliot murmured, as he framed Quentin’s face again, falling into a kiss again, almost jostling the coffees out of Quentin’s hands with the suddenness of it. But Quentin was somehow ready to meet him, keeping his balance and giving back. Eliot’s heart sparked anew.

Fuck his doubts, though. This warmth was everything.

“Hey there,” Quentin said, with a quiet vivacity that made Eliot want to keep kissing him forever. “You taste like whiskey.”

“I am a little bit drunk,” Eliot replied, a little more raggedly than he’d expect. He reluctantly slid his hands from Quentin’s face so he could free them for the coffee. He sighed. “It was a day.”
“So it was. You should try this.” Quentin handed him a cup. Except for the kiss, his eyes hadn’t left Eliot at all, just kept drinking him in. Eliot saw no need to hide from it – quite the opposite.

“How you holding up?” Quentin asked, as Eliot took a sip. “I love you, too, by the way.”

“Mm,” Eliot said, swallowing. He looked at the cup. “I wasn’t aware they did Irish coffees?”

“They don’t,” Quentin replied, conspiratorially.

“Oh my god, I fucking love you,” Eliot said. He kissed Quentin again, one hand around the back of his neck. “Do you want to come in?”

“Actually,” Quentin said, smiling stupidly, taking Eliot’s hand as it left his nape, entwining their fingers. Their arms rested at diagonals between them. “I mean, yes, I do, but – I was wondering if you wanted to take a walk with me first?”

Eliot tilted his head. Squeezed Quentin’s hand. “A walk?”

“Yeah, a walk. Outside? There’s this thing I like to do, before I travel anywhere. Especially somewhere I won’t like?”

“But you – ” Eliot struggled with that a second. He knew Quentin didn’t like the process of flying, but he liked new places, and he seemed to like the idea of Fillory – “Ah. Me. You’re referring to me. Somewhere I won’t like. You’re right.”

Quentin nodded. “It’s a tradition that’s worked for me before. Thought I’d fold you into it. If you wanted?”

Eliot didn’t reply. Or he didn’t reply quickly enough to prevent Quentin from qualifying his request –

“I’d be doing it anyway,” he said. “I assumed you wouldn’t be sleeping for a while? We could get some air? But. If you’re not done packing – ”

“Not nearly,” Eliot said. “Yeah, let’s go.”

***

Eliot had bundled back up for the outdoors – including gloves, which were going to be a fucking travesty for hand-holding.

They walked past the doorman – who, Eliot realized, had let Quentin up without asking him. Who had, Eliot also realized, been letting Quentin up for months without asking him. That should have been a sign.

Well, another sign.

There’d been a lot of signs.

Quentin waved goodbye to the doorman with the hand that had a coffee in it – he couldn’t wave his other hand, as Eliot had hold of it, gloves be damned.

Eliot’s hands would be warmer, fine, whatever – but would they really, without being able to touch Quentin directly?

As they emerged into the night, with all its gloomy chill, Eliot felt like they were completely
distinct from their surroundings. Like they were three-dimensional and walking through a painted background, or another set. Some Mary Poppins shit.

Nothing could touch them.

Including, apparently, each other, because of these goddamn gloves.

Did they need winter accessories at all, really? Together, they provided their own atmosphere. Their own summer day. Eliot had to imagine they looked like a beacon walking down the sidewalk, like a star in the night sky of the street. How could they not? Surely there was a column of light encompassing them, beaming up into space, announcing their unified existence.

Who needed clothing when this was going on? Honestly.

“So here’s what I do,” Quentin said as they strolled past the now-closed coffee shop. Eliot could see Quentin’s breath again, which was absurd. They were in the middle of a heat wave. “I walk around. I take in what I appreciate about where I live, so I can carry it with me.”

“Alright,” Eliot said, taking in as much of Quentin’s face as he could, the only exposed skin. “I appreciate you.”

Quentin turned to look at him, eyes widened in affection and – something that looked a little like surprise, despite what had already happened. Disbelief without disbelieving?

“But – I’m going with you,” he said. “I don’t count for this.”


Quentin stopped walking. Eliot did, too.

Quentin was quiet. Quentin was looking at him. Eliot let him. Eliot waited.

Eliot kept looking back.


Eliot nodded as firmly as he could, woozy as he was from – not the alcohol, but the effects of that smile. “You’re going with me. I’m carrying you with me. I confirm it.” To demonstrate, he started himself walking again slowly, tugging on Quentin’s hand, a gentle request to follow. He didn’t look away from Quentin.

As Quentin followed, then matched pace with Eliot, his face got even more disbelieving-without-disbelieving. “Jesus Christ, this is surreal.”


Was this what joy felt like?

He stopped them this time, to kiss Quentin – whose lips were cold, that really wasn’t right, good thing Eliot checked – then put his arm around him as they kept walking. If it was actually cold out, despite other evidence, they’d have to find ways to increase the heat even more. Quentin’s arm wrapped around Eliot’s back at the same time.

Eliot took another sip of his Irish coffee – with lips that had kissed Quentin’s multiple times today, god, and could kiss him more if they wanted, that’s fine – and was somehow able to start the
conversation up again. “Hey. Do you feel like we’re – ”

“Not even on this street at all, and there’s nothing to look at? Where are we? Yeah. Who came up with this game?”

“You did,” Eliot said, smiling just as strongly, squeezing Quentin’s side. He felt gauzy. He felt downright giddy. Joy indeed. “Ok. Things to see. What can we summon out of thin air to look at – ”

There were trash bags on the curb, plunked down near smaller piles of grime-coated half-melted slush from the last snowfall. It all might as well have been sparkling under the streetlights.

“Honestly,” Eliot said. “I love the fucking trash bags.”

“Do you?” Quentin asked, interrupting a sip to do so. “Tell me more?”

“I fucking do, though. Always have.” He looked beyond them, seeing a number of piles ahead, resting under the lamps. “Out for all to see, but still somehow shrouded in mystery. An eyesore, but an equalizer. The most humbling of admissions – we’ve all got our own shit. Every single one of us. We all had our own shit.” He swallowed another sip. “Fillory won’t fucking have trash like this.”

“Eliot Waugh. That’s goddamn poetic.”

“It’s the romantic in me. Quentin Coldwater.”

They walked in exquisitely comfortable silence for a few minutes, past the occasional late night dog walker, or rowdy group of friends on an evening out, or couple on their own disappointingly-bundled-up stroll – as well as quite a few glimmering bags of trash.

Not once did anyone look leadingly in Eliot’s direction, in pedestal-fashion, critique or awe. (Or maybe they did?) Not once was there even the tell-tale feigned ignorance. (Or maybe there was?) He and Quentin were indeed waltzing through another dimension. They were within the column of light.

He was letting himself savor it. He was letting himself get lost in the sensation of it.

Eventually, more to hear Quentin speak than anything, he took it upon himself to resume the conversation. “Is it – your…turn, now? Is that how this works? A turn-based tradition?”

“I’m honestly – not sure,” Quentin said, like he was waking up suddenly, then slowly, from a dream. “I’ve always been alone when I’ve done this. And it’s – ” he laughed, softly – “it’s, uh…hard to concentrate today. Maybe we just…I mean, no need for turns, anyway? Probably we just say it whenever we see it – ”

He looked up, toward a building not far in front of them, on their side of the street – then abruptly ended his sentence.

“What?” Eliot asked.

“Oh.” Quentin shook his head, looking forward. “I’ve definitely got one, and there’s – I can’t imagine you’ll agree.”

“Say it,” Eliot said, not unkindly. “You’ve seen it. Even if I don’t agree, I can listen.”
“Alright.” Quentin shifted his arm from Eliot’s back to guide him by the elbow, moving them to the outer edge of the sidewalk for a better view. He linked his arm around Eliot’s, then gestured up with the cup in his other hand. “There.”

Eliot followed the line of the gesture – to a glowing apartment window, the lights of a Christmas tree the visible source inside.


“Told you,” said Quentin, deadpan.

“Yeah, but, I mean, those things are everywhere –”

Quentin shook his head. “Not in Fillory.”

“Ok, sure, not centrally – they’ve got a – they’ve got Ember, but it’s a technicality, the tone of the whole enterprise is still –”

“And it’s not the – honestly, El, it’s not that it’s a tree, it’s that –”

“Lacking specificity. This isn’t – in this city. In this whole city of weird and wonderful things, this –” Eliot gestured up with his own coffee cup – “is something you’d pick to take with you? It’s everywhere.”

“Well, yeah,” Quentin said. “Look around.” He arced his coffee up again, the swoop turning horizontal at the top.

Eliot did look. And he saw the scene repeated, occasionally – other bright squares, illuminated by similar trees. Together, almost creating an abstract pattern within the grid of darkened windows.

“It’s,” Quentin began. “I don’t know. Unintentional collaborative vertical art?”

“Yeah,” Eliot said, whistling air out through his teeth. “Yeah. It’s just….”

He almost could see it.

He didn’t know how to say what he wanted to.

What else was new?

Quentin spoke again, tentatively, filling the silence. “I like to think…so many winter traditions are about light, yeah? During the darkest time of the year. I find it comforting to look up and see something welcoming and warm. To keep that in mind. I understand why we would do things like that, gravitate toward – or surround ourselves with –”

“That’s not –”

“What?” Quentin asked, genuinely.

“I hear you,” Eliot tried. “I…appreciate that you can see it that way.”

“But? Go ahead.”

“But – it’s…cold comfort, frankly. It’s just – it’s such a lie.”

Quentin very gently poked his elbow into Eliot’s side. Permission to continue.
So Eliot did. “It’s – it is that it’s a tree. It is that it’s – I don’t know, Q, you see something beautiful, that’s – I just see…something…” He sighed. “Cut down. Slowly dying. Dressed to look festive. On display. It’s fucking weird. It’s a goddamn weird thing to do.”

They kept staring up at the windows.

“Always bothered me,” Eliot concluded.

“There are fake trees,” Quentin said, quietly.

“There are fake trees,” Eliot agreed.

They still kept staring up at the windows.

“Maybe Fen’s got it right,” Eliot said. “At least the straw doesn’t pretend to be alive.”

“At least you know it’s not a real sheep?”

“The resemblance isn’t there, right?”

“Ember is…his own thing,” Quentin said, tactfully.

Eliot was looking from bright square to bright square. “They’re probably not even happy. They’re probably not welcoming, or warm. Not most of them, anyway. Probably compensating.”

“I can…see why you abdicated the Club,” Quentin said, equally tactfully.

“Damn right,” Eliot said, bitterly.

“Well, listen,” Quentin said. “Maybe I’m compensating.”

“There’s nothing wrong with compensating,” Eliot said. “We’re all compensating. I just – you’re self-aware enough to know when you’re compensating, Q. Or that you’re capable of it, at least. I bet if we went door to door up there, most of them would swear up and down they weren’t. It’s – compulsory cheer. They’re just doing what they think they’re supposed to. They don’t really mean it. It’s not holiday cheer because it means something. It’s holiday cheer because it’s…just there, I don’t know. It’s shallow. It’s a veneer. Why not – just celebrate what’s worth celebrating whenever you want, however you want, whenever you need it – ”

“Did you ever think about talking to somebody?”

Eliot turned to Quentin. “I’m talking to you right now.”

“Yeah, I know,” Quentin said. “But I mean, like – somebody objective.”

“Q?”

“Somebody whose job it is to talk – not in the way that it’s your job, but, I mean – about the tough stuff.”

Eliot couldn’t quite catch up. “Me?”

“Yeah. You. Did you ever think about it?”

Eliot looked back up at the windows.
“It’s always helped me,” Quentin said. “To have a place to say it.”

Eliot looked from tree to tree.

“I feel like – and correct me if I’m wrong, El – something’s been going on for a while? And while I’m happy to talk about it with you – I’m there to talk about anything if you want – ”

“Nobody ever sees that, though,” Eliot said, very quietly. “Usually everyone tells me I’m fine. I always look fine.”

“You do. But am I right in saying there’s a difference between how you look and what’s going on right now?”

“Everything pisses me off,” Eliot said. “Everything makes me want to run away.”

“I hear you,” Quentin said.

At some point, he had returned his hand to Eliot’s back. The gentle pressure of support. Eliot could feel it through all the layers.

“I’ll consider it,” he said, sincerely.

“Ok,” Quentin said. “Thank you.”

Eliot kind of smiled. “You’re the one I should be thanking, but alright.”

“You should be thanking yourself.”

“How’d I get so lucky?” Eliot asked, voice low, hand on the lapel of Quentin’s coat. “With you.” He felt achingly sincere.

“You’re an idiot if you don’t think it’s the other way around.”

“I’m not sure – no, I’m certain you don’t understand how wonderful you are. I’ll have to keep telling you.”

“Sure,” Quentin said, smiling. “Ok, we’re not far from our destination.”

“We have a destination? You’re wonderful.”

“We do. Are you up for a bit more of a walk?”

“With you? Absolutely. You’re wonderful.”

They’d been walking west, nearing the waterfront. And as they kept walking nearer and nearer, they got better at pointing things out to each other – a painted chartreuse front door on an old brownstone (Eliot), layers of street-art stickers and graffiti on a wall next to an expensive restaurant (Quentin), an extremely mangled MetroCard on the sidewalk that looked to have lasted there through multiple snows (Quentin again), a ridiculously frumpy sweater on a small fluffy dog (Eliot, who started laughing at the sight, and almost couldn’t stop). The buildings were smaller in this part of town, but Eliot could see the taller ones farther away on either side, quiet sentinels in the darkness. The two of them were nestled in a valley of observation.

Finally, there was no more land to walk in this direction, no more buildings surrounding them. They’d long since finished their coffees and thrown their cups away.
They’d reached a row of benches on a pier by the water. Above them, a wide stretch of sky, pressed low by a full layer of dark grey cloud. In front of them and just below, glints of dark water, not visible this time of night as much as audible – not cold enough to be truly frozen, rolling in the softest of rhythms. Peaceful. Subdued.

And beyond that was New Jersey.

“This is it,” Quentin said. He’d perched himself on the back of the northernmost bench, feet on the wooden slats of the seat. “This is where I always stop before I head back.”

“At a view of…New Jersey,” Eliot said, standing behind the bench with Quentin’s head resting on his shoulder. Eliot had sort of – draped his arms over Quentin, holding him close.

“Exactly that,” said Quentin.

He held onto one of Eliot’s arms with his left hand and stretched out his right, across the low line of winking buildings on the other side of the expanse. Like he was charting a course, or conducting a song. To the right, to the right – his arm stopped.

“There,” Quentin said, pointing now. “Somewhere that way, inland. That’s where I’m from.”

“Montclair?”

“Yeah. Too far away to really see. But it’s there.” He was holding on to both of Eliot’s arms now, a bundle of limbs covering his chest.

“So you – I want to make sure I get this right,” Eliot said, not unfondly. “You go to this bench to look at Theoretical Montclair – imagine a trademark symbol after that – ”

“That,” Quentin said, leaning further back into Eliot’s shoulder, “is exactly what I do. Montclair, TM.”

“Sure.” Eliot tilted his head closer toward Quentin’s. “To what purpose?”

“To remind myself. That it’s where I came from. And that – that it’s not where I am now. To thank it for the good it did me, and forgive it for the good it didn’t do that it really should have. To remind myself that there are many places to go and to be in this world, and there’s no reason to stay somewhere if it doesn’t fit what I want to be. That nothing is permanent. That I can acknowledge everything something was, and look forward to what will be. And that no matter where I go, there’s something else waiting for me that might feel like home. So – to keep an eye out, and keep moving. No matter where I go, no matter what I do, I always have the choice of what to take with me, and what to leave behind. Of what I want to build with, and what I want to strip away.”

The current was swaying, in and out.

“You’re wonderful,” Eliot whispered.

***

Eliot barely remembered the walk back to Quentin’s apartment. He was so gone on feeling, wrapped up in the night and in Quentin himself. He felt calm. He felt comfortable to his core.

He didn’t have to overthink for once.

There they were, having made it to Quentin’s stoop, one foot in front of the other –
“Do you want to come up?” Quentin asked. His voice slowly filtered into Eliot’s comprehension. “This isn’t, uh, this isn’t me asking you if you want to come up come up, if that’s ok, but I just – I don’t want to lose sight of you.”

“Yeah,” Eliot said. “Yeah. I understand.”

And…he did, which was, in a day of very strange things, the very strangest thing of all.

They’d done it all before. And it had been great. But what they hadn’t done before was – well, what they’d been doing for the last hour. The hand-holding. The soft looks. A more open tone of conversation. It was like they’d worked in reverse, having made their way back toward the nuance of a starting point. There was something about this intimacy of emotion, of the simple fact of acknowledged closeness, that felt more necessary at the moment than anything else.

Eliot never thought that would be the way he’d feel about anything. In theory, it would be antithetical to his identity. Unfathomable. In practice, it was…a kind of exhilarating that also settled him somehow.

He felt like he was able to relax.

Plus, there’d be plenty of time for that later.

Quentin unlocked the front door, and as soon as they were indoors –

“Gloves off,” Eliot said, while removing his own.

Quentin’s mouth quirked up at the corner. He nodded and did so, stuffing his gloves into his coat pockets.

Hands actually, literally intertwined again, fucking finally, they ascended the flight to Quentin’s apartment. Eliot’s heart probably sprouted wings as they went up the stairs.

Such a small thing. Such a huge difference.

They barely got their coats and scarves off and hung up (and, even more tenuously, got their shoes off) before collapsing onto Quentin’s couch, a tangle of tired limbs. Somehow Quentin was the one leaning up against the arm of the couch, and Eliot the one inside his arms. Stretched out like this, Eliot’s feet were practically up on the other end, past where his legs were wound with Quentin’s. He didn’t mind.

He didn’t mind any of this at all.

He didn’t ever realize this was something he was missing. This – just fully occupying a small space with another person. Eliot felt both lighter and like he had more density. The feeling of safety increased even more significantly in Quentin’s arms like this. Quentin’s heart was under his head. He could hear it.

After a few minutes, and just before Eliot drifted off to the rhythm, Quentin seemed to have to adjust the position of his own head on the edge of the couch.


“Mm?”

“I’ve got to move one of my arms for a second. Didn’t want to startle you.”
“Mm. Ok. Do we need to shift anything…?”

“No, it’s fine. My hair’s just stabbing into the back of my head – ”

Eliot grabbed Quentin’s wrist before he could move his arm farther – ran his thumb along Quentin’s pulse point for good measure. “May I?”

“Hm? Go for it.”

As Quentin obligingly lifted his head a few inches, Eliot reached up, carefully took the hair tie out of his hair, stretched it around his own wrist, streamed his fingers through Quentin’s hair to smooth it down, and fell asleep.

***

Eliot Waugh woke up.

It was a soft awakening – the gradual increase of light streaming in between Quentin’s living room curtains. Eliot opened his eyes slowly, perhaps in time with its degree of appearance.

And he kept them open. Though waking was a delicate process, like an incremental turning-up of a volume dial for visuals, he needed no acclimation to his surroundings. He knew where he was.

Quentin’s living room had the same level of organization as his office – meaningful items, arranged thoughtfully. At least, there was a baseline organization to it. There was also more surface clutter. Quentin cared about his apartment as much as his job – Quentin cared about everything (Eliot included – or, possibly…Eliot especially) – but outside of a professional setting, it was easier for him to get away with the obvious accumulation that went with depression. Easier for him to set things away from their proper place, indefinitely. Eliot could tell the places where things didn’t belong.

Right now, Eliot felt like he belonged precisely where he was.

They’d swapped in the night. Quentin was now nested on top of Eliot, like a weighted blanket on his chest, if a weighted blanket also had the ability to curl up contentedly. Eliot kept caressing Quentin’s back in feather-light, nearly nonexistent motions. Kept smoothing his hair, over and over. Kept listening to Quentin breathe. And kept some kind of knowledge that his own breathing was a foundation for Quentin’s rest.

They kept breathing together. In. Out.

The morning sunbeams were angled almost directly onto them. Eliot felt like a cat. He felt like the most luxurious cat in the world. He stretched out his soul. He looked down at Quentin, at the uncomplicated tranquility on Quentin’s face. He rested a hand on Quentin’s hand, curved the tips of his fingers around it.

Their skin was infused with the sun.

He listened to this quiet truth. He listened to the continuance of Quentin’s breathing. He listened to the slow ticking of the second hand of the wooden clock on Quentin’s wall –

He looked at the hour and minute hands of the wooden clock on Quentin’s wall.

“Shit,” Eliot said. “Q. Q – ” he kissed Quentin’s forehead, tucked his hair behind his ear – “wake up, baby.”
Quentin’s shoulder went up near his ear. “El,” he murmured, followed by a quietly unintelligible waking-up noise –

Followed by burying his face further into Eliot’s chest, and the possible renewal of unconsciousness.

“Q. Baby – ” the weight of Quentin’s whole body on Eliot seemed to double itself – “Hey. Quentin?” He rubbed the side of Quentin’s arm, attempting to warm him awake. “Quentin,” he said, musically, drawing it out. “Quentin Coldwater. If we don’t hurry, we’re going to miss our flight.”

Another unintelligible noise.

“Quentin? Our flight to Fillory.”

Then –

“Fillory,” Quentin mumbled into Eliot’s chest.


He tumbled upward, launching himself off the couch and toward his room, almost sliding on his sock-clad feet and tripping.

“He there – ” Eliot said, attempting to spot Quentin’s fall, until Quentin righted himself on his own, using the momentum to propel himself away faster.

The moment of panic past, Eliot let himself fall back onto the couch, arms resting out along the top of it. He suddenly found himself with an urge to do the opposite of what he’d just warned against, and lounge around instead.

“I don’t know, Q,” he called in the general direction of Quentin’s room, watching the doorway. “Maybe this is the universe sanctioning a cancellation, unfortunate though it may be. Maybe this is the Lord’s way of decreeing we stay in – ”

Quentin’s head, hair tousled from the run and face deceptively calm, appeared exactly where Eliot’s eyes were waiting. “Are you invoking a higher power? I thought you didn’t believe in any.”

“Oh, dear sweet Q,” Eliot said, faux-seductively. “When one is presented with incontrovertible signs – ”

“Are you invoking a higher power to get laid?”

“Perhaps. Is it working?”

Quentin squinted. “Your hair looks terrible.”

Eliot maintained what was meant to be a charming smile, but to outside eyes was probably an appallingly lovesick one. He made no move to touch his hair.

Quentin, however, in seeming to remember the existence of hair as a general concept, went to neaten his own by pulling it up – but found himself without means of tying it back.

Eliot held up one arm and waved, fingers waggling. There was a hair tie on his wrist – he snapped it with his other hand.
Quentin’s eyes narrowed further.

“Bastard,” he said, warmly, and disappeared around the corner again.

Eliot felt the lightning.

*Maybe that’s why our hair is standing on end.*

“Love you, too,” Eliot replied, musically again.

He closed his eyes for one second. Then found his phone and arranged for a car for efficiency’s sake. Then moved their shoes and Quentin’s equipment bag closer to the door.

“We’ve got five minutes,” he said, entering Quentin’s room. “We’ll swing by mine, then hurry to the airport – ”

Quentin’s back was to him, standing in front of a low dresser, double-checking the contents of the backpack resting on it. His posture was focused, but there appeared to be a great deal of tension in his shoulders. There was a mirror in front of him – Quentin’s head was tilted down, hair obscuring his expression, but Eliot didn’t need to see his face to know he’d begun to look stricken.

Quentin hated flying, but he hated running late for a flight even more.

Eliot went right behind Quentin and began to gently massage the knots from his shoulders. “How can I best be of help?”

“Oh. That’s – that goes a long way,” Quentin said, a bit of a tremor in his voice. “Can you move my gear near the door, so I don’t forget it?”

“Already done. Anything else?”

“Oh. Um, can’t think of anything, no. Oh – ” Eliot was getting the new tangles out of his hair with his fingers – “thank you.”

“Alright,” said Eliot, now twisting up Quentin’s hair and returning the hair tie to him via its rightful place on his head. He angled his own head around and kissed Quentin’s temple, returning his hands to Quentin’s shoulders for a moment. “You’ve – ah, you’ve got this. You’re taking the same coat?”

Quentin looked up at him in the mirror. “Actually. The warmer one? On the – ”

“Middle hook, can do,” Eliot said, unevenly, and went to retrieve that, too.

Somewhere behind Quentin, as he’d gone to kiss him, he’d seen a blurred reflection of something looming. Something unkempt, unshaven, askew. Wearing yesterday’s clothes, and *badly*. A partially unbuttoned man.

He turned back around –

He didn’t look at it.

“Q?” He cleared his throat. “You’ve got everything? Gear, clothes, toiletries, meds?”

“Yeah, I’ve – no, shit, the meds are in my other bag.” Quentin picked up his backpack and started heading for the living room to retrieve them. “*God*, thanks.”
Eliot glanced at the mirror as Quentin moved away, at the specter adjusting its tie there –

“Are we believing in higher powers again?” Eliot asked, removing his hands from his own throat. “I’ll take that,” he continued as Quentin passed by, and held his backpack for him.

***

Could he do this?

Wasn’t he doing it already?

He couldn’t tell.

He was obviously moving. He was putting clothes in his suitcase. But they were any clothes at all, lifted from the rumpled bed-pile first in some poor approximation of folding, then just fucking thrown in, while Quentin waited downstairs in the car.

Who-knows-what filling his bag haphazardly, he left the remaining who-knows-what in disarray on his comforter, and on his – Jesus, he’d forgotten about the clothes on the floor – jackets, shirts, vests, ties, pocket squares, underwear, pants, socks, shoes, jackets, shirts, vests, ties –

Too late; he’d moved on to care products. Skincare, haircare – they were organized enough that he could stow them away in the order he usually used them –

And he didn’t think he’d forgotten anything, but he also didn’t think his brain had really run through the list of items, and he also didn’t really remember putting anything into his toiletry bag, but within a minute, there everything seemed to be, safely secured. Bag in his suitcase. Suitcase zipped up.

Suitcase in the trunk of the car. Eliot in the backseat with Quentin. Car back on the road.

Was he doing it?

He was obviously doing something.

But was he doing it successfully?

Quentin was gripping his hand very tightly. His foot was tapping. He was alternating between looking out the window and pretending to not look out the window, especially at the moments when the car was stopped at a light.

Eliot didn’t think he was doing it successfully.

He could pack quickly. He could keep holding Quentin’s hand. But nothing he could do could lift vehicles out of the way, or transform a red light into a green one. He was fucking stuck.

He didn’t look out his own window. He didn’t look at the cars that should have been moving. He didn’t look at the edges of his own reflection –

He looked at the edges of his own reflection.

His hair was pitiable. He could see frizz –

A text from Margo, a burden and a mercy: enjoyment report?

Eliot started typing something, one-handed, almost automatically. He caught himself, deleted it,
and started over. He saw she was typing again, he tried to get there first – but – typos, typing with only his less-dominant hand – he deleted it, and –

Margo to Eliot: *if you’re not enjoying it, you’re supposed to tell me.*

He started over.

Eliot to Margo: *please hold for genuine response*

It was a failure, right? The previous night had been an anomaly. Waking up had been an anomaly. Most of this would be a sinking nightmare, soaked in the screaming terror he could feel seeping back in, keeping him company, probably keeping both of them company, drowning them. Most of this was going to be a fight to keep it from filling their lungs – you leave yourself open, and *this* was what got in. Any comfort they’d have in each other was going to be in spite of this invasion, a last-ditch effort to keep kicking –

His motionlessness must have said *flailing* instead, because Quentin was looking at him now, instead of the stationary vehicles outside.

“Margo’s wondering how we’re doing,” Eliot managed.

“Oh?” Quentin asked, adrift.

“And I have…*no idea* how we’re doing –”

“In this moment?” Quentin paused, thinking. His grip on Eliot’s hand got somehow tighter, but it was transforming into a reassuring tightness, not a panicked one. “We’re not doing great. But we’re here?”

“We’ll give it our best go,” Eliot said. “And if we miss the flight, we’ll reschedule to the next one. And…while we’re there we can play that walking-around game in the airport.”

“In the *airport*?” Quentin looked fond for a moment, instead of pained. “Deal.” He lifted their hands up and down in a sort-of handshake.

They both laughed. Neither laugh was without nerves, but it was real laughter nonetheless.

Eliot: *it’s a process, right? practice makes perfect*

Margo: *genuine response received. FUCK perfect. but keep up the practice!!*

Margo: *fucking proud of you.*

Five red heart emoji.

***

They were going to make it.

The line for checking bags had been miraculously minimal (Eliot had too many liquids in his suitcase for them to avoid it, and the guilt had struck *hard* on that one, so he genuinely thanked whatever higher power did or did not exist for sparing them true purgatory there). The line for security, however, had been utterly immobile and truly *heinous* (which no one, deity or otherwise, could ever help). But somehow they had survived both, and were now sprinting to the gate. Quentin looked worse for wear, but they were *going to make it*, both of them. Eliot wished he could do more, but at least he was getting it done. He hoped they’d be rewarded medals for
completing this makeshift triathlon. Or those foil blankets, or whatever the hell it was that runners were given to recover –

Eliot saw something. He had a thought, and halted. “Q. Go on without me.”

Quentin, very out of breath and barely keeping hold of his gear bag, turned to look back while running a few more slow, confused steps – then stopped and stared at Eliot like he’d grown multiple poorly-coiffed heads. “The hell?”

Eliot’s stomach dropped like a stone. He was gripping the straps of Quentin’s backpack, which were looped over his own shoulders.

Quentin was looking at Eliot like he’d grown maybe thousands of heads, and he didn’t know which one to look at.

Which –

Fuck.

The idea Eliot had had –

It had been for Quentin. It would only take a minute away, a minute of effort. It would be a surprise. If he could do it in time, he’d thought it would help Quentin feel less anxious, less drained.

But now Quentin just looked fucking scared. Like Eliot was going to leave him –

Eliot straightened his spine, to better shoulder the pack. “Oh, no, that’s not what I – Q, I’m not abandoning this – how can I stop him looking like that, shit shit shit shit – my stuff’s already on the plane. I’ll be on the plane. I’m doing this for – I’ll be there right after you, ok? There’s… something I’m going to do” – this was a terrible idea, it was a stupid idea – “it’s a fucking idiotic idea, Q, it’s ridiculous, but I think I can risk it –”

Millions of heads. Abysmal hairdos, all.

“ – for you?” Eliot said.

Infinite heads.

Eliot tried again. “I am – so sorry, Q, I’m a fool, I’m telling you, I am a fucking idiot, but I’m going to do this. You’ve got to go. Please keep going. I swear, I will be there right after you.”

“Ok?” Quentin said, sounding unconvinced –

How do I prove that I’m making an effort? How do I prove that I’m not going to fuck this up?

The straps could have been crushed within Eliot’s hands. “Quentin. I’m taking you with me. I’m carrying you with me. I promised I would. I will not break that promise. I just need a minute. I promise I’ll meet you there.”

“Fine,” Quentin said, almost inaudible.

He looked so small as he turned away.

This wasn’t working. This wasn’t what Eliot was going for at fucking all –
Quentin was headed toward the gate –

Eliot went after him.

“Never mind,” he said, taking Quentin’s hand. “Bad idea, let’s go.”

Quentin blinked up at him.

A voice blared out a call for final boarding on their flight.

***

Just after they went through the door, it was sealed. They both waved to Fen, seated further back on the plane (and wearing another eye-catchingly bad set of earrings), as a flight attendant ushered them the short distance to their first-class seats.

Fen’s smile clicked on, visibly in victory but presumably in relief, as soon as she saw them –

But then it slid away just as quickly, and in its totality.

So easily? So soon?

Did Eliot look that different today, that Fen couldn’t hide her shock? Could she even recognize this panting, rumpled, backpack-wearing entity? She should have been able to – the clothes were the same. Was it that he looked as tense as he felt for once – or as undone?

The only kind of action he could salvage for a response was to wink at her.

And slowly and quickly at the same time, almost as if it was rising up from being submerged, a different kind of smile surfaced on Fen’s face.

It was almost certainly the first genuine smile of hers he’d seen.

Eliot’s lungs were hot from running. He could feel the flow of oxygen through his whole body.

He thought he might be smiling, too.

Fen held up a dorkily affirmative thumbs up. And Eliot did the same, shocking himself.

He could see Fen laugh. He could almost hear it.

He put Quentin’s pack in the overhead compartment, and swung in toward the window seat.

The plane started wheeling forward. Quentin buckled himself into the aisle seat and studied the safety pamphlet like he was about to be tested on it. Eliot could see tears overlaying the weary intensity in his eyes. So the instant the attendant completed their demonstration, and the only sound was the ambient humming of metal and wind as the plane kept wheeling –

“I’m so fucking sorry, Q.”

Quentin wiped an eye. “Fuck. I’m just stressed. We both are.” He sighed, and wiped both eyes with the backs of his hands. “God, I hate flying. I can see why you’d want to get out of it.”

“Ah. Yeah. I mean – no. I did fuck up. But I was hoping –”

He didn’t say anything else.
“What?” Quentin rolled his head toward Eliot, expression grim, shaking his head in confusion. “I know that you wouldn’t really want to go to Fillory, El. It’s fine — ”

“Yeah, no, I mean – that is true. But I — ”

“But you what?”

“I’m telling you, it was a bad idea — ”

“I’ve heard so many bad ideas from you in meetings before, El – what’s one more?”

“I don’t know, Q, I just — ”

“Just one more, Eliot — ”

“Hudson News was right there. I was hoping – if I went in, I mean, I’d know it when I saw it — ”

“Saw it?”

“ – and quickly.”

“Saw what?”

“That’s the thing, Q. I’d know it if I saw it. I could have found it quickly. Something tangible – you know, like a blanket, or a neck pillow, or some crosswords or something. A snack. Or – all of the above. Clear the shelves. Anything to make up for this.”

“A snack?”

Eliot shrugged. “Or something.”

“Or something,” Quentin repeated. “To make up for what?”

“You deserved something nice for going through this.”

“Me?” Quentin asked, quietly.

The rumbling of the plane was getting louder. It was picking up speed.

“Of course you. You ran through the airport with me, you waited in lines, you sat through traffic, you did all the things you hated, in a whole clusterfuck of less than ideal travel circumstances, even though you don’t have to go through this at all. Even though I’m the one who messed up. So I was going to try to get you something nice for the flight, to maybe make that better at least, to say sorry, sorry this is happening, sorry you’re stuck with me, Quentin, but instead I messed it up more when all I wanted was to surprise you – ”

Quentin kissed him, fiercely. Everything around them was trembling. Eliot’s ears were roaring. His insides were somersaulting.

The plane was taking off.

“You were right,” Quentin whispered under the engine, fingers scraping over Eliot’s stubble. “You are a fucking idiot.”

“I am, though,” Eliot managed, lurching from the jump in altitude. “I didn’t mean to make you doubt. I’m not planning on going anywhere, Q.”
Quentin leaned up, and Eliot bent his head, and Quentin kissed Eliot’s forehead, catching a stray lock of hair with it. “You want to get me a present?”

He met Eliot, eye to eye.

“Yes,” Eliot said. “You deserve all of them.”

“I only need one.”

“Name it.”

“You already gave it.”

“Q?”

“This, Eliot,” Quentin murmured. “You beside me. That’s what I want.”

His hands were in Eliot’s awful, greasy hair.

“You,” Quentin said, like all of it was sacred.

“Oh,” said Eliot.

He kissed Quentin deeply. Almost filthily, with an overwhelming undercurrent of vulnerability that flowed freely within it. He could feel their energies blending, like swirling dyes dancing in water, becoming the same color. It was the headiest of mixes.

“That I can do,” said Eliot, dreamily. “I can do that at any moment.”

“Yeah? Thanks,” said Quentin, pleasantly stunned and newly winded. “And, oh – the idea was good, Eliot. I appreciate the idea. The technique – ”

“Was atrocious, I know,” whispered Eliot, still so close to Quentin. “I am sorry. I have to imagine that calling it extraordinarily unhelpful would be an understatement. I’m learning. I want to learn.”

There was the look he was hoping to see from Quentin. “You will. You are. I believe you.” Quentin linked their hands together, pressing arm to arm, and leaned his head on Eliot’s shoulder. “I’m going to try to sleep through this? I don’t have a neck pillow, so you’ll have to do.”

Eliot chuckled. “I can do that, too.”

“Will you get me a water, and…those cookies they have, if they have them? If I’m asleep for the snacks.”

“Absolutely. Sweet dreams, Q.”

***

Eliot had been watching the world go by.

Quentin was asleep, his hand in Eliot’s a tether as they soared above everything. Thousands of feet below them, drifting at a glacial pace, a westward panorama – the tiniest of snow-capped mountain ranges, and hills, and scrubby plains, and –

Squares and rectangles. Fields. A patchwork quilt of endless boundaries, salted with white.
It reminded Eliot of Indiana –

Given their trajectory, it could even be Indiana.

Well, what else to do with theoretical points of origin?

*Thank you,* Eliot thought down to those squares on the ground. *Thanks for nothing, really. I’m sorry for what you took away. I’m sorry for the time I wasted because of you, for what I had to do. I’m sorry for the ways you didn’t see me. The ways I had to shout. The ways I had to hide. But I’m up here. Away from you. Still me. Still Eliot. I did what I could to make it through. I made it through despite you. I still have problems, but I still have chances to grow. I’m going to be a better me – no, a truer me. And you are not part of it.*

He held a solemn middle finger to the porthole window.

*Can you see this?*

***

This looked…tolerable.

It was his fourth attempt at cobbling together an outfit in the airport bathroom, and this particular Frankenstein might have accepted the spark. A burgundy jacket, a patterned navy vest, a scarf in a comparable shade, suggestions of gold in the tie – there was a richness to the combination that could belie the wrinkles, if he carried it with enough confidence. He would have given up the rest of the clothes he’d brought in exchange for a steam cleaner, but no one would have to know. If only he could tell the Eliot of the past not to worry so much about yesterday’s outfits. To let him know he’d feel much more grateful for any kind of result within a much more dire sartorial situation.

The boots – well, the boots were going to be completely ruined by the snow, but he’d feel the temporary authority of their aesthetic, and would praise their sacrifice to the ages. Their silhouette was sufficient to walk him through.

Besides, he hadn’t remembered to pack more appropriate shoes.

He moved on to concealer – the dark circles wouldn’t entirely retreat today, but he could send a warning volley their way – and eyeliner, and then began tackling The Hair Problem.

The door swung open, and Eliot set his features in a devil-may-care expression to combat another silent critique of his taking over nearly the entire counter space, as well as the front of two of the stall doors with hangers –

“Making yourself at home?” Quentin asked, sanguine, picking up Eliot’s toiletry bag so he could sit on the counter space nearest him. He too had changed clothes, to a heather plaid with a lattice of the thinnest red stripes running through it – though that had only taken him a minute. He’d left a while ago to touch base with Fen.

Eliot’s chest expanded at Quentin’s return to proximity; he rested the back of his hand – not covered in hair product – on Quentin’s thigh. “Ah. Speaking from experience – ” he turned his attention, and both hands, back to his hair – “the home thing doesn’t work for me in these sorts of places. I’m conceiving of myself as a visiting dignitary, prepared for diplomacy or battle.”

With a final flourish, he let go of his curls, washed his hands, and surveyed his work.

Perhaps even more than tolerable. The individual pieces were good, and they were better in
conjunction with each other –

And in conjunction with whatever he was radiating.

It was…it was odd. It would have been disconcerting if it didn’t feel so right. There was some surprisingly strong part of his aura that didn’t require the usual effort, that was just…happening. That was painlessly present. That was imbuing what he’d put on with more power than he could have imagined.

Normally when he did this – frankly, it felt like a cover-up. A shell. A tank for him to steer around. Today – the inadequacies were so fucking visible still, the stubble, the circles, the soon-to-be-stained shoes – but he wasn’t so much offsetting them as balancing them. Complementing them. Owning them. He felt – integrated? Organic? Like he wasn’t replacing, but adding. Like it was an extension or a conduit, rather than a shield.

Like enough of him existed underneath that he was wearing it, rather than it wearing him.

“It’s working for you,” Quentin said.

“It’s the charisma, I think,” Eliot demurred. “Fools everyone.”

“It’s different from that,” said Quentin, certain.

“It is,” Eliot agreed, overwhelmed.

He had – he had so much energy. There was so much of him, it couldn’t all stay inside –

He found himself shifted to the side, standing between Quentin’s legs, pressed against the counter, kissing him, cherishing him with wet – and clean – hands.

Quentin was practically biting his lip. Quentin was pulling down on his vest in a way that made him want to growl. He could feel everything that Quentin was – his openness, his kindness, his longing, his sorrow –

He wanted to do the same for Quentin. He wanted Quentin to feel him. Eliot. He wanted to reach through himself, outside of himself, donate everything he had to the cause. To take everything out and set it at Quentin’s feet, or inject it into his heart – combine selves at a cellular level. He wanted to share and share alike.

So that’s what he tried to do.

And, as soon as he let himself, he felt the same thing he’d felt on the plane, magnified – a dissolution of boundaries, an expansion of awareness that was also concentrated to a very specific point –

To them. Quentin and Eliot.

They were the same. They were one territory.

Just making out had no right to feel as elemental, as unified as this.

“Eliot,” Quentin breathed. “You’re –”

“Here, Quentin. I’m right here –”

The door opened, and they sprang apart.
“Hey!” Fen said, walking right in, her puffy matte gold coat the kind of statement Eliot could really goddamn respect. And the walking in, to be honest – he could respect that, too. “I circled the block, like, three times waiting for you guys. Finally I just parked out front where I’m definitely not allowed to – hey, Quentin, you forgot this – ”

She tossed Quentin’s coat at him (and Eliot caught it, as he was still pretty much standing in front of Quentin, and could also picture how an unexpected rerouting of hand-eye coordination was going to go for him), then continued on to gathering up Eliot’s hangers.

“So you guys are together. New thing, yeah? Congrats! C’mon, we gotta bounce, I could get a ticket!” She folded over a stack of clothes into Eliot’s open suitcase.

She sounded so contentedly blasé about it all. How had Eliot ever not been a fan of this person?

“Aren’t – aren’t you – ” Quentin said, picking up what he could reach from his seated position, but fumbling over both his words and his hands – rerouting wasn’t working on multiple levels, and Eliot was damn proud of it, and would keep holding on to the coat for him for now – “You’re, like, a political figure. Aren’t you supposed to be, like – an example for people?”

“Yeah, totally,” said Fen, blissfully unaffected. “Which is why we have to go right now.”

“Fen makes the rules, Q.” Eliot, having put Quentin’s coat neatly over his own arm, collected everything Quentin was holding.

“I do sometimes!” Fen chirped. “But right now, I’m breaking them. And this town isn’t under my jurisdiction. We’ve got to get a few towns over for that – so let’s roll, team!”

She and Eliot got the last of the items into the bag, and she zipped it up.

She gave him a look that could only be described as ecstatic conspiracy.

And then they were walking through the rest of the tiny terminal, briskly. Fen was rolling Eliot’s suitcase. Eliot had put on his own weather-inadequate coat (why would he have remembered – as with the shoes – to grab the more appropriate choice yesterday, or this morning?), and was now aiding Quentin, who was struggling with his own. Eliot’s hands definitely lingered on Quentin’s shoulders.

Fen was outpacing them, and Quentin almost stumbled into the wheels of Eliot’s suitcase. He looked down, and –

“Eliot – are those boots going to be ok for walking around out there? It looked like a lot of snow.”

The doors wooshed open. Fen picked up the suitcase.

Eliot couldn’t help some of his old habits of justification. “I think, Q – the moisture won’t be kind to the material, but I think I have enough experience to know what kind of soles have enough grip for – ”

And that’s when he almost bit it on the first patch of ice he stepped on.

Quentin caught him. He may not have rerouted his coordination yet, but that worked in Eliot’s favor – not only did Quentin catch him immediately, but with a great amount of sturdiness and grace.

“I’ve got you,” he said.
Eliot could have melted.

“Get in the car!” Fen shouted from the window of a pickup truck parked in the traffic loop just outside the door, like they’d just robbed a bank and she was the getaway driver.

Quentin got Eliot to the front without slipping, then got in the back, and they pulled away – Fen waved a friendly wave to an employee standing outside, who waved a friendly wave back in a way that said to Eliot they knew whose car it was the whole time.

***


Margo to Eliot: do tell

Eliot: i wouldn’t say i’m enjoying the drive to town

Eliot: but i’m not not enjoying it

Margo: do TELL??

Eliot: it’s a contest between fen and quentin as to who can be interested in fillory more

Margo: ……..christ

Eliot: Who Will Ascend To A State Of Pure Enthusiasm First

Margo: COULD BE ANYONE’S GAME

Eliot: i doubt they’re aware of the level of one-upmanship that’s occurring here

Eliot: they are FASCINATINGLY overinvolved

Eliot: i could turn this into a sociological study

Margo: get a book deal??? get interviewed on other talk shows???? new career path

Eliot: or i may just keep score. i plan on being referee if necessary

Eliot: or if i feel so inclined

Eliot: there is so much CHEER in this CAR, bambi

Margo: STEEL YOURSELF

Eliot: it’s…..not a bad thing to be around

Eliot: i think i’m coming down with something

***

Fillory was exactly as small as he thought it would be, and in many ways as ordinary.

But it was also much emptier than he thought it would be.

He hadn’t realized it until it was disproven, but in his mind’s eye he’d been picturing something bustling and picturesque, a hamlet packed to the gills with strays who’d gathered together to drink
the Kool-Aid.

The picturesque was still certainly present – the buildings could have been watercolor painted into existence, they were so aggressively cute – but the distinct lack of people wandering through the main drag in the middle of the day on a Saturday gave it the air of a tumbleweed-strewn Western ghost town, if the town was also located in Candy Land.

Taking this in, Eliot was feeling less of the claustrophobic anxiety he’d been expecting to feel and more – just plain bewilderment. Detached bewilderment. Fillory was indeed underwhelming, but not in a way that felt personal to him. There was nothing to rail against – nobody was buying it. Nobody believed in it. Nobody – or at the very most, only a few people – would try to convince him otherwise.

That was the bewildering part – that Fillory seemed to actually correspond with his level of belief in it.

Which took a weight off him that he hadn’t realized was there.

However –

Quentin, so cheerful on the car ride over, was beginning to bleed effusiveness while trying to cover the wound. Seeing the absence of energy Fillory had to offer hit him harder – Eliot was prepared for any kind of disappointment this place could throw at him, having a range of expectations for it that went from negative to nonexistent. But Quentin was always looking for something special anywhere, and – there was something recognizably lacking about this place from the jump. Something that, despite the colorful appearances, defied positivity in a way that couldn’t be denied.

There was no way this image fit whatever Quentin had been imagining.

Eliot would have to broach the subject delicately –

“The Fillory Experience!” Fen was proclaiming, in full town crier mode. “I give you free reign of its wonder. Find your story! Work your magic! We’ll catch up in the evening – I have a city to run, paperwork to catch up on, a Sheep Watch to fulfill – ”

He’d broach it as soon as Fen wasn’t around, probably. Or as soon as she’d feel comfortable sharing her perspective on Fillory’s emptiness.

She wasn’t feeling comfortable now; Eliot was sure of it. She was being so – overperformative, even for her. Arms wheeling over her duffle bag, face exaggerated. The opposite of whatever she’d been on the plane. An escalation of what she’d been at the airport. Sentences tossed off, but at one hundred miles an hour –

Like she could fill the space entirely on her own. Like if she could be more than proud, they’d never notice any shame.

Like she couldn’t stop herself.

Now that she was back in context, it seemed that she must have been experiencing doubt – because she absolutely refused to show any.

Asking now would get him nowhere. He’d bide his time and wait.

Bags in tow and Eliot walking carefully, they were passing the town square on their way to Fen’s home, centrally located and where they’d be staying for the weekend.
And in passing the town square, they passed Ember.

The real Ember.

The giant ram – easily multiple Eliots tall, certainly taller than the tallest buildings Eliot could see (though those were only a couple of stories tall, but still) – stood silently, head held high, red-ribboned, with a blanket of fallen snow on its back, and over its snout and eyes – or, Eliot supposed, where its eyes would be. A lighter dusting of snow speckled most of its form like powdered sugar.

Fen greeting anyone like an old friend apparently extended to inanimate objects, too, because she paused in front of her creature of straw and steel to say hello.

“Ember! I’m back. I brought Eliot and Quentin with me! They’ll be here for the next couple of days.”

“Hi,” Quentin said, politely. Then he turned to the mayor. “Fen, this is truly impressive work.”

“Thanks,” she replied, proudly. “I think he’s my best Ember yet. Glad to see he’s remained in my absence.”

Eliot believed this sentiment was real. This was something she was beyond glad of.

Relieved by, even.

He looked up at Ember’s doubly-nonexistent face.

And he…felt a weird sense of appreciation for the construction. For the time and energy it had taken. He felt his own gratefulness that Fen’s efforts hadn’t been disturbed against her will.

Ember was fake, but it had taken real work to put him together.

“He hasn’t been threatened,” said a voice from around the side of the sheep.

No shit, Eliot thought. Who’d be here to do it?

“Ah! Tick!” Fen exclaimed, rushing around to greet its source.

Seated on one of the benches surrounding the square was a man with very shiny teeth – the first person they’d seen since arriving in town.

His grin widened upon seeing Quentin and Eliot – nothing starstruck to Eliot’s eyes, just small-town friendliness. “Salutations, visitors! Welcome to our home!”

But to Eliot’s ears, the words were pickled in Kool-Aid – so, it was still being imbibed by at least one other person here.

“Quentin, Eliot – this is Tick Pickwick, deputy mayor! And the citizen currently on the observation shift.”

“Hi there,” he said to the newcomers, then turned to Fen. “Benedict should be here to relieve me any minute. And, Fen, he hasn’t shown up – ”


“Ok,” Fen said. “Good to know it’s still business as usual. You’ll let me know if – ” she looked
over and up at the sheep – “anyone approaches him.”

“You know I will!”

Fen returned her gaze to the deputy mayor. “I definitely do, Tick – thank you!”

“Nice to meet you,” Quentin said, mirroring the pleasantries level, as their group continued on to Fen’s.

“I’m sure we’ll meet again!” Tick called after them. “Given my position and my love for the town, I look forward to being interviewed – ”

“He’s a delight!” Fen exclaimed.

“Seems like it,” Quentin agreed, a tinge of something sad unavoidably present in his voice as he took in more of the bright but lifeless street.

“Hm,” Fen said, quietly, looking up at the sky. “It might snow tonight.”

There was hardly a cloud up there.

***

Whitespire Inn seemed to not only be an inn – it was Fen’s home and the mayoral offices and a place for visitors to stay, all at once.

It was festooned for the holidays within an inch of its life, inside and out, which Eliot did his best to ignore.

It was also idiosyncratically Fen – Eliot could have picked it as hers out of a lineup, instantly. It bore so much of her mark. The avant-garde yet kitschy metallic furniture with puffy jewel-toned cushioning that graced the combination lobby and living room had to have been handcrafted Fen originals. They were like physical extensions of herself – if Fen had been split into pieces and transfigured into chairs and couches, she couldn’t have made something that matched her more completely.

“It’s very you,” Eliot said, without sarcasm.

It felt better in here.

“That’s what I’m going for,” Fen replied. “Let’s get you checked in.”

A wide-eyed but bored-looking gangly teenager with blonde hair was reading in a quilted armchair on the far end of the room, behind a table with a computer, some sticky notes, a cup of pens, and a silver push-bell on it – it seemed to be serving as a reception desk.

As the group approached, she didn’t look up.

Fen pressed down on the bell.

The teen waited a full three seconds before:

1.) sighing,
2.) folding the corner of the page she was on in order to close and set down the book,
3.) adjusting the pin-covered jean jacket she was wearing,
4.) leaning against the back of the armchair,
“Hey,” said the teen. “Yes?”

“Fray,” Fen said. “They’re here.”

Fray’s eyes darted over to Eliot, maintaining the kind of withering non-expression that only teens could wield. They darted back to Fen. “They are indeed. I’m assuming the suite?”

She slid a key across the table without waiting for an answer.

Quentin picked it up.

“Welcome to Fillory,” said Fray. “Your room’s upstairs on the left.”

“Thanks,” said Quentin.

“Take some sandwiches when you go.” Fray gestured with grand sarcasm to a buffet table with far more food on it than would be needed to feed the town’s entire populace of…four?

At least four.

“Have a feast,” Fen said, “and then feast your eyes on the town again! I’m gonna go unpack, and – all the best with your work.”

“You really won’t be joining us?” Quentin asked.

Fen shook her head. “Oh, I don’t want to impose my opinion! And...I trust you to form your own.” She didn’t look at Eliot. “You’ll...you’ll let me know what you really think, when we meet back up? Looking forward to getting your real, direct perspective on it – ”

***

They had a sheep-view window.

Of course they fucking did.

The inn was just far enough away that the sheep perfectly filled the frame. It was like Fen had taken it into dimensional consideration, scaling Ember for the most complete view of the off-putting tourist attraction for the most valued (least put-off) tourists.

Eliot and Quentin were sitting on the bed, eating sandwiches. Eliot was watching the sheep. Watching someone on the bench watch the sheep. Watching the very occasional person or two walk around outside, usually past the sheep.

Quentin had stayed focused on either his sandwich, or the multicolored squares of the quilt. Mostly the sandwich.

Probably neither, really.

Ok, Eliot thought. Time for the delicate bringing-up –

But Quentin swallowed a bite and spoke first.

“You’re doing – uh, you’re doing admirably well with…all of this.”
“All of this being…the watchman out the window? That sculpture having infinitely more of a presence than any human member of the populace, including Fen, who is practically made of presence?”

Quentin was chewing another bite of sandwich. Eliot continued.

“Not unexpected. And, ah – I use the word populace, but I doubt that word is really applicable – ”

“Yeah, it’s – ” Quentin had started speaking again having not really swallowed, and so found he had to do that before completing his sentence – “it’s, uh – you know, I don’t really have a word for it? For the…tone of this place.”

He stared at the last corner of his sandwich as if it would have the answer.

Eliot nodded. “It defies definition, but it’s also…probably something with a negative connotation, if we had to attempt it? But, Q, it really is no worse than I thought it would be. So I’m not sure where I’m at with it can be called admirable, but it’s looking like I can at least wait it out ok. The benefit of being a pessimist. The real definition I’m looking for is – how are you with this?”

Quentin tried to look at Eliot instead of the sandwich, like a man struggling to come out of a sandwich-induced trance. Like someone who was just realizing Eliot was there, despite already being in the middle of a conversation with him.

“The truth, El?” He took a moment to weigh his words, or maybe even just to beckon words back to him. “This is…The Beauty of All Life number fifty-one, right?”

“Yeah,” Eliot said. “If segments were years, we’ve done a half-century of these.”

“Well, this is the first time I have no idea what our angle is. Every other time, it’s been easy. This time – ” he sighed – “I – I just don’t know, honestly. Fillory gives me the creeps. It’s so…aesthetically thoughtful, and devoid of anything else. It just – ” he sighed again – “it feels wrong.”

Eliot was getting the creeps hearing him talk about it.

“There’s something missing,” Quentin said.

“Verve?” Eliot hazarded.

“A soul,” Quentin said.

They sat in silence.

“You’ve got one of those,” Eliot said, then. “A soul. I know that. Even if Fillory doesn’t, you’ve got one. And I trust in your ability to tell a story of value about even this place. I’m serious, Q – ”

Quentin was looking like he was going to fold in on himself – “even if Fillory has nothing to offer, anything you produce within it is going to turn out ok, because you’re doing it. Even if it has nothing to offer. Because you do. You have the most to offer out of anyone I know. So – even if we have to bullshit this, even if we never find an angle beyond boy, Fen sure is good at building stuff – we’ll make it through this, we’ll make something of it, and we’ll do segment number fifty-two. Our time here is finite. We go past this.”

“God,” Quentin said, oh-so-quietly. “Yeah, I really fucking love you. I really do.”

They leaned against each other.
“Ok,” Quentin said. “Ok, we’ll figure it out.”

“We always do,” Eliot said, imbued with gratefulness.

“Just – no disaster porn, ok? We still hold to that. It’s low-hanging fruit.”

Eliot nodded, in a way that was also kind of a nuzzle.

“No disaster porn,” he said.

***

“Last year – flaming bow and arrow. The year before that, drive-by Molotov cocktail! And the year before that – well, no one knows, really, we just saw it on fire, and that was that. Impressive blaze, though – ”

“Jesus Christ,” Eliot said, closing his eyes and holding the bridge of his nose.

Quentin paused the screen on Tick Pickwick’s face, mid-monologue. He scrubbed forward on his editing software. “He goes on like this for…five minutes. Jesus, El, why didn’t you stop him?”

“I was transfixed with horror. Why didn’t you stop him?”

“I mean…same?” He wrote the timestamp on a notepad. “I’ve never…I don’t think I’ve met anyone who tells longer stories?”

“And you love a long-ass narrative,” Eliot said, very fondly, “so that’s really saying something. Have another cookie.” He took another sip of the hot cider they’d also brought up from downstairs.

They were sitting on the bed again, tray of snacks between them, laptop editing suite resting in front of them, going through their dailies. The vast majority of their material, almost all anyone had wanted to talk about, was the repeated destruction of the sheep. Everything revolved around the sheep’s misfortune, and Fillory’s by association. An endless loop of personal sheep-trauma.

Fen had given them recommendations on who to talk to, but if she was hoping these people were going to shine a light on Fillory through any method other than fireglow, she’d been very mistaken.

Benedict, who turned out to be a kindly, pensive young man, had taken time during his afternoon watch shift to show them blueprints of the town from its creation four years prior. However, he veered away from the marvels of architecture and town planning into a well-thought-out list of all the best vantage points for staking out the sheep for protection, as well as the ways in which his commemorative 3D-model business had suffered – first from a glut of near-identical sheep-themed commissions from an influx of tourists he couldn’t keep up with, then an almost complete diminishing of traffic. Despite all that was clearly a source of heartbreak for him, he still stayed in Fillory, and still helped Fen build the sheep every year. His eyes kept going to Ember during their conversation, as if checking that he was still there.

Rafe and Abigail, the keepers of the town museum (which Eliot thought an odd thing to have, given Fillory’s relatively short history), also seemed promising to talk to at first, though Abigail could have projected her voice more. She mumbled them through a model of the town and the surrounding area that Benedict had crafted. Every building was accounted for – an Ember (even smaller than Fen’s ornament version), the town square, Whitespire Inn, the rest of the shops and homes, the trees surrounding it, a cozy-looking cabin in the woods, more trees, more cabins, more homes, and eventually the airport they’d landed at earlier that day.
Then Rafe had returned with the tourist records, displaying a spike and ebb, similar to what Benedict had described, as well as police reports from the fires, three years’ worth –

Eliot ran interference with the information so that Quentin could go back to the miniature, sweeping over the whole thing with his handheld camera in small-scale aerial shots. Eliot felt reassured by the thought that it might end up resembling the views he’d seen from the real plane today.

But watching the way Quentin now watched back the slowest of close-up pans toward the model planes, Eliot took a long non-alcoholic swig of cider, wishing there was a kick to it.

“Your dad?” Eliot asked then, cautiously.

Quentin blinked a couple of times. “Yeah,” he said, as the camera continued to drift closer. “You know, I always found flying so fucking unbearable…and kind of even more so whenever I thought about how much he loved the idea, in that I felt guilty about my anxiety surrounding it? I wished I could have enjoyed it with him more. I can look at planes, knowing that he loved them, but I hate being on them. No, actually – it’s hard to look at them now, too.” He broke the cookie he was holding in half; crumbs got on the quilt. “He’d love this specifically,” he said more quietly, pointing a cookie half at the screen. “Fuck. It always hits at weird times.” His shoulders dropped. “The holidays are going to be weird this year. So much…so much of the grief is going to float back up, I think. I’m surprised it hasn’t already, I think some part of me is trying to protect the rest, but then – I worry it’s just going to show up bigger when it really does get here.”

“We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it,” Eliot said. He’d started tracing circles on Quentin’s back as soon as Quentin had begun to speak. “Any bridges that appear. We’ll all help you cross them safely.”

“Thank you,” Quentin said.

He let Eliot continue the circles as he returned to scrubbing forward through the footage. Eliot could see him fighting to push through, to keep his mind and heart in the arms of his work, rather than in the clutches of something else.

Eliot kept tracing. He let the images pass by without meaning. His brain kept almost drifting to a question –

What was it like to have a father who was good? A father who was worth missing?

But it felt unfair to even think it. Every time the thought prodded at him, he heaved it all the way out of his mind, and focused all the more on unbroken circles for Quentin –

“He liked you,” Quentin said. “He always asked after you. I think he would have approved of this.”

Tears had sprung to Eliot’s eyes. “Yeah?”

“Definitely.”

“Well, here’s to Ted Coldwater,” Eliot said, trying not to sound choked up, raising his mug of cider.

They continued their work – or tried to, anyway. Quentin made a valiant attempt at locating an editing groove, but either through the lack of a clear throughline or his current emotional state –

“I think I need a break,” he said, eventually. “I just need a few minutes to sit quietly?”
Eliot stretched a bit—sitting like this, without back support, had an unfavorable effect after a while.
“Do you want me to head downstairs?”

“Is that alright?”

Eliot got up and put on his coat. “I’ll have a smoke. Text me when you’re ready for company again.” He picked up the tray—implying that when it was time, he’d bring back a replenishment of baked goods. “If I don’t hear from you in a while, though, I’m going to check on you, ok?”

Quentin’s attempt at a smile was more successful than his recent jabs at editing. “It’s a plan.”

***

Eliot’s pockets contained two sheep, some loose straw, his keys, a lighter—and nothing else.

Damn. He really fucking could have used the nicotine. Cigarettes were now added to his list of omissions, along with a better coat, better shoes, a better sense of self-protection—

He walked onto the back porch—alone but for a determinedly calm-looking Fray, sitting on a woven chair, waving her hand in front of her face.

Hmm.

“I’m in the market for a cigarette,” Eliot said. “Know where I could find one?”

“No clue,” she said, burying herself deeper in her giant blue fuzzy coat.

Then she coughed. Breath burst out like smoke.

She was staring at a sparse grouping of trees at the edge of the yard. The sun would be starting to set on the other side of the building now—hopefully Quentin would have an increasingly colorful view. Meanwhile, on this far side, beyond the shade of the deck, a soft ambient glow was filtering through the leaves, as if light was being siphoned out of them with the sun’s spinning away.

“Word of advice?” Eliot said. “The air’s not so clear here. You might not be getting away with as much as you think.”

From within the pile of fabric, a muffled statement: “Fen’ll be back from watch soon.”

Then, an even more muffled request: “Don’t tell her?”

Eliot sat in the other woven chair. “Can I interest you in a cover story? I, a long-time delinquent, could smoke a cigarette out here, thus providing a plausible source of atmospheric disturbance. Either way, I won’t tell your boss what you may or may not have been doing.”

Fray’s eyes snapped over to Eliot. “What was I doing?”

“Nothing.”

A fresh cigarette emerged from somewhere within the coat, held out toward Eliot.

He took it and lit it in one click.

He took a drag, trying not to inhale too gratefully—for the sake of example, or something. “Smoking really is bad for you, you know. They’re not kidding about it. If this is your chosen rebellion, you might want to pick something more…constructively destructive? Destroying
yourself to prove a point ends up proving theirs. Plus, it’s woefully basic. If you’re going to run the risk of getting I told you so’d on anything, I recommend choosing something at the very least more original, if not worth defending. Don’t you want to be better than the legion of copycats who still, in defiance of all evidence, think they’re just so soulful, rather than polluted? Give me a break. Get creative, and really thrive. Living well is the best revenge. Smoking is the tackiest.”

He took a third drag and watched the trees blanch.

“But,” Fray asked, emerging slightly, “why do you do it, if you think it’s basic?”

Eliot breathed out, contributing further to the fog around him.

“Destructive,” Fray added.

“I had no soul to start with,” Eliot replied. “The stakes don’t exist for me.”

He went to tap ash onto the ground – and she held out half of a hide-a-key rock that seemed to have been repurposed into an ashtray, the stub of half a cigarette recently stabbed into a small pile of dust in the compartment.

He accepted the rock. “Ok, that’s creative. But that’s you, and not the smoking, remember that.”

He availed himself of the ash.

“She’s not my boss,” Fray said.

Eliot looked up. “What is she?”

“She’s my mom.”

He set the portion of rock on the arm of the chair. “Oh.”

“Well, foster mom, anyway. She knows I don’t like it mentioned.”

Eliot nodded. “So how was that? Making the change to Fillory?”

She ducked her face into her coat again, then seemed to pull herself back out through force of will.

“It’s dumb. I always feel like –”

She almost ducked down again. Regrouped again.

“I don’t know,” she said. “She tries. She does her best. She directs so much care at me. More than I’ve ever gotten before. She tries to understand me. But even so – I don’t think she can see past herself sometimes. Past this place. Her thoughts get trapped in Fillory.”

Eliot sighed. Tendrils of shadow were beginning to wend their way around the trees. Smoke was curling up from his hand. “That’s the thing about anywhere this size – not a lot of square footage. Depending on the person, they might possess more than can be contained within it. Stuff bounces off the walls sometimes, when they try to find an outlet. Instead of breaking through or altering anything, they get hit in the eyes instead.”

“Yeah,” Fray said.

She looked like she was mulling something over, so Eliot focused on nicotine and gave her whatever time she needed to think.
It took most of the cigarette.

When she was ready, she said: “You talked to a lot of people today, right?”

“Some.”

“They all talked about the fires?”

“All. The party line with everyone, to our regret.”

“But none of them were interested in figuring out who’s been setting them.”

Eliot paused on breathing in his last drag. “That’s true.”

_Who wouldn’t want to torch a dream? he thought. Could be anyone._

“They’ve lived with the problem so long,” Fray said, “they can’t think of anything else. They talk about it most, even though it hurts them the most. But they never stop it.”

“Sometimes dwelling on the problem is more accessible than solving it. And – ” Eliot extinguished the cigarette – “this is where it gets real thorny, here – because sometimes it can’t be solved. Sometimes you can’t have both the thing you want and its salvation. Life is full of impossible scenarios.”

“You’re a font of knowledge.”

“I am your elder,” Eliot said. “I have _experience_. And I am here to tell you, compromise is the currency of the world.”

“That’s depressing.”

“Isn’t it just.”

“I don’t accept it.”

“Good. That’s a rebellion worth defending. A hard road, but a _good_ one. If you manage it, you’ll do more than what most people could – ”

“Just – _ugh_. I mean, you said it yesterday, right? _How_ can this be _worth doing_? They keep losing everything they put out there. Why would they put it out there _more_? It makes no sense.”

“You watched the interview?”

“Of course I did – I’m the one who told Fen the show existed. Plus, she’s my _mom_, I wasn’t _not_ going to watch it – ”

“Thanks for watching – in general, I suppose, and even that shitshow. I’m sorry for how I talked to Fen. Have _you_ asked her why – ”

“Of course I have! For all that she tries to hear me on everything else, as soon as I say something that doesn’t fit, it’s like my words are silent. It’s like I’m invisible. Like I’m not real. She just keeps going. So I…just shut down.”

“I get it,” Eliot said.

It was his turn to mull things over, and Fray’s turn to let him.
When he was ready: “Our disasters are not what define us,” she said. Or something like that. My assessment is – from the extremely limited amount of time I’ve known her, so, grain of salt here – she’s trying to figure out how to walk the walk, even if she has no idea how to yet. To become more than what’s been happening. She’s trying to reach out. To be open. But she is closed the fuck up, kid. Be patient with her, maybe, but don’t stop trying with her. It’s tough to figure out how to become an escape artist when you’re far more used to having your hands tied.” He looked right at Fray. “Adults aren’t necessarily smarter than you. She might need you to keep calling her on her bullshit. She might be embarrassed that she doesn’t have the answer. But it seems like she is looking for one.”

Eliot almost lifted a cigarette that wasn’t there, then continued. “I’ve seen parents that don’t have the answer. That don’t give one single shit about it. That don’t give a shit about…enlightened forms of living, or whatever. And it’s for you to say, but I doubt Fen is one of them.”

“She’s not,” Fray said, exhausted. “Which only makes it harder to know what to do.”

“Understandable. But – listen, it’s her work, yeah? It’s not yours. You can comment on it, you can help her with it if it makes sense, but it isn’t yours. Your work is in building your own life. You see her mistakes? Don’t repeat them. Make your own, more fun mistakes. Don’t sweat it so much.” He suddenly felt like he might have been rambling, and pretended to clear his throat. “Anyway.”

The smallest of flurries had started to fall in the dim, their paths like mist.

“Anyway,” he repeated, standing up. “This scapegoat is gonna head in.”

He was nearly in the building –

“Eliot?” Fray said, more timidly than she needed to. “Thanks?”

He turned around, to say you’re welcome, or something –

Her book was in her hands again – he hadn’t seen it until now, it must have been secreted away, too. She must have been about to start back up, and decided to thank him first instead.

“What are you reading?” he asked.

Her face scrunched a bit, surprisingly Fen-like. “Oh, uh – ”

She held it up sheepishly, fingers held within the sandwich of the pages she’d opened to.

It was a film textbook.

“Huh,” Eliot said.

Fray had the look of wanting to become more coat than person again. Eliot knew that look well.

“You want to be on t.v.?”

“Hell no,” she said, with a sudden forced excess of bravado. “I want to make it.”

“You should’ve said something.”

Fray’s mouth twisted. She looked at the snow. She shook her head.

Eliot – god, Eliot knew that look, too.
“Hey,” he said. “You want a mentor?”

Her whole head immediately turned to look at him with an unimpressed *are you fucking kidding me* expression.

“Quentin’s great with kids,” he said. “And he knows a fuckton more than that book has in it, probably.”

“Maybe,” she said.

“Anyway,” Eliot said again. “You know where to find us.”

As he walked into the lobby-slash-living-room-slash-whatever-it-was, he almost felt like –

It was a new feeling. Whatever it was.

He’d always told himself he was immortal. But he never quite believed it.

He was now starting to feel like he’d really survived something. That he’d gotten through to the other side. That the endless network of tunnels had been navigable after all. That he’d emerged long enough that they definitively might not be his home anymore. That he’d tasted fresh air long enough that it no longer disturbed him.

He felt like it might be truly safe to take root in himself after all.

He smiled to himself as he poured two new mugs of warm cider –

That he promptly dropped as he turned to find Fen standing next to him, holding an Express Mail envelope.

Ceramic shattered on the floor. Cider splattered on their coats.

Fen didn’t start at all. She laughed.

“Eliot! Don’t worry about it –”

She pushed the envelope closer, and Eliot took a step back.

He must have – he must have really looked spooked, because though her face held, her eyes immediately filled with worry, and her words with carefulness.

They echoed unnaturally, but that was – that was surely just him –

“I don’t know how this happened,” Fen said, distorted and distant, “but…someone really wanted to get in touch with you, I guess. It’s addressed to Whitespire, for –”

**ELIOT WAUGH**

Eliot ran upstairs.

**ELIOT**

Outside. He usually needed to get outside. He usually needed air. But – this, *this* was the claustrophobia he’d expected –

This was –
If he went outside, he’d only feel smaller.

He’d only be reminded.

He needed control.

He burst into the suite, where the lights were off, the lamps were on, and Quentin still sat on the bed, now fixated on the laptop screen. Eliot darted around and sat himself on the floor between the side of the bed and the window, knees to his chest.

“Eliot?” Quentin said, turning –

Eliot could see the stars from here, if he looked up. He could see the stars through the snow, and nothing else.

“Is he ok?” asked Fen’s voice from the doorway.

Same goddamn question.

“What happened?” Quentin asked, turned the other way.

She held it up. She must have held it up.

“Jesus Christ,” Quentin swore, quietly. “Ok.”

Eliot felt Quentin’s weight lift away, heading farther from him. Something tore out of his soul – no, his –

“I’ll take it,” Quentin said at the door, at the same volume. “I’ve got him.”

After a moment, Eliot heard the door click closed.

“Drop it,” he heard himself say. “Don’t – don’t hold onto it.”

There was a soft sound – like the result of gravity having done its work on heavy paper from hand-height.

Then, sock-foot footsteps.

Then – not a sound so much as –

Quentin enveloping him. Cramming himself into the crevice, too, and getting as much of himself around Eliot as completely as possible. He sort of – turned himself backwards as he came around the corner, heading in spine-first. He was curled up in Eliot’s lap, between the V of Eliot’s thighs and chest, with his knees under Eliot’s armpit and his feet hooked around his waist. One arm looped under the other armpit, hand on his shoulder, and the other arm looped around to hold the back of his head, and Quentin’s head rested above the same shoulder that had his hand on it, and Eliot could feel Quentin’s breath on his neck –

He started sobbing.

Quentin stroked his shoulder. Caressed the back of his head.

“Ok,” he said, softly. “Ok.”

It hurt. It hurt at the very core of him.
He kept crying.
Quentin kept holding him.
Eliot felt nothing.

Being a person was nonsense. Being a person was a stupid thing to do. Thinking that he could connect with anyone else, thinking that he could exist outside of himself –

Quentin kept holding him.

***

He didn’t know how much time had passed. But he knew that outside, it was now more snow than sky.

He was breathing the kind of shuddering breaths that one does when trying to re-establish regularity.

Quentin was still holding him.
And he was holding Quentin.

He didn’t know when he’d brought his arms up and around him, but he had. He was holding him tightly.

He had been holding him tightly.

“Ah,” Eliot said, testing his voice and finding it ragged. He almost really did choke. “Well. This is stupid.”

“It is what it is,” Quentin said, gently.

“It’s unnecessary,” Eliot croaked.

“Kinda sounded like you needed it, for good or for ill.” Quentin’s forehead was pressed against the side of Eliot’s face.

Eliot closed his eyes and tried not to scream.

And – and he felt Quentin shift his energy somehow, in response to the tension. Like he was trying to project a calming bubble over both of them. Through them.

Which only made Eliot want to scream more.

“It’s not ok,” he said.

“No,” Quentin agreed, his voice infused with the same calm energy. “It’s not.”

“I – I don’t know what to do.”

“Keep breathing,” Quentin said. “In through your nose, out through your mouth. Keep breathing. I’ve got you.”

Eliot tried.

He kept trying.
“I can’t do this,” he said.

“You’re doing it already.”

“No – I. This. I can’t do this. You can’t expect me to stay here with you.”

He was holding Quentin even more tightly.

“Why not?” Quentin asked, with a slight hesitation.

“I trust you too much,” Eliot said, which felt like a weird leap in logic, but it was the first thing he thought of to say, if he was even thinking at all.

He opened his eyes.

Snow was falling in lumps, streaming over patches of darkness.

He kept breathing.

“I’m terrified,” he said, barely. “I’m – I’m so fucking scared, Q. All the time.”

“I know,” Quentin said.

The calm pierced into him now. It started coursing through him. He closed his eyes again, and opened them, and he was crying again, silently, freely.

“Here,” Quentin whispered into Eliot’s skin. “I’m gonna adjust. You need to hear this.”

And he slowly navigated his hands free, and angled himself so Eliot could see his face. He ensured it – placing his hands on either side of Eliot’s and gently guiding it to the side, slightly, to align with his.

He didn’t bother to wipe away Eliot’s tears, which were getting on his hands. And Eliot somehow wouldn’t have wanted him to.

Eliot’s hand spread wider on Quentin’s back.

Quentin looked like he’d been crying, too. And his eyes were refilling with tears – some kind of empathetic reflection.

“You are not alone,” Quentin said slowly, resolutely, intently. “If you think you are, then you’ve been lied to. You are not alone, Eliot. I can see you in there.”

Quentin kissed him. It took Eliot a half-second to even realize it was happening – he almost didn’t respond.

All he could do was accept the blessing.

“Eliot,” Quentin breathed.

Eliot Waugh.

“We can help you,” Quentin whispered. “We all can. Me, Margo, Julia – we’ve been right there. Looking out for you. You’re not alone –”

“You’re a fucking miracle,” Eliot said, suddenly.
Quentin shook his head in millimeter increments. “I’m just me.”

“I’m going to ruin you,” Eliot said, holding him even closer.

“I disagree.”

This time, Eliot was ready for the kiss.

How had this happened? How had he found someone who not only would endure sitting with him in this, but do so willingly, and treasure him within it? It was brain-breaking.

It was heart-breaking, too – in that it felt like his heart was cracking open. All of him was. Not because Quentin was forcing it to happen, but because he had chosen to be present with Eliot in a way that led him to feel safe enough to try the cracking-open himself. In a way that allowed for him to attempt the agency of feeling. It didn’t happen unwillingly on Eliot’s end.

It hurt, but – in a way that was clarifying. Purifying. Utterly unfamiliar. Scary in a good way.

It took all of the shit he was feeling – that insurmountable, unacknowledged, absolute and total garbage – and transformed it into something bearable. Welcomed it in as an incorporated part of his being.

It was a fucking miracle.

That someone would see it, and help him do that with it.

If he didn’t know where he was. If he didn’t know how he was doing. If he retreated down to an atomic level, or was catapulted beyond the reaches of the universe. If he lost himself entirely.

He knew Quentin would be with him.

Eliot.

“You taste like cigarettes,” Quentin sighed into Eliot’s mouth. “And apples.”

“You taste like someone I want to keep kissing forever,” Eliot replied, softly, certainly, opening his eyes again –

Quentin was backlit in red.

An eerie, wavering halo of red. He resembled a glorious, cursed, tear-stained angel. The color tinged the snow swirling behind him in the window – all of it, strained through a crimson filter – Quentin’s brow was knit together. “Eliot?” He was blinking. “You’re flickering like firelight – ”

He traced the edges of Eliot’s face with his hands.

Eliot swallowed. “Speak for yourself.”

They scrambled to disentangle themselves and peek their heads up above the bottom of the windowsill.

Ember was ablaze.

“Yeah,” Quentin replied, crawling past Eliot to go grab his coat.

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It was snowing more violently than ever – the wind sliced at them, wet and sharp and cold. Even rarer and more sudden slashes of black were appearing behind the white, like lightning strikes in negative.

But as they rushed toward the giant ball of fire in the middle of the square, they experienced the singularly bizarre sensation of an ever-increasing searing temperature encroaching its way through the freeze.

The colors of Ember’s fire – more heat than color, perhaps, given its level of intensity – tilted with the will of the wind, then snapped against it as if fighting back with a will of their own.

Ember was now no longer a creature of straw – he was a creature of flame and molten steel, a white-hot frame emanating emptiness –

The bonfire towered above them, abnormally tall. It was difficult to look at, from the sheer fact of wattage. It was as if the sun had put itself down on the ground in Fillory –

The gathered citizenry – still sparse, even in the face of this event – were mostly shielding their eyes, as if in religious awe.

But really, it did defy science.

It shouldn’t have been possible for something to be so stubbornly on fire with so much moisture in the air.

Fen stood the closest – just past the boundary of a safe distance – seemingly not bothering to protect herself. Just watching, her hair whipping in the wind, the gold of her coat almost blending in with the blaze. Fray stood a ways behind her, in her shadow, her hands a visor.

Quentin ran past them, in some misguided impulse that in this situation, closer equaled more helpful.

“Q!” Eliot shouted –

Thank god his legs were longer than Quentin’s. He overtook him, turning to catch him, skidding them both to a halt.

The sudden cease of momentum rocked them, and they both planted their feet. Everything slowed for a moment.

Sparks were floating down around them, sluggishly but chaotically, like falling stars turned fireflies.

Temperature was strafing down Eliot’s back. He walked them slowly back toward Fen, surrounding Quentin as best he could.

“Please,” Eliot said. “Stay safe.”

Quentin nodded.

Eliot unwound himself from Quentin – mostly – and turned to face Ember again, but Fen turned to face them, so he redirected his view to her instead.
“Sooner than I thought,” said Fen, not quite loud enough under the sound of the flame. “Don’t film this,” she continued, looking down at Quentin’s hands – where there was no camera.

She looked resigned. Enduring. There were complete fires in her eyes, two sheep that traveled with her pupils and irises as they cast about.

She was biting her lip to keep herself from reflex-smiling. Even now.

Even when it was probably the opposite of what she felt.

Eliot wanted to scream again.

“What can we do to help?” Quentin shouted, then looked back at the small crowd of stationary folk. Eliot looked, too – some of them appeared to be weeping. Some of them alternated between keeping their eyes cast down and chancing a glance upwards. They were observing it like it was a natural, though disheartening occurrence. *Oh well.*

“Do you have – I don’t know, *water* or something?” Eliot asked no one in particular – asked the swirling snow, really, directing it an accusatory look. He was irked that the question didn’t result in its aggregation or redirection in such a way that it would actually smother the flames as it should
“Aren’t you prepared for this? Why isn’t anyone doing anything? Where’s the offense is the best defense –”

“It only works until he gets a goal in!” Fen yelled, over the overpowering sound of crackling. “We watch Ember constantly, but whenever this actually starts up there’s not much we can do. Straw catches fire so easily – it burns too quickly! He’s so damaged already.”

She faced the assemblage of the people of Fillory.

“Move back!” she shouted, waving her arms. “We have to wait it out!”

Tick, amidst the group, made his own shouts to the populace, gathering them up and getting them further away. “Ok, people, you know the drill! Buddy system in order –”

“Even in this?” Eliot asked, gesturing wide to the general snow of it all. “Why is this happening at all? This isn’t normal –”

Fen rolled her eyes. “It’s normal for –”

Eliot noticed that the bottom of his coat was on fire, on the left side.

He scampered back, but the coat, of course, went with him. Then he struggled to get himself out of the sleeves, but with Quentin darting to assist, they got the coat free and stamped the fabric out.

“– a show-off,” Fen said.

The pocket had burned open, and two small sheep were on fire in the snow.

“Your lighter?” Quentin asked.

“No, no,” Eliot replied, mystified. “It would have been in my other pocket –”

He was kicking snow over the ornaments, and they were still burning.

“This happens every year,” Fen said, attention on the bigger sheep now.

“What the hell?” Quentin asked, quietly.

“It’s ok,” Fen said. “Benedict and I and a few others built another one, just in case. That’s our play this time. We have it stashed away in a barn. We’ll get it towed into town. He can’t have it in him to do this twice in one year –”

“Fucking seriously?” Eliot asked, his scarf thrashing about. “You’re ok with this? All you wanted to talk about was stopping it, and now you’re just going to do this again? This is how you fight?”

“…Him?” Quentin asked, quietly.

“What else do you want me to do?” Fen snapped. “I’d personally love to not have this keep happening! I’d personally love to talk about something else! Anything else! I don’t want to have to do this, but no plan has worked, really, so here we are!”

“Just don’t build it!” Eliot shouted back.

“I shouldn’t have to not build it!” Fen shouted louder.

The fire was still going next to them, stronger than ever.
“I don’t think you have a choice,” Eliot said.

“Fuck that,” Fen replied. “I always have a choice. I choose this.”

Eliot shrugged. “Weird choice, but ok.”

“Him?” Quentin asked, as pissed off as the rest of them. “Who’s…he?”

Eliot looked at Quentin.

Quentin was looking at Fen, who Eliot could feel was still entirely focused on him. But he couldn’t look back at her; not right now.

Instead, he looked at Quentin looking at Tick across the way, who was looking at the ground.

He looked at Quentin looking at everyone he could.

No one answered him.

“What did you say?” Eliot asked Quentin. “He?”

Fray spoke up, hands in her pockets, the fibers of her coat drifting like blue kelp. She was still standing close by their little group.

“The town founder,” she said, strong but quavering.

Eliot felt the storm shift slightly, the sparks fall more slowly.

Through the wind and snow, he could see Tick nodding.


“You wanna meet him?” Fray replied, with less of a quaver.

“I talked to him last year,” Tick called out, holding up his hands.

“Mom should take them,” Fray called back.

She turned to Fen.

“Will you?” she asked, very quietly.

Eliot felt Fen pull her anger and attention away from him. He saw it simmer down as she looked at Fray with the third genuine look he’d seen her give someone – fourth, if he counted the rage she’d just directed his way, and he definitely did.

“I will,” Fen said to Fray, hugging her.

“Step away from the flame,” she continued, trying to adjust her foster daughter’s hair despite the uncooperative atmosphere. “I’ll be back soon.”

She put on a mayoral posture once more, gesturing to Eliot and Quentin. “The two of you, come with me. You’re visible, maybe he’ll like that.”

Quentin’s eyes were wide with frustration; he was shaking his head in annoyance and curiosity. “He…will?”
“Don’t bring your camera,” Fen said to Quentin, even though Quentin still did not have his camera on him.

They set off –

“Wait,” Fray said to Eliot.

Eliot turned back, eyebrows raised.

Fray was holding out her coat to him. “Cold journey.”

*It’s like someone skinned a Muppet and straightened its hair*, Eliot thought.

It looked alive as she held it, trying to twist away.


Fray nodded, and Eliot caught up to the other two.

“Uh – so…Fen, what about the –” Quentin began, waving back at the sculptural fire.

“Disregard for now,” Fen said, as she led them back to her house. “It’ll stop eventually.”

***

They were in the woods.

Fen had led them through the decor-laden Whitespire Inn, to the back porch (which now was scented with the perfume of both cigarettes and the giant fucking fire that was still occurring), to the sparse grouping of trees in the backyard –

To the fucking woods that began behind it.

They had been crunching through the snow between the trees in silence for fifteen minutes. Well – silence except for the howl of the storm, which couldn’t quite fully reach them. With a shaking of branches and a mist of sifted snow, the trees were absorbing the impact. Any reverberations were beyond them; there was silence on a human level. They were a snowglobe inside a tornado.

A snowglobe full of quiet rage. Eliot had desperately been trying not to shake himself around, tending to his anger carefully, letting it fuel his steps.

Fen was a pillar of metal in the darkness ahead of him. Every stride of hers shook the earth.

He didn’t want to think about her. He didn’t want to feel angrier. He didn’t want to feel anything about this situation at all. It had nothing to do with him.

It was literally a dressed-up pile of straw in the middle of nowhere that kept having accidents. *Fuck* ing honestly.

But that didn’t change the fact that he did indeed feel angry. It didn’t change the fact that Fen was walking like she could have crossed the entire earth without tiring – unleashed at whatever she was walking towards, but still inside her cage from their viewpoint.

It didn’t change that he ultimately felt that he couldn’t blame her. Which somehow made him angrier.
He felt angry at himself that he’d been angry at her.

He let himself feel it. He tried to just hold it and see it for what it was instead of turning it on himself. He didn’t want to turn it on anyone anymore. He hoped that eventually it would metabolize into something more helpful.

He just kept walking.

Meanwhile, he was sort of aware that Quentin was spending his walk lobbing questions at the moving barrier that was Fen. That keen investigator’s look was likely in his eyes – having been given a lead, Quentin now required answers – but Eliot couldn’t dare try to process much more outside his internal anger-balancing act yet.

Quentin, obviously, seemed to be feeling the opposite, needing to process everything out loud at once.

“Fen, can we get on the same page here? We’re going to see the person who…founded the town – and…is this the easiest way to get to him? I’m just checking –” “Uh, Fen, just to check, also – why do we need to see him, exactly? I have my…well, I have my thoughts, and we’re happy to go along, but I don’t think you mentioned –” “And – hm – I’m wondering if it could have been helpful to mention him before now? It’s just – I don’t think a single person we talked to brought him up in interviews, but they seemed to know about him –” “Wait – does Fillory not have firefighters or a firehouse or anything? Isn’t that a pretty basic necessity?” “How does something just…stay on fire like that, anyway?” “Fen, I’m so sorry I didn’t ask this before now…how are you holding up, are you sure you don’t want to –”

Fen, like Eliot, just kept walking.

The recurring styrofoam-crush of steps and Quentin’s monologue to a silent someone else eventually lulled him enough that the slope of his anger was finally beginning to smooth out, and he could think outside of himself again with far less fear he’d do or say something rash.

So: inventory.

His feet, though they probably still looked great, were cold.

His hands – also definitely cold. (Perhaps he could begrudgingly admit that gloves did have a time and place after all; a moisturizing regiment would be necessary after this.)

His torso was, to put it mildly, questionable, but he couldn’t deny that it was finally the correct amount of warm.

Quentin was moving next to him in verbal openness, but physical containment, with a brain working on overdrive so hard that Eliot could swear (now that he was paying attention) he could hear the whirring in there.

They’d all been in their own heads long enough.

He wrapped an arm around Quentin’s shoulders, hoping they’d both be able to squeeze through the plantlife like this.

Quentin’s stream-of-consciousness halted mid-word. He looked at the tacky sleeve, a brand of ostentatious Eliot had never worn before.

It broke him out of his grim reverie. His eyes traveled up to cast an almost-merry how ridiculous is
this expression at Eliot.

Eliot raised both eyebrows and smiled back.

Might as well own the ridiculousness. Wear it with élan.

“Fen!” Eliot hollered to the gold-clad figure cutting through the shadows.

“What?” she replied, curt, not bothering to look back.

“I’m sorry.”

No sound but the continued crunching of all of their footsteps.

“How can we help?” Eliot asked.

Eliot’s fingers were becoming proper icicles, but he’d be damned if he removed his hand from Quentin right now.

“We can’t know how to help without your input – ”

“My input,” Fen said, “is that I want this off the record. This isn’t for a story. You are here for insurance, maybe support, and nothing else. Can you do that?”

“What are we walking into?” Quentin asked, much more succinctly than before.

Fen stopped and turned to face them.

Her eyes regained an iota of joy upon seeing Eliot’s (Fray’s) coat, which she clearly had not expected. Did she regret missing the earliest opportunity of witnessing him trudge through in it? Did she relish the idea that he’d been behind her the whole time, wearing something so silly, and she hadn’t known, like a joke with a slow-burn punchline?

Either way, it seemed to make quick work of diffusing most of the friction between them.

Most.

“The town founder and I…we talk past each other a lot,” she told them, in a more measured way than they were used to. “If we talk at all. We keep our roles pretty separate, but we tend to disagree on how Fillory should be run. Words rarely seem to reach him from us these days, but he’ll acknowledge a gesture of attention sometimes – I hoped I could get his by going on your show, hoped I could make a public case to him of what we wanted to see the town return to, but… obviously, friends, it didn’t change anything. So, if speeches aren’t working – trying to have a conversation again will be the thing. We’ll do our best; we won’t stay long.”

“He’s the arsonist?” Quentin asked.

“Of course.”

“I mean,” Eliot said, “we didn’t know about him an hour ago, so…of course?”

“I’m never sure whether to mention him. Or give him credit? I really am sick of this. I really was hoping your story would be somewhere else! It’s not something any of us coordinated against you, I swear – it just kind of happened. We’re not trying to compromise your integrity.”

Quentin nodded.
“He doesn’t live in Fillory?” Eliot asked, with light sarcasm, as they resumed walking deeper into
the woods.

“He used to visit sometimes,” Fen said. “Not anymore.”

***

It appeared to be a comfortable home.

A log cabin – one-of-a-kind, likely – with a controlled plume of white smoke puffing out of the
chimney. A classically tranquil-looking hideaway, made all the more appealing by being an oasis
from the storm.

They all scraped their feet on the welcome mat under the sloping roof, but they were so snow-
logged, it didn’t make much difference – they were probably going to end up dripping all over this
guy’s place.

Fen shave-and-a-haircut knocked in the middle of the wreath on the front door. A rueful smile was
painted on her face. Her hair was still windswept.

“Enter,” a voice called – was it British? Some kind of heightened accent.

Fen turned the handle and walked in from the cold, Quentin and Eliot following her.

Eliot pushed the door shut – and the house was devoid of clamor, except for the softest of popping
sounds.

Huddled just inside with the others, who were trying to minimize a potential puddle, he swept his
eyes around.

The inside was as rustic as the outside, but invitingly disorganized. More importantly, it was warm
and dry. A man sat on a quilted couch near a fireplace, which held the one neat thing in the room
in it, which was also the only source of noise – a well-behaved fire. The man was holding a mug of
cocoa below his robust beard.

“How are things?” he said, sanguinely.

“Founder,” Fen replied, arms folded.

“And – oh – these are the boys from t.v.?”

“Nine o’clock weekdays,” Eliot said. “Eight central.”

Quentin’s hand found his and held on to it. Warmer.

“How are things?” the Founder asked Fen.

“Things,” Fen said, “are on fire.”

“As is tradition!”

Fen bit her lip for a moment, then continued. “Tradition’s gotten a little old for us?”

“It’s fresh and fine!”

“My definition of fine is – uh, it’s a little different. Fillory’s dwindling, Founder. We’re losing our
spirit.”

The Founder’s bushy eyebrows lifted. “Nonsense! Here, sit, have a cake. Nothing more soothing than resting and listening to a blaze.”

He held out a plate of small, finely-decorated delicacies, while tantalizingly looking at each of them in turn; he tilted his head toward the fireplace.

It was a very strange thing to be meeting his eyes, Eliot thought. There was something about the pupils – they almost had ninety-degree corners to them –

“Cakes?” the Founder inquired again.

When none of them accepted his offer, he set the plate down on his coffee table, picked up one of the treats for himself with a flourish, and continued. “You didn’t bring anyone else? Don’t you miss me?”

He popped the cake into his mouth.

“I miss my community more,” Fen said. “I’m spending my time trying to bring back their well-being –”

“You’re spending too much time with your own projects,” he said, chewing. “You should be running the town. There are still people there, aren’t there?”

“I enjoyed my projects. I’d like to keep enjoying them.” She took a deep breath. “I didn’t start them thinking you were going to make a tradition out of –” She almost lost her words; Eliot put his free hand on her back. “I didn’t put it there for you to take it away.”

“It’s my town,” the Founder said, picking up a second cake.

“But…I live there,” Fen said, in a way where it seemed like she knew how insufficient it sounded. “I was trying to make something nice for everyone that matched how I felt about Fillory! Something the people who live there with me could work on together, that might make anybody else feel welcome, too – I don’t know if I can feel that way about it anymore.”

“So…leave the town.”

“It’s my home.”

“Fillory should be enough on its own. It doesn’t need anything extra in it. That sheep, it just isn’t me –”

Quentin spoke up. “But – uh, excuse me, sorry…isn’t Fen part of Fillory, by being there? Is she not, well…kind of the town, too? Wouldn’t anyone living in it make up a piece of it? I’m just – a town’s not a town without the people in it, right, and what they do? Otherwise it’s just buildings, or –”

“I don’t recognize your face?” the Founder said.

Eliot jumped in. “He’s a producer. Listen, I’m from out of town, and my read on the situation is that the bonfire display was being met less with cheer and more with…horrified discontentment. It might just be buildings soon.”

“The buildings are nice, though,” Fen said.
“I do know you,” the Founder said to Eliot. “You’ve got a unique charisma on you. I like controlled chaos. Who wouldn’t delight in it? You’ve got it in you, certainly. In that interview – ”

“Do you like chaos, though?” Quentin asked. “Actually?”

The Founder turned his rectangles on Quentin. “I like my kind of chaos. I think it has an effect on people. The sheep gets more eyes on it with the added pizzazz.”

“Eyes of horrified discontentment,” Quentin said.

“Surely not.”

“Maybe not to start,” Fen said. “But lately. We’re no longer making enough in the tourist season to last us the rest of the year. And even the people that have been here year-round are leaving – ”

“That’s not what I envisioned.”

“But that’s what’s happening,” Eliot said. “You gonna not ignore it? Or are you gonna keep imagining your ideal result in perpetuity?”

“It’s not for me to say,” the Founder said.

“Who, then?” Quentin asked.

The Founder shrugged.

“Come talk to us,” Fen said, with a smile. “Do you want to at least see what it’s been like, or maybe be part of – ”

“I’m part of it in the way I can be.”

Fen’s expression didn’t change.

“Do you have anything to say for it at all?” Eliot asked. “Anything that might help her? She’s really been trying here.”

Fen’s expression still, of course, did not change.

The Founder shook his head. “This is how it works.”

Eliot clenched his teeth.

Fen nodded. “Ok,” she said. “I understand.” She kept nodding as she turned to Quentin, and to Eliot. “We have to go – ”

“You created Fillory?” Quentin asked the Founder.

The Founder nodded. “I did.”

“Why?”

“Why?” The Founder laughed softly. “Wouldn’t you, if you could?”

“Everything’s made up,” Eliot said, with feeling. “Your town. That sheep. All of it. It’s all made up, and it was all made by somebody. That’s true of everything, probably, fuck. Everything’s made up, and we’re all creators, and we all create what we think we’re looking for, and defend it tightly,
even though – *everything’s made up, you know?*” He sighed. “Everything’s real, too. Including people’s feelings.”

The Founder looked at him, considering.

But he didn’t say anything.

“See you next year?” Fen said, bitterly, on the way out.

***

The storm was still whistling away outside. Under the edge of the roof, Fen wrapped her coat close.

And Eliot wrapped his arms around her.

“Hey,” he said, kindly. “You said your town was ordinary.”

“The parts I like about it are,” she said, quietly and a bit brokenly. “Or, at least, I think they should be.” She laughed, as uncomplicatedly as Eliot had grown accustomed to her laughing. “It’s definitely small, though. Smaller every day!”

Quentin added himself to the hug. “You’re fighting for yourself, and the people there. That’s no small thing.”

“I don’t know if any of it’s worth a story anymore,” she said. “Even those parts that I like. But I appreciate that you were up for taking a look.”

“There’s still time. We’ll find a way to tell it that works for you,” Eliot said, kissing her forehead.

“Thank you,” Fen said. “Genuinely.”

“And,” Quentin added, “we’ll help you install Ember 2k19 2.0 tomorrow.”

Fen leaned out of the hug, one eyebrow lifted, and looked at Eliot.

It was a combination of selves – the mask, and the person who was wearing it.

“I am, believe it or not, seconding Quentin’s statement,” Eliot said. “Hell, I’ll even take a watch or something.”

Fen smiled a many-layered smile. “I’ll put you on the schedule.”

“In the meantime,” Eliot continued, as they walked into the wind, “how do you feel about workshopping a rebranding?” He snapped his fingers. “You could start calling the sculpture a ram, instead of a sheep – the pun possibilities are endless! Or, really, the one pun possibility is – ”

***

“So,” Fen said to Eliot during the walk back.

“So,” Eliot replied, “go ahead and ask it – ”

But, of course, Fen had already started speaking again while he was still on the first word of his sentence. “What do you think of Fillory so far?”
Eliot scrunched up his face in exaggerated consideration. “Genuine response?”

“No thanks!” Fen said. “Gimme the bullshit – ”

“Genuine response it is!” Eliot crowed. He regained an element of seriousness. “I grew up in a town like it.” He now made a face of actual consideration. “Well… it wasn’t meant as a destination. In that way it was different. It was stagnant. The size was similar, but the purpose wasn’t fluid. It wasn’t for coming in or heading out. It just…was. That didn’t sit right with me, but – it took so much work just to get myself anywhere else. Just to get myself even one step outside of it. So I always assumed it would be difficult to return to anything that even remotely resembled it. Like the trap would slam shut on me. I always assumed I would feel stuck, or not like myself. But – ” he almost laughed to himself now – “I think I also kept feeling those things after I left. The…stuck-ness. The not myself-ness. Somehow the trap got built on the inside, too.” His chest hurt with the oxygen of what he was saying, of the strangeness and newness of articulating it on the outside. “Does that make sense?”

Quentin, whose arm was linked with his, their hands in their pockets, leaned toward Eliot’s side, touched his arm to his ribcage.

Fen laughed again, freely. “Oh, ok! The hilarious thing is, Eliot – I really think it does!” She made her best attempt to settle her laughter as she kept speaking. “That’s why I went to Fillory when I saw it was being created. To fight probably…yeah, probably those exact things in myself? Oh man. I thought I could focus better here. I thought I could define myself in a new way. It’s still fucking tough to do! I’m still me.”

“We’re all little geographies,” Quentin said, meditatively. “We’re all little worlds.”

“I’m Fenlandia!” Fen declared to the trees.

“You are. And I’m Quentonia, and this right here – ” leaning toward Eliot again – “is Eliotland. We all have worlds to explore inside ourselves. We all have terrains that are well trod, or undiscovered, or are shifting ground – treacherous ground, even. We also…can build new space in ourselves, if we want, I think.”

“We have room to grow,” Eliot said, looking through the canopy to the clearing night sky.

“Or we can create it.” Quentin paused for a moment. “Fen, if there’s one thing I’ve seen in Fillory that I love, it’s creative people doing creative things. Benedict’s maps and models. Rafe and Abigail’s collection. Your furniture. The sculpture you’ve all made.”

“And keep remaking,” Fen said.

“You are kind of like an arts collective at this point, rather than a holiday town,” Eliot said.

“You’ve got artisan perspectives, and – ”

The trees were thinning now. The expanse was much wider. He could see the stars again. He could see galaxies.

He released the hand attached to the arm not linked around Quentin’s from its pocket, and pointed it upward.

“ – you know what you also have? You’ve got that. That’s the one thing I’ve missed, if I missed anything. Looking up and seeing vastness, unobstructed.”

Eliot looked back down at where he was walking – and prevented himself and Quentin from
tripping over a root.

“I always thought it looked like hope,” he said.

They were nearing the end of the trees. They could see a lantern glowing on Whitespire Inn’s back porch.

Eliot had one more subject to broach before they stepped into the yard.

“What do you think of Fillory, Fen? Is it still worth it to you?”

She looked right at him. She took a full moment of thought.

“It is,” she said. “At least right now.”

Eliot nodded. “Then it’s worth a lot.”

Fen didn’t smile, but her eyes provided Eliot every single thing she was feeling. Three dimensions, every color and nuance of emotion. A full human range.

“It doesn’t go unnoticed,” he said.

Fen’s eyes crinkled at the edges. “What?”

“How much effort it takes.”

“You know,” she said, unsurprised and honest down to her core, “I don’t believe it does. Go unnoticed, I mean.” She nodded, firmly, and pointed at him. “Whatever keeps boxing you in, Eliot…don’t let it get away with it.”

Eliot nodded. “Only if you’ll do the same.”

Fen held out a pinkie. “I’ll do my best.”

And they pinkie swore on it.

Then, Eliot gestured for her to take the first step back into her own backyard.

Fray was on the porch, reading by lantern light. She was bundled in a big cream-colored woollen blanket.

At the sound of their approach, she looked up right away and called out to them while she was closing her book. “I was waiting for you! The fire’s out – everyone’s having a meal inside. Join us?”

“Sure!” Quentin said. He unlinked arms with Eliot, who watched him follow Fray and Fen toward the glinting of tinsel, the sound of forks scraping on plates and the warmth of conversation –

“Here, hang on,” Eliot said.

Quentin turned back toward him. He was suffused with the lantern-light, glowing in gold and orange that burst through and beyond the purple of night-shadow.

Quentin would look like that to him under any conditions.

Eliot crowded Quentin’s space. Soaked up the sunlight.
“You’ve got a lot of snow in your hair,” he whispered, tenderly, with all the sureness in the world.

“So do you,” Quentin replied, waiting.

Eliot reflected the rays of Quentin’s bright smile.

He brushed back one lock of hair, then kissed Quentin thoroughly.

***

Even Eliot had to admit that it had been a pleasant few hours, and that he was legitimately enjoying himself. This gathering was by no means a structured affair, but it felt like the kindest mercy just to sit down on the couch next to Quentin and nourish himself with food and interaction. It warmed more than his skin and bones – something deeper, too.

He was tired, but he was there. He was alive. He was in one piece, and so was Quentin, and though they were in Fillory of all places, it was indeed temporary, and he could very much let himself enjoy what could be enjoyed of this very brief portion of his life.

To the point that – and he didn’t tell Quentin this, but – he was playing the game with himself. He didn’t live in Fillory, of course, and he wasn’t clomping around the area anymore (thank fuck), but he did find himself curious what details he’d choose to carry with him just the same. What did he appreciate in Fillory?

He’d miss the weirdest chair that Fen had built, one with a giant, angled footrest that made anyone who sat in it look like a reclining monarch (currently, Abigail, with Rafe sitting primly at her feet). He’d (perversely) miss the captured expressions on people’s faces when Tick told a yarn that went on for minutes too long, and the sense of anticipation over who would venture to break politeness and interrupt him first. He’d miss how quick Benedict was at guessing rightly in Charades, and his quiet triumph once having done so.

He’d miss seeing Quentin and Fray talk shop, and how, surprisingly, Fray could match Quentin in loquaciousness – though he hoped that he wouldn’t have to miss that forever. Maybe one day they could get Fray on the team as an intern or something. Some time in the city, if she wanted it.

He appreciated the fuzzy blue coat, now hanging up to dry, though he didn’t think he’d be trying out that look again.

He appreciated the ever-increasing morale he was seeing as the night went on. Camaraderie, getting newly easier. Friendship restored in relief. A celebration that felt genuine – the greatest kind.

And Fen.

He appreciated Fen.

He appreciated her persistence. Her goodheartedness. Her creativity. Her weirdness. Her fearless laugh. Her flawed coping mechanisms. The things she hid.

He appreciated that they made a damn good Charades team.

He might even appreciate her dumb earrings, eventually.

And, strangely, he also appreciated that though outside there was a charred frame, still standing under the cold night sky –
He appreciated that it was patiently waiting for the work of rebirth.

***

He did not appreciate the cursed white rectangle resting on the shadows of the hallway floor outside the suite, presumably kicked out in their rush to leave earlier.

But that would be something he’d always have to take with him, it seemed – no matter what.

“What do you want to do with it?” Quentin asked as they stared down at it from a few feet away.

“Shit,” Eliot said. “I don’t want to have to do anything at all. But, well – there it fucking is.”

He stepped closer. Crouched down.

Picked it up using only the tips of his fingers, making sure not to touch the handwriting.

“Open the door for me?” he asked Quentin.

As Quentin did indeed open the door, Eliot stood and carried the letter in like he was dangling a dead rat.

He crouched again to drop it on the floor, then stood again to switch on a red and gold glass-paneled side-table lamp. Picking the lamp up, he carried it as far as the cord would go, which was far enough for him to set it on the rug next to the envelope.

Then he sat cross-legged in front of the set-up, like it was an interrogation and he was settling in for questioning.

Elbows on knees. Fingers steepled under his chin.

Lungs breathing. Always keep breathing. Always always always always keep –

Quentin was sitting across from him. The letter was between them.


And Eliot felt –

ELIOT

“It’s stuffy in here,” Eliot said. “Can I – can I open the window?”

“Sure,” Quentin said. “Do you want me to get it –”

But before he could stand, Eliot was already up and heading around to the other side of the bed, in a loop that reminded him of his earlier one, when he first got this letter, when he needed to hide – which he would not be thinking about, just keep moving, keep breathing, just open the window (even slightly), just get some air, (just don’t look at Ember’s skeleton), just get back over to Quentin –

Which he, somehow, achieved.


“Are you gonna burn holes in it with your eyes –”
Eliot felt a clear, cold breeze reach their side of the room. In a sudden burst of nerve, he picked up the envelope –

And immediately dropped it right back to its place on the ground, like it scalded him.

“Are you trying to startle it?” Quentin asked, cautious and confused. “Throw it off?”

“I’m trying to do anything at all,” Eliot said, quietly.

They sat in the loudest and heaviest of silences.

“It’s dear old dad,” Eliot said, finally, gritting through the words.

He probably didn’t say it at any kind of useful volume, but it felt like he was speaking through a megaphone, that the words would echo over to Indiana. The envelope did nothing upon his naming its source, though he’d almost fully expected it to. He understood Margo’s acting like the previous envelope might bite her – *fuck*, he missed Margo dearly –

“Dear old dad,” he said again, testing the limits, “and his holiday beseechment.”

He looked up enough to find Quentin, his eyes only once trying to wander from the path and not find their destination –

Quentin, who was still there.

Quentin, who was listening. Keeping himself open. Keeping the moment safe.

“Ok?” Eliot said.

Quentin nodded, once. “Ok.” He nodded again. “I, uh…El, I do know who it’s from. Margo told me yesterday, before the show. After the first letter.” He was speaking carefully. “To explain what had happened, and why you might have needed to be…especially averse to engaging with the intersection of small towns and holidays.” He smiled a sad smile. “I hope that’s ok. She didn’t say much – just the broad strokes.”

“I’m averse for many reasons.” Eliot raised his hands to cover his face or wipe the tiredness out of his eyes or *something, anything, fuck* – but instead stopped himself halfway through the motion, hands out, palms up.

He looked away. It was still easiest to look away and talk. “It’s…he does this every year. It’s the only time he gets in touch. The only way he gets in touch.” His hands clenched. “He seems to…not understand why I keep breaking tradition and forsaking home for the holidays. You know, *fuck* all the other times of the year I’m not around. But god forbid, the holidays. What will the neighbors think?”

Eliot exhaled. Kept following the pattern of the rug.

“I mean, Eliot, I don’t know him, but – *he is* trying to communicate. He is reaching out. Does that count for something?”

Eliot exhaled again. “I…ask myself that question every time, Q. Some years, I read the letter. Most years I don’t, because the years I do read the letter make the arrival of the next year’s letter that much worse for me. Reading it is like –” He twisted his hands together in his lap now. “It’s like reading a message from an alternate dimension. It’s like intercepting a dispatch for someone who died. What he’s offering – it doesn’t read like it’s meant for me, and I’m not sure I can ever read it
any other way.”

“What do you mean?”

“He’s writing to the son he missed,” Eliot said, looking at the envelope. “He’s writing to an idea, to the son he wanted me to be. He’s writing like that will retroactively make it real.” He found Quentin’s eyes again. “He addresses it to the studio, but he never mentions the show.”

Quentin’s mouth was wrung up like Eliot’s hands. “Do you think he watches?”

“Obviously he does,” Eliot said, quietly. “Otherwise he wouldn’t have sent this one. He’s never sent a second one before.”

It was another question he’d asked himself, and more often than he’d like to admit. Whether one of the endless copies ever found himself gliding through the wires to a familiar t.v. set in Indiana, a prodigal returned to peer in on a room he recognized, but never really inhabited, trapped behind glass (or protected by it), an emissary who had taken the escape route in reverse.

And – what would his father have seen in it? Which Eliot was more real to him? The ghost-child no longer sitting next to him? The omnipresent, ever-regenerating man waving from another world?

Would Eliot – so abhorrently ignorable in person – be more digestible with time and distance?

Or did his father look straight through every conceivable version of him but the one he wanted to see?

Did he know that Eliot had never really been in that room, not even once?

Did he know that Eliot had never really lived in Indiana, not at all?

“Or, you know, maybe he doesn’t watch,” Eliot said, more to the envelope than Quentin. “Maybe he only heard about our heading here on the news.”

He continued, abruptly. “My hometown is only a few hours away from here. Why send this? Why not send himself? If he’s going to reach out – ”

“Maybe he’s scared,” Quentin said.

“Of course he is,” Eliot replied. “Where do you think I get it from – ”

“Do you want me to read it?” Quentin asked.

Eliot’s heart was beating more loudly than the loudest silence. “What?”

“I could read it for you. I don’t have the history with it you do. Can I do that for you? Take a look?” Eliot’s heart was drumming a full-on drum solo – “I can tell you what it says. Be a buffer of some sort. If it’s too much we can forget it, I don’t have to – ”

“Oh,” Eliot said. “Oh, uh – no, that’s – ”

It felt like an incredibly kind and thoughtful thing, and something Eliot felt comfortable taking Quentin up on.

“That’s ok, actually. That’s…I’d be ok with that.”
Why did everything seem less fraught when Quentin was involved? Why was everything easier?

“Thank you,” Eliot said.

Quentin picked up the envelope, almost ceremonially. He slowly, neatly unstuck the seal, sliding it apart from one side to the other –

Eliot was braced for a horrorshow to fly out, or for the two of them to be pulled in between the layers. Neither one happened.

Quentin simply unfolded a piece of paper, held it in front of himself, and started reading.

Eliot watched Quentin’s eyes move from line to line, neutrally, attentively. He was very still, in the way he always was when he was focused. It was a recognizably Quentin way of reading – only him and the letter.

Only him and the words Eliot’s father had written.

“Hm,” Quentin said, eventually. “Interesting.”

“Yes?” Eliot breathed.

Quentin looked up at him – and Eliot knew that he saw him. Not only the Eliot sitting here, in a
second-floor suite in Fillory, exhausted from two days of self-analysis and the beginnings of romance, in need of a shower and scared out of his mind from so many longstanding unspoken things –

But that unseen Eliot from long, long ago.

“I see what you mean,” Quentin said.

Eliot had forgotten how long he’d been waiting to hear that very thing spoken. And now, long past hope, here it was, so casually stated, so normal. So obvious.

Of course.

He’d spent years and years trying to get anyone to see. Then he’d stopped trying altogether, and never mentioned it again. And, now, just by looking –

Quentin saw what he meant.

Somewhere, far back in time, the young, lost Eliot had finally been acknowledged.

Good for you, kid, he thought, gladly. I see you, too. So that’s two people in your corner.

Keep breathing.

Quentin folded the letter and slid it back into the envelope. “You don’t have to decide how to handle it today.”


Quentin returned the envelope to its place between them. “Take a break. It’s been a big couple of days –”

Eliot took his hands in his.

“It has. And you’re the best of it,” he said, struck with the need to return the favor. “You have so much within you. I love every part of you I see. I want to see all of it – the multitudes of Quentin. You are a complex being, and yet there’s so much clarity to you –”

“Eliot? You don’t have to –”

“I do, though. I need to, Q, it’s how I feel. You do and say…and, and see – you see so many things that just fucking awe me. That just leave me fucking awestruck. You’re proficient in understanding. You make it look easy. The way that you think, it isn’t ordinary – nothing you think is ordinary –”

“Eliot –”

“Q, even when you’re being a mess – which is less often than you think – you’re the most extraordinary thing I’ve ever seen. I want to bask in all of you forever. I am telling you, you’re everything to me.”

Eliot froze with a sudden thought. His guts were turning in on themselves – he always disappeared so quickly –

Quentin squeezed his hands. “Don’t go anywhere; I’m listening.”
“I don’t know what I am to myself,” he said, through the pulse of contact.

He kept squeezing Quentin’s hands back, a point of foundation. “I never got to learn who I am.” He looked at the envelope. “You know – ” he found himself making the same noise of frustration Margo made in the car – “so much of me is like him. I never wanted to be like him. But I am. That’s who I’ve been in...too many ways. Requiring things on my own terms. Just so. And – ”

He laughed.

“Never making the effort to share.” He looked at Quentin now; it wasn’t difficult. “You know what’s dumb, actually? The things I used to save myself were all the things he taught me. Hide it away. It was the only thing I knew. Fucking stoicism. Goddamn it – that’s how I protected myself. That’s how I got away. By copying him. That’s fucked up. It’s long since outmoded now.”

Quentin spoke to him directly. “We do the best we can with what we know. It’s like camouflage. If he wouldn’t go there himself, he wasn’t going to go there with you. It’s probably where you were safest.” He was holding on to Eliot so fully, their hands might as well have been merged. “It sounds like thanks to that, you survived.”

“Yeah, but – I wasn’t thriving. I wanted to – ”

“Yeah?”

“I really wanted to thrive,” Eliot said, wistfully and with weight.

“Oh, Eliot,” Quentin said, matching his tone. “So few people really get there.”

“We could,” Eliot said, with certainty. “We could get there.”

He would never get tired of Quentin looking at him in the way he was looking at him now. With real optimism.

“Listen, Q,” Eliot continued, businesslike. “I’m only just now learning how to open up. Only just now. And I don’t know what I’ve got in here.”

He pulled their collective hands to his chest.

“But I want to find out.”

Quentin was grinning. “Ok, easily done. Here’s how we start.” He lifted them up off the floor. “Let’s go to the tape.”

“What are you up to?” Eliot asked, smiling just as fervently.

“Come on, Waugh. It’s a surprise.”

He walked them the two steps to the bed.

Eliot mock-gasped. “You didn’t. How did you know?”

Quentin kissed his shoulder. “That’s not all, wait, hold on.” He let go of Eliot’s hands to pick up the laptop off the bed, still flipped open from when he was working before. He set his notepad and pen on top of the keyboard. “And – hold these?”

Then, with a flourish, he gathered up the entire quilt.
“Sit down?” Quentin said.

Eliot sat on the middle of the bed, facing the window.

“That too,” Quentin said, from over the bundle he was holding. “You can set that down.”

Eliot set the laptop in front of him.

Quentin had now arranged the quilt around his own shoulders, and was about to sit down next to Eliot –

He bent down to pinch the letter between two squares of color and bring it with him.

He plopped down next to Eliot, wrapping the quilt around them both.

“Comfortable?” he asked.

Eliot leaned onto Quentin. “Very – ”

Quentin had clicked on the screen, but then immediately whirled within the quilt to reach toward the floor in an attempt to get the lamp and put it back on the side-table. Eliot, unprepared for the sudden movement, consequently almost flopped over onto the mattress.

“I’m so sorry,” Quentin said, not quite able to reach the lamp, but still trying, “the lighting from down there is weird, there’s an odd glare against the screen, and the arrangement has to be right, I have to fix it – ”

Eliot was now also trying to reach the lamp from their perch, and speaking over Quentin. “Don’t worry about it, Q – wait, ok, here, I got it, I’m closer – Q, hold off, my arms are longer – ”

“Ok, sorry – ”

With the lamp restored to its rightful place, they were now not only wrapped in the comforter, but in a soft glow.

And after a moment’s untangling, they were properly leaned against each other again – rightful places all around.

“It’s like we’ve built a portable blanket fort,” Quentin said, proudly.

“They’re called Snuggies, Q, and they’re already copyrighted.”

“Fuck,” Quentin said. “You ruined a perfect moment.”

“Mm,” Eliot replied, comfortable. “Wait, shit, we could’ve put on pajamas – ”

“Too late for us; moment’s already ruined.”

“Mm.”

Quentin hit play on a familiar project file.

And Eliot began to see some very familiar footage.

“The party edit?” he asked, quietly. “Fifty segments, greatest hits?”

“Mm-hm,” Quentin said, handing him the pen and notepad. “Don’t write on this, though.”
“Don’t – wait, what am I writing?”

Quentin had re-extracted the letter and set on the notepad, blank side up.

“Eliot Waugh,” he said. “This is your life. This is your work. What do you see?”

The old woman. The chess champion. The lunches they would have together –

*I like being social with people I respect,* Eliot wrote on the back of his father’s letter. *People I look up to. I like sharing the gift of time and company, when it’s earned.*

A wall of keys in an escape room. Arguing with Quentin.

*I’m tenacious. I like a puzzle. I like getting to meet my match.*

After a moment, he wrote something else.

*I’m better at freeing myself than I think I am.*

Eliot’s interview with restorers of early airplanes –

He stopped writing and held Quentin through that part.

A sidewalk chalk drawing competition –

*I’m bad at recreating what I want to see.*

*I’m good at loving Quentin Coldwater.*

A child lost in the maze of the museum –

*I’d like to be better at guiding things back where they belong.*

A lightning storm –

Eliot smiled.

*I really do like my electrical current.*

*I could be even better at loving Quentin Coldwater.*

*And I’d like to get better at letting him love me.*

*All of me.*

*Whatever that may be.*

***

Eliot Waugh woke up just before dawn, wrapped in a quilt, and Quentin Coldwater, and nothing else.

If he’d asked himself a couple days ago where he’d be, and what he’d let himself go through, he wouldn’t have known what to say.

*This* certainly wouldn’t have been what he’d intended.
But that was for the best.

He didn’t know where this would lead to next. He still didn’t even have much proof that it would work out all that well. He didn’t know what story they’d be crafting, or which one they would choose to work on after.

But he looked forward to filling in the blanks.

He looked forward to the process of it. To making mistakes – determining which ones he wanted to let go of, and which ones he wanted to keep. To building something from the inside out (that still took an ever-changing outside into account). He craved the possibilities, and knew that he could reach out for them, and honestly hoped there’d be some unexpected ones thrown his way that he could learn how to catch.

He looked forward to talking about what worked and what didn’t. He looked forward to connecting, to sharing, to cherishing the people in his life.

To existing as fully as he could in the world around him.

He almost couldn’t sleep for the excitement.

His eyes stayed open.

The sky was beginning to lighten. Quentin dreamed on next to him. Through the partially open pane, he could see Ember’s frame glinting through the last remnants of shadow.

Eliot Waugh had opened a window, and it absolutely felt that way.

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