Summary

“I can choose a husband?” High King Eliot asked again, blinking in shock. “A husband?”

“If you’d like,” Dint said through his teeth. “And a wife, of course.”

“What if I—” the High King’s eyes darted between Ted and Dint, fast as a bunny sniffed. “What if I only want a husband?”

Quentin couldn’t feel his legs.

—

When newly arrived High King Eliot Waugh meets Fillorian Quentin of Coldwater Cove, he makes a decision with lasting consequences not only for the two of them, but for the entire kingdom.

(Or: A Love Letter to Fillory)
Hi there! Welcome to my Fillorian!Q AU :) Before we dive in, I just have a few notes and then I’ll get out of the way:

1) Fear not the “?” This baby is very outlined and I’ve already got several chapters ready to go for a weekly posting schedule, every Thursday unless I let you know otherwise. But I’m still figuring out concrete chapter breaks, especially for the later material.

2) I am not watching season 5. The Fillory of this fic is in no way season 5 compliant. Any similarities are coincidental, etc. Also, despite the title, this fic isn’t book compliant either (except for one detail I saw on tumblr and stole/ran with. *shrug*)

3) Unlike my last two fics, this story is NOT a rom com. It’s absolutely a romance, but we’ve got a different story beats ahead for our dual protagonists here. To be clear, it’s got a happy ending in spades, plenty of mutual pining for your needs, and there are lots of silly/campy/goofy/even fluffy elements. But please, please, please mind the tags, as there are some darker moments and more serious themes that emerge, especially past the midpoint. I’ll also warn for specific chapters.

On that last note, the “past homophobia” tag is *extremely* relevant for Eliot’s part of the prologue, as is “canon typical violence.” FYI, homophobia is not at all a major factor in the rest of the story, except in how it has shaped Eliot and, in a different way, the past leaders of Fillory. But for the prologue, please check the end notes for details and places to skip if you’re concerned. Take care! <3

Thank you so much for trying this fic out! And many, many, infinite thanks to my incredible beta Rizandace, who has already talked me down from a hundred story cliffs, been the most amazing cheerleader, and kept my verbose butt in line when I needed it. Seriously, y’all, I hit the *jackpot.* All remaining mistakes are 100% mine.
Prologue: Smells Like Teen Spirit

Chapter Summary

"I'm worse at what I do best / And for this gift I feel blessed"

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Coldwater Cove of the Swept Coast
Western Border Province, Fillory

★

A Friday of Early Summersun
Year Thirtyumber (approx. 1989, Earth)

Quentin’s heart laid its axis on the point where the coast cut away from the Western Sea. The water there was blue-green and clear, with light that dappled down so far, local legend swore one could see the swirling magic on which the whole of Fillory rested.

The long shoreline was rocky, coarse under his calloused bare feet. His toenails were hard and yellowing already, at the end of the tender age called twelve, ripening toward manhood. Ages and numbers and days were so named by the foreign rulers, ones who never understood the change of seasons, who never cared to know the way the moons shifted in the sky. Of course, Fillorians had adapted to the custom because Fillorians always adapted. It was their way.

But Coldwater Cove adapted for no one, and Quentin loved it for that.

As he ran down the line of the sea, the maw of water gasped at him under and over mountainous waves. His wild hair flew in the wind, with his ribbon—the one his father said kept him looking civilized—long lost to the tide. With a quick glance over his shoulder at the yelling figures not far behind him, he reached the ruddy cliff. It stood tall at the edge of the tumbling white sand, and Quentin grasped onto the holds. With a grunt and a prayer to Ember for strength, he kicked off the ground and climbed upward, a path he knew better than the lifeline on his palm.

Two years earlier, a festival soothsayer had declared that the creases on his hands were split into multitudes. With dark eyes, she whispered that he lived many lives at once. She told him there were threads Quentin could and must find, threads that connected everything. She also told him that he held a great destiny within him, if he were brave enough to grasp it, like the cliffs he loved so dearly.

It had sounded poetic at the time. But when Quentin tried in vain to figure out the meaning on his
own, he had no idea what in Hades she was actually talking about. He had asked her so many questions that night, his tongue had ached with numbness. In the end, the interrogation led him nowhere. But she still took four gold crescents from him.

Quentin hated soothsayers.

But what he didn’t hate was the view from the top of the cliff and the solitude always found there. Once he got through the final part of his climb, Quentin settled himself on the edge and pushed his sweaty hair back, gazing over the sea. He tucked his knees to his chest and pulled out his book—an Earth tale called *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, mostly nonsensical, yet fascinating. He had procured it from a rare bookseller in the Brass City, spending his last bit of savings.

It had been a long journey to the gilded metropolis. He had been forced to leave the workshop for over a week, costing him more in missed wages than what he spent. But Quentin had been allowed to go there alone, guiding the young boat all by himself through sky and field and river rapids, and nothing had yet made him feel more like a man.

It wouldn’t be long until he went to Earth though. Two more years, if he remained inclined, which he would. In comparison to that upcoming journey, a trip to the Brass City, the safest stronghold in Fillory, was nothing. But it still felt good.

Below, the figures—his friends—had caught up to the rocks and their whistles carried high, calling him downward with equal parts irritation and exhilaration. But all Quentin cared about was the reach of sea, stretching long to the celestial dance of night, the darkest line of the horizon.

Above, the moons were visible in the daylight and they shone perfectly tethered to the two islands in the distance, round and flat breaks in the rough waters. They were the sacred burial grounds for the nymphs, places of peace, mourning, and memory. Quentin loved to look at them from afar, as was respectful. He loved to imagine all they had seen, all they had learned. How he longed for their wisdom, for their—

“Quentin, you stupid oaf!” A shrill voice demanded from the shore, breaking his thoughts. “Get down!”

Grunting in frustration, Quentin made a rude hand gesture at his heart-cousin. She stood unmoved in her long dress, hands on her hips. Her dark golden hair was tied back, and she wore both a scarf around her neck and an unpleasant scowl on her face. Apparently, he was never allowed a single quiet moment these days.

Ember’s stinky taint.

He leaned back on his hands, staring up at the sky. “I can’t hear you!”

With a shriek of frustration, Fen kicked at the cliff, like it would avalanche down and bring him along with it. At the same time, a peal of booming laughter followed. Bayler joined her in the futile endeavor, kicking out his legs toward the stone with gusto and yelling upward at Quentin through his laughs, though with cruder word choices than *oaf*.

“Don’t be a chokesuck! Climb down,” his strong voice whooped and danced around Quentin’s ears, drawing out a smile. “Stick your cock in a muff like the rest of us, not another one of your godsdammed books.”

“Not my fault I’m more sporting than you, Bay,” Quentin called down with a laugh, an obvious falsehood. Everyone knew Bayler was the strongest boy in the province. He was always the best at
the long-set physical games Quentin cared little for. He found them boring at best, savage most often. But Bayler saw glory, and for good reason.

For once, Quentin didn’t actually think these things with his usual morose self-pity. He had his strengths, few and far between as they were. Outside of his quick study, he was also nimble in form, and he knew his way through the land. It helped him evade many treacheries, from the cruel-yet-accurate taunts of the local bulldog pups to the otherwise inescapable maladies of his mind. It also gave him freedom, moments of peace, away from the stifling reality that followed his every moment.

But that mattered not.

In the present, the place that did matter, Bayler was as arrogant as he was strong. So at the unfounded insult, he let out a stuttering yell. As expected, the challenge yielded a fast climb up from his friend, who pushed Quentin to the side as soon as he hopped beside him. And even more expectedly, Bayler was followed by a reluctant climb from his heart-cousin, who kicked Quentin’s hip with a not-so-good natured huff, before slamming down next to him on the opposite side.

“I don’t understand why I can’t wear pants,” Fen said mournfully. “Pants seem wonderful.”

“Pants are for boys,” Bayler said with a shrug, tugging a clothbag of stewed nuts out of his pocket and throwing one up in the air to catch with his mouth. “You’re not a boy.”

“How well observed,” Fen said with an eye roll, leaning across Quentin to flick Bayler on the forehead. “No wonder your school marks are moons high.”

“I could lend you a pair, uh, if you want,” Quentin said to Fen, as he delicately placed his book inside his feathered knapsack. It was made from the fallen down of a graysmoke hawk at migration. It was ugly, but sturdy. He loved it.

But at his suggestion, Fen scrunched her nose up and sniffed. “I do not want my rear butt anywhere near where your rear butt has been.”

“Then I don’t know what to tell you,” Quentin said, sniffing right back at her. “You’re on your own.”

Thankfully, Fen just smiled at him for that. No words spoken in jest had ever been further from the truth. Not when it came to the two of them. She elbowed him affectionately, right as Bayler ominously cleared his throat, tapping his fist to his chest.

“But indeed, Lord Quentin, she is correct,” he said with a crooked smile, standing up and throwing his arms out, bombastic and bold. “For Fen must save her rear butt for I, the High King of Fillory, a most eminent and gassy monarch.”

Quentin’s face melted into a delighted smile as Fen’s darkened into a grimace.

“Gods, Bayler,” she said, sticking her tongue out. “Must you? Again?”

But Bayler was gone and in his place stood the High King, burping and farting every which way, as always. Quentin laughed into the crook of his elbow as Fen voiced her weak complaints, her usual words about duty and honor ringing hollow.

“As the ruling Child of Earth,” Bayler roared, hunching over and snarling his face into a grotesque mask, “I declare all households must hold weekly murder parties, where people murder each other for fun. And all women must undergo a spell of my own making so they have bigger tits.”
“But that’s just, like, a really good idea,” Quentin said, rubbing his chin with his fingers. “Should we fight progress?”

He received a sharp slap on his forearm.

“Don’t be vile, Q,” Fen said. He felt bad. He had only been joking. Mostly joking. Almost entirely joking.

Bayler continued, playacting with a waggle of his brows. “But I will also be the first High King to enjoy relations as they should be enjoyed, instead of limiting myself for no godsdamned reason.” He reached down and grabbed Quentin’s hand, licking his knuckles. It shouldn’t have felt good. “Thus so, shall I also take my husband to bed.”

“Likely story,” Quentin muttered, wiping his nose with the back of his wrist. His cheeks grew hot, darting his glance away from the way Bayler’s eyelashes fell against his cheekbones, from the sly tilt of his mouth. “No way I’m marrying anybody.”

Quentin had prepared his whole life to stand on the side. Everyone knew the destiny belonged to Fen. Kings from Earth had always chosen one way and one way only. It had always been and thus, always would be, if one considered historical precedent any kind of predictive power. Which, according to historical precedent, it was. It was definitely more reliable than soothsayers, he knew that much.

But even after Quentin came of age and the chosen High King made his inevitable arrival and swept Fen off to Whitespire, Quentin wouldn’t be free. He would wait, forever, for the next or the next or the next, until he was chosen. Until he died.

He tucked his hair behind his ears, swallowing dry air with too much force. There was no use dwelling on it.

Besides, it wasn’t like Quentin would be nothing but a waste. Maybe he could be a scholar, focused on the consciousness of boats and the transfer of magic from their tree parts to the life cycle of the vessels. And then also, he could sometimes get sucked off by, like, barmaids who didn’t care who he was or who he was technically promised to. Bay always told him that, to cheer him up. Or at least, he told him that to cheer him up after he had explained what getting sucked off meant.

Tearing his eyes away from Bayler’s full lips, Quentin considered that it wouldn’t be a terrible life. He could still find something like happiness, someday, he was sure. He hoped, at least. He really hoped.

“You muttonheads are wrong. That’s not how it will go,” Fen said, turning her sparkling eyes up to the sun. The blue of her irises matched the clear water below. “I don’t think he will be a murderer, nor will he be disgusting. I think the High King will be someone special. Someone worthy, brave, and true.”

Bayler snorted. “That would be an unexpected boon.”

But Fen ignored him and smiled wide, her rounded cheeks growing pink as her eyes closed. “I can already picture the celebration, vivid in my mind. He will arrive by boat, dark hair and dark eyes, with an open white shirt and a cutlass across his waist. Handsome and charming, with a smile that speaks to his spirit, courageous and valiant.”

Quentin itched to grab his book. When Fen got like this, it could go on for a long time.
“... He’ll step onto the docks and we’ll lock eyes, knowing our future, knowing our destiny at once.”

Destiny was cat’s scat.

Quentin let his head fall back, stretching his throat up to the clouds, pink and dotting the sky with magic. As he did, Bayler kicked at his ankle again and Quentin could feel his teasing grin, even though he couldn’t see it. He tried his hardest not to smile back.

Meanwhile, Fen brought her hands to her heart and sighed dreamily. “Then the High King will sweep me into his arms and we’ll waltz through the night and away on our hearts to the castle.” She gasped, caught in her own dream. “Fillory will fall away in the embrace of our true love. A love that will carry a kingdom to glory and lasting peace.”

With a clench of dread deep in the pit of his stomach, Quentin finally exchanged a glance with Bayler. After a long beat, Bay let out a breath from the side of his mouth, shaking his head and staring down at his hands.

Quentin concurred.

Still, he hoped with all his heart that Fen was right. So he said so, because she deserved to hear it. Because she deserved a life like that, even if it was unlikely.

“I hope so, Fen,” Quentin said, shrugging down his doubt, deep set and well cultivated though it was. “I know Fillory would be better for it.”

“Of course it would,” Fen said cheerily, grabbing Bayler’s clothbag from his lap and stuffing her face with a handful of the sweet and sour nuts, grinning as she chewed. “Everything’s better with the power of love.”

The Children of Earth were not known for love.

They were known for greed and cruelty, with perhaps the exception of King Rupert the Brave, the only leader known for his heroism in centuries. But even Rupert had been melancholic and erratic, driven by dark secrets he never had to keep. His journals told sad tales of regret and longing, of resentment and unfounded fear. They proved that even Rupert had never understood Fillory. That even Rupert had never been Fillorian.

That was why Quentin wanted to go to Earth. He wanted to understand, to learn, to see what they were, who they really were, all of them. The people who came through the portals, the trees and wind, they were a mere blip of the millions and millions of people on the strangely spherical planet. Perhaps if Quentin studied them—with them—he could understand. Then he could be useful, to Fen if no one else.

(Also, of course, he wanted to see their untamed ways, their hot dogs and their silver cities reaching to the sky. The stories he read, new, old, and nonsensical, bewitched his dreams and fixed his brain.)

“I will admit, it’s hard to completely despise them,” Bayler said, cutting through his thoughts to rest his head on Quentin’s shoulder. It was a warm feeling that curled his stomach around itself. “They are the only ones who have the energy inside them fit to rule.”

The Children of Earth were also known for their magic.

Energy, light from within. Internal magic. Real magic, the same as Fillorians once had eons ago,
before Ember took it away, deeming the synchronicity too powerful, too perfect between the land and their hands. Now, true magic in Fillorians was scarce. Though not unheard of.

At least, it couldn’t be unheard of. It had to be possible. Because otherwise—

Quentin’s heart raced, tingling and shaking, as something shifted and moved, something sacred and mysterious. His chest heaved with breaths that formed around the name he never spoke, the name of the mythical school, so clear in his mind at all times.

... Brakebills.

Brakebills was for Magicians, as the Children of Earth called themselves. It was tucked away in a hidden shire, spoken only in whispers and melodies. Ol’ King Rupe of Brakebills yore, the bards sang. Quentin had found every book in the land that mentioned the word and still he looked for more, even knowing he wouldn’t find them. Most Fillorians cared not about the ins and out of Earthly magic. Because it mattered not to their lives.

But Quentin cared.

Gods, did Quentin care.

“That’s not true. Lots of Fillorians have magic,” Quentin said carefully. His palms tingled. “Look at The River Watcher.”

But he only received a scoff for his good point.

“He’s still not like those from Earth,” Bayler said, kicking his legs out to the side, settling into Quentin’s tiny shoulder frame as his pillow. “The River Watcher can curse people and see their future. That’s it. He can’t do anything else.”

Quentin was never sure how Bayler knew these things and knew them so well. But no one ever questioned Bayler. He was right more often than not and when he was wrong—well, in truth, it was never worth breaching. Because no one messed with Bayler, in any sense of the word.

That cold surety was a source of frustration at times. But it also meant, by association, that no one messed with Quentin. He was Bayler’s friend. He was someone under his protection. And it had saved him more times than he could count. So who was Quentin to look a pig in the rear butthole?

“I heard that Children of Earth have the soul of Fillory inside them,” Fen said, dipping her voice low into reverence. She also made Quentin’s stomach curl, sometimes. “That they can call upon the power of the gods at their will, their whim.”

“But magic is—it’s common, right?” Quentin stared down and out, into nothing. “It’s everywhere. So it’s not that unusual for a Fillorian to do magic. It’s—it’s not weird. It’s not—uh, not like Children of Earth are the only ones—”

“No, they’re the only ones,” Bayler said confidently. He tilted his head back deeper into the crook of Quentin’s shoulder, endless green eyes akin to a wildfly’s, iridescent and buzzing through branches.

“But, like, where are you getting that information?” Quentin’s heart hammered in his chest, staccato and fierce. But if Bayler noticed that he was getting heated and clammy, he didn’t say. Which meant he didn’t notice. Bay wasn’t known for his tact.

“I’ve, uh, I’ve read a lot on the subject—“ Quentin started to say, and Bayler proved the point,
sticking out his teeth as though they were bucked. He yucked a false laugh, spasming his hands about.

"I've read a lot on the subject," he repeated, mocking. Quentin’s ears burned. “Gods, Q, you need to learn to use your mind well, out here with the rest of us.”

“I—I use my mind well,” Quentin started to say again, cursing his voice for being so small. Everything about him was so small. “I mean, I think I—”

“Intellect is worthless when ill-applied,” Bayler said with a yawn. “You will never learn the truth of things in those books of yours.”

“Books are just, like, another way to—“ Quentin started to say, once again. So often he started when it came to Bayler. So rarely he finished.

“Not to mention Earth will be wasted on you,” Bayler cut him off, the firm lines of his back muscles tensing along Quentin’s arm. “If you actually go.”

Quentin bit his tongue so hard it bled, sweet metal in his mouth. “I’m going.”

“Do what you please,” Bayler said, kicking abruptly at a rock. The soft stone broke, shattered under the iron-tipped boot. “But it’s a stupid idea. You know you don’t have the stomach for it.”

“Don’t fight,” Fen said. The wind almost drowned her words, carrying them to the waves below. “Please don’t fight.”

The rush of anger and hopeless hope swirled in Quentin’s chest, hot and savage. He never wanted to fight with anyone. He especially never wanted to fight with Bayler—proud, reckless, blustering Bayler, full of passion and completely careless all at once.

Quentin knew Bayler wanted him to stay. That he hated, hated the idea of Quentin studying on Earth, of Quentin taking the only advantage of his position. Quentin knew that Bayler would spit on the soil of the Chatwins’ graves if it meant Quentin never walked through the portal. But he never really knew why Bayler fought the inevitable so fiercely. He was too terrified to ever ask. He knew not which answer he wanted.

Meanwhile, the broken stone called to him.

Quentin was stubborn too. Quentin had pride. Quentin had purpose beyond his circumstances. He could feel it within him, pulsating and bursting with life. And he decided then and there that it was time to prove it.

He was going to show them.

Everything was glowing as Quentin centered himself over the ground, over the brokenness before him. His heart sang to fix, to fix, to fix, to never let it be. He moved his fingers on instinct, filled his lungs with air, precise and tumultuous.

He slid his fingers around and across each other, letting the way his skin vibrated guide his every motion. Light shone from his pores, invisible but undeniable. Slowly, as his movements grew more steady, the shards of rock lifted from the ground and trembled in the air.

Fen gasped, sliding backwards with a startle. But Bayler moved ever closer, like a griffin in a morass. Quentin concentrated ahead, heart singing and fingers moving in time.
The world shimmered like sunlight underwater as the stone came together, locked in harmony and floating above them. Reborn, the cracks were sealed, triumphant and shining with what it once was and would always be.

Fixed.

“Quentin,” Bayler said, his voice low and urgent. “Q, is that—did you do that?”

Quentin didn’t answer.

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Shawnee High School, Whiteland, Indiana
United States of America, Earth

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Tuesday, March 7, 2006 (approx. Thirtyumber, Fillory)

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Eliot loved Milky Way bars.

First of all, they had the best name. Like, what the fuck was a snicker, anyway? It sounded gross. Hard pass. Second of all, Milky Ways had the most caramel and even some nougat, which was super underrated. People who thought that a bunch of peanuts—all of them God’s greatest little mistakes—were better than delicious, lightly whipped nougat were all proof that humanity was failing. Forget poverty and pollution and shit. Peanut cultivation was the real enemy.

The fact that there weren’t any peanut farms in Indiana was actually about the only good thing it could claim for itself.

Munching down on his candy with a satisfied hum, Eliot pulled a shoulder up to his ear, nudging the squishy-soft casing of his headphones back into a comfortable position. They were a little big on him, always sliding down. It was annoying. They had belonged to all his brothers at some point, and they were certified janky by the time they reached Eliot’s hands. But at least he got them at all, rather than having to rely on his dad’s old ass country music records for occasional entertainment. What makes me wanna roam, when I got so much love at home? What makes a man wander—

No one wants to be your friend, Waylon.

So once the portable CD player was finally in his possession, Eliot had taken the long bus ride(s) to Fort Wayne, to shop at Sam Goody for as many CDs as he could get his hands on. He could mostly afford singles, but it was better than nothing. At least now he could keep up, could talk about the same music as everything, top 40 and all. He would learn all the dance moves and impress the cool kids at the spring social, after practicing and perfecting in his bedroom. Well, you know, after his dad passed out for the night.

Of course, Eliot knew most of his classmates had fancier stuff. Some even had iPods, that fantasy
of fantasies. But access to music was better than nothing, he reminded himself, not for the first
time. So he swayed his hips a little as the beat picked up and resounded in his ears. It was a good
day. It was a good day.

“Yo, nice Walkman, you fa—“ some nameless voice called from somewhere, but Eliot just turned
the music up, ignoring it. It didn’t matter what they thought, not when Sean Paul had figured out
how to protect some lady from a storm, or so he sang. Good for him.

Anyway, it also didn’t matter because Eliot was pretty sure he wasn’t even actually a—you know.
Mainly because he watched a lot of porn (like, a lot of porn) and he wasn’t totally repulsed when
there were girls involved. He liked it well enough. Like, for instance, he watched a lot of orgy porn
(like, holy shit, a lot of orgy porn ) and Eliot totally recognized that the girls were nice to look at
too, sweaty and moaning in the mess of writhing bodies on the tucked away screen.

They had pretty faces and he liked the breathy sounds they made when the guys railed into them
with their huge cocks. That was hot. Breasts were visually pleasing, in particular. He liked when
the guys put their strong hands on them, kneading out pleasure with their sturdy fingers or when
they’d reach down to put their full lips around them. He also liked when they fucked their huge
cocks between the tits, asses clenching up and thrusting strong, and you could see every move they
made, sweaty and slick. That was super hot.

Which, like, yeah, sure, pussies were a little odd. But, hey, they were interesting and honestly,
seemed way easier to deal with. You just stuck it in and went to town, from what he could tell. He
even read an article on WebMD that talked about “natural lubricant” in the “elastic vaginal canal,”
which— gross, holy shit, fucking gross. It sounded convenient though, which was a plus. Fucking
was fucking, right? At the end of the day?

That was a comfort at least, since Eliot figured he’d have to figure it all out once he had a
girlfriend. Because he would absolutely have a girlfriend. He'd show them all. Eliot Wilson,
Girlfriend-Haver, they’d call him.

That is, once Eliot Wilson found a girl he was actually into. That hadn’t happened yet. But it had to
be because the girls in Whiteland weren’t hot enough. Most were bland, freckled, and pimpled in
their tacky bright clothes. They all flocked like a group of brainwashed parrots to some dumb mass
market store that seemed like it was more for little kids than peeps his age. But all the girls were
obsessed with it. It was weird.

Eliot had high standards.

It made sense. He was definitely meant for something more than podunk Whiteland. So he
imagined his future wife would be tall and blonde, a city sophisticate to match his own city
sophistication. Maybe she would be Swedish. Perhaps an actress. Certainly, she would have a
symmetrical face, wear sheath dresses, and accessorize like a dream.

Whistling along with the tune in his ear— Oh, lord, I got the right tactics to turn you on and girl, I
wanna be the papa, you can be the —Eliot waved a big and happy goodbye to Ms. Sandoval as she
walked by. He really liked her because she was nice and because she let them watch the movie
after every book. Most importantly though, she was the theater arts director for next year’s fall
musical. They were doing Les Mis and Eliot couldn’t wait!

He slid down the railing of the school steps in one smooth motion, landing with his usual bounce,
like walking in outer space. The second verse started and Eliot was starting to not completely hate
the song with every fiber of his being. Maybe there was hope for him yet. Pushing a hand through
his curls, he looked both ways before crossing the street.
But when he swiveled his head left, his pulse set off into an erratic mess.

Just on the other side of the stop sign, Logan Kinnear was laughing with Kyle and Matt, grabbing his groin and stomping his feet like a barbarian. A tight band of spikes wrapped around Eliot’s chest.

Logan *was* a barbarian.

He was a bully. He was mean, and an asshole, and a monster. And once again, he was right there, like he always seemed to be. Eliot swallowed, his brain yelling at him to run but his feet frozen to the ground. Then, like in a scary movie slow motion, Logan straightened out from his crude joke du jour, broad and solid. With a wave and a middle finger behind his back, he turned toward the road, heading back the way he had come.

—Toward Eliot.

That was always a bad thing.

But on that day, it was a really bad thing.

The last time Eliot saw Logan was before first period, by his locker. Eliot had been reorganizing his books in a gradient color pattern, when a closed fist slammed the back of his head into his dark green Algebra II book. His nose bounced hard off the spine, crunching with a snap.

“Sup, bitch boy?” The burly sophomore grit his teeth down as Eliot rubbed his face, blinking away the spinning stars. “Suck a dick today?”

Eliot wished. But he didn’t say that.

“Leave me alone,” he had sighed instead, turning back to his open locker. He had a cut out picture of the brown haired girl (and Adam Brody) from *The OC* smiling out at him from under carefully placed scotch tape. It was soothing. “What did I ever do to you?”

“Shut your fucking mouth,” Logan laughed harsh and angry, breath like onion dip wafting the side of Eliot’s face. He spat on Eliot’s neck. “Pussy.”

Eliot’s jaw had worked down on his molars, hands popping at his side. He tried to swallow and duck away, but before he could move, his world spun into a harrowing snap. Logan grabbed him by his shirt collar.

It was his favorite button-down. It laid against his skin in airy cotton, in a blue and green checked pattern. Every night before he wore it, he would sneak to the laundry room to press it—after his dad passed out, that is—to make sure the collar was sharp and the fabric sung. He had bought it with his own money. It was a step up from his usual options, the leftover jean jackets and too-wide gym shorts from his brothers’ discard pile. Wearing their clothes made him feel like he was dying. But this shirt—his *Banana Republic* shirt—made him feel handsome and light. It made him feel like he could be somebody, someday.

Anyway, Logan had bodily lifted Eliot up into the air, slamming him against the lockers. It would have been laughably cliche if it hadn’t hurt so badly.

“I’m sorry,” Eliot had said, his eyes wide and hands trembling. He didn’t know what he was sorry for but he was *sorry*. He gulped as Logan lifted him even higher, preparing to launch again. “Okay. I’m sorry, I’m really sorry.”
“Say your dick smells like shit,” Logan had growled. His red face was sweaty, vile anger seeping out his huge pores. “Cause you fuck dirty asshole.”

The next moment was like a flash of delirium.

“Just your dad’s, Logan,” Eliot said, snapping his teeth into a sharp smile.

He pushed the dickhead away, wrenching out of his grasp. He stood taller, looming and imposing even an inch below Logan. His spine tingled and aligned. He faced the world cock first, virile and poised. He was a swan above a slug. He was a flare on a dreary night. His whole damn brain shut down and a snarl cut loose from his soul, unfamiliar and well known all the same.

Logan was a peon. Eliot was a king.

—But the flash ended sooner than it began, and his stomach caved in around an inevitable hard knee. The older boy yelled his least favorite word in his ear, while a fist hit his mouth before he could cry uncle. Then again. And again.

Eliot was so stupid.

“Mr. Kinnear,” some random teacher had scolded, tired and resigned, while Eliot’s teeth trembled, blood seeping out from his gums. “That’s enough. Move along.”

Logan let Eliot fall to the ground, kicking his shoulder. He convulsed into a heap, face down on mud tracks and grime, cheek plastered to cool white and blue tiles. The monster above laughed at the pink saliva that pooled around his shaking lips.

“See you after school, bitch boy,” Logan had promised. Then he stepped over him and yelled out toward Travis, another bottom-feeder of a human. And Eliot had twitched along the dirty floor, before doing what he always did.

He stood up.

He brushed off his shirt, and closed his locker. He walked quietly to the bathroom and stood in front of the mirror, splashing water on his face and swishing it around his mouth. He fixed his hair. He took a deep breath, gripping the white sink with tight knuckles.

Then Eliot smiled, cheerful and wide.

He was a happy, positive person. He prided himself on being a happy, positive person, no matter what the assholes in this life threw at him.

After that, he went to social studies. It was boring.

But now, as that frantic beat thumped in Eliot’s ears— I got the right temperature to shelter you from the storm— Logan was heading his way. He stepped into the street as time crawled in slow motion, fuzzy and bending in the harsh sunlight. He hadn’t noticed Eliot yet. But he would. Logan always found Eliot, no matter what.

The flash sparked again, dizzying the senses. Eliot ran his tongue over his teeth, a dark corner of his mind lit aflame. It was the one that promised, that swore on every star, that one day, he would be more than Logan Kinnear.

He would be smarter. He would be hotter. He would definitely be taller. He would be successful, living in the city—a city, any city, even New York City—and only visiting Whiteland to make
them all suck his cock. He would float down the street, attracting only admiration and never jeers, and Logan would cower before him like the lowlife he truly was. And Eliot would look him in the eyes and smile, serene and spectacular. He would offer him a careless word of happy greeting, a slight tip of the hat, a classy little chat below his station, as an act of charity.

But really—but really, it would all be a perfect pretense. All a long con, before Eliot would finally spit his cruelty back in his face, dripping with disdain over Logan’s white trash bullshit, barely worth the shit on his shoes. It would all lead to when Eliot would sneer, when he would laugh, when he would mock his weakness with his own strength, when he would crush him —

Eliot dropped his candy bar.

He should have been surprised when the bus literally crushed Logan before he could finish his thought. But he wasn’t. Nothing had ever been less surprising.

_I always told you he was a bad boy_, his mother’s brittle voice rang in his ears, floating over her paper cup filled with cheap gin. _Sinful and full of hate._

Eliot fell to the ground, blood running down from his nose like a faucet. The screams around him were muffled by the relentless pounding in his ears, an ocean of knowing. Music kept playing, slow and steady in his ear, a hollow laugh from the gods. _I got the right temperature to shelter you from the storm._ He was numb. His Milky Way had rolled away, onto the street. All his breath gathered in the back of his throat, stinging and choking without mercy. But that was okay.

Eliot didn’t deserve mercy.

The next hour was a blur of police activity and gathering crowds. Eliot blended into the background, resting his army green backpack along a row of unused bikes. He didn’t let himself take his eyes off the bus, the splattered red and the mangled remains. The nice weather mocked him and he held his arms tight across his chest, shivering from the phantom cold. His heart flipped over, strangling under the weight of himself, under the weight of what he’d done.

Which—

Like, how the fuck had he done that?

In the next instant, Eliot snarled a breathy laugh at his own stupid question. He knew. He _knew_. He had always known he was different, that he was a freak. There were too many coincidences. It couldn’t all be blessings from the Lord, especially not from the one who abandoned him at every other turn. The way he could throw basketballs further than anyone in his class despite being proudly unathletic, the time his brother’s car stalled out right before running over his legs, the boneless feeling to his joints when he danced. It had been there all along. He knew.

His hands kept shaking. He stuffed them under his armpits to keep them still. He stared down at the road, at the skid marks made by the bus as it slid in circles toward the school, dragging Logan along with it.

The driver had been taken into police custody.

Eliot wanted to close his eyes and look away. He wanted to scream. He wanted to—
A soft hand patted his back. Eliot jolted, blinking his eyes at the intruder, defenses engaging. But even with everything, the shadow of a smile crept up his mouth as genial green eyes and a bright blue backpack came into focus. His pathetic heart even skipped the shortest of beats.

“Hey man,” Taylor said with a wavering grin, aiming for normalcy and just missing. “How’s it going?”

Eliot swallowed back a surge of bile and shrugged, letting out a shaky breath.

“Okay,” he said, glancing over at the coroner van. “You hear?”

“Yeah, super fucked up,” Taylor said, sticking his hands in his pockets. He hesitated for a minute before he stared at the bus. “Couldn’t have happened to a nicer guy either.”

Eliot almost laughed, except that he was about to jump out of his skin and disintegrate. “Oh my god, Taylor.”

“Just saying,” Taylor shrugged. Then he glanced at Eliot, frowning. “You’ve got a bunch of shit on your shirt.”

It was the blood from his nose. He swallowed a stream of copper-flavored snot and nodded. He’d try to clean it later. But it was probably no use. The tracks of black-red burned through the fabric into his skin. They felt permanent.

At Eliot’s noncommittal nonanswer, Taylor’s cool eyes flickered. For a second, he looked as young as when they first met. “Did you—like, did you see it happen?”

“Uh-huh,” Eliot said, crossing his arms back over his torso. He vaguely registered that it still hurt from when Logan had kneed the shit out of him that morning. “It was too fast to know what—”

The lie died on his tongue, and he choked back a rush of tears. They stung his eyes and closed down his throat, and he couldn’t breathe. His shoulders shuddered and fuck, he really was a pussy.


But it was too late. Eliot hitched a gasp into the air, head shaking over and over. “He didn’t—no one deserves that. He was a total douchebag, but he was sixteen and he had a family and, like, a girlfriend and a dog and—”

“No, I know, it’s fucked up.” Taylor leaned back against the bikes with a sigh of his own. “I know.”

“It was my fault.”

Eliot hadn’t meant to say it. He didn’t even really want to think it. But Taylor pulled things out of him, in his quiet support. He was the only one who knew about the time with his dad and the dog. The wrench too. Now he would be the only one who knew this.

Taylor’s face contorted, dark brows pulling together. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“It was my fault,” Eliot repeated, hocking his tears and saliva back from where they came from. “It was—it was my fault.”

“Were you driving the bus or what? Don’t be weird.” Taylor had a sharpness to him that could shake Eliot out of funks.
But sometimes, it only made it worse.

Eliot clenched his jaw, the muscles popping and snapping in rolls. “I wished for it.”

Taylor rested a hand on his arm, always brave enough to touch the queer in public. “You’ve probably wished it a million times. I’ve wished it a million times.” He paused, pulling his face up toward the sun with a faithful purse of his lips. “But we’re not God, Eliot. This was terrible, but at the end of the day, it was His will.”

Eliot was pretty sure he was an atheist now.

“No one deserves that,” he said instead. If there was anything that would push Taylor away, it was being a Doubting Thomas. So he’d pretend forever. “His parents. Melanie.”

Melanie Kinnear was a freshman too. She was a lot nicer than her brother. She had brassy yellow hair and the rubber bands on her braces glowed in the dark. Eliot had watched a teacher pull her away from the accident site while she screamed at the top of her lungs. Her eyes were screwed up so tight that tears couldn’t even fall.

Taylor hugged himself, like the thought hadn’t even occurred to him. “Shit. I do feel bad for Melanie.”

“I saw his eyes,” Eliot said quietly. “They were open, but he wasn’t there anymore.”

“Shit,” Taylor swallowed, making himself even smaller. Almost imperceptibly, to anyone other than Eliot, he shifted away, so there was space between them. It felt like the distance between universes. “That’s so fucked up.”

“His arms were twisted,” Eliot continued, staring and staring down at the blood on the asphalt. “The bus ripped him in half. His skin was pale white. I saw it all.”

Taylor tensed and froze, voice in a whisper. “Stop.”

“Did he deserve it?” Eliot asked the gaping hole of the world, the power that lived inside his chasm of a soul. “Is this what Logan Kinnear deserved?”

“Maybe you should go home, Eliot,” Taylor said, though he sounded far away. “Take a nap or something.”

Eliot shook his head, soft explosions of laughter bursting out his lips. His hands were shaking and something crept up his chest, something golden, something lined in blood and sin, something regal. The bikes beneath them began to quake, growing more and more violent in their tremors. One started to rise from the ground, the tires floating just above their locks.

Taylor sprung away like he was burned, big green eyes popping out of his skull. But Eliot didn’t move as he kept laughing, crying, laughing, crying. He didn’t move as he felt the energy, the power, the— the goddamn magic flow out his skin and into the world. He had always known. He had always, always fucking known.

Suck it, Harry Potter.

“Eliot,” Taylor said, his voice low and urgent. “Eliot, what are you—? What the fuck is happening?”

Eliot didn’t answer.
Chapter End Notes

Eliot’s prologue deals with the first time he used magic and killed his homophobic high school bully with a bus. There are three instances of implied f-word slurs, though the word does not appear in full at any point. However, there is a section in which strong homophobic language is used and Logan beats Eliot up (beginning “The last time Eliot saw Logan was before first period” and ending “He stood up.”)

Additionally, Eliot verbally describes the deceased Logan in fairly graphic detail (beginning “Taylor hugged himself” and ending “Is this what Logan Kinnear deserved?”)
I Want It That Way

Chapter Summary

“But we are two worlds apart / Can’t reach to your heart”

Chapter Notes

Hey all! Warning time. Off the bat, per the tags, Reynard the Fox still exists here. The horrors he brought about are different than in canon, but still definitely horrors. As it turns out, I’m slightly more cool with gratuitous murder than gratuitous S.A., so that leads us into my Background Character Deaths tag. It’s a slight misnomer because while they are all background at best in this universe, at least one is a major canon character. All of the questers (and my son, Todd) are safe. But please see the end notes for the specifics if you’re concerned, both regarding the group of folks who died and how they died. As always, please take care!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Eleven Years Later

*

Coldwater Cove of the Swept Coast
Western Border Province, Fillory

*

A Wednesday of First Autumntime
Year Fortyember

*

Sunday, January 15, 2017

The crow’s nest swayed, jostling Quentin on still waters. He laid with his ass tucked against the post, his boots dangling just over the rim of the wooden basket. He frowned as his untied laces bounced in a senseless rhythm. The whole mast was moving back and forth, with increasing speed and the squeak of magic hinges.

Flipping a page, Quentin shrugged and chalked it up to the Dryad Winds from the North, the ones
that always came at the cusp of the season change. But then the nest rocked harder, faster and with
more force, like an annoyed parent shaking the sleeping shoulder of their laziest child. He sighed,
placing a silver ribbon between the aged and damp pages of his book, closing the spine with a
satisfying crack.

If the boat was trying to get him to leave, she was going to have to try a hell of a lot harder than
that.

“I’m reading,” Quentin said out loud, raising his annoyed eyes to the tip of the sails. “Sometimes
people are going to read on you. Deal with it.”

It was a lesson she needed to learn now, if she was ever going to leave the Cove. She was still in
training and her progress had plateaued in recent months. So no more Mr. Nice Guy, Quentin had
decided. She needed a little tough love and a lot of consistency to help her over the hump. If she
hated him for it in the meantime, so be it. At least then she would have half a chance.

As it was, the boat—Ursidae—was hardheaded by nature, every groove in her design imbued with
a stubborn prickliness. She was fierce, and calculating, and rammed against all problems that
crossed her path as though she were the father of Umber himself. In many ways, Quentin actually
really admired her willful spirit. Always had. Always would.

But practically, it was his job to teach her something different. He had tried for months to explain
that there was beauty in understanding the journey set forth in front of you. He had spent so many
star-filled nights whispering to her heartwood about quiet bravery, and inner strength, and loyalty.
He explained that there was a nobility and a dignity in accepting your duty, or at least in accepting
what couldn’t be changed, even when you fucking hated it. Even when you fucking hated yourself
for it. And one of these days, Quentin was sure he would manage to believe his own words too.

It had been a long year.

But even after his (mild and justified) scolding, the mast groaned and then shook with a new rush
of petty annoyance. Below him, a plank of wood almost snapped as the helm swung from side-to-
side, furious and teetering on its edges. Quentin snorted a sigh, tempted to open his book and read
vigorously, if one could, just to prove a point.

“Ooh, scary,” he said, waving his hands in the air with a laugh. He had no patience for temper
tantrums. “Have you ever heard the expression, uh, Don’t cut off your nose to spite your face? Do
you know what that means?”

It was an Earth expression, one he liked. It was versatile. The richness of Earthling English—the
pops and dips and crescendos of meaning and tone—was one of the things Quentin missed most
about his time there.

Well, that, and watching Star Trek: Voyager.

He turned his stern face back up to the sails, waiting for an answer. But he only received a sarcastic
stillness back, too silent. She was basically flipping a middle finger. It was a shitty way to treat a
beloved teacher who only had your best interests at heart.

Quentin rolled his eyes. “It means Don’t break your own shit because you’re pissed at me. Trust
me, if you do that, you’ll regret it.”

... The boat disagreed.

With a roar, she slammed her bow and gaff about, swishing the main sail through the air. The wind
forced Quentin down to the bottom of the hold, his feet scrabbling out and knees curling all the way up to his neck.

Quentin yelled against the relentless howl. “Ursidae, stop!”

... She did not stop.

“Holy shit, come on,” he pleaded, right as she almost sent him tumbling to the waters below. “Ursidae, stop, fucking stop! I’m sorry, okay?”

With a jarring halt, the boat went abruptly still. Ursidae creaked one more time, a haughty sound, in acknowledgment of his coerced apology. Quentin rocked his head back with an exhale.

“Hades, you’re—you’re in a bad mood,” he stammered out, steadying his wobbly legs. “This is a bad look for a bear-class, Urs.”

But with a soul spark of understanding, he grazed his hand along the wood, a small grounding touch. He got an affectionate little rock along the water in turn. Quentin smiled.

“Yeah, yeah,” he said, stretching his arms toward the bright sky. He squinted out at the horizon, and then blinked as he noticed a large black boat dotting the clear blue. It was steering toward the Cove with a charted silver path through the rough waters.

That was unusual. As far as Quentin knew, they weren’t scheduled to complete any repairs that day and tourists were rare in the autumn time season.

“Hey, do you see that out there?” Quentin asked Ursidae. He chewed on his lip, reaching for a suitable explanation. “Visiting Lorians, you think?”

Lorians were always batshit over sentient boats. They came all the time, just to get their portraits painted with Ted and even with Quentin sometimes now too, much to his embarrassment. Ess probably told them to do that, the asshole.

But in response, Ursidae just sighed her sails dramatically. Quentin shrugged, ready to sit back down and dive back into the colorful and technical world of Isaac Asimov. But before he could find his place again, he was interrupted by a loud call of Yoo-hoo! from far below. It was a familiar sound, theatrical and bright.

“Pardon me, good sir,” the cheerful voice hollered up with a giggle through cupped hands. “But I was expecting a parcelful of stupid oaf today. Have you perchance seen it?”

Fen was a dork. And Quentin knew from dork.

Leaning over the nest on his elbows, Quentin opened his mouth to retort when confusion hit. He blinked hard at his heart-cousin. She was dressed in a floaty pink dress, with white geranium blooms swirled through her honey brown strands.

“Uh,” Quentin called down articulately. He could feel his eyebrows crawling everywhere. “You look nice. What’s the occasion?”

“Well,” Fen laughed out with a glowing smile. “Maybe if someone hadn’t been hiding out like a grumptroll all day, he would have noticed the trumpets and ribbon-spinning all through the Cove, hm?”

Quentin frowned, snapping his head toward the workshop and homestead. With a pinch of
uneasiness, he noticed that a crowd had formed, fifty or so heads in all, chattering and singing around painted poles and wreaths of fur. Pastel ribbons hung from every rooftop and young boys rolled barrels of ale into the open yard. And above the fray, his Heart-Uncle Dint stood tall on a new platform, reaching down with a broad grin, shaking the hands of all who passed.

He swiveled his head back again toward the water, toward the ship on the horizon. The puzzle pieces slid together and a key wound a clock.

It was time.

It was the day Quentin and Fen had waited for their entire lives, under the watchful eyes of Fillory. It was here.

Right the fuck now.

As usual in a crisis, Quentin spoke without synchronicity.

“Wait—I—what? Fen, is this when—did they—?” He swallowed a grunt of frustration, swirling his tongue around his teeth as his thoughts caught up. “Are you saying that—?

Quentin still couldn’t get it out, but Fen understood. She nodded brightly, bringing her hands together under her chin and jumping up in jubilant excitement.

“They’re here, Q,” she said, cheeks flushed and eyes smiling. “He’s finally here.”

Fillory flipped in the air like a pancake, dizzy and shot in slow-motion. Quentin gripped the wooden edge in front of him, taking as many breaths as he could in the span of a minute. He needed as much air as he could get, as quickly as he could get it.

Black dots blotted his vision and he rubbed the corners of his eyes, forcing himself to get a fucking grip. This wasn’t going to change anything for him. His life was going to remain unchanged. It was Fen he should be worried about, not himself.

… Yeah, that didn’t help.

But Fen was happy for it. That meant he should be happy for Fen, no matter how he felt, no matter what basic reason told him to feel. With taxing effort, he tried to fill his eyes with all the shiny godsdamned joy he could muster.

“He’s here!” Quentin wagged his hands in the air and pitched his voice high to show excitement. “That’s so great!”

Fen crossed her arms and looked at him like he was the dumbest pup of the litter, barely able to solve differential equations by his first birthday.

“Their ship is pulling to harbor” she said, voice flat. “You have an hour at the very most and you absolutely cannot be late.”

Quentin sighed, plastering a hand to his forehead. “Okay, fine, I know.”

Fen stared at him, unimpressed but resigned. “Please comb your hair and don’t wear your work boots.”

Quentin stole a glance down at his feet, clad in sturdy deer hide. There was algae mucous on the soles and the leather was crusted in the scales of old mer corpses. Water pooled around his wool
socks, squishing every step. They were discolored from tromping through the acid tide pools one too many times, blanched bright orange where they were once dusty brown. Sure, they weren’t fancy. They were dirty as shit. But it wasn’t like the High King would give a shit about what he wore. Or about Quentin at all.

So he scoffed, blowing an uncooperative strand of hair away from his lips. “I mean, fine, but honestly? All this pomp and circumstance is really just, uh, you know—”

Fen hummed into a threatening melody, eyes wide and wild. “Do not wear your work boots, Quentin.”

With that final decree, Fen shot him a big smile and her whole demeanor lightened back into her usual cheerfulness.

Quentin prayed to Umber for peace of mind. He wasn’t sure if the god still took calls. He wasn’t sure if Umber listened to anything anymore, or if his will had been too burned by his asshole brother. But it was worth a shot.

With a quick jump, Quentin slid down the rope, with only the smallest amount of magical assistance to stick the landing. Fen must have noticed. Her eyes darkened for a moment, before she blinked it away, nothing but a perky happiness in its stead.

Ursidae made scraping sounds under Quentin’s feet as he crossed the main deck. He leaned over the railing to grin down at Fen, hoping his face didn’t showcase the growing sadness in his heart. On top of everything else, he was going to miss her so damn much.

Fen went up the steps to meet him halfway.

“Now remember what we always agreed to be true?” She squeezed his hand as she sang a rhyme of her own making. “What’s the High King going-to-be / For all of Fill-or-y?”

He had heard those words, in that same sing-song tone, so many times before. He had complained every single time. But he knew he couldn’t do that today.

Quentin forced a smile. He forced his own Fennish faith.

“The High King will be someone worthy, brave, and true,” he said gently. He shimmied his shoulders back at her, just a little. “He’ll be brave-and-true / For Fill-or-y / And just-for-you.”

The cadence was imperfect, his singing voice even worse. But Fen still smiled at him again, eyes glassy. A hint of warmth crept up his cheeks and he shrugged.

They’d always been two dorks in a pod.

(“If you and Fen ever became even sweeter ninnyheads than you already are,” a roguish voice once murmured a laugh in his ear, near sinister in a way that tingled the spine, “I’d have to serve you to Ember myself.”)

“Hey,” Quentin said, pushing that shit way the fuck down. He took her small hands in his. “I want you to know that whatever happens today, no matter what he’s like, even if it’s not—um, even if it’s not everything we’re hoping, you’ve always got me, okay?”

Fen nodded, her eyes filled with unshed tears. “I know, Q. You’re my family. That matters more than anything.”
Quentin knew that would always be true, for both of them. He and Fen knew and understood each other better than anyone in the whole of Fillory. Maybe in the whole of the universe. They were so different—gods, so fucking different—in every way. Except the ones that mattered most.

Levering himself up on his arms, Quentin swung over the side of the boat and dropped down. He elbowed Fen and rolled his eyes as she immediately scrunched her nose.

“Umber’s rear butt, when’s the last time you bathed?” She plucked his shirtsleeve fabric between her fingers. “You smell like gull dung and fish parts.”

Quentin frowned and sniffed his own arm pit. He pulled away with a sharp grimace. Yeah, okay, fair enough. He’d been working on Ursidae for a few hours. Smelly shit happened.

“I’ll clean up,” he promised, twisting his hair into a loose bun and affixing it with a touch of magic. “But no one’s going to be looking at me anyway, trust me.”

Fen pinched her nose dramatically. “Smelling you is out of our control.”

“I said I’ll get cleaned up,” Quentin said, widening his eyes with every syllable. “Nag.”

With an unfazed shrug, Fen renewed the perky spring in her step and tugged him along the docks. They turned the bend toward the graylog shipkeeping workshop, where curls of smoke rose into the air and a melodious din of chattering crowds started to reach their ears. At the whirlwind of energy coming from the yard, even sociable Fen froze in place.

Catching eyes and nodding in a silent language, Quentin hauled ass away from the gathering, taking the back path through the saplings to charge up the outdoor stairs of the homestead.

Fen followed in a flurry, until they reached the landing near the third story window. They were right outside of Quentin’s quarters, where the two of them (once three) had spent more Summersun days and dreary Wintermoon nights than could be counted, playing tiddlywinks and Shave-the-Sloth over sips of plum juice and rowdy laughter.

The view was spectacular, looking out to forever. Quentin used to swear one could see the edge of the multiverse from his small patio; even the gates of Elysium. It had been a sweet thought.

Quentin tore his eyes from the water to look back at Fen, who stood ramrod straight at the railing. She sucked in an audible breath.

“Do you think he’ll like me? Do you think he’ll think I’m good enough?”

“He’d be an idiot not to,” Quentin said with more sincerity than he even knew he possessed. “You’re everything a king could want in a wife.”

She really was.

Fen was sweet and loyal, slow to anger and full of unfettered joy. She was smart. She would give her whole heart to her position, to her new family, to Fillory. He hated to admit it, but Fen was born for it. Which meant Quentin was just some petty asshole who still thought she deserved better, even though she had always been clear that better wasn’t his to decide.

“What do you think he’s doing right now?” Fen rested her head on Quentin’s shoulder, even with the pungent bird shit smell that wafted off him like toxic fumes.
“I’ll bet he’s standing at the prow of the ship, valiant and noble as he breathes in the sea salt,” he said, pointing toward the boat as it charged closer and closer. “He’s, like, totally holding a broadsword—"

Fen frowned. “Why would he have a broadsword?”

“Because it looks cool?” Quentin rolled his eyes. “That’s not really—"

“A longsword would be more handy. They’re what’s used for portraiture too.”

“Yeah, okay, fine,” Quentin huffed out. “But I’m, like—I’m doing a thing here. So can I just—?”

“Sorry,” Fen said, holding back a laugh. “Sorry, yes, please do your thing .”

Quentin glared at her without heat and blew a puff of air out the side of his mouth. “Anyway, he’s holding a longsword and—I’ll bet he’s already strategizing about how to lead our beautiful land to prosperity and justice for all.”

Fen had to know that Quentin didn’t believe that. She had to know he was only saying it for her benefit. So he was glad when she smiled, watery and warm.

Flooded with his brotherly affection for her, Quentin hugged her close. Then he whispered to a finish, fixing his eyes on the blue horizon.

“But most of all, I’m sure he’s singing hymns of praise,” Quentin said, willing the dream to life. “I’m sure he’s thanking the gods, and the fates, and all the stars that brought him here. Because he’s so grateful that he’s finally coming home to the love of his life.”

---

Eliot groaned over the side of the boat, retching and awaiting the sweet release of death.

They had left The Red Ruin an hour ago, on an ostensibly ‘blessed’ boat from the gaseous excretions of a so-called god—a loathsome goat creature with a constant semi and pastrami breath. Since then, they had roared up and down into massive waves, all while remaining perfectly still above deck. Already prone to seasickness when the tides weren’t pulled by two fucking moons, the visual and physical incongruity alone made Eliot puke his guts out for over an hour.

The perfect capstone for the perfect quest.

Resting his forearms on the wood and glaring under hooded eyes, Eliot surveyed the expanse of water in front of him, the unfamiliar landscape in the distance. He could see a group of tiny Fillorians running about a beach’s white sand, scurrying around gray and black buildings. He wondered if they knew they were coming, the venerated Children of Earth. They probably did, somehow. Magic flowed through the local atmosphere like a Hedge junkie’s wet dream.

But before he could go down that new horror of memory lane, a cool hand massaged the nape of his neck to sweetly distract him. He closed his eyes as a clever tongue clucked in his ear.

“Aw, honey,” Margo said soothingly. “I didn’t even think you had a gag reflex anymore.”

He spat out a congealed bit of yellow gunk into the water and growled, “Bitch, me neither.”
Turning him into her arms, Margo readjusted his tie again, pressing down on the lines of the trinity knot to make sure they laid flat. “Want me to grab you some Listerine? I know where Penny hoards his stash.”

“I’ll spell it away later,” he said, pressing the cool metal of his flask to his sweating forehead. “Not to be glib, but are we fucking there yet?”

Margo didn’t respond to stupid questions. So she just hummed out a low sigh, tugging him down to sit along the side of the boat. There was a puddle of muddy water near his shoes and he instinctively winced. But he wasn’t in a position to be a princess. Not after everything.

Tangling their hands together, Margo rested her head in the cradle of his neck. “We need to come up with a plan, El.”

“Not sure we do,” Eliot said simply, letting his head rock back against the wood. “It’s as straightforward as it gets.”

“Please, shit like this is never straightforward,” Margo said, flashing serious eyes up at him. “What does it mean to be High King? What does it mean to be married? What are the terms and conditions?”

“It’s only a thirty percent chance it’s me,” Eliot said, sidestepping the reasonable questions. His head hurt and he was still queasy. “I’m wagering Josh. He’s got that Luke Skywalker nerdgasm thing going on.”

Josh agreed, and had already started mapping out his first ninety days. It involved negating the embargo between Fillory and Earth to support marijuana trade. He was following his bliss.

“It’s possible,” Margo said. But then her face fell into confusion, a finger tapping her chin. “But remind me—who’s Josh?”

Their matching devious smiles slid into place like a dance. “You are a giant among men, Bambi.”

She cuddled into him in silent agreement and laid her head back on his chest, absently threading the end of his tie through her fingers. Eliot closed his eyes and breathed in the scent of her hair. For a moment, he was back at the Cottage, hazy smoke and amber lights all around.

“We can bail,” Bambi whispered into the still air. “Say the fuckin’ word. Make that thirty percent chance a zero.”

It was tempting.

Eliot knew he would look glorious in a crown. He also knew that he was terrible at responsibility and commitment. Even if he could be an interim king—coming back for seasons or years, here and there—the weight of a whole land was already chafing like ill-fitting brogues. Ones that were custom made for someone else.

But Eliot lifted his eyes to the upper deck to take in the tiny woman leaning against the railing. Her curled hair cascaded down her shoulders and her haunted eyes drilled into his heart. It was all he needed to know.

“I can’t,” Eliot said simply. “I just—I can’t.”

Margo sucked in an annoyed hiss of breath. “Why the fuck not?”
Bambi knew why the fuck not, but she was making him say it. He closed his eyes.

“If it’s supposed to be me and I don’t hold up the bargain? That Reynard dick could come back. We don’t know. We—” Eliot licked his dry lips, sea salted and vomit sweet. “I can’t do that to Julia.”

“Yeah, I don’t get it,” Margo said, not for the first time. “I don’t get your obsession with her.”

Eliot sighed, not for the first time. “I’m not obsessed with her, I’m friends with her.”

“I’m your friend.”

“No,” Eliot said, kissing her forehead. “You’re my Bambi.”

Her answering smile was bright as stars. But then it dimmed to a smirk. “Good answer, slick.”

But before Eliot could change the subject with his usual dexterity, Margo set her face fiercely again. “But seriously? Let her clean up her own fucking mess while we take the next portal to the French Rivera.”

Bambi and Julia hadn’t exactly gotten along like gangbusters from day one.

Julia had been a bushy-tailed first year, a Knowledge Kid. She lived for both the library and, as it turned out, fucking with more and more potent magic until it reached a deadly breaking point. She was intense and studious, her chilled out vibe a facade for the fever below. And Margo had been territorial and biting toward the “rando” who had started hanging out at the Cottage more and more, always at Eliot’s other hand.

“She’s gonna be trouble, El,” Margo had promised one night over their eighth glass of wine. “Not in the cute boy kinda way. In the, she’s gonna fuck our shit up kinda way.”

In the end, Bambi was right because Bambi was always right. But even if he would never dare say it to her...

Bambi still didn’t fully understand.

She didn’t understand Julia’s remarkable kindness and curiosity. She didn’t understand her tenacity and her bravery. And she didn’t see that indescribable quality, and how it was something that made him feel stronger in her presence, almost at peace, almost like fate, even as the world had gone to hell by her hands.

Margo may have been his home, but Julia was his lighthouse. He wasn’t going to abandon her. Especially not now.

So Eliot swallowed, eyes falling shut. “Bambi.”

He said his name for her softly, pleadingly. And Margo was still for a long moment, her body tense and angry against his. But then she relaxed, melting into his side and rolling her head so it rested in the crook of his neck.

“Fine,” she said, like it wasn’t fine but she was allowing a great compromise for his sake. “We’ll stay. But I blame her entirely.”

Eliot wrapped his hand into her soft hair and made a noncommittal sound. “I think she’s learned her lesson.”
“Bitches like Julia don’t learn lessons,” Margo said, eyes dark. “They get smarter and stronger.”

“Same difference,” Eliot said lightly, but shot his eyes over at her. “Julia’s doing her best.”

“Why do you care?” Margo threw her hands up. “Seriously, what’s so fucking special about her?”


“At what cost?” Margo shook her head, eyes closing. “It’s not over. You might be the goddamn king of an entire land. There are a few variables we can’t predict.”

“If it comes to that, which is a big if,” Eliot rubbed the heels of his palms into his eyes, stars dusting the blackness, “we’ll figure out a system. I can appoint Josh as my proxy and come back as needed.”

“And the marriage?” Margo licked her lips viciously. “To some Fillorian farm girl?”

Easy. “Royal annulment. Ember didn’t say I had to stay married.”

“He didn’t say all that goddamn much. Nothing intelligible, that’s for fucking sure,” Margo argued. But then she sighed, endless eyes staring up at the endless sky. “But I hope you’re right. I hope it’s that simple.”

“Don’t take it out on Julia,” Eliot said gently, rolling his head so they could look each other in the eyes. “I’m just trying to do for her what I hope someone would do for me.”

Margo’s eyes flashed. “Of course someone would do that for you. Jesus, what do you think—?”

“I know, that’s my point,” Eliot said, bringing her hand to his lips in reverence. “Julia doesn’t have a Bambi, Margo.”

At that, Margo finally let her shoulders drop. Her perfect little lips curled resigned pucker, shaking her head at him before kissing his cheek again.

“Well, you do have a Bambi,” Margo said, smoothing back his curls with a deft touch. “And she will eat all the other woodland creatures if they even give you a nasty look, you hear me?”

“Evocative as ever,” Eliot smiled, stroking his thumb along the back of her hand. Her soft skin was a balm.

“Their children will scream as I pick my teeth with their mother’s tiny bones.”

“Jesus,” Eliot laughed out, his cheeks hurting with the surprise wide grin. Margo snorted a private nerdy laugh as she played with his hand.

“As for Julia, well, I suppose I am fucking the everloving shit out of her ex,” she said with an annoyed sigh, like it was such a bother that she was getting Penny’s dick every time they were behind closed doors, the unbelievable bitch. “Probably doesn’t help our cold war.”

“Don’t remind me,” Eliot spat out, knowing it was tetchy. “Do you have any idea how long it’s been since I fucked someone?”

Margo cupped his face in her hands and her tiny grin came into focus. “Down to the goddamn second because you won’t shut up about it.”
“Fillorian men leave little to be desired,” Eliot grumbled, adjusting his collar as he sat up straight. “The last one, Callum or whatever—"

“I feel like it was Callias. With the weird jowl shit?”

“No, that was the twin,” Eliot said with a shudder. “Callum had a decent face, but a concave chest and a severe lack of hygiene.” He paused. “I also fucked Callias. It was fine.”

Margo wrapped her fingers around his wrist and grinned. “Well, at least you finally crossed Same Night Twins off the bucket list.”

Eliot stuck his tongue out. “Barely worth it. In any case, that was four months ago. I’d kill for a ride on the Adiyodi train, even if it imploded my only other meaningful friendship.”

Julia, Kady, and Penny had been a hot mess of a triad from day one. Their breakup, following Julia’s summoning of Reynard the Fox under the guise of a deity known as Our Lady Underground, was more like a scalding shitstorm. And Margo had delighted in ruin, in more ways than one.

“He just has so much pent up energy,” she said with a shimmy. “His whole angry young man thing totally translates the way you hope it does.”

Eliot sneered a false smile at her and slammed his head back, glaring into the void.

“But my happy clit aside,” Bambi said, glancing up at the forlorn silhouette of Julia against the sky. “Why don’t you go up and check on your girl?”

“You’re my girl,” Eliot said automatically. He got a twinkle of big brown eyes back.

“That was a test and you passed,” Margo said. Then she angled her head. “Now go, you bleeding heart asshole. You know you want to.”

Eliot sighed, resenting that description as he looked back up at the figure of Julia above. Her skin was pale and lips spasming as she stared at nothing in particular. Margo was right. He really wanted to go check on her.

“I’ll be back,” Eliot promised as he stood. “Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.”

Bambi blew him a lazy kiss and pulled out a well-worn book as he ascended the small staircase. The boards creaked under his careful steps, as Eliot tried to approach quietly. Sliding into the space next to her, Julia didn’t twitch.

“Hey you,” Eliot said, lightly touching her elbow. “How’s it going up here?”

“Do you ever feel like shit is wrong?” Julia spoke in rough tones, tear-streaked face shining in the sun. “Like there’s a fundamental piece of your life that’s just—missing?”

She had never been one for small talk.

Eliot frowned, not sure what to say. So he stroked her hair and waited for her to continue. She almost always continued.

“Do you ever feel like something should have been there, in that ache, but instead you got stuck in some, like, fucking simulation of the life you were supposed to have? And now it’s all wrong in ways you can’t put your finger on?"
Her sorrowful eyes finally met his.

“Oh, darling,” Eliot said, wrapping both arms around her and kissing the top of her tiny head. “That’s why I drink.”

She gasped out something that was almost a laugh. Her shoulders shook like the wind under his hands.

“I thought I would feel relieved, now that it’s over,” Julia sniffed, tiny hands clenching. “But I feel hollow. Nothing will make what I did better.”

“It wasn’t your fault,” Eliot said again. He’d always say it again, just as he would always twine the loop of her curls between his fingers. “This is the shit that happens with magic.”

“Henry told me that there’s always a fine print, always a result you can’t expect when you fuck with gods,” Julia said, a sob breaking up the name of her mentor. “He told me and I did it anyway because I’m an arrogant monster, and now he’s—”

Eliot took her chin in his hand. “If you’re a monster, there is no hope for the rest of us.”

But Julia’s eyes just narrowed off toward the water. She stared, inward and dark and hateful and so fucking recognizable, down to his goddamn soul, in a way that made Eliot want to hold her until it disappeared.

“Persephone told me that I need to speak my truth, in order to find healing,” Julia said without inflection. “So here it is. Reynard murdered every Master Magician at Brakebills. He murdered every Master Magician in New York. He murdered Mischa Mayakovsky, the greatest Magician of all time. Their blood is on me, Eliot.”

“No, it’s on Reynard,” Eliot breathed out. “You were trying to make things better, trying to do something actually good for that miserable world—”

Julia falsely laughed. “No, I was trying to prove my own power.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Eliot said. “Reynard’s gone now. You fixed it.”

“Like that makes up for anything,” Julia said, shaking her head. “It all feels so fucking pointless.”

“Hey now,” Eliot said, wagging a very stern finger in her face. “If that’s true, then Alice chugged curdled semen in vain and we cannot have that blight on our hands, young lady.”

An unexpected laugh burst out of her. She covered her eyes with her hands. “Shit. That did happen.”

“And obviously, the next logical step is that one of the three fucked up young men on this ship will be granted automatic dictatorial power over the fantasy land featured in your favorite children’s book series.”

“Tale as old as time,” Julia said with a serious nod, before laughing into her hand. “Jesus, I need a cigarette.”

Taking his cue, Eliot slid two out of his pocket. He winked at her mock scandalized face. “In case of emergency. This qualifies.”

He snapped fire from his fingers. Julia grinned through smoke and popped her cigarette into her
lips with a blissful sigh. He expected the words of thanks to flow like honey. But instead, he got—

“I’m telling Alice.”

“You would betray your benefactor?” Eliot stared down at her from over his own cloud of beautiful smoke. “Fie, motherfucker.”

Julia shrugged, unapologetic. “I’m cold blooded as shit.”

Heart warming in his chest at the rare glimpse of his Julia, rather than the hollowed out ghost that had been walking around in her body, Eliot decided to drop the bullshit. He pulled her into a tight hug, wrapping his arms fully around her back, cigarette be damned. She gasped a quiet sob into his chest, probably further ruining the already ruined silk of his waistcoat. For a few moments, they stood like that, the salty breeze blowing their hair into messes and the kinship of an embrace grounding them to each other in the midst of a fucking ridiculous situation.

But fucking ridiculous situations waited for no one and Julia was always a step ahead. She pulled away and pulled her cigarette back to her lips. Eliot brushed ash off his clothes as she did.

“Penny might run if it’s him,” she said, furrowing her brow. “Because Kady won’t stay. We might have to grapple with that.”

“Who knows,” Eliot said, flicking the end of his cigarette toward the water. Penny may have been fucking Margo, but where his heart lived was clear to everyone. “Let’s not overthink anything that might end up being irrelevant, okay? Enough on our plates.”

When he looked back up at Julia, her gaze had softened, with a faint halo of otherworldly sunlit glow behind her. “I think you’d be a good king.”

Eliot laughed. “Based on what?”

He had been the Prince of Brakebills, a lifetime ago. He threw a good party. But Eliot didn’t know shit about political science and even less about magical political philosophy. The school had a class on it, but only nerds and sociopaths took it.

“Your inherent magnificence?”

“Yes, the marker of greatness,” Eliot said, tossing his head back into the wind. “Went well for Louis XVI, I hear.”

Julia shook her cigarette at him. “That dickhead had nothing on you.”

But as he was about to respond—something about eating cake, he hadn't totally thought it through—a small cough caught their attention. Alice Quinn stood at the top of the stairs, an unamused brow ticked up right at the smoke rising from their hands. Guiltily, Eliot and Julia both plastered on placating grins and hid their cigarettes behind their backs. Alice rolled her eyes.

“Sorry to interrupt,” she said, almost sounding like she meant it. “But I figured you should know that we’re docking in the next few minutes. From what I understand, it’s expected that Eliot will be ready to undergo the ritual shortly after disembarking.”

Eliot and Julia exchanged a quick glance, remembering what Ember had said. It was some kind of blood-letting. Always fun.

Alice gave Eliot an odd twitch of her face, perhaps meant to be sympathetic. “Anyway, the map
says this is the place, so we need to be ready in about twenty minutes.”

“Do they have minutes here?” Julia pulled her cigarette back to her lips, giving no shits. “Is that how time is measured?”

Alice nodded, always knowledgeable and giving many shits.

“Yes. They also use our days of the week, modified season names, numbers, and some of the metric system,” she said, flattening her skirt along her thighs. “One of the first Earth rulers implemented the usage and they all stuck around.”

“Huh,” Julia said with a slow nod, eyes unfocused again. “Interesting.”

Alice gave her a forced smile, eyes darting away. It was the most she and Julia had spoken to each other since Alice and Kady had confessed their passion for one another, atop a volcano filled with screaming bats. It had been annoying.

Both the bats and the love declaration.

“Anyway,” Alice said, clearing her throat a touch harder than necessary. She worried her lip between her teeth and pointed over toward the shore ahead. “The map says this is the place.”

Tossing her cigarette into the water (and eliciting a deep frown from Alice), Julia placed both hands on the wooden railing and smiled wistfully. “What’s it called?”

“This is the Swept Coast, of the Western Border Province,” Alice said, pulling out the small map. She pointed down to a tiny inlet, just south of a city called Sultan. “But the ritual site is at a place called Coldwater Cove.”

Eliot rolled his eyes. “Creative.”

“It’s ancient,” Alice continued without any acknowledgement of snark. “Known for a profound magic far beyond anything in our realm. Historically, it was once neutral, but the deal with Ember and Umber solidified its alliance to Whitespire.”

“So it’s all about control of magical resources, even the ones that aren’t inherent to gods and borders,” Julia said with a strangled sound in the back of her throat. She grit her teeth. “Shit really is the same everywhere.”

Eliot pursed his lips and rested his chin on his hand, smoking thoughtfully. “Did you read anything about the deal itself?”

“There’s almost nothing,” Alice said apologetically. “Just that Ember and Umber made a trade with the area surrounding Coldwater Cove for their first born, promised to the High King. Then there are ledgers showing the royal family trees—all their wives are from a radius of approximately 1500 meters from the center of the Cove.”


Alice’s lips spasmed. “Um, that’s hard to say. Not many of the monarchs lasted. A lot—most of them died or disappeared shortly after taking the throne, with the exception of the Chatwins. But Rupert was married to Lady Prisnella until her death, and all the books I could find only praise their deep love.”

“A swift annulment is definitely still on the table, Eliot,” Julia said, taking his arm. “We have no
reason to believe it’s not.”

“Though whoever it is will have to consummate,” Alice said with a cringe. “That’s how the magic is set.”

“I mean, I can fuck some girl, it’s fine,” Eliot said with a sigh. He’d done worse. Would continue to do worse once this shit was over with. “We should probably be more worried about Penny and Josh, when it comes down to it.”

Alice bit her lip so hard it was a shock it didn’t pop off.

But Julia swung her arm into him, smiling gently even if it didn’t meet her eyes. “Cross that bridge when we come to it, right?”

Eliot swung his arm back at her with a secret smile of his own.

And with another deep, nauseated, fucked up breath of salty air, Eliot stepped forward toward the stairs, leading them down the stairs. Ready to go, he tossed his cigarette over the side of the railing, watching the arch of it fly and drop into the clear water below, still moving under the boat, churning toward an unknown future.

(“Okay, that’s really not acceptable, guys,” Alice huffed with a sharp glare.

... Fair enough.)

Quentin was late.

Running a hand through his ribbonless hair, he ran down the creaky old stairs two at a time and muttered, “Shitshitshit shit” on a loop under heaving breaths.

He was clean now, complete with a splash of his father’s sweet-smelling elixir, burning into his freshly shaven cheeks. He even wore his favorite (only) formalwear, dark blue shirtsleeves and a silver vest. All of this would appease his father and Fen, maybe even deeming him halfway presentable to the new monarchs. But tardiness would eclipse even his best efforts.

It wasn’t that Quentin didn’t have an excuse for his late arrival. It was just that reading an essay on how and when Asimov had coined the word *robotics* probably wasn’t an excuse any Fillorian would be able to understand. Which was a shame because it was an interesting topic. See, the thing was, Asimov had believed that he was using an existent word, paralleling *electronics* . So when he wrote it into a 1941 short story, he actually predated his own most significant definitional use by approximately ten months and that was—

Thoughts bouncing with fervor, Quentin barely noticed when he ran smack into his father, staring down at him over crossed arms. Ted of Coldwater Cove stood in the shadows of the workshop, while the celebration exploded into dance and music around them. Streaming ribbons in the air and tankards of ale clanged high in time with the melodies. But his normally gentle father’s face clouded like a storm as he silently pointed over toward the empty space next to Fen, at the front of the crowd. With a short nod and feeling like a child, Quentin wound his way through the revelers.

The celebration was quintessentially Fillorian.

The blooms of ribbons floated in swirling patterns, glittering under the cooling afternoon sunlight.
A catering company of hired bears served delicacies like broiled mutton in puff pastry, poached mutton à la mode, and flattened goose egg. Barrels of ale broke up the crowd and most of the guests were already flushed with drunkenness, craning their heads to try to catch a glimpse of the Earthlings.

Quentin was a perfectly average height, but he couldn’t see over all the bobbing heads, especially with the way young children climbed on their fathers’ shoulders to wave novelty sparkler wands in the air and holler their well wishes out to the wind. Whatever. He stuffed a nice looking hors d'oeuvre of creamed yellow cheese and glazed boar into his mouth, and finally reached the first row of the crowd. He came to a stop next to Fen.

As soon as she registered his presence, she slammed an irritated foot down on his without breaking her smile. He hissed in pain, jumping on his uninjured foot as he shook off the reverberation of her sharp heel.

But Fen just kept smiling, ever ready for royalty. “What was the one thing I said?”

“Don’t wear your work boots,” Quentin said out the side of his mouth, just to be an asshole. He settled back down into a normal stance, cracking his neck. But of course, she just slammed down on his (formal boot-covered) toes again. It hurt even worse, but he breathed through it with barely a glare at her.

Following Fen’s unbroken line of sight to the center of the yard, Quentin scanned over the newly arrived group of Earthlings, the ones who were to be their monarchs. Three young men stood in a line on the shining platform, all of them dressed in various states of Earth wear, from jeans to coats to unseasonable tank tops. Dizzy with the heaviness of reality, Quentin didn’t focus on them —couldn’t focus on them. Instead, he craned his head over to the small group of young women, all in jeans and bright colored shirts, with dour looks on their faces as they talked amongst themselves. Their hands wrung together and their eyes slit sharp around the goings-on. At best, they looked bored. At worst, they looked hostile.

Well, with one exception.

A beautiful Earth woman with dark hair and a wicked smile floated around the nearby Fillorians, shaking hands and sipping libations with them. She was dressed in fuchsia and black, and she painted on false looks of interest every time a Fillorian said something—while then quickly extracting herself to move onto the next once the words were gone, as though she were on a mission of some kind. Quentin frowned, wondering.

But Fen’s elbow cut off his curiosity and she smiled wider as she flicked her eyes back over to the High King candidates.

“Since you were late, I’ll catch you up. That’s Lord Joshua,” Fen whispered, indicating the squat man with glasses and sandy hair, who was clapping along with the music, “of a land called Yonkers.”

Quentin knew where that was; it was a city in Westchest County. Also, he had seen the movie Lost in Yonkers. So he nodded curtly and darted his eyes over to the next. He had to adjust his sight upward, because the man in the middle was a good head taller than Lord Joshua.

Once he did, Fillory started free falling. Fen’s introduction of Lord Eliot of New York sounded like rushing water over plugged ears.

Because Lord Eliot of New York was—
He was—

Well, he was tall.

Really fucking tall. And, like, he was dashing, which was a terrible word but the only one that was coming to mind, stupid as it was. Because, fuck, Lord Eliot held himself like he was born to be adored. A camel hair coat and a silk blue scarf framed his unfairly gorgeous face and draped over his broad shoulders, held back and still like stone columns. He was impressive as shit from every angle, but all Quentin could really see were his eyes, fern and copper, rolling Springtime hills and endless seas of gold. Then his defined face, his haughtily set lips, the way his posture towered like the peaks of the Nameless Mountains. Irrationally—pathetically—Quentin felt unworthy.

As soon as the thought sparked his heart paradoxically alive, Lord Eliot’s eyes met his and the music must have stopped. The Earthling’s brow ticked together once over a soft and inscrutable look, and Quentin couldn’t breathe. But it only lasted a second.

… Because then those eyes narrowed over a knowing smirk.

The burning fury of a thousand wildfires attacked Quentin’s cheeks and he firmly looked away. Shit. Shit. He needed to get his shit together.

“—but that’s an odd name for a city,” Fen whispered to his ear, frowning. “Or is it a province?”

Quentin jolted back to solid ground, wrinkling his face at her in confusion. “What are you talking about?”

She rolled her eyes and popped a quick glance at the man on the furthest end of the line, all the way to the left. He was sullen, bare arms crossed over a tank top like an iron shield. He stood with his shoulders squared like Lord Eliot, but there was no placidity to him, no regence.

He also wore a festive paisley scarf.

“Lord Penny of None-of-Your-Damn-Business,” Fen repeated, still speaking through her smile. “It’s a strange name for a homeland and I was wondering about the origin?”

Quentin startled, taken aback at the rudeness of that. He thought about telling her the truth—Uh, Lord Penny probably said that because Lord Penny is probably a dick—but opted to preserve her innocence, in case he was to be her husband.

So Quentin just shrugged. “Earth is weird.”

“That’s not really an answer,” Fen hissed, but her father Dint shot them both a hot-tempered look for silence before Quentin could respond. From behind him, Quentin’s father squeezed his shoulder, a touch too tight, equally telegraphing his displeasure at their chatter.

Quentin felt a hot spike of anger torch his stomach. How fucking dare their fathers begrudge them two goddamn moments of conversation with each other before their lives were changed forever, before Fen was shipped off to Whitespire and a dangerous future? They had a lot of nerve.

He stretched his fingers along the soft fabric of his impractical pants and focused on his breath. He reminded himself what he always reminded himself—Ted and Dint were ingrained in this world. They were products of their environment. Neither of them had ever had the opportunities Quentin had. Neither of them had ever even left the small radius of the Cove, never explored further, whether by foot or flight or mind. It was wrong to blame them for their invisible chains.
Dint stood tall and clapped his hands above his head, a commanding presence even without a drop of royal promise. The crowd silenced on cue and the Earthlings all exchanged careful eyes with one another. They straightened up, readying themselves for what was to come. The woman in fuschia returned to the small group of women, positioning herself front and center. Her eyes zeroed in on Lord Eliot, without blinking and full of an unmatched intensity.

They all looked young, around his age. Did they really know what they were in for? What Fillorian royalty meant? The trials they were about to endure, to overtake the Pickwicks, to quell the concerns of a dissatisfied populace? Honestly, had they not come completely of their own volition, likely in search of wealth and glory, Quentin would almost feel sorry for them.

They didn’t exactly look prepared.

“Great Children of Earth,” Dint said, voice booming and joyful. It was a big day for him. His obsession with receiving a family name at court had been his lifelong driving purpose, other than smithing. “We welcome you humbly to the beautiful land of Fillory and we praise Ember for his strength, Umber for wisdom in bringing you to us on this tremendous Day of Days.”

The crowd around Quentin chanted, “Praise be The Rams. Bahhhhh .”

Lord Eliot sucked in his lower lip, face spasming in a poorly hidden laugh. Beside him, Lord Penny rolled his eyes so high into the sky, Quentin thought they may fall out. But the squat man with glasses bounced even more excitedly than before and smiled.

“Wow, that was a beautiful greeting,” Lord Joshua said with a thumbs up, a meaningless symbol to every Fillorian other than Quentin. “Please let me be the first to thank you for this reception. It’s been like the Ren Faire of my acid dreams. Kudos.”

Lord Eliot flashed a glare at him, shockingly menacing. “Jesus, Josh.”

“They don’t know what that is, man,” Lord Penny added, his own face scowling impossibly harder as he bent over his crossed arms. “You’re a fucking moron.”

“When’s the last time you ate, Penny?” Lord ‘Josh’ accused, raising his bushy eyebrows high above his glasses. “’Cause you’re sounding a little hangry to me.”

“I will show you hangry, you piece of—”

Lord Eliot sighed, the most put-on man in the universe. “Now, now, gentlemen—”

The embarrassing bickering continued for awhile and Dint waited with his hands behind his back. His serene smile belied the screaming impatience below the surface. Quentin grew bored and kicked patterns into the dusty ground, trying to think of the specific wording of Asimov’s zeroth law, in regard to a robot’s duty toward the well-being of humanity. He couldn’t remember if the word was inaction or—

“At least they all cut a handsome figure,” Fen risked as a whispered comment, nudging Quentin back to Fillory with a wink. He frowned, tracing his eyes along the fighting threesome—the intense Penny, the empyrean Eliot, and, well, Josh—before clearing his throat.

“Two of them do,” he muttered back, leaning into her. She dug her heel back into his toes, swallowing a shivering laugh.

Finally, with a snap of fingers and a particularly harsh word from the woman in fuchsia (“Simmer the fuck down, dickholes,”) the three men righted themselves back up on the platform again and
stared back at Dint, queasy smiles painting their faces.

… Gods save Fillory.

Dint held his hand out to his daughter and Fen caught her breath in a gasp, her eyes glowing bright. Quentin forced down his fear to smile warmly at her, linking their pinkies for a quick moment before she stepped forward, taking her father’s hand.

“My lords, I present my daughter Fen,” Dint announced with pride, firelight bright. The Lords Joshua and Penny widened their eyes in clear astonishment. “By the decree of their goat-truths, the truest of truths, I am honored to proffer her as the firstborn lady of Coldwater Cove of the Western Border Province, and as the aspirant to your chosen kingship, in the most holy role of Wife.”

Quentin had a million qualms with that particular speech. By the flat and stony looks on the faces of the female Children of Earth, it was more than a shared sentiment. And to their credit, even the men looked a bit uncomfortable.

But Fen set them at ease in her effortless way, sinking down to the ground, her gauzy and ruffled dress cascading about. She bowed her head and spoke sweetly, “My lords, my future king, it is my duty and my privilege to make your acquaintance.”

“Hold the phone,” Lord Joshua said, thrusting his hand out with a gape of his mouth. “If we’re the High King, we get to marry her?”

“It would be our greatest honor,” Dint said, placing his hand on Fen’s shoulder. Fen smiled up at them. Lord Penny’s eyebrows lifted high and he let out a small laugh.

“I mean, you know,” he said, hopping on the balls of his feet, “team player and stuff.”

“Hey,” Lord Joshua said, reaching over to hit his arm. “Who says it’s you anyway?”

Meanwhile, the silent Lord Eliot pulled out something that looked suspiciously like a flask—an Earth container for spirits—and drank, gulping like he was searching for his salvation at the bottom. Quentin watched the line of his throat swallow rapidly, the sheen of panic glossing over his eyes. It wasn’t a typical response and he found himself wondering, beyond what was appropriate to wonder.

But then those eyes met his again and Lord Eliot’s smirk returned, all the more gleeful. For a second, Quentin found himself unable to look away. That is, until the Lord pulled the flask away and mouthed a silent Hi there. Quentin’s spine electrocuted, abject mortification convulsing his nerves and limbs at once. He stared back at the safety of the ground.

What the fuck was wrong with him?

Back in the Fillory where people weren’t all horny nutjobs, Fen stood in front of her father and kissed the blade that would select the High King. She held her shoulders back and walked over to Lord Joshua, smiling at him as she readied the traditional blessing from the Wife of the Chosen High King.

Fen had dreamed about this moment for as long as he could remember, calling it the first moment of connection before life changed forever.

“Lord Joshua, your face is kind,” Fen said, tilting her face up at him with a gentle smile. Lord Joshua nearly lost his shit. “Shall it be you, may you lead our land with such compassion as you exude.”
Lord Joshua held his hand to his heart and breathlessly said, “It would literally be my fucking honor and pleasure to be your husband and your king.”

“Calm your dick, Hoberman,” the woman in fuschia called over, not looking up from her apparent intense examination of her painted nails. Lord Eliot closed his eyes, tucking his lips into his mouth to stop another laugh.

The crowd gasped at her bold statement, but Quentin actually felt his own lips wobble. Crude or not, she wasn’t wrong.

But Fen was a consummate professional and so she scrunched her face in a happy smile at Lord Joshua, before moving over to Lord Eliot. She swallowed a little—clearly, this one had an effect on her too—but she took a breath, continuing without pause.

“Lord Eliot, your stature is commanding.” Fen said, voice still bright and true, but also fluttering just under the surface. “Shall it be you, may you lead our land with the strength of your guiding hand.”

“Mmm,” Lord Eliot hummed. He nodded, clipped and a touch condescending. “Okay.”

Fen gazed at him for a moment longer. But when it became clear that Lord Eliot had said all that Lord Eliot was going to say, she faltered and forced a too bright smile. As she walked away, Quentin watched Lord Eliot’s face darken, glaring his strong nose down.

Quentin felt a pang of something uncomfortable in his stomach. Beautiful face aside, maybe Lord Eliot was—kind of a dick too? But for whatever reason, he could tell it wasn’t that simple.

… Or maybe he just didn’t want it to be that simple.

Finally, Fen reached the end of the line. She turned her face up to Lord Penny and she started to smile. As she looked at him though, Quentin watched as the corners of her mouth wavered. Her eyes turned into something more discerning, more genuinely Fen than any of the theatrics thus far.

She took a step closer.

“Lord Penny, your spirit is fierce,” Fen said softly, almost like she meant it. “Shall it be you, may you lead our land with the passion from your heart.”

Whatever Lord Penny thought Fen was going to say, it was clearly not that. His eyes widened and narrowed and widened again in a single instant, his lips curling down into a frown. He tightened his arms across his chest and heaved a breath, his chest puffing out as he teetered back onto his heels.

“Well, uh… thanks.”

The two of them stared at each other for another long moment, until Penny tensed, sliding his eyes slowly over to the group of women. Quentin followed, only to see the the woman in fuchsia mouth the words, She wants to fuck you. She pulled her hand up to her mouth to make an, uh, holy shit, extremely crass gesture at Lord Penny, who glared for a lightstorm of a second.

With a cough loud enough to resonate through the crowd, Quentin unsuccessfully hid an unwelcome howl of laughter. But upon realizing that he had seen, the woman was unapologetic. Instead, she winked and blew him a kiss.

Quentin kinda liked her.
But Fen was moving on yet again, taking a surprise turn toward the women, inclining her head slightly, if not quite a bow.

“To the Ladies Julia of Montclair, Kady of Fuck Off, Alice of Illinois, and Margo of Los Angeles,” Fen said sweetly, looking each of them in the eyes and finally giving them names to match. Not that it was important, but they were all ridiculously gorgeous. “May your strength and support buoy our chosen king through his every glorious decision.”

Fen clapped her hands together. She waited happily for both their praise and agreement.

—it never came.

“What the fuck?” Lady Kady said, her face screwing up into a scowl. “Ew.”

“Seconded,” Lady Margo—the woman in fuchsia—said, equally sour of face. Next to her, the blonde Lady Alice held her face in a pained smile, saying nothing.

But the smallest of them stepped forward with a faint smile, taking Fen’s hands in hers. Her warm brown eyes glinted and Quentin weirdly wished his hands were the ones in hers.

“Thank you, Lady Fen,” Lady Julia said gently, before glaring sharp at her friends. “We, of course, appreciate and respect your well wishes.”

The other ladies grumbled, but faked smiles that were good enough for Fen. Radiant, Fen squeaked a sound of happiness, skipping her way back to Dint. Her father kissed her forehead and turned back to the crowd, holding the blade high.

He raised his voice along with it, speaking with all the gravitas in Fillory. “This blade draws one thing and—”

But a cough cut off the speech. Ted of Coldwater Cove stepped forward, pushing a horrified Quentin along with him as he did.

“My lords,” Ted said with a bow, his voice unsteady compared to Dint’s. “I am Ted of Coldwater Cove, the landkeeper of this ancient parcel. On behalf of the Boats and the Tide, I welcome you here. As does my son, Quentin of Coldwater Cove.”

The Children of Earth frowned, every eye turning to Quentin. All at once, Quentin flushed with a burning heat along his cheeks and neck. At that, in a bright contrast to the others’ dull stares, Lord Eliot seemed to find it very amusing, eyes thrilled over a wide grin.

(Quentin had been wrong—he was a dick.)

“Hey,” Quentin said in official greeting, waving his hand once. Ted squeezed his shoulder. It was another warning. “Uh, I mean, welcome, my lords.”

“We also offer our blessing,” Ted continued, voice tight and on edge. “Right, son?”

“Um, yeah,” Quentin agreed with a nod. “We sure do.”

The silence that followed was a cumbersome thing. The Children of Earth betrayed no hint of mercy. Nearby, Fen fluttered her eyes open, begging. Someone in the quiet crowd coughed.

Finally, Ted sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. “Go ahead, Quentin.”

Oh, shit.
“You want me to—?” Quentin shot his eyes over at his father, who nodded with threadbare patience. Shit. “Um, okay.”

The Earthlings still stared, brows wrinkled and eyes blank, with two exceptions. The first, Lady Margo, who was once again completely ignoring the goings-on to chat within the crowd. And second, that damned Lord Eliot, who was still grinning like a jaguar ready to pounce.

Quentin tucked his hair behind his ears, rib cage rattling under his skin. He didn’t like public speaking. He had no idea what to say.

“May the chosen High King, uh—” Quentin swallowed. “Uh, may he—”

His fingers shook and he took a deep breath. It didn’t help. With a churning regurgitation of panic, his brain short-circuited. His clumsy mouth took over, spitting out words before he thought them through. Like, at all.

“—May the High King live long and prosper.”

His blessing rang out into the open yard and settled over the crowd.

Beside him, his father gave him a warm smile and nodded, proud. Fen beamed as she whispered, “That was really nice, Q,” reaching over to rub his forearm with bursting affection. Quentin cleared his throat, jagged around the pounding heart lodged there. Then he dared to look over at the Earthlings.

He pretty much knew what he was going to find.

Their faces had morphed into some gradient of incredulity and amusement, with a touch of *Is he fucking serious?* Lady Margo had even stopped mid-conversation to gawk, her eyes filling with laughing tears.

“Uh, did he just say—?” Lady Kady started to ask, eyebrows going high into her black curly hair.

“Yup,” Lady Julia squeaked, nodding her head in short bursts. “Yup, and it’s a lovely thought and we all appreciate it.”

Wanting to just, like, die, Quentin forced himself to look at the recipients of his blessing. Lord Eliot had widened his eyes, nodding simperingly as an even wider smile melted across his annoyingly perfect face. Lord Penny rubbed his temples, like he was soothing a headache. But Lord Josh smiled, genuine.

“Hey man, same to you,” he said, flashing a Vulcan salute as he did. “Peace and long life.”

You know, maybe Quentin had been too harsh on him.

“Shut up, Hoberman,” Lord Penny said, clenching a fist at the center of his forehead. “This Fillorian dude doesn’t know what that nerd shit is.”

… Quentin had not been too harsh on Lord Penny.

“We don’t know that,” Lord Josh shot back. “Maybe the Fillorians have also discovered their Lord and Savior Leonard Nimoy.”

“You are the most annoying motherfu—“

“Children,” Lord Eliot said, wrapping his long arms around both their shoulders. “Let’s behave for
“Call yourself Daddy one more time,” Lord Penny threatened, turning toward Lord Eliot with a stony glare that should have cowed nations. But Lord Eliot just laughed, while Lord Joshua quickly explained the backstory behind how Leonard Nimoy came up with the salute, as if everyone on Earth didn’t already know it by heart.

Meanwhile, behind the small commotion caused by the Three Stooges, Lady Margo had gotten caught chatting with Glintraw the Pig. But despite the fact that he usually tricked people into letting him fart on their hand, the Lady hung on his every word, nodding and biting her lip. Then after Glint said something particularly long-winded, she shot a terrified glance over at Lord Eliot. But Quentin couldn’t focus on what could have put that look on her face.

Because Dint raised the blade again.

“This blade draws one thing and one thing only,” Dint bellowed out. His smile was as bright as the full moons and his eyes gleamed with pride. “The pure royal blood of the High King of Fillory!”

The crowd erupted into joyful cheers and music played triumphantly, playing an upbeat and well known melody. The crowd bent and bowed together, swinging arms high and low. Their voices sang along with the Earth ditty they all loved so well, the only one they ever played. It was a hymn, a national anthem, played with deepest respect and care.

Quentin cast a quick glance over at the Children of Earth. All their lips trembled and their cheeks turned red with the great effort of not reacting.

… It was one he actually couldn’t blame them for.

“ Feliz Navidad! ” Fen sang, her pretty voice ringing over the rest of the crowd, her face bright and cheerful as she swayed back and forth, “ Feliz Navidad! Feliz Navidad, prospero año y felicidad —”

As the English chorus prompted the Fillorians to thrash their heads back in ecstasy ( “I wanna wish you a Merry Christmas! I wanna wish you a Merry Christmas!” ) and raise their tankards high, Lady Julia was the first to break.

With a howl of screeching laughter, she bent over at the torso with shaking shoulders. Shortly behind her, the Ladies Kady and Alice fell into each other too, tears tracking down their faces as they cracked up, laughing wide and loud into their joined hands. Meanwhile, the three High King candidates kept it together a bit more, as Lord Joshua danced along, singing the lyrics with his arms raised high to the sky. Lord Penny rubbed his eyes into the heels of his palms, lips mumbling things that probably weren’t prayers of thanks for the opportunity before him. And Lord Eliot grinned down at Lady Margo, beckoning her to him with a come hither hand motion.

But Lady Margo was stone-faced.

“Eliot,” she said, sharp against the music. “We need to talk.”

Lord Eliot rolled his eyes at her. “Little busy, Bambi.”

“No, don’t care. We have to talk now. Let’s go before we—”

But Dint pushed past her, walking between them like she wasn’t even there. Lady Margo raised her hands, like she was about to blast him with the magic she was certain to have, if she had made her way to Fillory. But Lord Penny grabbed her arm to pull her away, whispering in her ear and
holding her in place. She snapped something vicious up at his face, but he only held on tighter.

Rising onto the platform, Dint nodded to a nearby Druid, who put the finishing touches on the knife with a wand. Quentin’s hands tingled as he watched the proceedings, the flicker of magic in his gut clamoring for release. As the song ended and the crowd cheered, Dint bowed first to Lord Joshua.

It was time.

Still exhilarated from her dancing and the promise of her future, Fen giggled her way back to her place by Quentin. He smiled down at her—proud to be her heart-cousin, this and every day—and took her hand in his. Together, they stood and waited.

The swipe of the knife on Lord Joshua’s palm came up empty.

Fen let out the tiniest sound of relief. Her eyes grew brighter, casting over to the two very handsome men remaining.

“Maybe in another life,” Josh said mournfully, offering Fen a small bow. She smiled politely.

Dint walked to Lord Eliot and Lord Penny kept holding back Lady Margo. Her face was wide-eyed, veering on horrified, as Dint bowed and held the knife high. The point came down and glided over the lifeline with ease.

—Blood began to pour.

“Motherfucker,” Lord Eliot said with a flinch. He clenched his palm into a fist, reaching into his coat for a handkerchief. “That stings.”

The crowd burst into an uproar of applause. Magic light flashed and sparkled in a burst of confetti from wands. Dint sunk to the ground and pledged loyalty to Your Majesty, along with every man, woman, and child in the vicinity. Beside him, Fen fell to her knees and lifted her eyes up into the air, shining all her focus on High King Eliot. Her soon-to-be husband.

High King Eliot stared out at the crowd, face slack with shock. Quentin sighed. Long live the King and all that. He began to lower himself down to the ground, when an unhinged voice cut through the clamor.

“Eliot, you do not have to do this,” Lady Margo roared, finally breaking out Lord Penny’s grasp to run to the king’s side. She gripped at the lapels of his coat, staring him deep in the eyes. “I’m serious, we have to talk, right now.”

The scandalized murmur of the crowd underscored her point like a musical cue. Quentin raised himself back to a standing position along with Fen, who winced as she whispered, “Oof, it’s always awkward when a lover’s in tow.”

But High King Eliot crumpled into a mere man for a moment, eyes darting between Lady Margo and the confused crowd. “Margo, I—”

“El, she’s right,” Lady Julia said, stepping forward. “You don’t have to do this. We can figure something—”

“Shut the fuck up, Julia,” Lady Margo snarled, barely even looking back at her. “No one wants to hear from your sorry ass right now.”
“Margo,” the High King breathed out, far more like a monarch.

“Can I go now?” Lord Penny asked, wrinkling his brow over the most relatable thing anyone had said all day. “I’m not the High King, so—”

Lady Margo held her index finger in the air. “I will cut your balls off, Adiyodi.”

“Maybe you should take a minute, Margo,” Lady Julia said, eyes going cloying wide. “You’re not behaving rationally.”

“No,” High King Eliot said, turning a dark glare to Lady Julia. “Not you too.”

But Lady Margo bit a laugh into the air, “I am the only one who has been rational about any of this since day fucking—”

“Your Majesty.” Dint bowed low once again, voice calm and steady. His eyes spoke another tale. “I apologize for interrupting your strategic discussion, but the contract must be completed for the binding magic to begin its work.”

“He’s not completing shit, dickbag,” Lady Margo shot out and whoa, okay, Quentin’s mouth fell down. Fen remained smiling, though an edge of anger glinted in her pretty blue eyes. No one talked to her father that way. Ever.

Dint narrowed his eyes and set his jaw, just as High King Eliot grabbed Margo’s shoulders, turning her toward him.

“Margo, listen to me,” the High King said, pouring his eyes into hers. “This isn’t like that thing Josh always talks about where people pretend to be other people and they’re playing a game like its medieval times or whatever.”

(LARPing.)

Lord Joshua held a finger in the air. “LARPing.”

“Gross,” High King Eliot said, waving his hand backwards. “But right, that. It’s not that. This is very real. This is the cost the magic is asking of us.”

“The cost is more than you think,” Lady Margo said in a rush. “I have new information that changes shit.”

“Your Highness,” Dint interrupted again, losing his control as his voice pitched higher. “Sire, I truly apologize, but you must make your official selection or selections now, among the candidates for marriage.”

At that, High King Eliot stopped, turning confused eyes over with a frown. “What are you talking about?”

Dint frowned right back. He spoke slowly, in case High King Eliot was slow. “Did you not understand that you must marry in order for the deal to be set?”

“No, I got that,” High King Eliot said archly, stepping back on one foot. “It was the plurality that confused me. Your god was pretty clear I have to marry her.”

The High King indicated Fen with a distracted flick of his hand. Quentin felt a strange foreboding build in his chest, but Fen kept smiling.
“As one of your options, yes,” Dint said, eyes wild like he couldn’t believe he had to explain it. “Most traditionally, certainly.”

The High King’s eyebrows almost disappeared when they jumped. “... Options?”

“What fucking options?” Lady Margo inserted herself again. She stood in front of High King Eliot, shielding him like his legal counsel. “He has options?”

Quentin briefly, absurdly, wondered if she had ever seen *Ally McBeal*.

Dint blinked hard, clearly trying to keep his temper in check. “You must decide whether you will marry one or both.”

“Both what?”

“Monarchs are entitled to one of each, Sire,” Ted explained, stepping forward. His hands trembled with unforeseen excitement. Quentin couldn’t feel his feet. “A wife and a husband.”

High King Eliot widened his piercing eyes and breathed out, “What?”

“We assumed that was clear,” Dint said, catching eyes with his heart-brother and frowning.

“How the fuck did you think it was clear?” Lady Margo demanded, hands on her hips. “This whole thing has been like her creepy quinceañera.”

“I can choose a husband?” High King Eliot asked again, blinking in shock. “A husband?”

“If—if you’d like,” Dint said through his teeth. “And a wife, of course.”

“What if I—” the High King’s eyes darted between Ted and Dint, fast as a bunny sniffed. “What if I only want a husband?”

Quentin couldn’t feel his legs.

The gasp and murmur of the crowd was like a rush of waves.

Dint’s eyes narrowed into red slits, nostrils flaring. He spoke with ice. “Then you may select to only have a husband.”

“What is happening?” Fen asked under her breath, high-pitched and frantic. Her smile was wide and her eyes watery as she squeezed Quentin’s hand with all her strength.

“Do I choose any husband or—?” Eliot shook his head. “I’m sorry, I’m confused. I didn’t think the High King had any choice in who he married.”

“There was a deal, of course, for both,” Ted said, hand to his heart. It was still shaking. “I apologize, Sire, if the details were obfuscated. My son, Quentin, is also a candidate.”

His father put his hand on his shoulder but Quentin couldn’t—well, the same. High King Eliot’s eyes turned straight to him, burning as they studied his face. After a moment, they widened to the size of lunar majora.

“Holy shit,” the High King said, breathless. Quentin opened his mouth to say something, but found no words. So he opted to stare at the ground. It was a solid choice, if he did say so himself.

“Well, well,” Lady Margo said. Her eyes glinted, somewhere between danger and glee. “Aren’t
you the little gayus ex machina?”

“Ah, the blessing!” Lord Joshua said with a snap of his fingers. “They both gave blessings. I see where the wires got crossed. We thought that was random.”

It pretty much was. But all Quentin could hear was the ringing of Fen’s words what is happening what is happening what is happening? in a loop, unsure if she was still saying them or if his brain was caught like a skipped record on Earth. He knew the Children of Earth were still talking, still discussing, but he couldn’t hear a word they said. Just the echo of what is happening what is happening what is happening?

He saw his father smile wide and Dint curl into himself, angry and sneering. But everything they did was nothing but what is happening what is happening what is happening? Lady Alice, the blonde, brought up a ledger and pointed out family trees to a nodding Lady Julia, who spoke in the High King’s ear, who was still ignoring the pestering of Lady Margo, who was glaring at Lady Kady for some reason, and what is happening what is happening what is happening?

Then there was Lord Penny who stared and stared at Quentin and rolled his eyes and it was like Quentin could literally hear him in his head, saying Suck it up, pussy, but that couldn’t be possible, right? Also, that was sexist and Quentin couldn’t breathe and what is happening, what is happening, what is happening?

He glanced over at his side, where Fen stood. She was still smiling.

What was happening?

Quentin looked around and the world moved slowly. Then everything was spinning. He scratched at his eyebrow, body floating from the ground. Floating into the sky, floating back to Earth where he never should have left. He belonged on Earth, he belonged—

“—still need to talk about this,” Lady Margo finished saying, holding the High King’s hands and pleading up at him. “It doesn’t change anything.”

“No, uh, it changes a lot, I’m all set,” High King Eliot said, stealing a glance back at Quentin. He smiled at him, almost tentative. Quentin couldn’t feel his lips.

But Lady Margo shook her head tightly. “No, you're not. Come on, we gotta talk.”

“Pardon me, Lady Margo,” Dint said with a growl to end all growls. “But the High King needs to—”

“The High King needs to take a beat,” Lady Margo spat fire, pulling on the king’s arm like she was his own personal monarch. “To consider everything.”

“Do I?” High King Eliot said as he held her wrist in his fingers and stumbled along, eyes still glued on Quentin.

At his unmoving attention, Quentin swallowed, another fucking annoying blush rising on his cheeks. Its appearance sparked a wide smile on the king’s face and oh, god, he was beautiful. Quentin’s stomach spun like the spires over the castle, whirring and dizzy.

“Yes, you do,” Lady Margo said, offering no room for argument. She hissed at him then. “You gotta look further than the immediate cute boy in front of you.”

The High King hissed back, turning his molten gaze down to his friend. “But he’s really cute. If
that’s the sword I have to fall on, then—“

Cute.

The word zinged through Quentin’s soul and bounced around like an electron. He thought Quentin was cute? High King Eliot thought Quentin was cute. Cute, cute, cute. Not weird or awkward or annoying, but cute. Cute. Someone who looked like High King Eliot thought he was cute? That was—that was something, right? That—made a compulsory marriage to a complete stranger who could execute him on a whim okay, right?

Holy shit, cute.

… Quentin was pathetic.

“Jesus,” Lord Penny said with a harsh laugh. He threw his hands in the air and stormed away. “Well, this is gonna be fun. I’m going for a fucking walk.”

“See you soon, honey,” High King Eliot called off with a sing-song voice and a blithe wave, still unabashedly checking Quentin out. Lady Margo grabbed Eliot’s defined chin in the grip of her fingers.

“El, this Quentin kid is definitely not cute enough to make any impulsive decisions over,” she said, in a way that would have offended Quentin if it hadn’t been good advice. She pulled the king toward the shipyard. “Come on. We’re gonna figure this shit out.”

With that, the two of them were gone, leaving the din of a scandalized crowd in their wake.

Quentin dug his fingernails into his palms until the crescents bled, while a small honeybear toddled up to his side. The child held out a platter of aged plum wine shots and growled an explanation of the vintage in Bear, a language he barely knew. Not caring about the details other than alcohol, Quentin threw two of them down his gullet in quick succession.

Then he darted his eyes to Fen. He hadn’t even thought to check in on her. He was such an asshole. He was such an asshole. His chest caved in with worry, not sure what devastation he would find written on her face.

Yet beside him, somehow—

Fen kept smiling.

tbc.

Chapter End Notes

One year prior to the events of the story, Henry Fogg, Mischa Mayakovsky, Pearl Sunderland, Professor Lipson, all the other Brakebills professors, and every other Master Magician in New York were brutally murdered and (sorry) cannibalized by
Reynard, after Julia attempted to summon Our Lady Underground while on campus.
The Impression That I Get

Chapter Summary

“Has it ever come down to do or die? / You’ve got to rise above the rest”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

In all, it wasn’t the weirdest day of Eliot’s life.

Look, he had once “accidentally” smoked an assload of PCP before going white water rafting. He and Margo had scammed a real estate auction and now illegally owned several vineyards in Trentino Alto-Adige. He had almost fucked a former President of the United States and not the one you think. Eliot had scaled and conquered countless kinks and oddities beyond any Child of Earth’s wildest imaginings, beyond any Fillorian’s, beyond any god’s. So being named the High King of a malodorous shithole in exchange for saving the lives of everyone on his home planet?

That was more like an inconvenience.

…But a permanent inconvenience. As it turned out.

After the strange-as-shit ceremony, Bambi had dragged him away from the crowd—and the absurdly cute boy he was apparently betrothed to, praise Ember—in order to talk brass tacks under the covered corridor of a gray magic-ship-building workshop or some other fucking fantasy nonsense. Honestly though, Eliot hadn’t really wanted to hear it. If he’d been willing to fuck Miss Cream of Fillorian Wheat, he was certainly more than willing to take one for the team to the tune of Mr. Sharp Jawline Soft Eyes and Twitchy Hands.

But when Eliot had tried to explain that to Margo, she kept cutting him off with grunts of frustration and tight fists in the air.

“So I get to fuck a cute farm boy once, maybe twice,” Eliot had said again, before glancing over at Quentin. The Fillorian stood pensive on the distant docks with his jaw angled toward the setting sun and his firm ass just—there, to look at. He swallowed. “Three times, max.”

“El,” Margo buried her head in her hands. “Will you listen to me for two goddamn seconds?”

But Eliot was too busy already picturing Quentin naked underneath him, hot and hard from his touch. He could already hear the sounds he would make, lovely little notes of harmonic desperation. Thematic variations on his stutters and stammers, all drawn out from Eliot's masterful orchestration.

He took a couple of sharp breaths through his nose, eyes closing. Shit.

“Jesus Christ, I get it,” Margo seethed, smacking his arm. “It’s been a minute. But there are other
ways to get your rocks off.”

Maybe. But then Eliot wouldn’t get to fuck Quentin. As it turned out, he had become invested in the few short minutes since he had known it was a possibility.

Whatever. Time was an illusion.

“Look, I’ll rock his tiny world, get my annulment, and then send him on his way,” Eliot said, begging Margo to leave it alone. “After that, I get to be a gloriously louche king, his life is left sparkling for decades, and all of you stay safe from a newly neutralized homicidal trickster god. Win-win-win.”

Margo slammed her arms into his chest, pushing with all her strength.

“That’s my point, asshole. If you marry this guy?” Bambi let her eyes give her away for a second, filled with more concern than anger. “You can never leave him. You can never be with anyone else, literally, ever again.”

That should have freaked him out a lot more than it did. By every measure, it should have sent him running to the nearest portal. But instead, Eliot had found himself just waving his hand, scoffing.

“Okay, sure,” he had said, rolling his eyes. “So we’ll be married when I’m here. Fine. Plenty of fuckable fish left on Earth.”

Eliot could make that work. Having a sweet and adoring husband waiting in his bed every time he came back from some adventure on Earth, all longing puppy dog eyes and pretty mouth wrapped around his cock? Sliding between silk sheets with a lovely man who lived to serve him and him alone, in a castle where Eliot was the literal ruler of everything? High King Eliot, sitting naked and sprawled on his magical throne with a nubile village boy between his legs, breathily calling him Your Majesty?

Oh, yeah. He could definitely make that work.

But Margo just swallowed, shaking her head. “No.”

The realization hit like a flash flood. He blinked in slow horror. “Wait, if I do this, I can—never leave Fillory?”

She peered up at him in a devastating confirmation.

The force of it slumped Eliot against the wall, hand reaching for his flask. His stomach churned with a new wave of nausea and his throat went bone dry. Fuck. *Fuck.*

—Fuck.

Obviously, his first instinct was to cut and run.

Fuck it, be well, take care. See you the fuck never, backwards-ass land. Don’t let the door kick you on your whimsical way out.

But as Eliot drank, gulping the sting of whiskey down his throat, a thousand shitty memories played out across his eyes, like a freak show of oddly specific horrors. No matter what he did, no matter what shiny new glittering avenue tempted him with beautiful, hollow fulfillment—magic, booze, sex, drugs, fucking name it—nothing ever changed. Eliot never changed. His whole life, every part of it, save the miracle of Margo’s love, was a goddamn mess.
It had always been a mess, with new messes piled on top to try to cull the mess that came before. Too much pain, too much bullshit, too much effort. He had even been struck with the stark fact that he couldn’t remember the last time he had actually been happy, in any meaningful way, in any sustainable way. Shit, Eliot wondered if he’d ever been happy, ever. He didn’t think so.

Wasn’t that a motherfucker?

Meanwhile, Margo had just looked down at her feet. “French Riviera?”

...But Eliot had done something good, hadn’t he? For once?

He had helped someone he loved, helped a friend. For the first time in his life, he had placed something above himself, something greater, something more profound. Now, he had the chance to finish it, to make things right and safe and good, for good. Simple and clean, and with only marginal sacrifice on his part. Especially since—even though he didn’t deserve it, would never deserve it—he knew Margo would stay. He didn’t have a single doubt. Whatever he decided, they were in it together.

Bambi was his home. Julia was his lighthouse. And Eliot had pulled into harbor.

He handed Margo his flask and paced. “I’m doing this.”

Bambi widened her eyes beyond her namesake. ‘Eliot.’

“Margo, I am miserable,” Eliot had laughed, biting the inside of his cheek. He flashed a serious look at her. “I’ve always been miserable. My life—it doesn’t work. Nothing’s ever fixed that.”

She put her hands on her hips, lips pursing. “And you think this kid’s dick will?”

“Of course not,” he said, popping his hands at his sides as adrenaline ran wild. “But if I’m going to do this massive thing, it at least helps that I’m not getting forced into my worst nightmare.”

Margo let her arms fall to her side. “Right.”

“Don’t get me wrong,” Eliot said quickly. “Having a husband is nauseating too, but not like—“

“I get it. I get it, El,” Bambi said softly. But then two angry worry lines appeared between her brows. “Well, no, I don’t get it. I don’t get the whole—is this still about Julia? Do not get swept away in her bullshit.”

He started getting a little annoyed for having to state the obvious again. “Reynard the Fox is—”

“I know,” Margo sighed, closing her eyes. “Big Bad Murder Monster. I was there too, dick. But it’s not worth throwing away your whole life.”

But Eliot cast his eyes upward, toward the mountains like a crown upon the land.

“But what if it’s not that, Margo?” He had almost smiled, heart racing. “What if it’s—I’ve tried everything to be happy, to—to overcome my massive amounts of horseshit and despair. None of it’s ever worked. You are the only good thing in my life, the only consistent good thing in my life and that’s—I can’t live like that forever.”

Margo didn't always read between his lines easily. But this time, it clicked in place and her face had softened, eyes shining. “So you’re saying—”

“So I’m saying, more than us, more than this, even more than the Reynard of it all, maybe this is
—” Eliot stretched his arms wide, finally letting the smile cross his face. “Maybe it’s all led to this, to now, for a reason that's actually finally going to make my life not just about me, and my thoughts, and my feelings. Something—”

She matched his grin with a sad one of her own. “Bigger.”

“How wise you are, Queen Margo the Destroyer,” Eliot had said, taking her tiny face in his hands. Then he bowed to her, low and true. And all at once, his ferocious Bambi broke, her shoulders shuddering once as she tried to laugh over a wrenching sob. He wrapped her into his arms, kissing her hair.

Her voice was muffled into his coat, shaky and rough as she clung to him. “Is it okay if I hate this?”

Eliot swallowed, resting his chin on the crown of her head. “Yeah. It's okay.”

“That I fucking hate that you're getting married?” Margo had asked quietly, a few tears falling from her eyes. Eliot wiped them away with a nod and she let out a true short laugh. “I mean, Jesus, who the fuck is this kid anyway?”

Eliot had laid his cheek on her head, staring off at the kid in question. “He seems harmless.”

“I swear to god,” Margo said suddenly, jutting her chin up like a knife, “if that whole speech was just because you want to get Fillorian dick in your mouth—“

“Obviously I want to,” Eliot had snapped out tetchily. Then he breathed, letting the weight of his decision settle on his chest. “But no, I’m serious.”

Margo had regarded him for a moment longer, before tossing her hair behind her back. “Then I guess we’re moving to fuckin’ Fillory.”

And that was that.

Once the weepy bullshit was out of the way, Margo had gone straight back to logistics. Apparently, in Fillory, it was customary for the High King-elect to officially ask their compulsory betrothed’s hand in marriage, for the ceremony of it. There was only one possible answer, of course, but once upon a time, one of the gods had decided that the whole ordeal needed a touch of romance.

Meaning, long story short: Here the fuck he was. Eliot gathered his breath and stepped onto the dock. It was now or never.

The Fillorian boy was only a few feet away, hands in his pockets. His strong brow had lowered into a tight frown, nearly reaching his long eyelashes. He had terrible posture, his body curved over into a slump, but he was still undeniably handsome. That was especially true in the golden light as he stood still, long hair moving in the slight breeze.

So with a final step toward the rest of his fucking life, Eliot gently cleared his throat and tapped him on the shoulder with a, “Hey, ah, Quentin?”

He may as well have detonated a bomb.

Limbs flew in the air and brown hair thrashed all around as his enfianced lurched with panic, shouting, “Ember’s ballsack!”

Holding his hands to his chest, Quentin panted as he stared down at the ground, knees wobbling.
Normally, Eliot would have felt bad for disturbing him, except that he was a bit fixated on—
“...Ballsack?”

Eliot licked his lips, smile fighting for release. But the boy just shook his head, rubbing the back of his neck as he took several long breaths, eyes squeezed tightly closed.

“Gods, where the fuck did you even—?” Quentin started to breathe out, pulling his face upward. But when he finally saw Eliot, all his features fell at once. “Oh, shit.”

Jesus, the poor guy looked so terrified.

Eliot took a step backwards, hands raised in peace. “I didn’t mean to startle you.”

“Your Highness,” Quentin said, kneeling to an awkward bow. He almost lost balance but caught himself at the last second. “I apologize for my, uh, my coarseness.”

He lifted his pleading little puppy dog eyes right up at him. Maybe Eliot should have been ashamed at the way his cock twitched, but it was what it was.

“That’s unnecessary,” Eliot said quickly. He swallowed, collar hot. At Quentin’s sweetly confused face, he clarified. “You can call me Eliot. Er, and you don’t have to bow. Especially if we’re, you know, going to be... married. Ah, that is, assuming you—”

Eliot trailed off into a huffing laugh, before taking a deep breath to calm his ticking heart. It helped.

For all its fucked up absurdity, Eliot had to admit that the air in Fillory was soothing. Something about it. Perhaps the salt of the sea, the magic in the breeze. He wasn’t sure. But in any case, taking a nice deep breath always helped, no matter the situation. Including the crosshairs of forced monogamy.

Quentin furrowed his brow, delectable. “Assuming I what?”

“Accept my proposal,” Eliot said, standing tall with his hands folded behind his back. Quentin’s eyes widened and blinked rapidly, lips turning down into an incredulous frown.

“I mean, uh, of course I’ll accept your proposal,” he said, suggesting coercion over passion. Eliot’s stomach twisted. He knew that was the truth. But.


“Why?”

The question caught him off guard. Eliot frowned. “Excuse me?”

“Why ask if we both know it’s a foregone conclusion?” Quentin asked softly, blinking away an unreadable expression. He stood up and brushed off his knees, then inclined his head. “Your Highness.”

“Because I was told it’s tradition,” Eliot said softly, reaching his hand out to touch Quentin on the shoulder. The fabric of his shirt was softer than it looked, more like jersey than starchy cotton. “I want to respect Fillorian customs. The Fillorian way of life.”
He received a harsh and snorting laugh in response, muffled by firmly closed lips. Quentin didn’t move out of his touch, but his jaw clenched, eyes zeroed on the ground. Still, his head remained bowed, seemingly in respect.

Quentin stretched his smile wide. “Your Majesty is very generous.”

Eliot narrowed his eyes.

He slowly sucked his lip into his mouth, letting the low pressure valve squeal and rattle his teeth. He needed a new tactic.

“We should get to know each other a bit,” Eliot said with a lift of his mouth. He touched his hand to his chest, ducking to meet Quentin’s eyes. “My name is Eliot. I’m from Earth.”

It was a joke, meant to set him at ease. But Quentin just kept staring at the ground with as false a smile as Eliot had ever seen in his life.

“Thank you for sharing with me, my lord.”

Eliot’s mouth fell open.

—Oh, what a little shithead.

“This is where you tell me something about yourself now,” he said, lips tightening in impatience. “Conversationally speaking.”

“My name is Quentin,” Quentin said, flashing his eyes up. “I’m from Fillory.”

Fine, touché. Eliot cleared his throat and held his hands behind his back again. He looked the Fillorian up and down, searching for something— anything—that could begin to build the smallest amount of common ground between them. But as he slowly tilted his head in concentration, Quentin... squirmed.

Eliot tilted his head further, this time in concentration. A rush of heartening vigor coursed through his veins, especially when Quentin’s gaze dropped down to Eliot’s lips, for the shortest and most telling of a second.

The cute boy who had been making eyes at him from the crowd was still in there somewhere.

Confidence renewed, Eliot ran his eyes across Quentin under hooded lids, relishing the inevitable splotches of pink that burst onto his cheekbones. He was easy, at least when it came to that. That was something to keep in mind. But the real breakthrough came when he spotted the corner of a book hanging out of Quentin’s pants pocket.

Eliot brightened, nodding his head to the ice breaker. “What are you reading?”

It was probably some fucked up Fillorian origin story. The Brothers Grimm and the goddamn Bible had nothing on the tales the local bards sung. They were almost all about the very specific ways Ember and Umber had fucked each other silly to create the land they lived on.

Quentin went crimson and stuffed the book back as deep as it could go. He tucked his hair behind his ears and darted his eyes. “Um, it’s just a book. Like, about—um, you know, things.”

Eliot was marrying a regular Voltaire.

He touched the tip of his tongue to his teeth, willing back his agitation. He had to remember that he
was in a different world now. Over the past half year or so, they had met their fair share of Fillorian peasants—in taverns and villages and along the banks of the dirty rivers. Most, if not all, had been dull, crass, and more than a bit violent. If any of them were reading *anything*, Eliot would have swallowed Ember’s jizz from the source.

Maybe Quentin wasn’t as articulate about his literary interests as, say, Alice. But fuck, at least he was literate. If the rat hides swinging in the breeze were any indication, he had obviously crawled above his circumstances to reach that milestone, above the rustic and humble surroundings that probably never really gave him much of a chance. That took guts and grit and drive. At the absolute very least, it was something to admire, right?

So Eliot warmly inclined his head at his future husband. “Good for you.”

Quentin opened his mouth soundlessly, eyes wide and shocked. Then he blinked and his lips flew up into a tight smile.

“Sorry,” he said, blinking again, harder. “Uh, but what do you mean?”

Eliot shrugged. “Just that it’s very commendable.”

Quentin frowned, nothing but bald puzzlement. “I’m confused. What is *commendable* about it exactly?”

Eliot froze.

Shit.

He made a miscalculation somewhere along the way. He swallowed tight and ticked his jaw, trying to maintain that tranquil smile.

“That you—” Eliot cleared his throat and adjusted his tie. His eyes lowered. “That you like reading?”

Quentin fluttered his eyelashes, so wide and bewildered. “But why would I not like reading, Your Highness?”

Shit.

Quentin glared at him for a long held breath of a moment. But then he dropped his eyes down, hands shaking. He slid his palms down the sides of his hips, maybe wiping away sweat.

“I—uh, I apologize, Your Grace,” Quentin said, slowly, monotonously. “I understand that you were merely trying to pay me a sincere compliment. I value your favor more than my life.”
“Okay, well, Eliot definitely liked the shithead more than whatever the fuck *that* was.

“Jesus,” he said, running a hand through his curls. The situation was that dire. “That’s… wow.”

Quentin took one step forward, eyes panicking. “If I’ve offended you, Sire—”

“Again, Eliot is fine,” Eliot said, holding his hand up. Quentin took a quick step back, like a flinch. Like Eliot was about to strike him. *Jesus.*

There may have been elements of this arrangement that he hadn’t considered.

Eliot swallowed, throat tight and stomach curling into painful knots. “Look, okay, can we—can we just talk like people for two minutes?”

“Uh,” Quentin frowned. "As opposed to what?"

He cocked his head without sarcasm. It was sort of endearing.

“As opposed to king and subject,” Eliot said with a sigh, gesturing between them. “You know that I’m just a guy who came through a portal, right?”

At that, Quentin pinched his brow again, silent and searching. Eliot wasn’t sure what he was looking for, but eventually he shifted, face falling into serious lines.

“No, yeah, I know,” he finally said, low and with a short nod. “But it doesn’t change anything. By all the rules of my world, you’re my king.”

“But you don’t trust me,” Eliot said, softly as he could. “Which makes sense.”

Still, Quentin blanched. “I, uh, I didn’t say that.”

Eliot chuckled, “You didn’t have to. But I figure if we’re getting *married* we should probably try to get on the same page, no? So trust is at least a possibility in the future?”

He hoped he would hear the sincerity, hoped he would understand. But Quentin just looked down at the ground, eyes flitting every which way.

“Honestly, I’m—I’m not sure what you’re looking for here, Your Grace.” Then he took in a loud breath, sharp and hissing. “I mean, *Eliot.*”

He said it like it was the biggest concession of his life.

“I’m looking for common ground,” Eliot said truthfully, still trying to hold eye contact with middling success. “It would be nice if we can go into the rest of our lives clear-eyed and maybe even okay with what it will bring.”

Quentin laughed at that, loud and echoing over the water like skipping stones. Eliot wasn’t sure if he was relieved or annoyed at the return of Little Shithead.

“I mean no disrespect in the question,” Quentin said, fidgeting his hands along his sleeves. “But do you actually understand how Fillorian marriage contracts work?”

Eliot pulled in a breath, reality balling in his stomach like the pit of a stone fruit. He nodded.

“My friend Margo gave me a run down. I know that we’re—bound to one another and that means, ah—” Eliot coughed and looked down, a blush rising high on his cheekbones. He almost felt shy,
which was horrifying.

But wriggling little Quentin, by contrast, was practical and to the point. “So, like, we can’t even jerk off without thinking about our marriage bed. So to speak.”

That got his attention.

Eliot’s face lifted upward and his eyes widened. “Seriously?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s pretty goddamn restrictive.”

Quentin sighed, something almost like commiseration in his eyes for the first time. “Welcome to Fillory, Your Highness.”

“Jesus,” Eliot said, palming at the side of his head. “Jesus. This is all—fuck.”

“Yes, well, it’s the price of glory,” Quentin said, the sympathy zapped from his tone. “Did you seriously think there’d be no, uh, no downside when you walked through that portal? Not how magic tends to work.”

Eliot didn’t need someone to Filloriansplain magic to him. He lowered his voice into a warning, “This is not why I walked through the portal.”

But Quentin started pacing, like he hadn’t even heard him.

“Look, I get it,” he said, fingers flying about as he trudged back and forth. “You went to Brakebills and—and heard the rumors about another world, another world where Earthlings—”

“Earthlings?” Eliot snorted, crossing his arms. What the fuck? Was this a 1960s B-movie?

Quentin shot him a glare “—where Earthlings are awarded wealth and fame and kingship upon arrival. And, like, I guess I can’t blame you for chasing that, but—”

Yeah, Eliot was done.

He hadn’t gone through hell for a whole goddamn year for that bullshit.

“Let me be clear about something,” he said, pinning his would-be fiancé with a firm stare. “I’m not here by choice. I didn’t ask for any of this. I am here because I am helping a friend and maybe, you know, doing a small part to save everyone I care about and my own planet in the process. This is the denouement, not the dramatic climax.”

Quentin stopped and his eyes brightened with the smallest glimmer of surprise.

But then they shuttered again. “So you don’t even give a shit about Fillory.”

Come the fuck on.

“Jesus,” Eliot said with a huff. “So if I came because I wanted it, I’m an asshole. But because I came and I didn’t want it, I’m—an asshole?”

“I didn’t say that.” Quentin said with a slight and defiant tick of his jaw. Eliot felt a rush all the way to the tip of his cock, for the first time since they started talking.
—Oh, he was very cute and very stubborn.

He swallowed and took a deep breath, centering himself back in focus. That wasn’t the point. Not yet.

All in due time.

“The only reason I even agreed to this was because we needed a favor from your god,” Eliot explained quietly, to make him listen. “To bring down a lesser—trickster god, I guess, but one with a powerful parent? I don’t know. It’s been a lot of deities. I can’t keep it straight.”

At that, Quentin shrugged around a soft snort, gentling. “Yeah, uh, okay. That actually tracks. Ember loves that shit.”

Eliot cracked a small smile, soaking up the encouragement like a sponge. And Quentin dropped his eyes and lifted them back up, rocking on his feet, cute as hell.

“Anyway,” Eliot continued with a sigh, keeping focused, keeping focused. “Apparently, me dedicating my entire fucking life to ruling a whole planet and marrying at least one person from a deal made centuries ago were the two requirements to get us out of that insane jam.”

Both were arbitrary and nonsensical, the strangest tit-for-tat. It had been a long, long year.

So Eliot met Quentin’s eyes with a sad shrug, totally spent. “Honestly, between you and me, I’m—kind of at a loss here. I’m just trying to get from one step to the next without fucking up spectacularly.”

He tightened his shoulders around his ears, throwing his hands out. It was all he had. The rest was at Quentin’s mercy. He had nothing else to offer, nothing beyond his rough draft commitment to giving the whole High King thing an honest whirl. It was paltry at goddamn best.

But Quentin didn’t actually seem too concerned about that.

Instead, he had widened his eyes in horror, nodding slowly as his fingers dragged through his long hair.

“Um,” Quentin said, just on the other side of cautious. He took a low breath. “Okay, um, I feel like I need to correct you on something? Is that, uh, okay?”

Sure, now he was worried about propriety.

Eliot let out a breath and almost slumped over, perfect posture be damned. He twirled his hand in the air. “Have at it.”

Another deep breath in, Quentin twisted his own hands together. “You’re not ruling the planet.”

That was not what he was told. Eliot cocked his head to the side. “They said I’m the High King of Fillory.”

Ember was the god of Fillory, a planet. Ergo…

But Quentin dug his fingernails into his palms and spat the next words out so quickly, he didn’t even stumble: “Yeah, so Fillory is the name of a sovereign nation and the entire land mass, which is a mostly flat surface flying through a galaxy separate from your own.”

Eliot kind of knew all that through osmosis. But he had assumed the High King was some sort of
grand ruler, more like an emperor. But as he went to interject, to explain, Quentin started pacing, speaking faster.

“—Uh, in this case—and, well, you know, all cases—you are High King only of the state. There are, uh, two other autonomous recognized countries, each with their own rulers and forms of government.”

Well, that was good to know. Eliot blinked, opening his mouth to respond.

But Quentin wasn’t done. “Well, uh, actually three if you count the major Wandering Horde. But most don’t, which is a whole other mess of bullshit in its own right. Like, just because they’re nomadic doesn't mean they don't deserve basic recognition, right? Um, I mean, in my unworthy opinion. But still, culturally, they're seen as having chosen a life outside societal norms and therefore are irrelevant to diplomatic relations. Which is fine until it's not, historically.”

Huh. Okay. Well, that was also good to know. Eliot tried to say as much, to thank him.

… But Quentin still wasn't done.

“—So, like, yeah, you’re definitely the High King of Fillory. Like, that’s your title. Oh, and, uh, FYI, you’ll also have a High Queen, and two other rulers, a lower king and queen. Which, hence the name, right? But you are definitely not High King of Fillory as a whole. That would be stupid and, um, dangerous. To say the godsdamned least.”

With that, Quentin finally sucked in a breath, like all those words were conspiring to make him pass out. He was done.

And Eliot just stared at him, dumbfounded and blinking again. Oh.

Oh.

As Quentin shifted his weight from foot to foot, sighing to himself and muttering under his breath, Eliot could barely help the tiny grin that passed over his lips.

Oh, he was so cute.

Quentin cleared his throat and let out a ragged breath. “I, uh, I hope that helps clarify a few things, Your Majesty.” He twitched his eyes shut. “Eliot.”

“Sure, yeah,” Eliot laughed, breathy and halfhearted. He scrubbed his hands down his face with a groan. “You know, I think those are the first useful things anyone here has told me yet.”

“Well, I’m always happy to be useful,” Quentin said, with a sweet little smile. Like he meant it. Jesus.

Eliot tapped fingers against the sides of his thighs, tongue darting between his lips. “Yeah, I don’t know shit about Fillory. Which probably isn’t a great look. My friends say it seems different than the books?”

Margo and Julia had exactly one thing in common. Growing up, they had both loved the fucking Fillory & Further series, an odd little Narnia ripoff that was apparently based in actual fact. Eliot hadn’t been allowed to read them growing up due to their connection to the occult. Little did his bitch of a mother actually know.

(Alice had also read the whole series. For “research.”)
“The books?” Quentin frowned. “You mean the Christopher Plover ones? Yeah, uh, he was some random guy who knew the Chatwins early on.”

Eliot actually knew that. “Right, but they’re the only account available to—” he smirked “—Earthlings, in any accessible capacity. Even at Brakebills.”

“I mean, it’s been awhile since I’ve read them. They aren’t that popular here. But from what I remember, they’re cute, I guess,” Quentin said, blinking away an odd expression with a shake of his head. “But, uh, not exactly Thucydides, you know?”

Eliot shrugged. “Sorry, I’m not familiar with Fillorian writers yet.”

“Uh-huh,” Quentin said quickly, nodding hard and sharp. “No, yeah, sure.”

With a soft snort, his sort-of fiancé brushed his long hair back from his face, lips wobbling like he was trying not to smile. He slid a glance over at Eliot and looked at him—actually looked at him—like he was charmed by something. It warmed Eliot to his toes, compelling him to take a step forward.

Quentin didn’t back away.

“The point is, I could use your input,” Eliot said, drumming the tips of his fingers along his lips as ideas percolated. “I need more actually useful information, rather than just, like, what kind of shots Bristlycoat the Bulldog prefers. Otherwise, I’ll be in over my head, much as I’m loath to admit it.”

“So, what?” Quentin furrowed his brow. “You want me to be your—like, your advisor? That’s not really orthodox for a consort.”

Eliot smirked. “Nothing about this is orthodox, Quentin.”

“In Fillory, it is,” Quentin said, lacing his hands together and staring down at his fingers. “Well, except for choosing a husband. You’re, uh, the first to do that.”

“See?” Eliot grinned. “So what’s a little more trailblazing between spouses?”

The year had been a fucking whirlwind. The day even moreso. And, yeah, it probably was the weirdest day of his life, even if it was easier to pretend it was another blip along the crazy television drama that was his magical experience. But if Eliot was going to do this, it meant putting pride aside. It meant trying his best to be a good king, no matter how impossible it seemed, no matter what it took to get there. So asking for help from this stubborn, cute, clearly fucking smart boy who had been thrown into his orbit seemed like a reasonable first step.

But the boy in question just cooled his eyes, arms hugging his torso. “Yeah, but are you sure you want the input of an illiterate farm boy, Your Grace?”

Fuck.

Yeah, Eliot was an asshole.

“That was shitty,” he said, right before his eyes fluttered shut. “Though to be fair, I only said it because I know how difficult it is to—”

He knew. God, he fucking knew. But Eliot’s bullshit wasn’t Quentin’s problem.

“Never mind. Doesn’t matter,” he said. He swallowed his excuses away, looking Quentin in the
eye. “I’m sorry. Truly.”

“Thanks,” Quentin said quietly. He set his jaw and tuckered his hands back in his pockets, fingers stretching the fabric out. “Listen, in the interest of transparency, um, there’s some things I should tell you about myself. You know, like, uh—”

Eliot lifted his brows lightly. “Like why you don’t speak like any of the other Fillorians I’ve met?”

He wasn’t stupid. There was a story there.

Quentin blushed, delectable, and tucked his hair behind his ear again. “Yeah, uh, among a—a few other things. So, basically, I’m—”

His words disappeared with the sound of a trumpet, angry and blaring.

That asshole who had been a total prick to Margo—Clint or whatever—was standing atop the platform. He blew into the twisted metal instrument with all his might, cheeks ballooning bright red and stamping his foot like an angry toddler. Banners rose above him into the sky and the crowd was forming under him again.

“We can talk more later,” Quentin said, face going pale as he started to dart toward the sounding call. “Dint’s getting impatient. So, like, proposal accepted, I guess, and—”

But Eliot grabbed the crook of his elbow, pulling him back in a quick tug. With a small gasp, Quentin turned around, nearly into him, and their eyes met. And Eliot’s heart just—stopped, missing a whole beat. They were inches apart, sharing breath, and fuck, Quentin was beautiful.

His hair fell down the line of his neck, framing his strong jaw and pink lips, straight out of a dream. His gentle eyes peered upward, holding universes in the sweet earnestness that all his snarky comments couldn’t wash away. His skin was drawn in frown lines and they made Eliot achingly, absurdly, want to know all his secrets. Every last one, so he could kiss them away.

Maybe in another world, things could have been that simple.

Eliot pressed his lips into a line and took a short step back, meaning to be respectful and serious and true to his word. But he didn’t move his eyes from Quentin’s—couldn’t even if he wanted to—entranced by the awe he had struck without even trying.

“Quentin of Coldwater Cove,” Eliot said, low and solemn, holding his hand out in a handshake offer. “Will you marry me, in the partnership of ensuring I don’t fuck everything the fuck up?”

Through a fascinating shift of emotions in his warm brown eyes, Quentin regarded him for a long moment. But then he smiled, tentative but real, tiny dimples dotting and bracketing his lips with all the loveliness in this world and the next.

He nodded, grasping Eliot’s hand and squeezing firm. “My duty and my privilege, my lord.”

—So that was another one of those Fillorian phrases that sounded nice and vague on the first pass, but was actually terrible once you parsed it out, huh?

Eliot huffed a breath, lips quirking in an incredulous smile. “What the shit?”

Quentin blushed again, and holy goddamn, he wanted to rip him apart.

“I, uh, I have to say that,” Quentin said, rolling his eyes. “It’s, like, required.”
“Well, as your High King, I order you not to say it ever again,” Eliot said. He bit his lip and moved his gaze over Quentin’s own widening pupils. “It’s weird.”

They were still holding hands.

Quentin snorted, with that same look of half-charmed wonder in his eyes. “There’s gotta be way weirder shit here, from your vantage point.”

“You have to start somewhere,” Eliot said quietly, stroking his thumb in a circle around the soft skin of the hand in his. Quentin shivered. He could get used to that. “So was that a yes?”

“At least, uh—you know, I feel like that makes sense,” Quentin said, pulling his hand away and tucking it in his pocket. He chuckled, a breathy sound. “Plus, it’s probably better not to spit in the face of bullshit destiny anyway.”

Quentin shrugged around his grinning face, hair fanning out in disheveled waves, and Eliot couldn’t stand it.

He closed the space between them, dipping his mouth right to Quentin’s ear. He trailed his fingers down a fabric covered arm, sturdy and firm, under his touch. Eliot breathed in his scent—moss and sandalwood and salty citrus, like soap and sweat. He could feel Quentin’s warm breath on his neck and it took everything in him not to consummate their soon-to-be marriage (fuckfuckfuck) right there on the slippery wet docks. Or at least suck his cock a little. Like an aperitif.

“If destiny is bullshit,” Eliot murmured instead, smiling at the hitched breath against his cheek, the way Quentin’s eyes fell closed at his voice, “why would it matter if we spat on it?”

Pulling away and plastering on a cheeky grin, Eliot tapped the side of his head, beaming down impishly at Quentin.

All in due time.

Quentin regained his breath and frowned, bobbing his head back and forth as he thought it through. “Sure, um, that’s… actually a good point,” he landed on, because it was. Eliot could tell Quentin really was a smart boy. “Fine. Then better not to spit on the demands of an irrational god with too much time on his hands.”

Quentin offered a small shrug at the conclusion. Eliot laughed, before turning once again to the sound of the trumpet, calling and honking and irritated as fuck.

“Well, in that case, come along, dearest. Our kingdom awaits.”

“I mean, like, uh,” Quentin said with a frown, hopping to keep up with Eliot’s long legs, “one thing I’d say is that it’s not really my kingdom in any capacity. Though—huh, I guess what you’re saying is more, like, if I’m going to be an advisor, then we’re sharing a certain amount of responsibilities or ideas together, right? So you’re speaking from a—a—a metaphorical perspective? Rather than a literal one? Which, yeah, I get, but you really should know that Fillorians are very literal so—”

As Quentin continued to babble about technicalities and Fillorian culture and talking Sloths (“You'll, like, hope they're being metaphorical, but holy shit, they are not”), Eliot just strode ahead and hid his growing smile.
The ceremony was fine.

At sunset, Quentin wrangled on his grandfather’s itchy black unicorn cloak and tied his hair back into a low bun. He ate a bowl of grain porridge to settle his stomach and read a chapter of *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* to settle his mind. Then he stepped out into the chilled, firelit night.

Drums pounded from nowhere, a slight trick of magic to set the atmosphere. Swaths of ribbons and circles of dipped ropes hung from wooden ladders and every torch along the shipyard was alight, roaring with renewed vigor. Every chair and bench was filled, with standing room across the yard. The air took on a smoky, rarefied quality, the binding magic starting to wind its way through the crowd.

In compliance with tradition, Quentin was the one who walked down the aisle, a shining brick pathway, leading up to the staged altar and the bearded druid, covered in ancient furs. Ted, Dint, and Fen stood to one side, awaiting his arrival, in a collective show of support. On the other side stood Lady Margo, her black leather pants reflecting the celebration in their harsh sheen. She was a good few inches shorter than Quentin, but she managed to stare him down nevertheless.

And High King Eliot waited for him in the center, still in his Earthling wear, against every tradition. But he was no less beautiful, and the way his changeling eyes flickered in the firelight, focused on Quentin, did nothing to dispel the enchantment.

The purpose of their union had been settled, better than Quentin could have hoped. The High King—or Eliot, as he insisted, at least for the time being—seemed to harbor no illusions. Quentin should have felt good about that. Because much as setting a goal to *not fuck everything the fuck up* was a low bar for just about every other leader of every nation in every other corner of the multiverse, it was easily the most progressive thing a Child of Earth had ever said since the reign of King Rupert.

That was good. Shit, it was *really* good, all things considered.

Logically, Quentin was glad for the ease of their agreement. Wholly, he was heartened by how sensitive the High King had been, in his warm and clumsy way, thrumming just below the ice cool haughtiness he wore like cologne. How thoughtful and considerate he had been, both of what Fillory might need from a monarch and how little Eliot himself actually knew. That kind of humility, that kind of sincerity, was what Quentin would have considered a blessing on their land, if he believed in shit like *blessings*. These were the things that mattered, especially going into a new political administration.

Yet under his tingling skin—irrationally, in the dark and seedy part of him that hungered for touch and went wild under arrogant eyes—Quentin wanted Eliot to want him.

He wanted Eliot to throw his duty aside and throw Quentin on the ground, until they were both begging for mercy. He wanted to be someone Eliot would see in a tavern (or a roadside inn, or a divey bar in the Lower Eastside, or *Brakebills*) and... want. He wanted to be someone Eliot would pick out for himself, out of the multitudes High King Eliot could have in a snap. He wanted Eliot to *want* to take him home, even just for one filthy night, until they lost their minds together.

But those were the things that didn’t matter. Would never matter. So Quentin shut down his brain and listened to the service, letting the droning tones of Old Fillorian wash over him like the tide he
loved so well. Under the light of the moons, the Druid tied a rope about their hands and they were as one.

For Fillory, and for Fillory alone.

After the ropes burst into painless fire about their wrists, Eliot leaned forward and gave Quentin a small peck on the mouth. Nothing but a soft, brief brush of lips. It was a lightning bolt of Earthly custom. Then they shook hands again, a sly and private confirmation of their agreement. It was a slide of fingers and a grip of palms, in partnership and fraternity.

The High King winked, and Quentin was fucked.

But as it was, Quentin hadn’t spoken to him since the first fiddle announced the start of the reception. Though he had seen him, of course. Everyone had. Because, apparently, High King Eliot enjoyed a good party.

After clinking goblets with several starry-eyed merrymakers and chugging the nutmeg-spiced tomato wine with gusto, the king had laughed his way off into the crowd. There, he held metaphorical court with more ease than Quentin had ever possessed in his entire life, like it was effortless, like it was fun. The whole time, gorgeous Lady Margo hung off one arm with a cool smirk, the two of them swaggering about the adoring crowd like natural born regents. It was quite the image to behold.

Currently, Eliot was swaying about with Bristlycoat, while strumming a lute and warbling along to “The Goat Who Stole the Boat” with admittedly perfect pitch. The bulldog howled on the high notes and every time, the High King of Fillory fell over into his lap laughing, before insisting on starting from the top.

Meanwhile, sitting alone and curled into himself at the large wooden table—trying to be as invisible as the king was seen—Quentin was not having another panic attack.

He was not.

He was especially not having a panic attack every time he looked down to see one of his left hand fingers surrounded by a forged silver ring. Because having a panic attack would mean that Quentin had in any way internalized his marriage as a reality, rather than dissociating the fuck out of it, which was the sharpest skill he had ever cultivated. Not to brag.

The fire from the nearby torches was growing hot, burning his face and neck and shaking hands. So Quentin stood, forcing his shoulders back. He weaved his way through the crowd, nodding in acknowledgment at the many well-wishers, while avoiding the intense gaze of the other Earthlings. They all stared at him like he was an odd stray animal. Interesting enough to observe, but not to capture. As a group, they didn’t strike Quentin as friendly, so to speak.

Except for maybe Lady Julia, sitting alone in a quiet corner.

When their eyes met, she actually gave him a small smile and a tiny wave. But it only lasted a moment before she turned back to her plate of food, swirling the mashed parsnips around without eating, looking low and crestfallen. Without any cause, Quentin felt a pang in his chest. He hoped she was okay.

But that really wasn’t any of his business.

So Quentin kept moving to the far edges of the crowd, where he preferred. He stepped outside of the drenched yellow light of the torches and into the small thicket of tall grass and chopped trees
behind the workshop. There, he pressed his back to the cool wood and closed his eyes. The sea
nearby rushed low and deep, wide and wild like a hymn. He breathed in time with the tide.

It was a coping mechanism for his addled mind. His father had once suggested it, shortly after the
time when Ted had found Quentin laying face down on the shoreline. *Find your breath, son, with
the rhythm of the water, with the promise of the wind.* Ted had shown him how to breathe from his
belly, full inhales of air that would fill his lungs with relief. It helped.

But it wasn’t helping now.

Quentin blinked his eyes hard, sniffing with a startle. He needed to get a grip. He needed to focus
on the present moment instead of floating like a limp doll in the past or fretting too much
about the future. He needed to move forward, with confidence and all the knowledge he had
purposefully accumulated, for Fillory.

For Fillory.

With a final sniff of the sea air, Quentin pushed off the wall to head back to his fucking wedding
reception. But just as he had started to turn around, he heard a snap of a twig underfoot. He
furrowed his brow with the sound of quiet and shaking breaths. He heard a squeak of a sob—one,
twice—coming from around the bend.

Pushing his falling hair back, Quentin walked slowly into the plot of chopped trees, winding
around the largest stump that served as a most excellent hiding place. Curled along the the base—
still in her floaty pink dress—his heart-cousin buried her face into her knees, shoulders shaking.

“Fen,” Quentin said with a long sigh. He was such an asshole. He hadn’t even thought about—not
since—shit. “Hey.”

Her voice wobbled out into the dark precariously, pitching and dipping.

“Q,” Fen said, wiping at her eyes with her fingers. “What are you doing here? You should be—”

“I needed a minute,” Quentin admitted, plopping down next to her. He rocked his head back
against the wood, a familiar base for his own plights. “Today has been—”

“I’m very happy for you,” Fen choked out, grabbing his hand. “I need you to know that. This—this
isn’t about me not being happy for you.”

Happy. Quentin shook his head, “Yeah, uh, it’s okay if you’re not. I’m not sure that’s actually an
appropriate way to look at it anyway.”

“Of course it is,” Fen said with an affronted sniff. “Q, this is what we’ve waited for our whole
lives. It’s the reason we exist. Our destiny. *Your* destiny.”

Quentin ran his tongue across his teeth and chomped the fuck down on his molars, swallowing bile
and bitterness.

“I’m sorry you didn’t get what you wanted today,” he said softly, staring off at the party. His
stomach churned with harsher words unsaid. “I can’t totally understand how you feel, but I’m sure
it’s not good.”

Fen shook her head and squared her shoulders back, exhaling slowly. “The High King is ordained
by the gods themselves. His every decision is infallible and this is no exception.”
He knew Fen didn’t believe that. Or at least he fucking hoped she didn’t believe that. But everyone had their coping mechanisms and Quentin was definitely not going to be the asshole who shat all over hers.

“Yeah, I guess,” he said, giving her hand a squeeze. “You would have been a lot better at it though.”

“Well, obviously,” Fen said with a wet laugh. She rested her head against his shoulder, itchy fabric and all. “Do you even know how to bow properly?”

Quentin didn’t even know there was a proper way to bow. He shook his head, a deprecating grin sliding across his mouth. She laughed louder, the words stupid oaf a breathless whisper.

“But enough about me,” Fen said. She pulled herself up and pinched her lips, staring at him seriously. “How are you?”

Quentin gestured about before taking a deep breath of air and releasing it, his cheeks fluttering out like a cloud blowing a breeze.

“Married,” he settled on, with a dull shrug.

“That’s not an answer,” Fen accused. “Do not do that thing you do, where you keep everything bottled up until you get an ache in your gut and act like an agitated badger.”

“Who, me?” Quentin said, drawling his sarcasm. At her pursed lips, he sighed and closed his eyes. “I’m fine.”

“Quentin,” Fen took him by the hand and drew in closer. “This is an important day for us, for the Cove, for the whole kingdom. But you’re my family and that matters beyond our duty to the crown.”

He snorted. “Those things are, uh, intrinsically connected and you know it.”

Her eyes went Disney Princess wide, a reference she would never understand. “I’m trying to make sure you’re okay. It’s a marvelous thing that’s happened for you, but I know it was unexpected.”

Hades, that was an understatement. Sometimes her naivete wore on him like claws.

“The king is infallible, right?” Quentin snapped. “So, uh, I’m sure it’ll be fine. I’m fine.”

Fen stared at him for a long moment, her eyes annoyed and not a little hurt. But right as Quentin was about to fall into a pit of self-hatred, her whole face brightened into a grin.

“Wait, are you having another,” Fen let her mouth fall open, eyes sparkling, “panic attack?”

Despite himself, Quentin smiled fondly.

“No,” he lied. He had learned to lie to Fen years ago. She always claimed to be empathetic, but Quentin knew she often made other’s pain about herself. “I’m fine.”

“I love that turn of phrase,” Fen gushed, like he didn't know. Like she didn't say it every godsdamned time. “Because while it’s a silly image, that’s actually what it’s like. It does feel like the emotion of panic is attacking you.”

Quentin nodded, staring up at the moons with a sighing frown. “Right, yeah, you've mentioned.”
“When I think about panic attacking me,” she continued, ignoring him, “I imagine panic jumping out of the dark and stabbing me with a knife. Because it always makes you feel like all your favorite things are bad now.”

She giggled, and Quentin was overwhelmed with his love for her. “That’s actually… kind of a good way to describe it.”

“Thanks!” Fen chirped. “Your wholehearted praise means everything to me.”

Quentin snorted, rolling his eyes over a small smile. “Yeah, sure, I try.”

She smiled warmly and patted the top of his thigh, standing as she did.

“Come on,” Fen said, grabbing his hand and nodding her head toward the dusty ground of the lively reception. “Dance with me, oaf.”

Quentin didn’t even need to think twice about his answer. “I don’t know the steps.”

It didn’t matter what song was playing. He didn’t know the steps. He didn’t give any amount of shit to knowing the steps.

“Yes, you do,” Fen said in her fiercest sing-song voice. She pulled him quickly into the light and stood across from him, moving her feet together in time to the quick paced tune. “Remember, step to the side, and step to the side—” she took his hands in hers and forced him to slide in a circle with her “—Now, step to the, step to the, step to the side.”

“I look like an idiot,” Quentin grumbled, but he nevertheless allowed himself to be moved along with her. His bones and joints were tight and without rhythm, his face sour and dour. Fen was unperturbed.

“Now put out your hands and catch the rain!” Fen sang out, cupping her hands and sliding them out in front of her. Quentin reluctantly followed suit. “Now, the catch the rain! Catch all the rain and step to the side. Step to the, step to the, step to the side—”

The two of them ambled about with a mockery of the melody. Fen excitedly reminded him of the traditional steps, with more gaiety than Quentin could have thought possible for her on this, the most strange of days (“Climb up the wall and jump on the spider! Jump on the spider with your feet, with your feet, smash its guts with your dancing feet!”) He was sure it looked absurd to the Earthlings, all of whom were staring at the choreographed tale of arachnid homicide with cocked heads.

(… But really, how was it any weirder than the “Electric Slide” dance craze?)

Meanwhile, the High King was whooping through the megaphone of his own hands, as Lord Joshua stood on top of a barrel of ale with a makeshift beer bong. The luge was made of ice and iron, thrown together with tipsy magic.

As the music slowed down, Fen poked his shoulder and held her hands out in a waltzing position. Quentin rolled his eyes, but acquiesced, spinning her around once. He was still graceless, but at least waltzes had easier ways to hide his inability.

Quietly, they spoke to one another, about everything and nothing, the way they always did. The music turned in three-quarter time and Fen listened amiably as if her entire life’s plans hadn’t just burned to ashes.
“—meaning, he thinks I can provide, you know, good information,” Quentin said with a slump of his shoulders. Then he shook his head. “Which is great, until he realizes he has a whole Council with way more insight than me.”

Fen rolled her eyes. “I think you’re fluffing up Tick Pickwick more than he deserves, Q.”

“No, fuck, not Tick,” Quentin said with a wag of his disgusted tongue. They had to deal with fuckin’ Tick every time he came to Coldwater Cove for something Muntjac-related. He was the worst person on Fillory. “But, like, Heloise is pretty competent from what I understand.”

“That shouldn’t stop you from being an asset too,” Fen said, with her surprising wisdom. “You just have to figure out how.”

Quentin felt his jaw tense as his hand tightened around hers. “Yeah, maybe.”

Fen forced eye contact and spoke low, “Make yourself useful, Quentin.”

He knew she was right, that he had to be proactive in his own story. But it sounded so exhausting and futile. Quentin forced a fake smile, almost showing his teeth in his pursuit of scoffing derision. Fen was a realist, deep down. She would have to agree that it was better to be real about what was actually likely to happen.

“Except that, like, chances are good that he’ll die horribly and I’ll be executed or banished anyway, so—”

Fen cut him off by smacking the shit out of his arm.

“I hate when you talk like that,” she hissed through her teeth. “You have a responsibility now. To your family and to all of Fillory.”

Quentin set his eyes off to where the moons reflected on the water. “I know.”

The music dipped and soared, and Fen twirled under his arm as the steps demanded, but with an angry sharpness to the graceful movement. He held the frame high, his shoulder aching with the unnatural movement and the weight of his cloak. He hated dancing.

But when she came back around and slid her hand back on his waist, she did so with a grin.

“Besides, you have one thing the Council will never have,” Fen said, secretive and biting her lip. She winked, cheesy. “Your sexual wiles.”

His neck burst into flames.

“What the—? Gods, I—shit, no—that’s—oh my gods,” Quentin scowled hard and stammered harder. He stopped dancing and rubbed his hand down his face. “Fen, no, fuck.”

“I’m only saying,” Fen said, frowning and lifting one hand off his waist to get them back in rhythm. “If you want to ensure your place in his ear, start with your place in his bed.”

“I am not discussing this with you,” Quentin said, wishing for a tidal wave to drown him so he could die before the conversation continued. But tidal waves didn’t exist in Fillory. He had the worst luck.

But Fen just curled her shoulder into her chin, smiling coquettishly. “Fawn over him a little.”

“I don’t fawn,” Quentin countered, since apparently they were going to have this fucking
conversation whether he liked it or not.

“You have to,” Fen said. “Try it on me. Now.”

Quentin could feel his facial features falling into their mopiest droopy lines, his eyebrows slanting down until they nearly reached the grass. He stopped their dancing and shook his head.

“Oh, my king, how tall you are,” he intoned without inflection. He was an asshole. Oops. “Your shoes are so shiny.”

“That’s not good, Q,” Fen said, taking him in earnest. “Gods, that’s not good.”

Quentin shrugged, leaning into his assholishness with vigor. “That’s ‘cause I don’t fawn.”

“Watch me,” Fen said with an unimpressed sigh. She fluttered her eyelashes, puckering her lips into a circle, before giggling. “My king, your virility and strength will make our passion sweet.”

“Yeah, um, that’s good,” Quentin said with a short nod. “I just have one note which is, uh—”

He leaned over to the side and made a retching sound, doubling over and sticking his tongue out.

Fen growled in frustration, kicking at his ankle with a flash of her eyes.

“Listen to me,” she snapped. Her cheerful, reverent facade fell with a clamor. “It’s obvious as anything that the High King is vain. Flattery will get you everywhere, if you’re not too proud to do so.”

“It’s not about pride,” Quentin snapped back. “It’s about—I’m going to be with him for the rest of my life, no matter how short that is—”

Her voice fell to a whisper. “Stop saying that.”

“I need to do it my way,” he said, staring down at the shadows they cast on the ground. They flickered in the windy light. “I need to be able to at least keep my fucking dignity.”

Fen let out a breathy laugh, her eyes going wide and accusing. “Right. So I have no dignity.”

Gods, she was the most irritating person alive. Quentin slammed his eyes shut and pushed down everything to the dark pit of his stomach where all his fucking words lived these days.

“That’s not what I meant,” he managed to get out, striding away from her. He wasn’t about to pretend they were dancing anymore. “We’re different people. We have different survival methods.”

Fen followed, grabbing his arm and staring up at him with a firelit gaze of bald terror. “Yes, fine. But that argument only works if you actually have survival methods. I’m worried you don’t, Quentin.”

All the fight fell out of him at once, stumbling through his swooping stomach and onto the ground. Quentin grabbed a tankard of ale from off the barrel. It was warm and sticky, with the cooling enchantments running dim as the night grew elderly.

He drank anyway. It was his wedding after all.

Cheers.

“I promise,” he said slowly, swirling the drink around and watching the tiny whirlpool. “I promise
I’ll take care of myself, okay? I won’t—I won’t—you know.”

Fen hugged herself, kicking the ground the same way he always did. Feeling bereft, Quentin fought the urge to hug her. But it didn’t seem right for the moment, especially not with so many eyes on him. So the two of them stood in broken silence, words meaningless.

That is, until Fen asked the one question she should have known better than to ask.

“Have you seen him?”

Quentin’s hackles raised. The music swelled to a hypnotic pulse in his ears, mocking as he forced calm.

“Of course I haven’t,” he said, low and cold. A horrible thought punched him in the gut. “Have you?”

“No, of course not,” Fen said quickly. She grasped his wrist, pleading. “Of course not, Q.”

He believed her.

But he also couldn’t fucking believe her.

“Then why bring it up?” Quentin wrenched his hands into his hair, tugging on the strands until they all fell loose from his ribbon. “Why talk about it at all?”

Fen grabbed the tankard from his hands and took a long gulp. Her lips curled—she always hated the taste of ale—and she blinked, her eyes shining again in the light.

“It’s just odd that he’s not here,” she finally said quietly, a bit shakily. “For such a momentous occasion.”

Fuck Hades up the rear butt.

Quentin had no response for that.

He bit the tip of his tongue, his hands trembling with magic and rage. What the fuck was she doing? Why the fuck was she bringing this up now, of all times? It had been nearly half a year of hard-won peace, and now Fen had decided to remind him, today of all days, of the tumult that had defined the highest and godsdamned lowest moments of his life thus far. The headiest and heaviest and most gut-wrenching parts of his world that needed to remain as they were if he was going to be able to do this. Survival in-fucking-deed.

Instead of screaming these truths at her, Quentin just said, with stone frozen surety, “I don’t think him being at my wedding to the High King of Fillory would go very well, Fen.”

“I know,” she said, broken and sad. Her eyes were glistening with unshed tears. “But I miss the way it was sometimes.”

That had nothing to do with Quentin. “He made his choices.”

“I know,” Fen said again, clenching her jaw. “Gods, I know that, Q. I can still wish things were different.”

“Well, they’re not,” Quentin spat out, not caring if it was too severe. Fen shrunk into herself and he almost felt like a dickhead. Almost.
“The only thing I’ll say,” Fen said, a foreboding start to a sentence if he’d ever heard one, “is that he thought he was doing the right thing. He thought it was the only way to help Fillory.”

“You know what they say about the road to hell,” Quentin said, tightening his arms around his chest like a vice. Of course, Fen didn’t know what they said about that. She didn’t even know what hell was. His life was a jumbled fucking mess.

She seemed to get the gist though, because she nodded before she spoke again, cautious and oh-so quiet. “But maybe, Q, just maybe he—wasn’t as crazy as you thought he was?”

Quentin’s heart dropped to his feet, ice cold. “Fen.”

“I’m just saying,” she said, her hands up in preemptive surrender. But her eyes were wide and true. “Doesn’t this seem too—how can you deny it as a possibility?”

“Fen.”

Everything was topsy-turvy. He couldn’t handle this right now. He couldn’t have this discussion right now. The torches were burning him from the inside out. His cloak was so goddamned itchy. Yet Fen kept talking.

“The first time a husband is selected, it’s you?” Her big eyes were drowning him. “Maybe we can’t ignore that, Q. Maybe we have to consider the idea that—“

His hands snapped out from his sides and a whoosh of magic came along with them as he roared, “Fen!”

She stumbled backwards with a gasp, tripping over her dress and landing flat on her stretched out legs.

The air collapsed out of his lungs as he breathed a curse into the night sky, falling over his own feet to grab her hands. Kneeling down beside her, Quentin murmured a fast apology, hating himself for still not having all his shit under control, even after so many years of practice. But Fen knew him, better than anyone, and so she simply grasped his hands back, eyes locked on his.

“Quentin,” she said with a whisper. “Quentin, this is what I mean.”

He knew. He knew how and why and what Fen believed, wrong as she was. It had taken Quentin years and years to know how exactly wrong she was, how much greater the world, the universe, the multiverse was than a silly story and even sillier conclusions drawn. Except…

Except Quentin loved Fen like a sister, like kin, like part of his heart.

He didn’t want to fight with her on the last night they had together. So he pulled her into his chest and gave her the hug he’d been fighting against. Slowly, with a gasping sob, Fen hugged him back.

And so the night stretched on, endless in its twinkling disquiet. Quentin watched from the workshop’s shadows as the king sat at one of the long tables, speaking quietly to Lady Julia, her tiny hands in his. A single dark curl fell across his brow and bounced in the small space between their faces as he listened intently to her sorrowful, unheard words.
Around them, the revelers were all dancing now, with more and more zeal, their Fillorian loyalty fueling their passions more than food and drink ever could. Quentin sat along the bumpy stone of the yard’s fenced wall, staring out over his goblet, his gut twisting in apprehension and feet shaking to walk, to move, to go where he wanted to be. So because he had always been weak and stubborn and predictable, he gave in, jumping off the wall to the rhythm of the silent siren call.

Quentin walked to the docks.

As he approached in quiet thought, his favorite boat seemed to already know he was coming. She jittered over the still water in welcome at his approach. Quentin stepped aboard, briefly wondering if he should go below deck, to speak directly to her heartwood. But that felt too urgent, too final, to put on Ursidae right now. She needed comfort and assurance, not the bittersweetness of a true goodbye. Even if that was what was actually happening.

“Hey Urs,” Quentin said gently, stroking his thumb along the rough fiber of rope. “Um, so were you able to figure out what’s going on?”

He didn’t receive an answer, which was answer enough. He sighed, and leaned his forehead into the wood. He spoke softly to her, knowing that this was going to be a monumental change in her young life.

“I’m sorry,” Quentin said to start. He wished he knew how to express himself better, in a way that could reach her with all poetry and love he felt. “I didn’t think it would happen. No one thought it would happen. But I still—I still should have prepared you, just in case it did.”

Her whole stern dipped into the water once and then hopped back out again, like a nod. Like a, Yeah, you fucking should have. Quentin chuckled, licking his lips. He spun around, leaning back, eyes tilted up to her magnificent sails.

“For what it’s worth, I’m making history,” he said with a sardonic grin, shaking his head. “So, you know, I’ve got that going for me.”

Ursidae creaked, like a laugh. She sometimes humored his dorky and dry jokes, even though she preferred pratfalls and other physical comedy. Watching someone slip on a banana peel would have been the height of hilarity for her, if bananas existed in Fillory.

Quentin swallowed, throat tight and eyes stinging. “The thing is, Urs, I’m—gods, I’m going to miss you. I wish I could promise when I’ll be back or—or—or if I’ll be back, but—but that’s not really how it works. I have, um, a duty now and I kind of have to see that through, you know? It’s—it’s not really up to me. Not like, you know, maybe it should be, in a perfect world. But it doesn’t mean I don’t love you or the Cove any less than I did yesterday, okay?”

The boat went eerie still, and Quentin squeezed his eyes shut.

“I hope you can understand someday, even if you’re pissed now,” he choked out, rubbing the back of his neck. “No matter what happens, I want you to know that I’m so fucking proud of you and—and that I know your life is going to be a really amazing one.”

The sails billowed in mourning and Quentin hung his head low.

But then the boat made a loud clanking sound, unlike one Quentin had ever heard come from Ursidae. Opening his eyes with a curious frown, he tried to figure out what exactly she was trying to communicate.

Only the sound hadn’t come from Ursidae at all.
An unfamiliar figure moved out of the shadows and into the pale light of the moon, hip jutted out and arms crossed under a sly smile.

It was Lady Margo.

“So,” she said without preamble, striding toward him like she was on a fashion runway. “My best friend’s husband is the kind of guy who skips out on parties to chat with inanimate objects and wistfully stare off into the moonlight, huh?”

“Um,” Quentin said, with a slow blink of confusion. He looked both ways, seeking an explanation in the darkness. “Wait, uh, did you follow me or—?”

She widened her grin in response, before hopping onto the upper deck beside him in a move that looked almost choreographed. She dusted her pants off and cast catlike eyes up at him.

“Tell me,” she purred, tapping her chin. “Do the townspeople sing songs about what a strange girl you are?”

He knew what she was referencing. But Quentin also knew when to keep cards close to his chest. He had learned sleight of hand at Exeter and he was easily the most popular boy in school.

(Ha, ha.)

So instead of getting into any of that, he circled back to her original question. It was the one that interested him anyway.

“Yeah, uh, call her inanimate to her face,” Quentin said, throwing his thumb behind him to indicate the mast. “I dare you.”

Lady Margo didn’t miss a beat. “What fucking face?”

She didn’t sound scornful though. In fact, she circled around the deck, lightly touching Ursi’s surfaces with a surprising amount of gentleness that contrasted her tone and demeanor and—well, everything about her. Quentin crossed his arms as he stepped forward, watching her movements with a melting trepidation.

“This,” Quentin said, smiling slightly, “is Ursidae. She’s an adolescent bear-class sentient boat.”

Lady Margo pursed her lips and stared at him from over her shoulder. “You’re gonna have to break that down for me, kid.”

Quentin’s heart soared at the invitation.

Before his brain caught up with his mouth, he found himself smiling, hands bursting about as he explained how long ago, some of the sentient trees, in all their power and wisdom, grew to loathe their landlocked fates and took in the essence of the wellspring through their roots to bring about their flight and their micro- and macro-changes, from a sapling to old growth. Some became homes, some became mills, and some became carriages, and bridges, and clock towers, and tables and chairs.

Others, of course, became boats.

“So, like, the magic is, uh, infused into the wood grain, at a—a—a molecular level, right? So they are essentially going through what you probably know as evolution. But it’s more than that because they are completely in control of their own design, of their own worldview, in a way we
humans can’t even begin to comprehend,” Quentin downloaded with a smile, his hands jerking and twirling in front of him. “It’s—it’s really fucking fascinating, starting from a magical theory perspective, all the way to how they’ve societally integrated and how they’ve grown their own rich inner worlds and cultures. So it’s, like, a leveling up of not only genetics and metaphysicality, but also fucking self-actualization, you know?”

He threw his wild eyes up at her, feeling bright as the moons above. But then his mood dimmed, as he took in the enigmatic twist of Lady Margo’s lips, the way her own wide eyes blinked with laughter and a glint of something mischievous. Her hands were on her hips and she leaned into him, perhaps like a swishshark to chum.

Quentin swallowed. “Uh, what?”


“Oh, well, ah,” Quentin rubbed the back of his neck, staring down at his shoes. “No, not exactly. Like, I mean, if you get me started on something—”

“You never shut the fuck up?” Lady Margo folded her arms and smirked, looking to the sky without even checking for his rightfully offended glare. “Chill, it’s cute.”

There was that word again. He desperately wanted to ask her what they meant by it. Did they mean cute-cute? Or more like, Aha, look at our new soft toy we shall play with until it no longer amuses? Or was it more like, he was a sad little kitten with big eyes and a broken soul? Or like, all of the above? Or what?

But even though Quentin wasn’t always the most socially adept Fillorian, he could tell Lady Margo wouldn’t have a lot of patience for that line of inquiry. Or for much at all.

“Well, I’m pretty sure the High King doesn’t think I’m any kind of mouse anymore anyway,” Quentin said with a sigh, still cringing back on his terrible behavior on the docks. Shit. “I was, uh, kind of an ass to him.”

“Mmm, yeah, the High King,” Lady Margo said, like it was funny to her, which it probably was, “definitely said you’re bitchy as fuck.”

Shit. Quentin snapped his eyes shut.

But Lady Margo finished with a twist. “Which is stunningly high praise. I assumed he was reading into things. But now I find out you’re also an excitable little geek? Scales are unfairly tipped in your favor.”

Quentin braved a glance back at her and was surprised to see her smiling at him. He tentatively returned it and she huffed a tiny laugh, like he’d just passed a test of some kind.

“Anyway, bear definitely makes sense,” Lady Margo said, swiftly moving across the deck like she owned it. “She’s huge. Battleship?”

“She wishes,” Quentin said with a snort. At that, Ursidae rocked the whole hull and nearly sent Lady Margo flying into a pile of burlap grain bags. But she caught herself, casting her eyes up in wonder as it dawned on her that it was an intentional response to what Quentin said.

“Holy shit,” Lady Margo said, laughing a little. “Well, this place gets curiouser and fuckin’ curiouser.”
Quentin also knew that reference. He grinned.

“So, um, actually she’s more like a cruise liner? I think that’s the term?” He squinted up toward the moons, trying to remember. “Bears are known for their hospitality in Fillory.”

With a wink, Lady Margo touched the tip of her tongue to her teeth. “So Goldilocks would have been an honored guest?”

“No,” Quentin shook his head so hard his hair flew everywhere. “Uh, Goldilocks was an entitled piece of shit.”

Lady Margo’s face broke into a dazzling smile. “Oh, you’re gonna be trouble.”

He wasn’t totally sure what she meant by that, so he just shrugged. She was intense, and beautiful, and had a way about her that made him feel even more unworthy than the High King did.

Quentin looked back up at Ursidae’s sails, carefully regarding every line with a wistful affection.

“So yeah, she’s young. Still too volatile for the open sea.” The boat’s sails fluttered indignantly at his words and Quentin snapped his jaw upward. “I said what I said.”

“Ooh, fuck that, girl,” Lady Margo said, tilting her own head parallel to the mast, entirely shameless. “You wanna blow shit up? Blow shit up.”

Ursidae creaked happily, winding her rudder about with unadulterated joy. Lady Margo smirked and turned back to Quentin with a cool stare.

“Thanks,” Quentin said, flat. “That was helpful.”

“You’re cool with giving all this up?” Lady Margo wasn’t a fan of sequiturs. She ran her fingers along the grain of Ursidae’s wood. “Gotta say, you seem kinda attached.”

There was only one answer he could give.

“Of course I’m cool with it. It’s the greatest honor.”

“Exclusive access to Eliot’s dick?” Lady Margo crossed her arms. “You’re damn right it is.”

“You speak like you know from experience.” At her raised eyebrow, Quentin frowned. “Oh. I thought he was—”

“Don’t be boring.”

Lady Margo tossed her hair back and looked him right in the eye, a fierce challenge. Quentin bowed to it.

“That’s fair,” he said, folding his arms. “It’s just, uh, literally no other High King has ever chosen a husband. It’s not exactly precedent.”

“Well,” Lady Margo said with a theatrical shrug, “Eliot’s not exactly precedent.”

Quentin laughed at the absurd understatement. “Yeah, uh, no, I can kind of fucking tell.”

Lady Margo matched his laugh, stepping back on one leg.

“Okay, what’s your deal?” She put her hands on her hips. “El and I have a bet. He thinks you’re a
time traveler. But I say that makes no goddamn sense and you’re probably more like a mixed species of some kind.”

… Uh, what?

“What?” Quentin tucked his hair behind his ears, frowning. “I don’t know what you mean by, like, any of that.”

She groaned, annoyed on a dime.

“The anachronisms? The swearing? Your basic speech patterns?” Lady Margo rolled her eyes at his incredibly small brain. “We’re not experts, but we’ve been here long enough to know you don’t sound like Fillory.”

Right.

Quentin blew air out his mouth and nodded. He had meant to tell the High King—Eliot—about his time on Earth before their wedding. He wasn’t even really sure why it spiked his anxiety, them knowing. Maybe it set up a shitty yardstick, where he could never measure up as either a Fillorian or an Earthling in his own right. Or maybe it was because of all the shit that surrounded his return home, the unresolved nature of the festering wounds under the skin-light scabs.

“Right, okay, yeah. So, uh, nothing that interesting actually.” Quentin took a deep breath. “I went to boarding school on Earth for my secondary education. Um, you know, high school. Then I also did two years at Columbia for undergrad.”

It felt anticlimactic now that he said it out loud. He looked back up at her with a tight smile, without much more to say.

Lady Margo’s eyes widened into astonishment for half a moment before she frowned, with mild interest. “Huh.”

“I never really, uh,” Quentin licked his lips, looking at the ground, “rewired my brain to speak like Fillorians again, except for a few old habits. I mean, gods, some of my most formative years were on Earth and in a particularly, um, intense version of Earth—”

“What does that mean?”

Quentin rolled his eyes, twisting his mouth up. “Familiar with Phillips Exeter Academy?”

“The fancy prep school?” Lady Margo cackled, hands flying back to her hips. “Well, shit. You didn’t strike me as Brooks Brothers-wearing, wealthy frat bro, but I guess appearances can be deceiving.”

“It wasn’t a cultural fit,” Quentin said, making Lady Margo smile again. “But really, like, I kind of thrived there, in a lot of ways. Some ways, anyway. Which is part of why I stayed for university, even though most Fillorians return as quickly as they can.”

Lady Margo kept laughing, pleased as punch. “Exactly how many Fillorians are at Exeter?”

“No boy connected to royalty on the land mass has the opportunity to go,” Quentin said, noting how quickly her eyes darkened at the gender specification. “The founders of Exeter are Fillorian and Lorian, for, like, really boring reasons. So because of the deal, I got to go. I was even classmates with the Prince of Loria, whose mom was from Cincinnati.”
“That’s a lot,” Lady Margo said. “Jesus. This place.”

“But most people from Fillory don’t really want to spend time on Earth,” Quentin continued, wringing his hands together. “Like, said Lorian prince returned after graduation as fast as he fucking could. Missed the perks of veneration, I guess.”

Fucking goddamn alpha male dickhead Ess.

“Loria’s to the north, right?” Lady Margo asked, surprising Quentin. “They’re the bad guys.”

“Someone’s read Christopher Plover,” Quentin said with a grin, before shaking his head. “No, I mean, I personally wouldn’t trust them. Like, I knew Ess pretty well and he’s—not exactly a good dude.” Understatement. “But Fillory and Loria maintain a cold peace, more or less.”

Lady Margo sucked her cheeks into her teeth, eyes glowing with something new. “Eliot said you know your shit. That’s good, I guess.”

Quentin held his hands out, a presentation of his unimpressive form. “Yeah, well, I hope so.” Then he laughed. “So is this like a post-wedding shovel talk or what?”

“More of a reconnaissance mission of my own making,” Lady Margo said, narrowing her eyes into cunning slits. “I’m a very curious person, you see.”

She said it like a threat, like she was mocking the idea. Like she hadn’t proven herself exactly that in the few minutes Quentin had known her. Against all odds, it made him like her even more.

“What you see is what you get with me,” Quentin said, ignoring the niggle in his stomach that forcefully objected. He swallowed. “I’m, uh, not exactly mysterious.”

“No, you’re really not,” Lady Margo said with an eye roll. “That’s good. Eliot doesn’t need a stranger in a strange land. He needs stability and support.”

“I mean, I’m still a stranger,” Quentin said quickly.

“No shit,” she said, looking down at her fingernails. “What I mean is that I’m glad that you don’t seem like a total psychopath.”

“Yeah, that’s something,” he said, a tight clench gripping his stomach. “Makes the whole forced marriage thing way more palatable.”

Maybe he was pushing his luck with someone who was almost certainly going to be his High Queen. But fuck it, she wasn’t royalty yet. They were both just people. And if she went back and reported it to High King Eliot, and he was the kind of person to execute over a minor snarky comment? Then the people would know. They would see it.

All in all, there was no downside.

But he was obviously getting ahead of himself, because Lady Margo fluttered her lips and waved a lofty hand in the air.

“Sure, fuckin’ injustice, blah. But it’s more like an eternal business arrangement. When you think of it that way, it’s not so bad.”

“Wow,” Quentin snorted, an unwitting half-smile melting over his face. “You are from Earth.”

“Eliot is a good man,” Lady Margo said, eyes dipping low and sharp as her tactic changed. Her
“Though you should probably know that he has—some struggles.”

Quentin thought back to the reception and how the High King had finished a line of shots, then dipped back into his flask. He hadn’t even seemed tipsy after an amount that would have had Quentin laid out on the floor, naked and spinning.

He nodded once and Lady Margo averted her eyes, steely and cool.

“But I think you’ll see that he is—” She let out a breath and her face softened, glowing in the light of the moon. “Eliot is loyal, and funny, and nurturing, and he is so much braver than he gives himself credit for, and—and he’s kind of a self-sacrificing dick? But in that Noble Asshole way that probably makes for good leadership.“

She laughed at herself, wet and breathless. Quentin felt his tension melt, warming under her heartfelt words. He understood that fervor. He knew that kind of love, deeper and more profound than passion. He hoped she would be able to give the king—Eliot—strength, where he himself would probably be incapable.

Lady Margo brought her shining eyes up to him, like she was offering him little cakes, like he could make the world something whole, like he was the one with power.

“I don’t ask people for a lot of things, because people are bullshit. But I’m asking you for this. Please give him a chance.”

“Lady Margo—” Quentin started to say. But her eyebrow ticked up to cut him off, lip curling in defiance.

“I’m not a fucking lady.”

“Margo,” Quentin corrected himself, before continuing. “Margo, he’s—he’s my king before he’s my husband. So there aren’t any chances to give here. I’m all in, no matter what.”

He had meant it to be reassuring. But Margo’s shoulders slumped and she looked out at the water, her profile as stunning and dangerous as the power of her gaze.

“You guys will find your rhythm. You’ll make it work,” Margo said, nodding into the distance. Then she snorted, amused with herself. “For Fillory.”

Honestly, she had no idea what she was talking about. But she meant well, and Quentin had a lot of patience for good intentions. Most of the time.

“I should head back,” he said, angling his head toward the fireglow of the still shimmering party, the happy music. “There’s usually a final toast. It would be, uh, pretty bad if I missed it.”

“Oh, now you’re concerned about social form,” Margo said with a newfound grin. “You’ve been such a little sad sack this whole time.”

Defensiveness pitted in the center of his stomach. “I mean, I think sad sack is, uh, kind of—”

“Chill, it’s cute,” she said again, waving him off. Again.

Quentin wasn’t sure that being a sad sack could ever be cute, but he wasn’t about to look a pig in the rear butthole. Having Margo’s approval, in any way, felt like a victory he couldn’t describe or quantify.
So with the party calling to him in the distance, he turned on his feet to give Ursidae one last pat on the mast. He whispered a quiet Until next time, a promise and a hope. Then he nodded to his future Queen and matched Margo’s quick strides, heading back into the fray.

But just before they reached the light of the reception, she stopped and gawked at him.

“Wait a second,” Margo said, poking his shoulder hard. “You knew that shit was from Star Trek and you said it anyway?”

Quentin flushed hot and bright. “Uh, yeah, I panicked.”

Letting out a loud and wholehearted laugh, Margo wrapped her arm into his, sending bubbles of warmth up his whole chest. She smiled triumphantly.

“So much trouble.”

tbc.

Chapter End Notes

I’m on Tumblr! So if you like gifs from the first 3.5 seasons, fanfiction memes, and someone talking about how attractive she finds Eliot Waugh on an endless loop, you should come hang with me @hmgfanfic.
The reception was a disaster.

Eliot gripped the railing of the slippery wooden side-stairs of the Coldwater Cove homestead, taking a deep breath. He closed his eyes and steeled himself, not for the first time that night. The calming sea air was chilled, heavy and salted. His heart beat in double-time, thumping quickly over the expanse of reality before him.

First of all, the color scheme was all wrong. Anyone who would unironically put warm burnt orange and cool Kelly green together had to be deranged. Second of all, Eliot’s first act as High King was going to be making it illegal to serve sweet mint ice cream on top of fermented oily fish. He didn’t care if it was a sacred tradition. It was banned, forever. Goodbye.

Third of fucking all, as soon as Eliot had taken two steps into the crowd, before he could even look at his brand new goddamn husband, he was pulled in every direction by sycophants and their petty demands. He was crowded by people with stale ale breath and rotting teeth who all wanted his ear and his promise of frankly pretty impossible things. For instance, he was sure it would have been wonderful to present each household with its own pegasus and a yearly stipend of two hundred thousand Fillorian gold crescents. He had no essential objection to the idea. But the hunger in their eyes and the hatred simmering low below their surface made him think they may have been flying toward the sun of his assumed ignorance.

(Which was probably something he’d have to watch out for, for real, once he was around more sophisticated players.)

But in his own estimation, Eliot handled it all well enough. In stride, at least. He drank and made merry. He danced when he was supposed to dance. He laughed at jokes he didn’t understand. He tried to play the Fillorian lute, which was a perplexing instrument and seemed to have a literal mind of its own when it came to chord progressions. He even talked to Bristlycoat for over an hour, one of the only animals he had met who spoke Human. It was an interesting novelty at first, but
honestly, that dog was such a dickhead.

For the most part though, it had all seemed more or less fine. Well, except that he had lost track of Quentin at some point. Not ideal for a wedding reception. But Eliot had bigger things to worry about than canoodling, even if it was kind of all he wanted. That too-brief moment where their lips touched during the ceremony had been a highlight of the insane day. Soft and electric, and certainly a propitious sign for, you know, the rest of his life.

—Eliot nearly crashed face down when the worn bottoms of his shoes slipped out past the edge of a step. He scrabbled his hands out to catch himself, heart pounding. Shit.

The waves of panic came unexpectedly and knocked the wind out of him each time. The rest of his life, the rest of his life, the rest of his life. What the fuck had he done? How the fuck had he thought this was a good idea?

He pressed his chin to his chest and took a deep breath. No use in fretting over shit that couldn’t change. He had made his choice. He had committed. Nothing to be done now except move forward and figure out as many loopholes as he possibly could. Prince of Brakebills, Lord of Loopholes, High King of Fillory.

So with an exhale, Eliot held himself high and kept climbing upward.

Anyway, the real disaster had come toward the end of the party. At some point, deep into his ninth or tenth cup of thick and disgusting beer, Eliot had also lost track of Bambi, after she had whispered in his ear that she had a mission to undertake. Knowing her, that could have been anything from jumping right into whatever Fillory’s version of the Situation Room was, to getting Penny’s sweet dick in her mouth, or both at once. She was a glorious bitch and an even more glorious multitasker.

But in any case, she had disappeared. And as it turned out, the latter option—that she was off blowing Penny in the stable stacks—was determined not to be the case. Instead, the Trifecta of Hot Mess and Clusterfucks were screaming at each other in the middle of the yard, scandalized Fillorians be damned. Julia had cried and pleaded her case of—whatever the fuck, while Kady lashed out, barely held back by her new girlfriend Alice. Apparently, Kady wanted Reynard dead, despite the whole goddamn year of discovering why that would be an awful idea. She was bullish that way, in all her bullshit.

So Penny tried to reason with Kady, if not Julia, who he had written off long ago. He begged her to listen to what he had to say about—whatever the fuck, but Kady had just thrown battle magic at a bunch of pots for some reason. Then she had thrown the even harsher (and definitely false) accusation that Julia had cheated on her with the now-deceased Dean Fogg, all for shits and zero giggles.

…That went well.

In the end, in the rubble of heartache and fury, Kady and Alice had decided to fuck the hell off back to Earth with Josh, because he was on their side (?) for some reason. Julia had collapsed into herself, another force not to be reckoned with, in a very different way. Eliot knew her well enough to know when she needed time and space. So he watched her run down toward the water with a heavy heart but no intention of following.

Then there was also the issue of Penny, the ever the even-keeled and calm voice of reason, and how he had started kicking at chair legs, yelling at the top of his lungs and throwing his middle finger up in the air with the roar of a million battle cries.
“Fuck you, fuck you,” Penny had said, pointing at various innocent Fillorians, including those who Eliot had learned were among the most esteemed village elders. “Fuck you, double fuck you, Bristlycoat, and fuck all of you motherfuckers. I hate this place.”

And of fucking course, cherry on top, Penny’s cute little meltdown coincided with the exact moment that Margo came back—laughing and arm-in-arm with his fucking husband, Quentin. Bambi had of course taken one look at the wreckage and scowled with a Jesus, I was gone for five minutes, before dragging Penny off, to either yell at him to get his shit in order, have angry sex up against a wall, or both. Probably both.

Quentin, meanwhile, had just stared straight ahead, arms crossed and eyes stony.

Which was—really fucking great.

The last stretch of the party had been disjointed and dim, with a rushed toast from an angry Fint or Bint or whatever, who was obviously annoyed that Eliot hadn’t chosen to marry his daughter. He supposed it sucked for him. But honestly, he gave exactly no shits. He didn’t owe Lint a damn thing.

But there was a fairly lovely lightshow in the sky, and Eliot was cornered by more greedy loyal subjects, and his husband slipped away into the darkness, yet again. Which would have been a fair enough way to end a weird and shitty night.

Except.

Except that Ted of Coldwater Cove had tracked him down like a bloodhound, all to give him a quick and weirdly eager overview of the Fillorian Marriage Contract he had dived into head first. With bright eyes and a too-big smile, his father-in-law confirmed what Alice had said a million years ago, back on the boat, but now with a fun little time limit to boot. Fantastic.

Thus, Eliot was walking up the unfamiliar stairs, stomach twisting, before he finally reached the landing. There, he found a small window and a clear sight into Quentin’s private quarters.

Gathering his nerve into the center of his chest, he peered all the way through the glass.

Quentin was curled on his bed, legs twisted and tucked under him. His face squinted down into a huge book in concentration, hair falling around his lovely face in the candlelit glow. He had taken off his ridiculous cloak—heavy and black and very much unlike him—and now wore a simple gray shirt and loose pants. Surrounded by knit quilts and tiny trinkets, Quentin looked the epitome of coziness, of hearth and home, in a way that should have spiked Eliot’s anxiety but didn’t.

Swallowing a lump in his throat, Eliot tapped on the window frame as lightly and cautiously as he could.

—Quentin still jumped like someone had blown a foghorn in his ear.

Eliot smiled, watching the hair fly out, and the hands jolt up, and the eyes widen with a haywire fight or flight response. It was endearing as hell.

He waggled his fingers in a blithe wave, as Quentin clutched at his chest. Their eyes met and Quentin frowned. Not necessarily unhappy, but probably putting together exactly why Eliot was there. He was the picture of ambivalence, and Eliot agreed.

Still, Quentin beckoned him forward and Eliot pushed at the unlocked hinge to climb into the small room. It was toasty warm, with a small stove fire in the corner, the glow saturating the air with the smell of charcoal and pine nuts. The walls were covered in filled bookshelves that looked
hobbled together by hand. Model ships stood tall on platforms in the highest corners and Fillorian banners swung down from the log ceiling, bold red and gold.

His skin tingled and his heart ached. He wasn’t sure why.

Pushing it aside, Eliot cleared his throat and traced his eyes over Quentin, barefoot and sweet on his down comforter. He smiled at him, inclining his head in greeting. For a desperate second, he couldn’t think of what he could possibly say. Good evening, sweet husband? Ready to fuck for Fillory? You look lovely, like every domestic wet dream I’ve never allowed myself to indulge in? Suck my cock or yours? None of it felt quite right, given the circumstances.

So—

“Hi,” Eliot said, settling on simple. Quentin snorted, a smile popping on his lips like he couldn’t help it.

“Hey,” he said back, closing his book and sighing. “Uh, been a long night.”

“You can say that again,” Eliot said, stepping forward and spinning once, taking in his surroundings, finding his grounding. He fixed his eyes back on Quentin, who hadn’t moved from his place on the bed. “You disappeared on me.”

He didn’t mean it to sound accusatory. The aim was curiosity. But Quentin’s face blanched and fell. His eyes were ridiculously wide as he fidgeted with the edges of his sleep shirt sleeves, lips spasming as he mouthed unspoken words. Not for the first time in their short acquaintance, Eliot thought that the poor guy needed a spa day.

“Um, sorry,” Quentin said, pinching his eyes and clearing his throat. “I’m not much for crowds.”

Eliot couldn’t relate. It wasn’t that he liked people all that much. Fucking bastards, all of them. But the energy of groups, the buzz of conversation, and the headiness of body heat carried him over the world, allowed him to find solitude and poise in unexpected places. No one could touch you while you danced over their heads, aweing them with your grace.

But graceful wasn’t the first way he would describe Quentin. Or the eightieth.

“Hmm,” Eliot said noncommittally, walking over to the bookshelves to kill time.

He ran his fingers over leather-bound tomes, the gold script embossed and shining in the firelight. Most of the names he didn’t recognize, with titles like The Wary Fairy and The Hobnobbin’ Hobgoblin set in organized series. But then there were a few authors that did spark recognition—Francis Bacon, John Locke, W.B. DuBois, a metric fuckton of Asimov, and Twain, just to start. Eliot shook his head, stowing away a grin.

Quentin was definitely literate.

(And almost certainly a time traveler.)

Eliot glanced up at his husband and ran his tongue over his teeth. “Well, I’m sorry for my part in why we didn’t spend much time together at the reception. It’s been—”

He trailed off, his eyes spasming under his closed lids. He wrapped his arms around himself and slowly peeled them back open, only to stare off into the corner. It had been a long night. It had been a long year. Eliot hadn’t actually really begun to process that. Any of it.
Fuck, despite everything, Eliot hadn’t even processed that first fateful morning. Hadn’t really let himself think about walking into his classroom, hungover and laughing with Margo, only to find Professor Sunderland’s cannibalized remains slashed and spread across every lab table. If he closed his eyes tight enough, he could still hear Bambi’s howling shriek like she was shaking in his arms all over again.

It had been a long year.

So with the mood thoroughly set for seduction, Eliot blinked back up and smiled, serene and still. He found Quentin’s pensive eyes on him, every line on his face frowning.

“Um, no, that’s fine. It’s none of my concern,” Quentin said. Then suddenly, he straightened up and transformed into an obedient subject instead of a human being. “I mean, uh—I merely praise Ember and Umber for your safekeeping.”

Jesus. Fillorian stock phrases were not his favorite.

“That’s—nice of you to say,” Eliot said, darting his eyes back and away from Quentin. “Though I also wanted to apologize for my friends’ difficult moment earlier. It wasn’t representative of our respect for your father’s home. Your home.”

Quentin smiled, small but genuine. “I appreciate that. Thank you.”

Eliot nodded once, before letting out a low whistle. Again, he looked around Quentin’s quarters, tiny and rustic. It was about the size of those awful dorm rooms Brakebills shoved the first years in for a few irrelevant weeks. Back then, Eliot had entered his first and only longterm relationship of four whole weeks, so he could shack up with an Illusion third year. Marc had a king sized bed, which had been good enough for him at the time.

“So this is cozy,” Eliot said. He felt itchy and a touch claustrophobic. “Your childhood bedroom?”

“My only bedroom,” Quentin clarified, tucking his feet under him in a cross-legged position. He flitted his hands along his knees, not able to stay still. “Fillorians don’t leave home until marriage, unless they’re sailors or, uh, journeymen, outside of their family apprenticeships. Which is rare.”

Eliot smiled again. “You really are a fount of useful knowledge.”

“Honestly, that’s kinda basic shit,” Quentin said, sounding like a person again, thank fuck. “The complex levels of Fillorian society go a lot deeper than that.”

That wasn’t surprising, even as it sounded exhausting as sin. Eliot blew air out his mouth, longing for a nap. But that was definitely not on the itinerary.

With an awkward clap of his hands, Eliot spun on his heels and looked Quentin right in the eyes. “So, ah—I spoke with your father.”

The implication in the sentence filled the air with a rush of humidity, uncomfortable and gripping to the skin. Quentin nodded downward and fastened his hands together like a cat’s cradle, cracking his knuckles.

“No, uh, yeah,” he said, swallowing audibly. “I figured you weren’t here for a chat and some tea.”

In a weird way—in a way that infuriated his dick—Eliot wished he was. He wished getting to know Quentin, even a little more, was possible. So at least they could be comfortable with each other. So Quentin could be set at ease and actually want Eliot, the way Eliot already wanted him.
Unfortunately though, that wasn’t the brand of batshit they were swimming in.

“Look, Quentin,” Eliot said, keeping his voice as low and kind as he could. “I’m sure this is—I’m sure this is overwhelming for you.”

“Thank you for saying that.” Quentin forced a smile. It was not an Oscar winning performance. “But I am nothing but overjoyed on this happy day.”

Eliot felt his eyes go hard and cutting for a split second. He had long ago put a locator spell on bullshit, and the accompanying alarm had just blared. “Don’t bullshit me.”

Quentin’s smile dropped in a flash. He ticked his jaw and ran his hand through his hair. “What do you want me to say? That this is fucking weird? I think we both already know that.”

Eliot sighed, taking a rounded path toward the side of the bed, closer to his husband and all the more gentle. He owed him that, especially given everything he knew now.

“I’m trying to say that it’s okay if you’re overwhelmed. Really. I’m sure that saving yourself for a king who might not ever come or—” Eliot cleared his throat, looking away “—arrive, I should say, wasn’t exactly fun.”

During their tete-a-tete, Ted of Coldwater Cove had spoken at length about Quentin’s chastity, his unsullied virtue. He held his hand to heart as he smiled over the noble way Quentin had held himself forthright in pursuit of his truest path, that of the King’s Virgin Consort. It would have been a lovely speech, had it not been so goddamn creepy.

Still, Eliot took it seriously.

He took his responsibility seriously. It was important to make sure Quentin felt safe and secure with him, no matter what. It was the least he could do.

But in response, Quentin blinked hard, lips wobbling about. “Uh, what?”

“I want to make this night comfortable for you, for your first time. I have some experience in this—these, um, matters and I—” Eliot cut himself off with a wide, soundless laugh. Meanwhile, Quentin grabbed at his quilt in both of his fists and kept as still as he could. “Look, your father basically pushed me in here to get the whole wedding night thing, you know—donesies.”

Quentin swallowed what looked like a laugh. “Donesies?”

“It’s an Earth technical term.” Eliot waved him off, but heat peppered his cheeks. He was fucking this up. “Don’t worry about it.”

Quentin hid his face behind his knees, eyes alight. “I will only worry about that which you require, my king.”

Eliot started forward, brow falling down as he slid a shocked look over at his husband. Quentin’s mouth was hidden from view, but his eyebrows were raised and his dimples peeked out, thin lines of mischief.

If he didn’t know better, he would have thought Quentin was almost being—

Flirty.

But he shook it away when Quentin blinked and his face defaulted to the neutral melancholy that
seemed to define him. But still, slightly encouraged, Eliot sat down on the bed, on the furthest edge. Quentin tilted his head at him, stubble catching light and eyes dark in the shadows. He was gorgeous, and the stirrings in Eliot’s gut stretched up to his throat, rendering him breathless.

“The point is, I understand,” Eliot said, his words slow and stilted as he grasped for the proper language. He reached his hand out to lay on his shin, a gentle touch, to show his good faith. Quentin tensed and relaxed, eyes unblinking as he stared at his hand.

Eliot tried to meet his eyes carefully. “I know this is a big deal for you and I intend to treat it with the care—”

Quentin cut him off with a husky laugh.

“Okay, this was sort of fun, but I’m gonna put you out of your misery.” He rested his chin on his knees. “I’m not a virgin.”

Oh.

Oh.

—Oh, thank fucking christ, holy shit.


For a second, Quentin’s eyes faltered, “I mean, are you alright with that?”

“Are you kidding?” Eliot ducked his eyes seriously. “Please, yes, that’s more than okay. That actually makes me feel marginally less skeezy.”

He pushed his curls back and ran his hands down his face, chuckling. Fuck. Thank god. Shit.

“You were being really nice about it though,” Quentin said with a grin, flattening out his comforter. “So, like, my eighteen-year-old self thanks you.”

“Well, you know,” Eliot said, adjusting his tie and sliding slightly further onto the bed, so that his hip touched the tips of Quentin’s toes. “Either way, I want it to be comfortable for you. I was told early on that it had to happen, but not that it was so time sensitive.”

Quentin nodded, eyes shielded again. “Yeah, it’s pretty basic binding magic. I don’t know if this has crossed your path yet in your questing travels or whatever, but Ember’s a huge pervert and—”

Eliot held his hand up and grimaced. “My friend Alice had to imbibe his strength to power a spell.”

“Holy shit,” Quentin burst out with a pop of his eyes. “Okay, yeah, so you know.”

He knew. They all knew. Poor Alice really knew.

(It was weird that she had just—left. She hadn’t even said goodbye. He had thought they were friends, despite everything. He hadn’t thought the battle lines were so clearly drawn.)

But Quentin was still speaking, rambling in that sweet way that Eliot wished he could bottle up.

“—But, like, with the way the deal was structured, uh, you know, a few centuries ago, or maybe it was a millennium, now? Honestly, long stretches of time here can be weird and nonlinear compared to Earth. But, uh, that’s not actually—relevant.”
Quentin cleared his throat to take a breath. Then he blushed again. Jesus.

“Um, the point is that until we, you know, consummate our marriage, you won’t be accepted by the Knight of Crowns and my family’s social foothold will remain unfulfilled.”

“That makes sense,” Eliot said, offering a grateful smile. “Thank you for explaining.”

Quentin shrugged his shoulders to his ears and frowned, big eyes searching Eliot’s face. The tall white candle beside him was dimming low, wax dripping on the nightstand. The flame was magical, but not held steady. It painted the shadows darker, the flickering warmth dappling across his husband’s face. His husband.

Eliot’s heart beat faster.

“Here’s the rub, Quentin,” he said, sitting tall and poised, keeping his voice and eyes low. “I’m not in the game of fucking people who don’t want to fuck me.”

Quentin narrowed his eyes, not unkindly, and his mouth tilted down into a gentle frown.

“I do want to fuck you,” he said, softly. He stammered over everything else, but not that. “It’s weird, but I mean, I definitely want to.”

“For Fillory,” Eliot said, not a question. Quentin frowned deeper. “Not because you—”

With a shake of his long hair, Quentin sat up to rest his elbows on his knees, scratching at his furrowed brow. He dug his fingertips into his hairline and stayed like that for a moment, lost in thought. Then he popped back up, eyes determined.

“It is what it is,” Quentin said, sucking his lip into his mouth and shrugging. “It’s not ideal, but if we want to, uh, honor the path in front of us, we have to see it through. Together.”

Eliot wasn’t sure what he expected. Maybe there was a small part of him, an annoying flutter of hope against his rib cage, that had dared to think that maybe Quentin would look at him and smile, eyes melting and throat dry with the heat of desire, and declare, no, what I want is you, Eliot. I want you, I want you, I want you. And maybe that small, unimportant part of him was dejected, maybe even a little sad. Even if it wasn’t fair. Because this was the only answer he should have expected. The only answer he should have even wanted from a complete stranger, and not one he picked up from a dark corner of a Cottage party.

But fuck, if Eliot couldn’t shake the memory of seeing Quentin for the first time, in that unwashed crowd. Fuck, if he couldn’t clear away the image of him staring up, mouth open wide and face drenched in sunlight. How he had been awestruck and unbreathing, with an unbridled spark of hunger in his eyes. All while he looked at Eliot, and not yet the High King.

Shit had changed.

That is, if it had ever existed in the first place, and wasn’t all a trick of his overactive imagination in a stressful situation. Fixate on a cute boy, devise a narcissistic tale of lust and intrigue. Classic Eliot Waugh.

“I guess there’s camaraderie in that,” Eliot said carefully, “if not enthusiastic consent.”

Quentin dragged his fingers through his hair and spoke quickly, more into his sheets than directed at him. “I mean, I’ve already enthusiastically consented to helping you rule a fair Fillory. This is just, uh, step one in how you do that.”
He said it so pragmatically, so firmly and casually at once, like they were talking about picking up a package of stamps at the post office for a letter writing campaign. Eliot felt his heart jump, playful and laughing in his chest.

“You’re not what I expected,” he said, pressing his lips down as he looked at his husband. His husband. His beautiful, strange, twitchy, smart, probably time-traveling husband.

Eliot slid another inch closer.

Quentin jerked his fingers around his knees, dark eyes flickering in the last glow of the candle. “Is that a bad thing?”

His voice was whisper soft, curling around Eliot’s spine.

“No,” he said quietly. He could feel Quentin’s breaths, the warmth of him radiating in waves of wooded scents and firewood cinders. His big brown eyes were glittering at him, earnest and kind, so fucking kind—and full of brimming fire, about to topple over the edge.

Emboldened, Eliot placed his hand on top of Quentin’s, thumb stroking light patterns into his soft skin. The point of contact made him feel alive, sparks and gossamer tingling across his chest and back. He tilted his mouth up, entreating.

“Are you attracted to me, Quentin?”

His husband chuckled, shaking his head with another goddamn blush. “You know you’re attractive.”

The flutter of annoying hope sprang back to life.

“Wasn’t my question,” Eliot countered, lacing their fingers together. He felt the soft slide of skin in his veins. The point of Quentin’s jaw seized, his lips parting to exhale.

He stared down at their joined hands. “Does it matter?”

Eliot heard the real question in his breathless tone, the light pitch of uncertainty. It was framed as pragmatic, firm and casual, but it lacked his earlier conviction. This time, it wasn’t about Fillory or their duty or the logistics of magic. This time, Quentin wanted to know if mattered, to Eliot.

His throat tightened, desire pooling in the pit of his stomach.

“It does,” Eliot said, pressing their hands palm to palm, a slow meditation. “It’s the difference between lying back and thinking of Fillory, or whether I can—”

He drew his eyes up at Quentin from under his lashes, over a smirk. Quentin swallowed a shiver and Eliot nearly kissed him right there. But all in due time.

“Whether you can,” Quentin licked his lips, “what?”

All of Eliot’s most sensual tricks were quavering up his sleeve, bursting for release. Here was where, in any other circumstance, he would crawl over Quentin, pinning him down. He would hover right over his gasping lips, palming his hands up his sides as he trembled, delicate sounds of anticipation keening loose from his lovely throat. Eliot would dip his mouth down to his ear, scraping his teeth along the tender skin of his earlobe, to whisper exactly what he wanted to do to Quentin.
But they weren’t in any other circumstance.

So Eliot leveled with him instead.

“I’d like to be able to enjoy this,” he said, voice still rough. Quentin hitched a breath. Oh, he was a delight. “But I also want to respect what you want—your boundaries—within the context of this fucking weird situation. Does that make sense?”

He held Quentin’s hand lightly in his own, without pressure. Quentin let it stay, the weight of him warm and solid. He smiled, a closed mouth little thing, but with sweetly surprised eyes.

“It does. Thank you,” Quentin said with an incredulous chuckle. Eliot supposed most High Kings weren’t having consent negotiations at this point in the proceedings. “Um, I guess my only, uh—so yeah, I’m definitely attracted to you.”

His fervor rushed to Eliot’s cock.

“Thought so,” he said, barely managing his own composure. “Wanted to confirm.”

Quentin flipped Eliot’s palm into his own, running his finger over the magic scarring from where the knife had made its selection. His touch was delicate, deliberate. It made Eliot feel like the bed was going to swallow him whole.

“But I can’t pretend that this is—” Quentin pinched his brow, lips pursing. “I mean, this is a political arrangement, right?”

“Obviously,” Eliot said patiently. “But I’m not sure I follow.”

Those soft brown eyes darted quickly, a tinge of fear darkening them. “Sometimes kings prefer to believe that their spouse is instantly, madly—”

Eliot cracked a wide smile, light flowing from within. Quentin was such a dear. He really had a feeling this was the start of a beautiful friendship.

“No, no, no,” Eliot said, taking both of his hands in his and squeezing tight. He held back a giddy laugh, opting instead to beam at his new perfect husband. “No, we’re on the same page.”

Quite the pragmatist, Quentin frowned before he asked, “Which is?”

“We don’t know each other at all,” Eliot said. “We’re complete strangers from literally two different goddamn planets. We basically have a compulsory joint career goal with the world’s worst clause wherein we can only fuck each other because your gods are sadists—”

“One is,” Quentin said over his own growing smile. “The other does his best.”

Whatever. As far as Eliot was concerned, once you’d met one god, you’d met ‘em all. Same dick, different Richard. But he didn’t care about that now—he was too charged up, aglow from the inside. He toed off his shoes, letting them fall to the floor. Pulling himself entirely onto Quentin’s bed, he slid onto his knees, towering high above his newlywed husband with his hand to his heart.

“I know this isn’t the start of a grand romance,” Eliot promised, voice full of passion and goodwill. He gazed at the open and tilted face below him, drinking in the splendor of his fucked up life. “That’s not even what I want.”

Quentin leaned back on his arms, eyes crinkled in his curious grin. “What do you want?”
“That’s a loaded question,” Eliot said brightly and Quentin popped his eyes to the ceiling, like, fair enough. “In terms of us, though, respect would be nice. Friendship even. Fucking, definitely. If you’re interested.”

“I’m interested,” Quentin said, levering himself back up. “For Fillory and for—” his eyes dropped to Eliot’s lips with a swallow “—um, other reasons.”

Heat spread through Eliot’s body. He gave into the temptation of a soft strand of hair, hung loose along a sharp jawline, tucking it back.

“Where do you want to start?” Eliot let his fingers dip over to wrap across the nape of his neck. Quentin’s eyes fell closed. Yes. “I know there’s a time constraint.”

“Yeah, uh, before dawn. So, like, an hour or so,” Quentin said, staccato breaths puncturing his words. He wrapped his hand around Eliot’s tie, stroking the fabric. “As for where we start, well, um—”

Quentin kissed him.

It was an artless little thing. A brush of quick lips, pressed at the corner of the mouth. It was shy, like a question. And as fast as he moved forward, Quentin pulled away, doleful eyes on his. Electricity charged up and down Eliot’s arms, and he thought, Oh, yes as his easy answer.

He cupped Quentin’s cheek and gripped his neck to pull him closer, kissing him like he meant it. Eliot sunk into him with closed eyes, pretending for a minute that Quentin was a cute first year, holed up with him at the Cottage, pliant and fey and sweet for the taking. All he wanted was to touch, desperate for hands on skin, the heat of his pretty mouth.

Eliot lapped his tongue against his, light and teasing before he pushed him down onto the pillows. He nipped at Quentin’s lower lip, trailing his hands down. Palming at his ribs, sliding his fingers around the divots in his hips, and grazing back up under his shirt, through the downy hair on his chest.

Under him, Quentin’s hair was mussed and wild over blown pupils, breathing hard and fast in pulsating bursts. He surged up at Eliot, clacking teeth and tugging on his curls with a zing of want. He gave as good as he got, kissing them both breathless.

Dizzy and needing more, Eliot loosened his tie, did away with his vest. With quick hands between them, they undressed each other, rasping their breaths between tilting kisses. Before they had time to second guess it, they were naked and wrapped around each other. Their panting movements grew frantic as they licked and bit and groped at each other, rhythmless and heated. Quentin was gorgeous in the low light, nothing but golden lines of soft muscle and tufts of hair. He was masculine and wiry and solid, every inch beautiful and dreamlike.

Pressing him into the mattress, Eliot kissed him deep and dirty, like he would if he had him at the Cottage, growling his approval into his lips. They were both hard, aching hard, and their cocks rutted together clumsily, each slide of friction a spark to the gut. Eliot breathed along Quentin’s mouth, stuttering his hips at the feeling, chasing it with all the pent up frustration in his goddamn soul. But no matter what, no matter how long it had been, no matter how much he wanted the warm body underneath him—

—Eliot Waugh was never clumsy.

Tutting low around a single hand until it was oil slick—because even in his Official Non-Virgin
state, there was no way this kid had lube on hand—Eliot wrapped his fingers around the girth of Quentin’s cock, quickly finding a rhythm that made him rock his head back and gasp. Eliot licked a filthy kiss to his mouth, his mastery crossing the multiverse.

Quentin kissed him back like a starving man, moaning shamelessly, and tangling his fingers into his hair. Eliot wanted to make him come like that, before he got his own cock in that perfect mouth. It was late, or early, and it had been a long day. Hot and simple and easy and fast sounded wonderful, with a biting promise for more soon. Maybe in the morning.

( And the next morning, and the next morning, and the next morning, and the next, and the next, and the —)

Eliot broke through the water to gasp for air, heart seizing.

He pulled away from Quentin abruptly. Panic clawed at him, pulse battering at his skin. He skittered his hands around the bed, seeking the solid ground, seeking the earth. But he found neither.

Slowly, Quentin sat up across from him, eyes cautious and gentle. But Eliot’s blood churned, propelling him to flee.

“Your— Eliot ,” Quentin said. His fingers touched his jaw, featherlight. “Eliot, are you okay?”

He didn’t know how to answer that.

It had been a long year.

And devastatingly, dichotomous to his desire to run, Quentin looked like he was good at listening. Like Eliot could curl into his chest and spill his guts, like he could murmur harrowing truths into the warmth of his skin without fear of judgment. Like Quentin could comfort him. Care for him, even, with those strong hands and soft eyes and beautiful mind. Eliot had never had that in his life, not from a lover, at least. He’d forgotten how much he once wanted it.

But holy shit, that was way too much to put on a stranger.

Especially a stranger who had to be with him, who had to do this, for his homeland, for the whim of his actual literal gods. Eliot was a selfish asshole, bar none. But even he had limits.

Tighten your shit, Waugh , a brassy voice rang clear. Slap it around ’til it knows who’s boss .

Eliot had a mission.

He was the High King of an entire land. He was working to complete a mysterious ritual that protected everyone he gave a shit about and all the rest too. He was working toward a bigger future, with purpose, whatever the hell that was. He didn’t have time for sentimental horseshit. Feelings could blow him. They could get kicked in their spineless teeth.

They could bow to his majesty.

So he purred, rolling his hips over Quentin with a grin. “I’m great, baby. Trying to work out our timing and logistics, that’s all.”

That satisfied Quentin, who nodded with bright eyes. “Yeah, uh, yeah, good idea. Like I said, we need to set it before dawn or… well, we have to do the wedding over again until we get it right, like Groundhog Day .”
Eliot laughed, a true sound that happily rattled his ribs, before burying his lips in the column of his husband’s throat. “We’ll discuss your time traveling later—”

“That’s not really the Occam’s Razor here.”

—but first tell me about the binding spell?” Eliot murmured, brushing his lips against the grain of Quentin’s stubble. Down his cheek, to his throat. His warm fingers dug into his hips, but otherwise he stayed still—too still—allowing the lines of their bodies to touch, to heat.

“Um, yeah. Yeah, uh, one of has to—” Quentin swallowed, and Eliot kissed the movement, a hand traveling up to splay across his chest. With a delirious gasp, Quentin hiked his leg up, grinding them together. Pleasure thrilled down his spine.

“One of us has to, what?” Eliot asked, through a moan. His lips quirked up, with not a little hint of smugness. “Tell me.”

“One of us has to fuck the other,” Quentin panted, lifting his face to chase his lips. Eliot pulled back with a teasing smile. It only grew at the bratty, put-upon glare he got in return.

“Hmm,” Eliot considered, nosing at the hollow of his throat. “Meaning?”

Quentin sputtered, high-pitched. “Seriously?”

Yes, seriously.

“Spells are complicated beasts,” Eliot said, biting a line across Quentin’s collarbone as he began stroking him again, slowly and deliberately. “Misinterpretations happen all the time, to disastrous results. Better to be certain.”

“Um, okay,” Quentin nodded, eyes fluttering shut over an open and blissful mouth. “Yeah, that makes—”

“So for instance,” Eliot growled, pinning one of Quentin’s arms up over his head. “Would it be enough if I took you in my mouth and sucked you until you screamed?”

Diving down, he mouthed at Quentin’s pulse, thumping hot under his tongue and teeth. His skin was sweet and soft, and Eliot felt drunk with it, drunk with warmth and the promise of release. It had been so goddamn long and Quentin was so goddamn lovely.

Quentin let out a frantic laugh, his hips bucking up once into his stroking.

“No, uh, for the spell,” he forced the words out, arching his back and licking his lips, “we have to—you know.”

Eliot pulled him into a deep kiss, because he wanted to, because he could. Dragging his teeth along a pouty lower lip, he murmured, “We have to—what, Quentin?”

Something snapped and Quentin pushed up on his palms, glaring in frustration. “One of us has to put his dick in the other’s ass. Are you happy now?”

“Ecstatic,” Eliot breathed into his ear.

Then he crashed their lips together, tangling both hands in his soft hair—oil be damned—swallowing moans and gasps as he pressed their bodies together until he was crazed with the feel of Quentin. His husband, his husband, his husband. The candle snuffed out and only the red-
orange glow from the hearth gave any light, enchanting the room with an otherworldly flicker.

They had limited time. But all Eliot could give a shit about was the scent of silky hair, the slick of sweat, the heat between them. Quentin trailed his lips across his chin, his neck, inelegant and perfect. His hands gripped Eliot’s shoulders, legs wrapping tight like he wanted this too, like he needed this too.

Burying his face in the crook of his warm neck, Eliot’s cheek pressed to the thump-thump-thump of his racing pulse. “What do you want?”

“Whatever you desire,” Quentin whispered into the dark, “Your Majes—“

Eliot gripped Quentin’s wrists and pushed them over his head, into the pillow. He loomed down, glaring as gently as he could, serious and electric.

“No. Not that. Not here,” he said, pouring his meaning into his husband’s giant pupils. “I am asking what would make you feel good, Quentin. Man to man.”

With another blink of surprise, Quentin’s eyebrows searched for their place. Then he swallowed with a tiny nod. “I want you to fuck me.”

Eliot’s stomach lurched. “You’re not just saying that?”

“No, uh, I—I like it,” Quentin licked his lips, cheeks dappling obvious red even in the hushed light. He averted his eyes. “I like being, you know, filled.”

Motherfucking holy motherfuck. Eliot’s heart shocked to life, speeding to a gallop. He let out a bursting laugh, wrapping his arms around Quentin and rocking into him, their cocks sliding together with a lightning crackle of heat.

“Oh, Jesus Christ,” Eliot gasped out, kissing Quentin hungrily through a smile. “Did they make you in a factory?”

Quentin smirked up at him, pressing a soft kiss to his lips with a twinkle in his eyes. “What’s a factory?”

“Mmm, somehow, I think you already know,” Eliot accused, running his tongue across his teeth and snapping a kiss down with a hot moan. He nosed at Quentin’s jaw, bursting from the inside out. “Further on your back.”

Quentin slid down onto the lumpy mattress, the grooves filled with hay. His eyes locked on Eliot’s, dark and catching the low light, framed by the crown of his tangled hair. The willowy curves and taut lines of his sharp body narrowed to the point of his stiff pink cock, gorgeous and aching before him. It took all of Eliot’s considerable strength not to devour it whole, to wrap his mouth around his length and lick his way up to the pretty head until he begged for mercy.

But right now, Eliot had a mission.

“I’m gonna do a spell, okay?” He dipped his fingers low, along the tight warmth of Quentin with a hitching breath. He chuckled. “Trust me when I say that normally, I would want to take my time on you. But I don’t want to tempt the clock.”

“No, it’s good,” Quentin half-gasped. He lifted his hips and slid his firm hands up Eliot’s arms. “Cuts all the tedious bullshit.”
Eliot bit his lip, cupping the soft flesh of Quentin’s ass in his hands. No matter what the future brought, he knew without a single doubt that the two of them were going to have a lot of goddamn fun together.

“Oh, honey,” Eliot laughed, tracing his nose in a line down his throat, scraping his teeth back up. “If you think that part’s tedious, then someone has been doing it very, very wrong.”

Before Quentin could respond—because Eliot wasn’t actually there for some halfhearted defense of the unworthy pioneers—he moved his hands in a tut and leaned down to kiss him, murmuring Brace yourself into his lips. He sealed off his hand motion with an outward jolt of his fingers and Quentin sucked in an endless breath, pitching his body upward and trembling.

“Oh my gods,” he managed, high-pitched and wobbly. He gripped tight at Eliot’s forearms, squirming. “That is—uh, wow, that is—”

“A little weird, I know,” Eliot said soothingly, lightly trailing his fingers up and down Quentin’s body. “You need a minute?”

But Quentin was a trooper, shaking his head firmly. “No, I’m good. I’m—I’m good. We should probably, uh, you know, get on with it.”

“Sweet talker,” Eliot said with another laugh, sliding his tongue slowly into Quentin’s soft and inviting mouth. He gripped his bony hips, lining himself up with a tremor from his soul. “Okay then, let’s make a royal consort out of you.”

Quentin squeezed his eyes shut, his chest rising and falling quickly. “Gods.”

Sliding his hand over his dick, Eliot murmured a spell until it was slick and ready, so fucking ready, after so fucking long.

But first, as always—

Logistics.

“Condom?” Eliot asked softly, brushing back the hair from Quentin’s face. He wasn’t totally sure if he would know what he meant. But Quentin surprised him, or maybe didn’t, when he shook his head.

“No, uh, we can’t,” Quentin said, tongue darting out to wet his lips. “But not a concern here anyway. Long story.”

Eliot felt his cock twitch with a vibrating salute to this beautiful land.

Heady with anticipation and not able to stand it a moment long, Eliot shakily nodded and pressed forward, gasping with how easily Quentin took him. His husband was supple and tight, hot and ready, and fucking shaking into the mattress. My life is perfect, he thought, wild and giddy as he sunk deeper and deeper into Quentin, the tight hot heat of him transcendental, unearthly, in every sense of the word. And Quentin—gorgeous Quentin, his gorgeous husband, the weirdest and wildest thing that had ever happened to him—keened a loud groan, arching his back and panting.

Despite the urgency of the spell, Eliot wanted to make it last. He wanted to push slowly into him until he was moaning like an animal, desperate and threadbare.

But he had a mission.
They had a mission, something bigger than this, something more important. So Eliot surged in, mindless, bottoming out into his husband’s tight ass, stuttering to a stop with a gut punch. Quentin felt good. He felt so goddamn good, like he was made for him, made to be fucked and fucked by Eliot and Eliot alone.

But they had a mission, and so Eliot moved.

He gripped at Quentin’s muscular thigh, pulling him up into an impossibly tighter angle, his blood thumping in his ears, his skin on fire. Working into a steady rhythm, Eliot fucked him, buried to the hilt and back again. And Quentin rocked into him and cried out, mouth slack open and eyes squeezed shut. His heels dug into the back of Eliot’s thighs, beckoning him as close and deep as he could get, as was possible and more.

Eliot chased release, fucking him hard and frantic with his hands braced over the gorgeous face he was going to see every day for the rest of his life. Thrusting faster, a strangled groan slipped its way out his mouth, blissful and overwhelming until Eliot could barely breathe around it, barely breathe around the bliss of Quentin, his husband, his husband, the man who would make him a king.

“Oh my gods, oh my gods,” Quentin babbled out meaninglessly, grinding his hips up to meet Eliot, his eyes flying open wide. “You are—oh my gods, feels so good, oh my gods—”

“Yeah, baby,” Eliot agreed, giving zero shits about the unintentional pet name slip. His mouth melted into a wobbling, imperfect smile as he thrust and thrust. “You’re so good. Tell me when you’re—tell me when you’re close, okay?”

But just as Quentin nodded, eyes shining, just as he slid his hands down the sweat slick curve of Eliot’s back, pulling him tighter and closer, fuck—

His veins lit up.

With a jump of his heart in his rib cage, Eliot stared down at Quentin, mouth dry. Without warning, without reason, his heart split into a thousand shredding pieces, arms trembling with a sacred, bone-deep need. Quentin gazed back up at him, big eyes endless and pained, long lashes wet and black, skin flushed bright red. He was so beautiful, longing and desperate, like Eliot was an ocean away instead of buried inside him.

Oh, no.

Oh, fuck.

Eliot stuttered a thrust into him, trying to remember the goal, their purpose together. But he sobbed with the rush of sensation, with the unspooling of heat and bliss and something broken, something long buried and tender to the touch. He almost collapsed on top of his husband (his husband, his husband, had there ever been a more gorgeous word?) and almost promised things he had never thought, never given to the light, never wanted until that very moment, with Quentin and Quentin alone.

“What the fuck?” Eliot gasped. He pushed himself back into Quentin, lightheaded and delirious. “Oh, what the fuck?”

“The binding spell,” Quentin breathed out, lower lip trembling. Eliot nipped it into his teeth and sucked, out of control. “It’s just—it’s just the binding spell. It’ll be over when we—when we—”

Eliot’s eyes fell closed. Thank god. He wasn’t losing his goddamn mind.
“Copy that,” he groaned, thrusting in and out, halting and slow. He breathed in through his nose, out through his mouth. “Jesus, they could’ve warned us.”

But Quentin didn’t say anything more. He placed his hands on Eliot’s face, cupping his jaw and kissing him, slow and gentle. His tongue slid in and out of his mouth, curling and fucking in time with the rocking of their hips. Helpless, Eliot sunk into him, surrendering as they moved together in the heavy silence, capturing gasping breaths with their mouths and hands. There was nothing else in the universe, nothing else that had ever mattered, except how they fit together.

“Eliot,” Quentin moaned, exposing the long line of his neck. Oh, Eliot was gone at the sound of his name from his lips. “I’m—Eliot, I’m close. I’m gonna—”

“Come, baby, please,” Eliot begged, needing this to end. Needing it to last. Needing, needing, needing. “Come, Quentin. You’re so good, so perfect, been so good for me. Gorgeous boy.”

He fisted Quentin’s cock in his hand, taking shuddering breaths against his husband’s open mouth. His husband. And Quentin sobbed as Eliot frantically jerked him off, all while fucking him and fucking him until there was nothing left, nothing but a glowing heart and a firelit wave of pleasure coursing between them. He bit at the crook of Quentin’s shoulder and tightened his grip with a graceless flourish. Then Quentin was coming, hard and hot against his stomach, babbling sweet nothings and moaning into Eliot’s ear.

Eliot trembled as he fucked him through it, the lines of his body tense, orgasm roaring up from the pit of his stomach. It crested over the magic in the room with a tremor of the whole fucking new world. Until finally, finally, his cock spurted inside Quentin, pulsing without end. His wobbly arms gave loose and he collapsed on him.

Eliot wrapped his arms all around Quentin, kissing his mouth with hunger and desperation and something indefinable, something terrifying, as he stuttered still, lost in his husband (his husband) across and over the edge of Fillory itself. They both said their names—oh, Eliot, oh, Quentin—on a loop, as they came down, clinging to each other.

Then it was done.

The air grew chilled, raising gooseflesh and coiling dread in the pit of his stomach. Eliot blinked, raising himself back up on his arms. Quentin sunk down into the pillow, giant eyes frozen and startled. Every pin on Earth dropped. It was an echoing sound across the vast distance.

Eliot and Quentin—two strangers—stared at each other, mouths moving in failed grasps at words.

“Um,” Eliot finally said with a swallow. He was still inside Quentin. “So did it—was that it?”

“I mean, I think so,” Quentin said, voice flat and quiet. “But I don’t know for sure. I don’t—do you feel different?”

Eliot gave Quentin a tight smile, not sure what to say. Raking a shaky hand through his curls, he pulled out, hissing at the oversensitive loss of contact. He flopped onto his back, a cavern of inches between them. Along with quite a bit of a mess.

Back to reality.

Sitting up, Quentin raised his hands, curving his fingers in almost familiar twists and knots. Eliot watched him out of the corner of his eye, another flare of genuine curiosity sparking its way up over the screaming what the holy goddamn fuck was that? under his fragile skin. Because it almost looked like he was about to—
Quentin startled, catching himself. He slammed his hands back onto his stomach and swallowed, darting his eyes. Eliot blinked, new pieces to a new riddle falling in place.

“So, uh, I have a water basin in the corner,” Quentin said with a nod to a white ceramic tub atop a small stool. “Some towels too. If you want, I can heat the water over the—”

“No,” he said quietly. Then he laughed, a sardonic and inward sound. “I mean, uh, not like you.”

“Show me,” Eliot said, pushing down the blanket further with his feet. He tilted his head. “Show me what you were going to do.”

Quentin opened his mouth like he was about to protest, but then he closed it. He grimaced, cracking his knuckles against the heel of his palm.

“Yeah, uh, okay,” he said, voice a small tremble as he blinked his eyes as far away from Eliot’s steady gaze as he could. “But I’m not—like, I’m not trained.”

Eliot nodded, even though Quentin couldn’t see him. Then he waited.

Two strong hands raised in the air, shaking with concentration. Quentin crossed his middle fingers over his index fingers, then drew them back toward his palm. Stretching both pinkies, he twirled them twice in the air—a move Eliot had never seen before—and then clapped his hands together, lacing all of his fingers in a heavy tangle of flesh.

It was an unpolished and blundering tut.

—It worked.

After a slow but sure drip of molasses magic, their bodies and the bed were clean. It took a moment for everything to seep away, but when the spell was over, it was as though the two of them had never fucked each other mindless and with unnerving tenderness at all. Eliot clicked his tongue against his teeth, pulling up his knees and resting his forearms there, as he leaned forward to get a better look at Quentin.

Quentin let out a sharp exhale, like he wasn’t sure what to expect from his own spell. He swallowed and nodded, meeting Eliot’s eyes with a little lift of his hand like, that’s all, folks. Eliot grinned at him, searching.

“That was good,” he said, truthfully. But he reached over and took Quentin’s hand in his. “Only thing I’d say is that you want to keep your wrists steady, no matter what you’re doing. If you can’t,
the spell is probably too powerful for you.”

Quentin frowned. “Isn’t it good to push yourself?”

“No,” Eliot said, clipped. But he didn’t feel like talking about Niffins right now, so he offered something more useful. “I could teach you a simpler version, if you’d like. It’ll drain you less.”

The fiery hunger in Quentin’s eyes nearly blasted him through the wall. “Uh, yeah, I mean, if you don’t mind. That would be—that would be good.”

Eliot smiled and did the only thing he could do at that point, for his little magic-happy stranger-husband. He spat on the bed.

The tiny puddle of saliva sat between them, glistening in the diffused light. Quentin snorted, eyes sliding over with a question. Smirking, Eliot wordlessly held his hands out flat, rings up. He pressed his right fingers over the left, and brought the bird wings down at a severe angle. When he brought his hands back up, the spittle disappeared in a blink. Gasping in earnest, Quentin raced his hand down to where it had been, face broken open with a heart-tugging wonder.

“Holy shit,” Quentin said, stretching his fingers along the dry sheet. His voice was hushed, as if he were treading sacred ground. “I’ve never—I’ve never seen that up close before. I’ve never—I’ve never seen it period. That was amazing.”

Eliot warmed with the praise and shrugged, smile quirking against his will. “More where that came from.”

Quentin shook his head, plucking Eliot’s wrist between his fingers. The light touch burned. “The way your hands move. Is that—can all Magicians do that?”

Eliot’s throat was dry, pulse thumping. “Casting is an individual thing. It manifests differently for everyone. Changes the magic too, with variables we can’t quantify.”

Quentin looked right through him.

“So that was just,” he let out a breath, careful eyes meeting his with more intensity than Eliot knew what to do with, “... you?”

_Get the fuck out of here right now_, a steely shudder from his chest commanded. Eliot forced a smile and sucked in a breath.

“Apparently,” he said, mortified at his whisper-soft tone. And Quentin kept drowning him dry, a nameless and penetrating glint in his beautiful eyes as he just—kept staring, like Eliot was a marvel, like he was magic itself.

Enough was enough.

Getting drunk off sex magic was all well and good, until somebody lost their mind and their good sense. This was an arrangement. This was a handshake deal. Muddying the waters helped no one and nothing, least of all their mission.

“Anyway, Quentin,” Eliot said brightly, clearing his throat and clapping a hand on his knee. Quentin jolted, dropping his wrist. “This was a very fun start to our political endeavors, as I’m sure you’d agree.”

“Uh,” Quentin frowned, clearly taken aback. He shook his head too. “Uh, yeah, I mean, it sure was
Eliot stood up and reached along the floor, gathering his clothes with a frown. “Ugh, wrinkled. I’ll show you the tut to smooth them out later, if you’d like.”

Before Quentin could eagerly agree—because of course he was going to eagerly agree—Eliot threw him a roguish grin over his shoulder, slipping on his trousers. “Well, if we didn’t fulfill the terms of the bargain, I hope I have some say in the planning of our second wedding. I have several notes.”

“Take it up with Fen,” Quentin said, smile ticking up rotely. The name sounded familiar. “But, uh, we should be good. I can’t imagine we’re not.”

An uncomfortable tremor shook Eliot’s blood at that—fuck, good, so good—and he buttoned up his shirt with a forced chuckle, trying to sound carefree over its jagged pitch. He watched as Quentin pulled the sheets over his lower half, tucked his hair behind his ears.

He was incandescently lovely.

Eliot grinned with a wink, throwing on his vest and winding his tie around his neck. “Well, I’m certain down for round two, if we must. You know, for Fillory.”

Quentin frowned at that, and Eliot swallowed a bitter taste down his throat until it burned in his belly. He was an asshole. But better his husband knew it now. No one liked a blindside.

“Yeah,” Quentin said, scratching his brow. He glared off to the side. “Yeah, um, definitely. That would be fun.”

He said the word like it didn’t belong anywhere near his tongue. Eliot sighed.

Okay, fine. This wasn’t a one night thing. It wasn’t a simple thing. But it definitely was a power imbalanced thing, so a deft touch was required.

Eliot walked back over to the bed and sat next to Quentin, with a gentle smile.

“I had a nice time,” he said softly, ducking his eyes to capture the more guarded ones. His stomach churned at the eye contact but he swallowed, pressing on. “I can’t adequately express my appreciation for you doing this, even though it’s fucking weird.”

“No problem,” Quentin mumbled and Eliot’s stomach clenched.

“I hope we can—I hope we can make this work, Quentin,” he said softly, ignoring a scream from the back of his heart, one that he had become well adept at ignoring. “In the best way for us both. Partners, right?”

He held out his hand again, a proffer to shake. Quentin stared at his outstretched hand hard, like it contained a secret code that he could intuit if he just tried hard enough. Like Quentin could will himself to know the mysteries of the multiverse, each one trapped in the dark lines between Eliot’s fingers.

Whatever he found must have appeased him, because he nodded. He gripped Eliot’s hand, sending a shock of warmth up the length of his entire arm.

“Partners,” Quentin said quietly, frown lines still deep over his tentative smile. “Come what may.”
“Come what may,” Eliot repeated, the flutter in his chest acting up again. It was a bastard like that.

Letting go of his husband’s warm hand with herculean effort, Eliot cleared his throat and stared out the softly brightening window. The landscape was a swath of air-thin blues and pastel yellows, deep pinks and a haze of sea green over the long white beach ahead.

“So tomorrow,” Eliot started to say, before chuckling a groan. “Or, well, fuck, today—today, we go to the coronation place, right?”

Quentin nodded, looking a little dazed. He pulled his fingers through his knotted hair. “Uh, yeah. Across the Rainbow Bridge to the Knight of Crowns, who will administer the final test. The court will be waiting for you there, and you’ll choose your fellow monarchs.”

Shit. He only had three options now. Probably two, because who the fuck knew if Penny would stick around. But Eliot would deal with that later. One step at a time.

“How long journey?” Eliot asked, calling over his shoes and slipping them on in a near single movement. He smiled at the astonished awe that crossed Quentin’s face at the simple act of telekinesis. He really was sweet.

“My father will provide a boat,” Quentin said, breathless. “Couple of hours flying through the mountain passes. But there will be beds, so you can rest a bit, at least.”

Eliot wasn’t going to get a damn wink of sleep on any goddamn boat, especially one hurtling through the air at an unnatural velocity. But he wasn’t about to look like an ingrate, so he smiled and nodded.

“That’s good,” Eliot said, finishing lacing his shoes and standing to his full height. He turned and offered a small bow to Quentin, keeping his face placid. “On that note, I’m going to go check on my merry band of misfits. I hope you can sleep a little before we head out.”

Something sharp burned at the bottom of his gut, something hollow burrowed into his chest. A not insignificant part of him wanted to curl back into the bed and press his chest to Quentin’s back for the next couple of hours. But instead he smiled, keeping his eyes on Quentin with a hopefully gentle warmth and above all, camaraderie. They were in this together. It was the long-haul. They had to keep focused.

(Eliot had to keep focused.)

Quentin smiled, maybe a little sadly. But also maybe Eliot was projecting, because then he casually flopped back against his pillow and waved.

“Hope you can too, eventually,” Quentin said, brows raising. “Not much sleep at Whitespire, they say.”

“Well, changing that will be my first act as High King,” Eliot promised with a laugh. After, you know, the whole fish and ice cream thing. Details. “Sleep hygiene keeps your skin clear and your sex drive vigorous.”

“I’m an insomniac,” Quentin said with a shrug. He played with the edge of his quilt, captivating fingers anxious and unsettled. “So I guess I’m fucked either way.”

And how.

Eliot inhaled, sharp and catching. Clapping his hands together once, he refocused onto his next
task, his next step, and smiled warmly at Quentin, ready to bid him adieu for the moment.

“Thank you for everything,” he said, inclining his head once. Quentin returned the gesture, with falling brows. “Truly, I mean it, I can’t tell you how much I appreciate—”

“No, don’t fucking say that,” Quentin said, with a breathy jolt of his shoulders. He bit the inside of his cheek and closed his eyes, letting his chin fall to his chest. “Um, all I mean is that—that it’s my duty, as much as you don’t want me to call it that.”

Eliot really didn’t want him to call it that. But it was a good reminder.

With a shallow sigh, Eliot strode across the unfamiliar room on falsely confident legs, staring straight ahead like he wasn’t shaking a little. He reached the window and pushed it open, the cool and salty sea breeze wafting over his fevered cheeks. It was a balm, a relief. The air in Fillory was so, so sweet. It felt like freedom, despite his newfound gilded cage.

Turning around one last time, Eliot met Quentin’s beautiful eyes and saluted once from his brow.

“Until we meet again,” he said, letting the wind carry his voice.

Quentin nodded at him, unreadable in the glow of morning light. But there was kinship there now, Eliot thought. He hoped.

And so, with a new day dawning bright before him, Eliot hopped out the window and walked down the stairs.

tbc.
Wannabe

Chapter Summary

"I won't be hasty / I'll give you a try"

Chapter Notes

Hey, just another shout out to my amazing beta Rizandace, especially on this lengthier guy. <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

One Month Later

*

Castle Whitespire
Southernhaven Province, Fillory

*

A Monday of Middling Autumntime
Year Fortyember

*

Wednesday, January 18, 2017

Quentin was bored.

… This was a good thing.

Not unexpectedly, the first few weeks at Whitespire had been something of an adjustment. And historically speaking, Quentin was not great at adjustments.

You know, to say the least.
He had always known that about himself, even in his youngest youth. He’d always felt abject terror at small changes, sinking into a mire of his own mind every time a boat left the Cove for the last time or when Fen made friends with someone he didn’t know. But Quentin hadn’t really learned the hard truth of his frailty until the first day he stepped on Earth.

At first, he had been so excited to go through the portal. His hands shook and his eyes moved in circles to take in the splendor of small town New Hampshire, a brick-and-gazebo’d wonderland. He had chattered nonstop to Ess, who—at the time, at least—humored him and even joined in, both trading their well researched factoids (“That’s called a street lamp! My mother says it runs on electricity.” “Well, that’s called a telephone wire. It sends information directly to the President.” “What’s a President?” “Uh, like a king, I think?”) It had all been so new and shiny. Finally, a real adventure.

It was only that night, moved into his dorm room and submerged fully into the dark that Quentin became aware of himself. How he was laid flat on a spinning round planet, all alone. The heavier the new world weighed on him, the more he grew woozy from the unfelt movements, heartbeat unsteady and limbs trembling in sweat. Unable to find his breath, Quentin had violently coughed and wheezed in his bed, much to the annoyance of his roommate, Christopher-Michael Emmington III, who threatened to call his father.

It was the worst panic attack of his life. As a few astute people in his life had predicted, Quentin had wanted to turn right back around, tail between his legs. But the portal was closed, the time magic sealed. He was stuck on Earth, for at least one year. So for the following three months, he had been a slog of numbness.

Until he wasn’t anymore.

…Until returning home became the difficult undertaking.

But that wasn't relevant anymore. The point was, now, in the present, it had been barely more than four weeks and Quentin was already walking down the halls of his new home, bathed and dressed for the day, and itching for something to do. It just went to show that even old dogs could come a long way, baby. Or whatever that Earth phrase was. It didn’t all stick.

It wasn’t that the intrigues of courtly living weren’t interesting to him. Some of them were, at least in an academic way. But there was nothing yet that grabbed Quentin’s attention, nothing that made him want to sink in and work. Not even for Fillory’s sake. He knew himself well enough to recognize his apathy was the beginning of a churning whirlpool of cold and dangerous waters.

At least, it should have been.

But it was different this time, in a way it had never been different before. There was something that —

Because as much as he would never—

Like, look, Quentin did his own work, okay?

He was the one who had learned how to kick his own depression’s ass through a series of structural coping methods, from Earth therapists to escapist reading to more trial-and-error than anyone his age ever should have had to go through. Blood, sweat, and tears, in every literal and visceral sense of the cliche.

It was an internal process that could never be solved by external forces, no matter how warm or
charming or attractive those forces were, or how much pulling out those forces’ extraordinarily beautiful smile made Quentin feel like he had scaled an arduous peak and would thusly be showered in untold riches. It wasn’t that simple and fuck anyone who ever tried to make it seem that godsdamned simple.

But, uh, that being said—

Having Eliot around helped.

As it turned out, unlike Quentin on his best day, the High King was quick, efficient, effortless. Eliot owned the castle from the moment they stepped into the throne room for the first time, when his strong nose curled with a mutter of Well, this knock off Game of Thrones-meets-high vamp ornamentation won’t do now, will it? and got down to work without so much as a further sniff.

Since then, Eliot bandied about orders for rearranged furniture and silks from the Floating Mountain, and he sent servants to arrange his wardrobe by season, style, and spirit, whatever that meant. His bursts of laughter echoed across the stone as he wined dignitaries and dined diplomats. The sharpness of his speech was only outmatched by the precision of his expectations, which culminated when he led a seminar on how to properly make a latte, from the ground coffee beans the begrudgingly crowned King Penny brought back from his brief supply-gathering travels to Earth (“This is barely a cappuccino,” High King Eliot had said with a sigh, shaking his head at a dejected young cook. “I know you can do better.”)

All the while, Eliot kept Quentin by his side.

He asked Quentin clarifying questions throughout the day (“What the actual fuck is a spunk goblin?”) He forced Quentin to give an opinion on his every outfit (“It looks nice.” “In all your reading, have you never come across a thesaurus?”) He talked aloud to Quentin about the various grievances he had with the castle and its inhabitants, usually monologuing more than conversing (“That dickhead looked at me in askance, I’m telling you.”) He even coaxed Quentin into being his test subject for his, er, attempts at cultivating a champagne-like drink (“Um, technically, I don’t think you can call it—” “Jesus, I know, Quentin.”)

The days moved as quick as Eliot’s wit and Quentin was along for the ride. He had never before been taken in by such a vibrant distraction and it was surprisingly… nice.

But the nights were still hard.

Of course, Quentin had beautiful quarters, with vaulted ceilings and a long private corridor. The stonework was cut into trellises for hanging moss, the arabesque patterns shining moonlit patterns like a galaxy all his own. His bedsheets were warm, and Eliot had commissioned magically fit bookshelves that held more tomes than Quentin ever could have imagined in his life. He should have been grateful. Hell, things were so much better than he could have ever dreamed, so he should even have been happy, in a manner of speaking. But surprise, surprise—he wasn’t.

Still, Quentin had also learned long ago that exactly no one liked frowny foot faces full of fucking self-pity. So now, presently, he tightened everything to a knot in the center of his chest and kept moving through the hallway, off to the Armory for the fourth time in a single day. He figured bettering his mind was always a good use of time, even if he wasn’t necessarily seeking any particular or relevant knowledge. But just as he was about to head up the winding steps, a familiar voice resonated through the hallway.

High King Eliot stood tall in the center of a small group of blue-clad servants, attendants in red, and a smaller amount of yellow, the color of noble-ranked advisors. The king himself hadn’t done
his afternoon outfit change yet, so he was still in a velvet black jumpsuit with golden embroidery, atop a white silk shirt. It had taken him forty-five minutes to put the combination together under the hawk eye of High Queen Margo the Destroyer, while Quentin waited in the sitting room and twiddled his thumbs. It had paid off, of course, like it always did. He looked really nice.

“Is there anything better than a quill?” Eliot asked Marjenna, an attendant, as he brandished one about. “Once you know how to use them, they’re maestoso, no?”

Marjenna nodded because there was no other way she could respond. To her, it was the same as someone saying to Eliot, Wow, number two pencils are amazing, huh? But where any answering sarcasm was punishable by certain death, via The Bed of a Thousand Spikes.

“Your Grace,” an unfamiliar man said, over a practiced bow. He wore a messenger’s pin on his lapel. “I do need to catch your ear about the incident in the Lower Slosh.”

“The—what?” Eliot narrowed his eyes and looked behind his shoulder with a frown. “Shit, where’s Quentin?”

Quentin rolled his eyes, while trying not to smile. That was his cue.

Eliot always acted like Quentin was the only possible person he could ask about Fillory, despite the many other Fillorians around him most of the day. That probably irritated them, but it made Quentin feel—whatever. Didn’t matter.

Either way, as he walked forward, the messenger proved himself more assertive than his usual ilk, recapturing Eliot’s attention before Quentin could.

“They thought it was a way to grow plums inside. Quentin didn’t need to know that for certain to know it was true.

“Christ, really?” Eliot sighed, holding the white plume of the quill to his forehead. “Yeah, I remember that. Okay, well, fine, I’ll send a collection of some of the strongest soldiers to clean up the, ah, excrement. Posthaste.”

Eliot really liked to say posthaste.

It was funny, in a charming way. Almost cute, if the word ‘cute’ could ever be applied to someone as grand as High King Eliot. Quentin licked his lips to smooth away a smile, heart picking up in his chest like a bastard. He had to stay on task.

Because more importantly, Eliot was wrong about how to handle the Slosh shit problem.

At least, it was the wrong way to solve it, if he didn’t want to be exactly like all the worst fucking despots Fillory had ever had. According to Eliot, he didn’t. So Quentin would return that promise with actionable faith, even if it might piss the king off at first. A little bit.

As Quentin moved even closer to the group, the messenger predictably tried to keep his panicked voice steady. “Your Majesty, while we appreciate your great munificence—”

“Ah, Quentin,” Eliot said as their eyes met, cutting the messenger off by reaching his long arm out and beckoning him forward. “There you are. Come here, I need you.”
The eyes of the court were on them now, unlike their usual private discussions. A certain amount of traditional decorum would be expected, awful as it was. He just hoped Eliot would be able to roll with it.

Summoning up his inner Fen (shit, who he owed a letter), Quentin smiled bright, with all his teeth. Immediately, Eliot lifted his brows.

Which, yeah, fair. It was definitely a different approach than usual, and it was about to get weirder.

“My king,” Quentin said with a low bend from the waist. “It is—it’s wonderful to see you, Your Grace.”

“Dear husband,” Eliot said, smooth as silk. “How well rested you seem today.”

… Asshole.

But with the judging eyes of the courtiers on him, Quentin forced a laugh. Taking a quick step forward, he pecked a light kiss on Eliot’s lips, as was expected of a consort. It was faster than a breath, but when he pulled away, the lingering touch burned like a hot stove. Eliot gazed down at him, eyes hooded, and his mouth parted with a question.

Quentin licked his lips, willing away sensation. “My king, I was going to—”

But before he could finish what he was going to say, Eliot ducked back in and kissed him again, full on the mouth. Long fingers cupping his jaw, his husband slowly parted his lips, drawing the two of them as close as possible. Quentin didn’t know if he was floating or falling.

To be safe, he gripped at the fabric of Eliot’s jumpsuit, pushing up from his toes to deepen the kiss without thought. He lost himself in soft lips and grazing teeth, and in the way Eliot held the back of his neck. All of Fillory tapered down to the sound of blood rushing in his ears and the broad expanse of Eliot’s chest under his hands. Buzzy sparks danced across his back when Eliot bit his lower lip, his eyes whited out as their hips locked together, his stomach fell to the floor as—

A scandalized servant squeaked.

Quentin gasped out of the embrace as he came back to himself. Panting, he looked around at the group of stewards and squires, all staring at them with painted smiles. Admittedly, that had… not been conventional protocol. The discomfort in the air was palpable, and Quentin felt the thrilling charge across his skin slow to a crawl. His heart rattled in his chest, haywire and anxious.

“Um,” he said, touching his swollen lips with a swallow.

He glanced back up at Eliot, who was staring down at him with blown pupils, hands still sliding up and down his arms. When their eyes met again, his husband smiled at him, almost hesitant, in an endearing contrast from mere seconds earlier when sucking Quentin’s face off his bones had been the apparent goal.

Quentin shook his head until he saw stars. “Um, that was—uh, we’re just—”

“Still in the honeymoon phase,” Eliot filled in easily, tucking a strand of Quentin’s hair behind his ear. He winked at Rodri, one of the advisors. “I’m sure you all understand.”

They definitely did not.

“Yes, Sire,” they all said in monotone.
It was good enough for Eliot, who smiled wide and pulled Quentin into his side. He nuzzled his nose against his temple, distracting and warm and smelling like smoky amber. Quentin tried in vain to keep his shit together, reminding himself that Eliot was a showman and had simply miscalculated the appropriate response. That was all. It was the only explanation since, well, it was the first time he had shown any—

That is, uh, their marriage bed had been—

It was—

So, okay, to be blunt about it—

Despite being the only people either of them could fuck, the two of them weren’t fucking.

Which... that wasn’t because Quentin didn’t want to. Because, holy shit, gods, Quentin wanted to.

But their first night together had been intense. Really intense. Freaky intense. It was typical binding magic from what he understood, but that didn’t mean it hadn’t shaken him upside down and back again. The fact that Eliot had strode out without a care after had compounded the sensation tenfold, since it obviously hadn't had the same effect on him. Or if it did, it didn't matter enough to him to try to work through it with Quentin, which was... you know, it was fair enough. It wasn’t like he was a jerk for it or anything, Quentin often reminded himself. They were strangers. Strangers who had fucked, for political reasons. In a lot of ways, staying would have been the weirder thing to do.

(He reminded himself, and reminded himself.)

But because Quentin was as pathetic as they came, it had still taken him over a week to look Eliot in the eye. That mostly happened because Eliot forced the issue, by being so obnoxiously at ease with everything, like he really, really wasn’t affected because he really, really wasn’t. But from the first day of their marriage on, Eliot talked to Quentin like Quentin wasn’t being an asocial asshole, like they were having perfectly pleasant conversations where Eliot wasn’t doing all the heavy lifting on his own. It had at once served to make Quentin more comfortable and also to implant his own inadequacy hot and squirming into his gut. There was no way Eliot knew what he was signing up for when he chose Quentin, and no way he wouldn't eventually regret the burden.

To Quentin though, Eliot was just so—so everything. Gorgeous, and distinguished, and clever, and lively, and uninhibited, and regal, and everything Quentin could never be. It should have been aggravating, but somehow it wasn’t. Because it was Eliot.

Eliot, who was whispering in his ear, “Well, that was a fun little performance, darling.”

Which, right.

…Right.

Quentin was good for a fact or a pertinent take on policy, every now and then. He was an excellent sounding board, in his quiet lack of eloquence and dull approach to the world. He was a good teammate and a decent person when he wasn’t caught up in his own bullshit, which was almost never. Eliot obviously appreciated having him around for those reasons and also because he could reference Chandler Bing without getting a blank stare.

But at the end of the day, to someone like the breathtaking Eliot, Quentin was nothing but the not-so-illiterate farm boy assigned to him. Enjoyable for a distraction fuck, if he ever felt so inclined.
But mostly an annoying sad sack, weighing down the life Eliot could have had—fuck, probably did have—before he had decided to throw it all to the wind in a quest epilogue that he seemed to have thought through, like, as little as humanly possible.

Not to be self-deprecating as shit or anything, but that meant Quentin was more like a nasty side effect, like how ecstasy made you feel like the world was hugging you but also made you thirsty enough to drown yourself. Only without the hugging part. Also, he’d never actually done ecstasy, but he had friends who had done ecstasy. Well, classmates. Either way, he knew a little bit from hearing what people said, and from his reading, and all the pieces on the nightly news.

(Eliot had probably done ecstasy.)

The point was, as far as Quentin could tell, since that first night, his husband hadn’t been inclined to fuck him again.

Sure, Eliot was affectionate. The High King practically had his arm sewn across his shoulders whenever they were together and enjoyed the odd hair ruffle whenever Quentin said something particularly grumpy. But when Quentin would try to make meaningful eye contact, try to see if the lightning flashes he sometimes thought he saw in Eliot’s eyes held any promise, he came up empty every time.

At best, Eliot would hold a smile at him before sighing, turning them to a new corridor or conversation. He never made a single move, beyond the occasional flirty wink or snappy double entendre. Hell, Eliot even happily talked about how hot he found his personal guards, as though it couldn’t possibly affect Quentin (“God, the things I would do to Rhys were I a single man,” he had once said conspiratorially, whistling low. Which, like, Quentin kind of thought Rhys was a bland jerkoff, but whatever.)

Much as it made his stomach sink to his feet, all signs pointed to Quentin not having made much of an impression that first night. Which was fine. They barely knew each other. Eliot didn’t owe him interest, even if it had been unspeakably incendiary for Quentin in a way that still curled his toes if he let himself think about it. But it wasn’t mutual. That was fine. It was fine. Even if Eliot was his only chance at having a sexual relationship, ever again, for the rest of his life. It was fine. It was what it was. Which was fine.

It was why usefulness had to remain his primary goal.

“Um, my king,” Quentin said, breathing through his thumping pulse. “I was going to remind you that you and I were going to take a sojourn to the very same Slosh, as part of, um—a pilgrimage in honor of the great Ember. Perhaps then, you could handle the situation personally, with, uh, with your Earth-given abilities.”

All pretense of teasing fell from Eliot’s eyes with blunt force. They flashed as he snarled a fake smile, reaching out to grab a goblet of wine from a floating platter.

“Oh nono no ,” Eliot said, gulping around his pitchy voice. “I don’t think that’s a good use of my —”

“His Majesty is being modest about his magic , my lords,” Quentin said, shooting Eliot a sharp glare as he emphasized the most important word. “As I’m sure you know, kindness and humility are often entangled.”

(Queen Julia had crowned him High King Eliot the Kind. It had been a “thing,” as Margo put it.)
“Absolutely, Your Highness,” the messenger said with a shining disposition. “Honoring our ordure-saturated land with your presence and, of course, your magic would bring our people untold hope and promise.”

Eliot rubbed the bridge of his nose, drinking and saying nothing.

“I believe the honor would be High King Eliot’s,” Quentin said, grabbing the king’s arm with a subtle pinch. “We plan to be there as soon as our schedule allows. Isn’t that right, Your Grace?”

Eliot grit his teeth, eyes like daggers. “Sure is, honey love.”

Settled, Quentin grinned at him and Eliot twitched his lips into something near amenable as the messenger kept thanking him for his generosity. Eliot drank his wine until it was gone, as the attendants and servants and advisors finished their jobs and dispersed. Until only Quentin and Eliot remained, along with the stony silence between them.

(Well, and one servant, who Eliot always deemed the most important, holding the pitcher of wine at the ready.)

Eliot cleared his throat, tracing a probing look down at Quentin. “That was interesting.”

His voice was cool. Icy even. Quentin sighed.

“Yeah, sorry,” he said, pushing his hair out of his eyes. It was out of nerves, not necessity. “I couldn’t be blunt in front of the crowd though. Would’ve undercut you.”

“Hmm,” Eliot said, in that infuriating and condescending way of his. He held his goblet out wordlessly to the servant. “Explain what the fuck you just coerced me into then.”

Quentin frowned as the servant poured. “Um, I mean, I think that’s self-evident.”

“It can’t be,” Eliot said tetchily. “Because it seemed like you signed me up for magical sewage treatment.”

“No, uh, well, yeah,” Quentin said with a swallow, still staring at the silent servant. His bulging eyes were glued on Eliot, waiting for his next silent order with a shivering mustache. “That’s pretty much the gist of it.”

“Apologies,” Eliot said with a mock laugh, touching his chest. “Maybe we haven’t met. I’m Eliot, the *High King of Fillory*.”

Yeah, yeah. Quentin knew he’d be annoyed about it. But it was better that he understood the reality, so he could actually live up to his own stated ideals come hell or high water or swamps of shit. At the moment, though, Quentin was still too distracted by the neglected servant to get into it.

It was so fucking typical.

Eliot frowned and followed Quentin’s line of sight down to the man. Then he sighed, shaking his head. “Oh. Sorry.”

With barely a twitch of his face, a second goblet came flying through the corridor and Eliot caught it in his hand. He held it out to the servant again, still silent and still without even a cursory glance down, until it was filled.

Then he held it out to Quentin with a small smile. “Wine for my strange little puppeteer.”
That… was not the fucking point. Quentin grabbed the goblet and rolled his eyes, taking a long sip. Honestly, Eliot was impossible sometimes.

Quentin ducked his head to force eye contact with the servant, ungodsly unnatural as it was. But he had a small axe to grind. So. “Sorry, uh, I feel bad. I don’t know your name.”

The servant gaped, looking around like it was impossible Quentin was actually speaking to him. “It’s… it’s Smedley, sir.”

Smedley. Right. Quentin had actually met Smedley his first week. He had a nervous disposition just like he did. In a perfect world, it should have been a nice bit of kinship. In reality, it just compounded his own unease.

But Quentin persevered.

“Thank you, Smedley,” he said, lightly touching his arm. Smedley turned bright red under his hay-colored mustache. “I appreciate your hard work today and, um, all days.”

Eliot narrowed his eyes.

Smedley gulped. He sputtered a few more words of thanks before making up an obvious excuse about his nonexistent scullery duties and backing away, leaving the pitcher on the floating platter. Briefly, Quentin felt bad. Making the servant uncomfortable just so he could stick it to Eliot’s snobbishness was kind of a dick move in its own right.

But the guilt dissipated as the servant scurried off, and Eliot’s eyes pierced his. “Point taken,” he said, terse.

…Yeah, that was worth it.

Quentin shrugged, though in his mind he danced with victory. “I’m not sure what you mean.”

“No,” Eliot said, clucking his tongue and wrapping an easy arm around Quentin’s shoulders. “You’re right, you’ve got the art of subtlety down pat. Remind me to appoint you Spymaster.”

Quentin bit the inside of his cheek, anger weighing him down into a slump. Just because he was sometimes a little—he would be an awesome spymaster, okay? It sounded like a really cool job and he would work really diligently on every mission. Honestly, the fact that he didn’t seem like an ideal spymaster was what would make him an even better one. Eliot didn’t know what the fuck he was talking about.

Quentin grumbled, crossing his arms. “Don’t be pissy just because I convinced you to do your job.”

Eliot ran his tongue over his teeth before throwing more wine down his throat. He looked down at Quentin from the line of his nose.

“My job, darling, is to attend to high level strategy,” Eliot said, wielding the term of endearment like a condescending weapon. “It is certainly not to clean up a deluge of human feces like a common janitor.”

“Except that it literally is,” Quentin said, pulling out of his husband’s grasp, annoyed. “That is part of your actual job, Eliot.”

The High King scoffed. “You’re telling me all the monarchs were that level of hands-on?”
“The good ones, yeah.”

“So Rupert Chatwin personally mopped up shit?”

“Definitely.”

“I think you’re fucking with me,” Eliot snapped, brandishing his goblet so hard the red liquid splashed to the ground. In less than a blink, it flew back up and swirled into the goblet with a showy bit of his trained magic.

Quentin startled, but more from the assertion than anything else. “I—I wouldn’t fuck with you about matters of state.”

“That is not matters of state,” Eliot said with a scowl. “That’s degrading.”

“Imagine living with it,” Quentin shot back.

Eliot stared at him, jaw muscles rippling. Then he cast his eyes to the ground as he continued to drink like Quentin hadn’t spoken. Asshole.

“Look, maybe you can’t understand because you came from some fancy life in some, you know,” Quentin widened his eyes with a stab of sarcasm, “Park Avenue townhouse with nannies and shit, but—”

Eliot glanced away to take another deep gulp from his goblet, breathing out, “Fuck you.”

Quentin sighed, regret slamming his chest in an instant. Fine, maybe that had been a little unnecessary. But at the same time...

“Fillorians don’t have magic, Eliot. They can’t fix it themselves. They need—”

“Okay, well, ha,” Eliot said with a breathy laugh to match. “Calling bullshit on that one.”

“It’s true,” Quentin said, folding his arms. “That’s kind of the whole point. Fillorians don’t have —”

“You literally have magic, Quentin!” Eliot burst out. He glared at Quentin like he was the stupidest man on all of Fillory. “You’re a goddamn Magician! Are you fucking kidding me?”

Quentin felt all the blood rush from his face, down to his fingertips. His arms were heavy, weighted improperly, and he was sure he was going to fall over. He ticked his eyes to the side and back again, heart stuttering restlessly in his stupid, stupid chest.

Eliot had a point. Obviously. But it was a much more complex one than Quentin actually wanted to get into right then and there. Which was saying a lot because there was nothing that Quentin loved more than talking through complexities or thinking about complexities, or sinking into the shiitpile of his own complexities, murky like the Slosh. Which was weird, he knew, and also incomplete because he also hated all of that and yearned for simplicity every godsdamned day of his miserable life. But simplicity and Quentin didn’t work together. Neither did Quentin and complexity. He was fucked all around, when it came to the macro scale of his own sense of self.

He had long ago accepted that he was doomed to a limbo where exactly none of it worked, never together, never with any coherency. All Quentin had were the small discrete pieces he could focus on at any one time, the pieces that kept him moving and breathing and halfway functional even during the worst points in his life, during the spirals and slogs and returns. Magic was one of those
pieces, one of the simplest and most complex and easiest and fucking hardest in all his life. For every other Fillorian, magic was the *missing* piece, the broken one. For Quentin, it was the only part that was whole.

It was complicated.

“I mean, they—they practically don’t have magic. It’s, like, really rare,” Quentin said, the explanation sounding weak even to his own ears. “So the chances that someone in the Slosh can clean it up is next to none.”

His words impressed Eliot even less, who kept staring down at him with an exhausted expression. Quentin rubbed the back of his neck, skin burning with anger and frustration and something else that only the haughty gaze of High King Eliot the Kind had ever managed to bring out in him.

“Theyir crops will die, their water source will be contaminated, their livestock will get sick,” Quentin continued, focusing on what he knew, what he was comfortable discussing, what *mattered*. “We don’t have vaccines here, Eliot, so there could be really bad shit from this, uh, shit. Bacterial infections, young children could get sepsis—”

Eliot finally spoke again, disbelieving. “In a place where there are no STDs?”

“That’s a decree of Ember’s so men can fuck nymphs and selkies without consequence,” Quentin said, not caring to play reverent about their amoral deity. “Protect everyone’s dick at all costs, sure. But a toddler getting a blood infection, going into shock, all his organs shutting down until he has to be buried in a potter’s field? That’s too boring for him to care about.”

“Jesus. I get it,” Eliot said, looking sick to his stomach. He held up his hand, eyes closing. “You are… kind of intense sometimes.”

Quentin swallowed any embarrassment away. “I mean, yeah, but, like, if there’s anything to be intense about—”

“I said I get it,” Eliot repeated, placing his goblet on the platter with a sigh. “You know, I sent the plans for plumbing for a reason. I don’t know if you remember indoor plumbing from your little Earthly lost weekend, but it’s fairly well regarded.”

Quentin’s blood came to a standstill in his veins. His mouth somehow formed words around a hissing whisper.

“You think I don’t think about indoor plumbing every single day of my life?” Quentin did. He really, really did. “I can’t describe the things I would do for a hot shower or a toilet that flushes.”

“Oh yeah?” Eliot smirked, lascivious in a blink. “Give it a whirl.”

Quentin ignored that. “But you can’t throw blueprints at these people. You need to create scaffolded plans that take into account, um, Fillorian resources, culture, and—and needs, prioritized by urgency.”

“Right, just that,” Eliot said, back to queasy. He took Quentin’s goblet out of his hand and drank. “Easy.”

“Did you think this would be easy?”

Eliot clenched his jaw. “I thought things more or less took care of themselves.”
“They do,” Quentin said. “Until they don’t.”

“What does that mean?” Eliot asked, culling the second glass of wine in a gulp. He slammed it on the platter with a clamor.

“It means that Fillory works on its own design,” Quentin said, intoxicated by the free flow of information and spurred on by his own indignation. “That magic belongs to no one, not even the gods, and there’s an element of unknowable laws that govern its power.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means the atmospheric magic solves shit on Fillory about as reliably as it solves shit on Earth. There are no shortcuts here,” Quentin said with a kick at the ground, suddenly self-conscious under Eliot’s unwavering stare. “And—and until you have a real lay of the land, anything you do will be doomed to failure except actually doing the work, the way actual Fillorians are telling you we need the work done.”

Quentin forced himself to look Eliot in the eye, despite the menacing way the veins in his neck were popping. For a long time, the High King said nothing, until he finally let out a breath, not quite a laugh.


“Great,” Quentin said with an eye roll. “But understanding is only half the—”

“I mean that I’ll do it,” Eliot said through his teeth. “I’ll be bitchy about it the whole time, but I’ll fucking do it.”

Quentin hadn’t actually expected Eliot to give in that easily. “Oh.”

“Yeah. Oh,” Eliot said, shaking his head. He grabbed the pitcher and poured himself a third glass of wine. “I told you I want to try to be a good ruler. So if that means telekinetically hauling some shit, well, I’ve done worse.”

Quentin tore his eyes from the drink. That wasn’t his business. People coped how they coped. “Um, I’m glad you agree.”

Eliot grinned, genuine for the first time in awhile. “Well, you didn’t really give me a choice with your Jessica Rabbit act back there.”

“Jessica Rabbit?” Quentin thought he knew that reference but he must have been mistaken. “In what world was I anything like—?”

“But it’s certainly better for your general wellbeing that I won’t kick and scream over it,” Eliot said, elegantly lifting his goblet in the air and tilting it back into his mouth. “I’m a ferocious kicker and an even more ferocious screamer.”

Eliot winked at him as he lowered his wine, precise and rakish at once. Quentin’s heart slammed against his rib cage. “I, uh—I believe it.”

His stomach tightened with a flash of Eliot’s mouth sucking on his neck, hands sliding his pants down and palming at his hips. The way his seduction-rough voice had whispered, so good, Quentin.
Quentin cleared his throat and forced his burning eyes out anywhere but on Eliot. The High King had a way of making him feel exposed, naked and trembling, no matter how many layers of itchy clothes he tried to hide under.

But maybe looking away from Eliot was even more telling. So he glanced up at him, blood rushing to his cheeks at the soft and bemused look on his husband’s face. He was waiting patiently for Quentin to rejoin the world, hip jutted and goblet casually lounging in his hand. Everyone always had to be so godsdamned patient with Quentin.

So he conceded, trying to be useful.

“I mean, you know, uh, you don’t have to literally do it yourself. You could delegate.” Quentin paused and bit the edge of his lip. “Maybe send King Penny.”

King Penny was a total *dick.* If anyone deserved to rake up feces, it was him. Dickhead.

At that, Eliot laughed, a soul-filling sound. “Tempting as that is, trust me, Penny sucks at physical magic. His expertise lies elsewhere.”

Worth a shot.

“Well, uh,” Quentin squinted, thinking. “Maybe you could send—”

Eliot smiled, bright as anything. “You.”

Huh.

… That was actually a good idea.

Quentin stood up taller, nodding with the rush of an innovative solution. He wasn’t totally sure if he had the power to clean the whole field on his own, but he could at least try, if he could get the privacy to do it without calling attention to himself. That would give Eliot space to focus on the things he was interested in and the Slosh would get at least some kind of relief. It wasn’t perfect, but things rarely were.

“Yeah, uh, sure,” Quentin said, tucking his hair back. “I mean, I’d be happy to help if I can. We’d have to be creative for, like, reasons that I can explain, but I’ll do it. Of course.”

But Eliot just huffed a breath, studying Quentin’s face in that liquefying way of his. He pursed his lips and then sighed, taking a full gulp of his wine.

“That was no fun,” he said airily. “Fine. My job, my shit. But I really do have a lot on my—”

“I know,” Quentin said, because he did. The list for a High King was never ending. “But it needs to go on the docket.”

“The goddamn docket,” Eliot breathed out, steam emanating from his nose. “*Fine.* Done.”

He held the corner of his eyes between two tense fingers, like he had a migraine. Kind of dramatic. Quentin rolled his eyes. “It’s two days of work, max. I think you’ll survive.”

“On a planet with no Zoloft?” Eliot laughed, but it was a sour sound. “Debatable.”

That hit something tender right at the center of Quentin’s heart. He frowned, looking at Eliot’s profile, cast downward and strained. There was a chance, as usual, that Quentin was being kind of an asshole.
He also wondered what Eliot had been like on Earth.

He wondered what his world had been like, as a man who was able to so firmly choose a husband over a wife. During his school days, Quentin had occasionally felt an unfamiliar spike of fear that his attraction to boys would be found out, that someone would ask exactly why he had so many cut magazine photos of Winona Ryder and Johnny Depp in his binder. It had been nothing like Fillory. On Earth, Quentin's natural attractions had been treated like a punchline at best. The worst, he didn’t like to think about too much. It all still haunted him. It was unnerving. It was unjust. And it was almost funny how the Earthlings always regarded Fillory as the more unforgiving and fucked up place.

Quentin knew that nothing leading up to this point could have been easy for Eliot. So in this case, maybe he could be **useful** instead of a total dick all the time.

“Hey, um, if you’re serious,” Quentin said softly. “I have Zoloft.”

Eliot snapped his head up at that, more amused than anything. “What the fuck?”

“I have brain shit, so I stocked up before I left Earth,” Quentin explained, feeling inexplicably embarrassed. “About, you know, a lifetime’s worth or so.”

“Are you serious?” Eliot asked, eyes wide and mouth gaping. “That’s some seriously advanced magic for an amateur, Quentin.”

Quentin wished he could have claimed such a strong natural ability, but it would probably blow up in his face if he did. Besides, Eliot had already seen him barely manage a clean up spell, so he wouldn’t buy it anyway.

“Uh, yeah, before I left, I did research and ended up meeting with these, um, people at a warehouse and they gave me a spell for it in exchange for—well, like, it was kind of a whole… thing.”

“Hedges,” Eliot said, eyes guarded and cool at the word. Which, yeah. “Dangerous.”

“Not as dangerous as me not having Zoloft,” Quentin said, matter of fact and unflinching. It was true.

Eliot moved his eyes all over his face, calculating. Then, with a sigh, he placed his (empty) goblet back down and stood tall with his hands behind his back.

“Look, I’m not saying you don’t know what you’re doing,” Eliot said, like that was exactly what he was saying. “But if no one’s ever taken a glance at your supply, I should.”

“I’ve been taking it for four years, Eliot,” Quentin said with a rush of annoyance. He wasn’t a child. “I think I’m fine.”

“The fact that you think a Hedge spell can stay stable that long proves you need a second pair of eyes,” Eliot countered. “I’m not saying you’re not capable, I’m saying that I have an extremely reliable never-ending flask and two years of a Brakebills education under my belt.”

Quentin still hadn’t asked about why they had all left Brakebills, or what had led them to neutralizing a younger god and ending up in Fillory. It seemed like a sore subject, with the soulful Queen Julia at the center. He wouldn’t want to upset any of them by asking, but least of all her.

So he just nodded, swallowing down the burning irritation in his throat. “Fine. Thanks.”
“You’re welcome,” Eliot said sweetly, like there hadn’t been a hint of bitterness in Quentin’s tone.  
“Oh, and no, thank you for the offer, but I was just being an ass. Wine treats me fine.”  

That was—uh, okay.  

Again, not any of Quentin’s business. He nodded, pushing down the prick of concern trying to make its way up his throat.  

“Anyway, uh, sorry to bombard you like that,” Quentin said. Eliot laughed, which was probably fair. “But I didn’t want you to end—”  

“Up shit creek?” Eliot threw out wryly. “No, I’m sure I’ll appreciate it when the bronze statue of High King Eliot the Mucker goes up in the Lower Sloth—”  

“Slosh.”  

“—but in the meantime, I’ll hold my nose and throw myself back into the task of redecorating this tacky hellhole and getting my ass kissed by leeches who really want my head in a basket,” Eliot finished, adjusting his brocade with a grimace. “Speaking of, you’ll be joining the Council meeting today, right?”  

Quentin’s muscles went tense. “Uh, what?”  

“The High Council meeting,” Eliot reiterated slowly. “You haven’t shown up to the last three and we could use an ally.”  

A consort attending a High Council meeting in an advisor role was wildly abnormal. There was a big difference between Quentin casually helping Eliot out with factoids throughout the day and inserting himself into actual policy creation. He was usually the first to say fuck decorum, but even he knew that approaching that world required a light touch. Since Quentin was nothing but awkward stomps of his impatient foot, his disengagement so far had probably helped Eliot more than it hurt.  

“I don’t know about that. Uh, it’s kind of—” Quentin started to say, but Eliot rolled his eyes.  

“I need someone who can speak Tick Pickwick,” he said, twisting his mouth into mild disgust. “Something about the guy gives me the creeps. The smile. Foreboding.”  

“Nah, Tick’s not evil, he’s just a fucking blowhard,” Quentin said quickly, without any thought. But at the shocked smile that burst onto Eliot’s face, he winced. “Shit. Sorry, that was—fuck, I shouldn’t allow cracks in my veneer.”  

…That made Eliot laugh the hardest Quentin had heard since they met.  

“Hate it to break it to you,” Eliot said, as he turned an impish smirk down at him, “but you’re way more crack than veneer.”  

Quentin burned from the inside out. “Sorry.”  

“Jesus. Don’t be,” Eliot said, grin going softer. “That’s why I want you there. We’re discussing some long and dull economic proposal that is exactly the kind of thing your fervent little brain will glob onto and mine will reject.”  

He wasn’t sure if that was a compliment or not.
Either way, Quentin really wasn’t able to promise anything. It would be inappropriate, to say the least, for him to contribute. But if Eliot wanted him there, he also didn’t really have a choice. Fen had always been clear that the consort’s role in those meetings was to show up and shut up, if they showed up at all. But he supposed he could, you know, literally be there, for moral support or whatever.

“Okay, I’ll attend,” Quentin said with great reluctance. Eliot smiled, pleased. “Is there a copy of the proposal anywhere so I could see it beforehand?”

Wouldn’t hurt. Even if he wouldn’t be able to speak to it.

Eliot snorted, like that amused him. “In the Armory.”

“Great, uh, okay,” Quentin said, clapping his hands together. “Well, maybe I’ll go check that out. Context is always good.”

“Sure, sure,” Eliot said, shaking his head with an enduring smile. “Have fun, kiddo.”

He and Margo both called Quentin kid and kiddo a lot. As with most of what they said, he wasn’t sure how to take it. So he decided not to think about it at the moment, since it would fester deep into his brain and gnaw away at him at its own leisure anyway. Why speed up the inevitable?

With a short wave, Quentin turned on his heels and dragged himself back down the hallway, heading toward the library. But before he could get too far, Eliot called “Quentin!” right as a large hand grabbed the crook of his elbow.

Too shocked to be startled, Quentin spun into Eliot, almost into his arms. Staring up, his mouth went dry. His eyes traced down the line of shadow from Eliot’s lips to his remarkable chin dimple. He had spent a lot of time trying to forget just how beautiful Eliot was. But the High King made it hard with, you know, his face and everything.

“Um,” Quentin managed to get out and Eliot’s soft lips (really soft, shit) lifted. “Did—did I forget something?”

“No,” Eliot said, hand tightening and lighting up Quentin’s whole arm. “Just wondering if you wanted…”

Yes, Quentin’s brain answered as the king trailed off. Whatever Eliot was asking with those shrewd eyes, with his spun silk words, Quentin wanted. Please.

His hands gripped at the edge of his own sleeves, fidgeting so he didn’t run them up Eliot’s chest all the way to his long neck. So his fingertips wouldn’t graze the soft skin behind his ear, the wiry hair at his neck. He fidgeted so he didn’t kiss him again, desperate and helpless.

They were standing close enough that he could track the rise and fall of Eliot’s breath, and he found his own matching as he waited.

But Eliot never finished his thought. He just kept looking at Quentin, eyes hooded and thumb tracing slow, dizzy circles around the sharpest point of his elbow.

“If I wanted,” Quentin breathed, “what?”

“If you’d like some company, I could come with you,” Eliot said, voice lower than before. He smiled, with a glow of something unfamiliar. “Good kings probably do research too, right?”
Quentin swallowed his pounding heart. “Um, I mean, no, that’s—uh, that’s fine. I’m sure you have better things to do than, like, get caught in one of my obsessive fact finding spirals.”

“Hmm, indeed,” Eliot said in his noncommittal hum, stepping forward to smooth down Quentin’s collar. Their knees knocked together and Quentin’s just about buckled. “Still, if you want some help, I’m all yours.”

Eliot’s hand lingered, tracing the lines of the fabric. He was so close that Quentin should have been able to count each of his long black eyelashes, except they were infinite in number. The smoky amber smell filled his lungs, exhilarating, and all Quentin wanted to do was bury his face in the crook of his neck. He wanted to smell him, to taste him, to bite him, until Eliot moaned like he had that night and finally gave in, taking Quentin right there on the stone floor.

“I, uh,” Quentin said, breathless. He closed his eyes and Eliot’s hand moved to his hair, smoothing it back. What the fuck were words? “Um, I—”

“If you need someone to talk through it with,” his husband murmured, right in his ear. “Or bounce ideas off of or to ramble at, I’m your guy.”

Quentin’s heart thudded in his chest. Tentative, he unfurled one hand to rest on Eliot’s hip, drawing closer to him. He tilted his face up at the simmering something hidden in the High King’s eyes. At the way his lips parted and breath caught.

Quentin waited for Eliot to close the distance.

He waited for Eliot to finally kiss him again, for real. He waited for him to drag them to one of their ridiculously luxurious quarters, to fuck as thoroughly as he had thought about every night when he touched himself, a slow and easy fantasy along every inch of his aching dick. But he needed to know that Eliot wanted it, that it wasn’t a trick of his overactive brain.

So he waited.

… And waited.

Eliot kept staring down at him, head tilted and unmoving. It took an embarrassingly long time before it occurred to Quentin that he was going to be waiting for a long time. A really long time.

Like, forever.

He was always such a godsdamned fool.

Quentin blinked himself out of his stupor, taking one step back. Eliot’s hand fell away from his hair, slack against his own thigh. For a quick second, it looked like his eyes darkened with a storm of frustration. But in the very next one, he was the picture of placidity. As always, as ever.

“That’s okay,” Quentin said, clearing his throat and crossing his arms over his chest. “Uh, it’s probably not a good use of your time. But thanks for the offer.”

At that, Eliot smiled. It was dimmer than before.

“Oh, Quentin,” he said, with a small sigh. Otherwise, he seemed unaffected. Because he was. “I’ll see you at the meeting.”

With a small wave, Eliot turned around and walked away, head held high and whistling to himself.
Quentin was so fucking stupid.

Eliot needed a goddamn cigarette.

Seated in his so-called throne (which was more like a third-tier chair option for a corporate event at the Wynn Las Vegas), his fingers scratched against the sides of his velvet tapered pant legs, itching for nicotine and oxygen deprivation and warm skin. His stomach growled because he had forgotten to eat his delicious lunch of boiled mutton and potatoes, and his brain was a melting pile of fuzz, as Tick Pickwick droned on, and on, and on, and—

“—by allocating a portion of the funds set aside for the now defunct How to Spot a Homicidal Plant program toward the construction of the henceforth proposed effective wellspring distribution system towers, via the collection of home devices and the masonry labor of fifty strong builders across the centralized regions highlighted on these charts,” Tick Pickwick said, speaking quickly and without even an ounce of charisma as he waved his hands across a beige poster board, “I believe Your Majesties will agree that my estimation of a 35.3% improvement on Fillory’s workman debt and an increase in Fillorian advantageous trade between our neighbors skyward at a rate of 6% yearly is but a conservative basement to our—”

From the chair to his right, Julia held her hand up, brow tight. “I’m sorry, I need you to walk me through that six-percent number again. I’m still not seeing how that works out, at all.”

“Holy shit, who cares?” Penny exploded, hands flying up to his forehead.

“I’m going to gauge her fucking eyes out,” Margo breathed to Eliot at the same time in a vicious whisper. And for once, Eliot agreed with both of them.

Julia was a wonderfully curious person. It was endearing. But right now, she needed to shut the fuck up and let them move on from this laborious nightmare they’d all been trapped in for the last hour and a half. But on the two of them went, lobbing questions and answers back and forth, back and forth. Julia kept bringing up something about Pegasi and Fillorian fabric industries, Tick kept evading the specifics and holy god, these were the things that made Eliot’s brain feel like it being kicked in the balls repeatedly.

And when Julia refused to budge, after another fifteen goddamn minutes, Tick flared his nostrils but didn’t stop smiling. “Your Highness, since you seem so confused, I will explain my reasoning again, this time much more slowly and carefully.”

“Not slower, not more careful,” Margo shot out, finger jabbing up in the air. “If it’s slower or more careful, I rip out your rectum.”

“Apologies, Your Majesty. I only offer a remedial explanation because I know that mathematics can be,” Tick smiled all the wider, “a challenge for the fairer sex and—”

“Okay!” Eliot said with a laughing clap of his hands, cutting off Margo and Julia from cutting off Tick’s head. Or ripping out his rectum. “Julia, ah, while I appreciate your enthusiasm for details as always—”

Julia spun to look at him, eyes twinkling. “Do you? Really? Is that really something you appreciate about me?”
“—I think we have enough information to make a decision at this point,” Eliot concluded, smiling wide. “Are there any objections to Tick’s plan, except the detail about the trade… stuff?”

No one spoke. Good enough.

“Great,” Eliot said with a magnanimous sigh. “Then, I suppose I see no reason not to—”

“Goddammit,” Penny said out of nowhere, squeezing his eyes shut tight. “Shit, I can’t believe I’m saying this, but someone in the room, like, violently objects. To the point that we should pay attention.”

“Well, speak now or forever hold your peace,” Eliot said, casting his eyes out at the High Council. “If there’s something we should know, then tell us. Otherwise, we’re going to pass it through and adjourn.”

Penny stilled, eyes peeling open with a loathing he usually reserved for Taylor Swift. His snarled half his lip up to his nose, ominously swiveling his livid face past the whole High Council until he landed on—

Quentin.

Eliot smiled. He had kind of forgotten Quentin was even there, in his silence. But no matter what, he was always a welcome sight. His great bone structure and grumpy disposition did it for him in ways he couldn’t quantify, even if Quentin’s complete lack of interest in continuing their sexual relationship had been the most frustrating element of being a king thus far.

But Quentin was smart and funny, in an idiosyncratic way. He knew everything about Fillory and, honestly, a lot more about Earth history than Eliot. He was passionate and earnest, and rude and twitchy as the day they met. After a month—and with the whole messy binding spell business well behind them, thank you very much—his husband had become almost something like a friend. Eliot appreciated that more than he could say. On a planet that generally revered and/or despised him, sometimes in equal measure, it was heartening to have someone from the kingdom itself actually on his side. It was almost enough to make up for the fact that, again, Quentin somehow seemed completely fucking disinterested in fucking him, despite the thousands of hints Eliot sent his way every fucking day. It was enough to drive a man to drink.

—Well, more.

Eliot couldn’t be the one to make the real first move though. Because as it turned out, the number one reason that Children of Earth had executed their wives in generations past was for ‘refusal to copulate,’ according to the outraged Margo. So if Quentin wanted to fuck, Quentin had to come to him or Eliot wouldn’t know if he felt forced, for fear of death. Bit of a mood killer.

That meant all Eliot could do was make eyes and wait, silently pleading please god please god please god until Quentin got at least one of the thousands of hints. Which, so far, Quentin was either painfully oblivious, painfully shy, or painfully uninterested. Eliot didn’t really care to parse out which one was most likely.

(And yes, okay, Eliot had technically kissed him earlier. But Quentin kissed him first after gazing up at him adoringly and Eliot was only fucking human, o kay ?)

As it was, currently, his husband was staring off into space. His brown eyes were glassy and unfocused, his mouth in its sweet permafrown that Eliot desperately wanted wrapped around his cock, all the time. He seemed completely lost to the world, body swaying with either acute
boredom or process overload. It was always hard to tell with him.

“Jesus,” Penny bit out, snapping his neck toward Quentin so hard it broke through Quentin’s
daydream with a typical jump. “Of course it’s you. Say your shit now before I punch your face.”

Eliot sighed. “Don’t punch Quentin.”

“But I—I didn’t say anything,” Quentin said, spinning to look behind him both ways. “I think you
must have misheard or—”

“You didn’t have to say anything,” Penny said before rolling his eyes at Quentin’s growing
confusion. “I have psychic powers, moron.”

“Like, this whole time?” Quentin sputtered out indignantly. The heels of his palms flew to his
temples, like that could keep Penny out.

Tick Pickwick stepped forward with a slight cough, “Excuse me, Sire, but if I may insert my
humble opinion, I do believe trusting your first instinct is key to effective governing—”

“Whoa,” Penny laughed to cut Tick off. He cast almost impressed eyes at Quentin. “Damn,
mouseboy. You fucking hate this douchebag, huh?”

“I didn’t—” Quentin said with a tight swallow, losing all his words in a scarcely audible squeal.

“Dude hardcore disagrees,” Penny said, guarded eyes unmoving from the squirming Quentin.
“Trying to hold back for some reason. Now he’s trying to jumble his thoughts so I can’t make
sense of them.”

“It’s not my place to say anything,” Quentin said, averting his eyes.

Eliot’s defensiveness calcified to frustration.

“Except I specifically told you I wanted your opinion,” he said, with more than a touch of ice.
Honestly, Quentin was kind of impossible sometimes. “Especially when it comes to matters we
don’t understand as non-Fillorians.”

“FYI,” Penny said, growling, “he just thought ‘That’s all matters’.” When Quentin set his eyes
with a fierce anger, Penny leaned forward. “I will keep doing that until you speak your fucking
mind.”

“I’ll allow it,” Eliot shot out, annoyed.

“I was going to talk to you after the meeting,” Quentin said quietly, those warm brown eyes boring
right into his. “But I—I can’t—”

Eliot didn’t care what he couldn’t do. “Why waste everyone’s time?”

Penny summed it up neatly. “‘Cause he’s a pussy.”

“You mean a cock,” Margo said, arms crossing over her black lace dress. “Pussies are tough as
shit.”

“I thought you were on my side,” Quentin accused as he snapped his face to glare at Margo.

“Oh, honey,” Margo laughed, shaking her head. “No.”
“Your Majesties, I am sure Lord Quentin merely misunderstands what I’m proposing,” Tick said. He held his hand to block the side of his mouth, speaking in a loud whisper. “He comes from a common background after all.”

“Is that it, Quentin?” Eliot held his head high as he challenged his husband to lie to him. “Are you misunderstanding Tick?”

Quentin bit on his teeth so hard it looked like his jaw was about to snap. But then he cast his eyes downward. “I mean, uh, it’s possible.”

Tick smiled and pat Quentin on the back. Eliot kind of wanted to throw them both in the dungeon.

“Jesus,” Eliot breathed out, crossing his legs.

“I must say, I was concerned when I first heard you selected Lord Quentin, Your Majesty, based on my experiences with his enthusiasm at Coldwater Cove,” Tick Pickwick said, irritating as all get out. “But it seems you’ve been blessed with a most obedient consort.”

“Apparently,” Eliot snapped.

This was not the Quentin he wanted when he invited him to the meeting. He didn’t want little Fillorian Mouse Quentin. He wanted Coronation Beach Quentin. Anything else was ineffective and false.

( “And to you, Lord Quentin,” Tick Pickwick pronounced, with a short incline of his head. “As per your consummated marriage, in accordance with the law of ram, of their entropy and inertia, in their chaos and order, may you select a family surname, upon your courtly and godly appointment. What say you?”

“Henceforth,” Quentin said in a low memorized tone, like a kid reciting the pledge of allegiance, “shall I provide my family and heart-family the pioneering of generations, under the name—”

He paused, looking off into the distance, something quiet in his eyes. But then Quentin set his jaw and blazed right up at Tick, defiant.

“Lord Quentin Coldwater.”

The crowd tittered, snobbish laughter carrying over Eliot’s head. Tick placed his hands behind his back and smiled at Quentin, a crocodilian thing.

“You choose your royal surname after your land of living?”

“I do,” Quentin said, eyes flashing. “My name will be Quentin Coldwater.”

“To clarify, sir, you choose your full title to be,” Tick opened his mouth wide with a mocking lilt to his voice, “Lord Quentin Coldwater of the Coldwater Cove Coldwaters?”

Quentin faltered. “Uh—I mean, yeah.” He swallowed and the fire returned. “That’s what I want.”

Eliot was a big fan of the fire. )

“Huh,” Penny said, dropping his head back on his chair with an annoyed groan. “Yeah, so now Quentin is thinking that you’re being as big of a dick as your actual—”

Eliot crossed his legs tighter, a throb rushing downward. “Alright, that’s enough.”
Penny always took shit one step too far.

“Oh my gods. Why are you doing this?” Quentin asked Penny, his face buried in his hands. He paused again, letting out a slow stream of angry breath. “Your Highness.”

“I like that he has to call me that,” Penny said, smirking. “Some fuckin’ justice in this world.”

But then a strong voice cut through the din, a purple chiffon covered arm held high.

“This isn’t productive, Penny,” Julia said. “This proposal is actually the first one that has mattered since we got here.”

Penny sniffed. “I know that, Julia. That’s why I’m pushing it. I’m not stupid.”

“Jesus Christ,” Julia seethed through her teeth. “As always, no one said you were stupid.”

“Like you’re not the fuckin’ queen of saying shit without saying it,” Penny said, dark eyes flitting her way. Eliot had to admit that was a fair point.

Still, Julia was right too. Eliot didn’t give a shit about economics, nor did he understand shit about economics. Wellspring access was a huge deal in Fillory though, so if anything deserved attention, it was probably this. So he turned his eyes to Julia and nodded.

Permission granted, Julia turned forward, with her most beatific smile. “Lord Quentin.”

“Oh, uh,” Quentin said, startling at her attention. “That’s okay, you can—Quentin is fine.”

“Quentin,” she said softly, inclining her head. “We don’t know each other well, but I’ve been told you have both an Earth and a Fillorian education. That kind of diversity of thought is something I value, and so I think your perspective would be a priceless one if you were willing to offer it.”

“Um, thanks, but it’s not that I don’t—” Quentin started to say, beet red and tucking his hair behind his ear. Julia smiled, softly and silently cutting him off.

“And I’m sure High Councilman Pickwick agrees that we should have as many voices in the room as possible, so we can make the best decision,” Julia said, lips pressing together in victory. “Don’t you, councilman?”

Tick blanched as Julia’s warm yet fierce brown eyes fell on him. His face spasmed as he tried to maintain his smile. “Of course, Your Highness.”

“Great!” Julia said with a big grin, turning her eyes back to Quentin. He was staring at her over folded arms, tiny and wavering smirk forming on his pink lips. “Then the floor is yours, sir.”

Quentin stared at Julia for another moment before tightening his brow. He licked his lips and darted his eyes around, like he was searching for words. Then, finally, he spoke.

“So, yeah, you’re not wrong about the numbers,” Quentin said. “They’re—I think your Socratic method of trying to get Tick to admit he was, uh, fudging them to make his case was dead on.”

Julia beamed. “Good catch.”

“Small correction,” Tick inserted, finger high in the air as he bowed down low. “While delicious, fudge is actually not one of the commodities involved in this endeavor.”

Everyone ignored that.
Quentin sucked his lip between his teeth and looked right at Julia. “Um, but—are you familiar with the idea of Reaganomics?”

Julia’s eyebrows shot up, smile turning puzzled and amused. “I am.”

“Yeah, so that’s basically what Tick—um, what High Councilman Pickwick is proposing. For example, see these zones here?” Quentin waved his hand at the dotted circles Tick had drawn. “They weren’t selected due to physical centrality, which you can probably see, you know, with your eyes—”

Ooh, snarky boy.

Julia pursed her lips, calculating. “I assumed they were central in regard to population density.”

“Well, uh, no.” Quentin said with a smile. “I mean, you know what they say about assuming, right?”

“No,” Julia said, eyes glittering. “What do they say?”

Quentin froze. “Um, that—it’s bad.”

Eliot wanted to rip off his shirt and suck bite marks on his chest, so everyone knew that Quentin was his. God, he was just so fucking attractive with all his dorky, twitchy, stammering appeal and he had no idea. It was enraged.

“Can we speed this shit up?” Penny groaned, slumping down into his throne. Margo nodded, sliding over to rest her cheek on Eliot’s shoulder.

“Yeah, uh, sorry,” Quentin said, turning back to the poster board. His ass looked great. “So these are the land parcels of the Pickwicks, the Spinkins, the Honebones, and the Jotclots, all of which are Fillory’s most, uh, esteemed households. This proposal gives them first access to the flow of the wellspring.”

Julia pinched her brow, looking wary. “So basically—”

“It redistributes the majority of Fillorian magic to the wealthiest families,” Quentin said, tapping on a set of numbers that made no goddamn sense to Eliot. “The claimed vague benefits of which will, um, in effect—”

“‘Trickle down’ to the poorest,” Julia finished with a sour face. “Jesus, I should have seen it.”

“Wait, for real?” Penny shot out, sitting up to attention. “That’s bullshit.”

Quentin offered him a tight smile. “Your word, not mine.”

“Your Majesties,” Tick interjected with a jump in his voice. “I would disagree with that assessment. A trickle sounds so paltry. I prefer to think of it as a Pickwick’s Torrent, rebuilding our economic stability from the top down.”

“That’s bullshit,” Penny said again, crossing his arms over his really quite fetching emerald and rose quartz beaded vest. “Don’t be a sneaky assface.”

Tick smiled. “I will do my best, Your Highness.”

Eliot’s head hurt.
There were some parts of the whole *ruling a country thing* that weren’t so much *an adventure* as they were *boring as death*. All he wanted was to drink wine, consensually fuck his cute husband, gossip with Margo, chat international strategy with all the various ambassadors, and pose nude for potraiture. It wasn’t that much to ask.

“Okay,” Margo said, abruptly standing from her throne before Tick could continue. “Well, thank you all for the fucking colossal time suck, but we’re obviously not going to do that shit.”

Tick let out a sharp little laugh. “I apologize, Your Majesty, but that’s not up to you. It’s up to the High King.”

Eliot sighed, pressing his thumb into the pressure point of his temple. “Yeah, um, I reject the proposal. I trust my fellow monarchs’ judgment, especially if it has anything to do with Reagan.”

“Sire, I don’t know who or what this villain is on Earth,” Tick said with a panicky jolt to his voice, “but perhaps you aren’t understanding—”

“It’s over, asshole,” Margo shot out, fixing her crown and grabbing Penny’s arm. “Time for lunch. If anyone even looks at me before I have my mouth around a spoonful of chowder, I will curse your fuck parts off.”

“On that note, everyone can head out,” Eliot said, breathing in the sighs of relief as he stood. Everyone bowed to him and turned away, dispersing in small groups and chatting amongst themselves.

Except *some people* were trying to weave their way out the door at a faster pace than others and that simply wouldn’t do.

He cleared his throat and crossed his arms. “Except you, Quentin.”

Quentin stopped at the grand stone door, muscles rippling to a freeze under his loose navy blue shirt. His shoulders slumped and he turned around, looking very much like a chastised pupil being sent to the principal’s office.

—It was *hot*.

Margo and Penny were long gone, but Julia stopped to pat Quentin on the shoulder as she walked by, exiting with the rest of the crowd until only the two men remained.

Quentin shifted on his feet, shoulders up to his ears. Eliot rolled his eyes and strode down the steps, the clacks of his boot heels echoing in the cavernous space. He stopped at the nearby table and poured two goblets of wine, holding one out to his husband in silent question.

Tentatively, Quentin stepped forward and took it. They clanged the rims in a lackluster toast and took sips. Much as it fed into fantasy fodder, Quentin wasn’t actually being punished by an authority figure. They were on the same team, as equals. As much as they could ever be, while Eliot was technically able to sentence him to death by ‘serrated spoon,’ whatever that was.

But that didn’t mean he wasn’t pissed.

Eliot swallowed the sugar sweet wine down his throat, not looking at Quentin. “So what’s it gonna take?”

Quentin sighed. “What?”
“To deprogram your random adherence to bullshit tradition?” Eliot snapped, done fucking around. Quentin’s eyes fell into slits as his nostrils flared, pissy and frustrated. Good.

“Deprogram,” Quentin laughed without humor. “Gods, Eliot, it’s not that simple.”

“It should be,” Eliot said, holding his hands out in an exaggerated shrug. “I’m not saying we know each other well, but I do know that compliant isn’t the first way I would describe you.”

“Based on what? How I entered into an arranged marriage with a High King?” Quentin shot back like he was clever. Eliot scoffed. That was different. “Uh, do you think I approached you in the hallway the way I did today for fun?”

“No,” Eliot said, feeling his eyes widen with a cloying rush of exasperation, teetering out of his control. “But only because you doing anything for fun strains credulity.”

—Eliot was such an asshole.

When he slowly brought his eyes up to Quentin, his husband looked like a kicked puppy who was desperately trying not to look like a kicked puppy. Like a puppy who was used to being kicked. Fuck.

Eliot closed his eyes. “Sorry. That came out the wrong side of pithy. You’re not—I’m not—I’m tense.”

Finishing his disgusting wine in a gulp, he walked over to the stone stairs and sat down on the bottom step, rolling his neck his his hand. He massaged the ripples of knots along every muscle. The fire-hot room was quiet for a moment, until he heard the sound of shuffling feet and felt a warm presence sink down beside him.

“You should be tense,” Quentin said softly. “You should take this seriously. All of it, including our traditions.”

Eliot had learned very early in his life that blind reverence often had horrifying consequences, especially for people like him. “I’m a king. If I see bullshit, I should be able to call bullshit.”

“No, that’s—” Quentin took a deep breath, playing with the loose fabric of his pants. “I’m not saying it’s not fucked up, but I’m saying this is the backbone of Fillorian court, of what keeps leadership and the upper echelons working together smoothly. This isn’t Earth. Compromises have to be made.”

“I’m not one for equivocation,” Eliot said honestly, bone-weary at the idea. “Correct me if I’m wrong, but it sure seems like Tick Pickwick works for me.”

“He does. It’s still not that simple,” Quentin said, those big earnest eyes meeting his. “Not if you actually want to be able to get shit done without worrying about, like, shadow coups.”

“Jesus,” Eliot breathed out. He felt giddy, like he might float away, or crash down, or both. “I feel like in another universe, the term shadow coup would be... thrilling. Sexy. But it’s actually exhausting as fuck.”

Quentin’s hand twitched in the space between them, like he wanted to touch Eliot but lost his nerve. As if Eliot wouldn’t have melted into it.

“Trying to dismantle this shit all at once is dangerous, trust me.”
Eliot nodded. Self-pity got no shit done. “Then we need a code.”

Quentin blinked, a sparkle of interest in his eyes. “A what?”

“We need a secret code,” Eliot said again, tapping his fingers all along his knees as he thought. “Some way for us to communicate without ruffling any undue feathers.”

“Yeah, okay,” Quentin said, sitting up straighter. He smiled. “That’s, uh, actually kind of smart.”

Actually. He was damn lucky his face looked like that.

“Such a silver-tongued devil you are,” Eliot said with a purring roll of his shoulder. Quentin blushed and everything was bright. “How about this? If you’re not worried about a situation at hand, you work Your ass looks splendid, Your Grace into the conversation.”

Quentin pulled a face. “But I would never say that. In any context.”

“I have a system and it works,” Eliot said, very serious and not at all amusing himself. “Next, if you have concerns and think we need to debrief later, you say Pardon me, Your Majesty, but your utterly exquisite crown is askew.”

Quentin snorted, pressing his mouth against his own shoulder. “Is that, like, uh, how humans talk?” His voice was muffled and eyes deliciously warm. “I feel like Data. Learning so much.”

“Ah, nerd shit,” Eliot said, not able to help a grin. “Naturally.”

Quentin peeked his mouth up briefly, to return the smile. “I mean, you recognized it.”

Eliot wasn’t about to throw Margo under the nerd bus without her permission, so he opted to wink and move on.

“Finally, if things are really bad and you need me to light a fire under my own ass, you can say—”

Eliot swallowed, heart ticking faster “—All is well, my love.”

—Because it had to be something Quentin would never say, right?

Quentin kept looking at him from over the golden stitched seam on his shoulder, a criss-cross of royal detailing in a dark sea. His eyes were no less warm, but a cloud passed over them, indiscernible and silent.

“Yeah, okay,” he finally said. He sighed and rolled his neck with a snort. “No, uh, it’s a good plan. Really.”

“Glad you agree,” Eliot said, patting Quentin’s knee as he stood. “Now, I need to go eat an entire mutton, whatever the fuck that actually is. Care to join?”

Quentin looked for a moment like he was going to explain what mutton was (it was sheep flesh, Eliot actually did know some things despite his best efforts.) But instead he sighed, shaking his head.

“I was gonna decompress in my quarters for a bit,” Quentin said, stretching his arms up. “I’m sure I’ll see you for dinnertime though.”

His fingers buried into his long hair down to the knuckles. His hands were like the rest of him:
delicate and jittery at first glance, while really being defined and strong, with a topographic map veins, tufts of dark brown hair, and sunbaked calluses. They were beautiful and masculine, and Eliot wanted to have his lips on them all the time.

“Okay,” Eliot said instead of doing just that, giving his husband a gentle nod. “Well, have a good afternoon, Quentin.”

But before he could leave, stomach whining in its lack of either sustenance or nicotine, he heard the shuffle of quick feet behind him.

“Um, hey, Eliot?”

Quentin stood with his hands tucked under his arms, eyes darting as he stared at the ground. He shifted back and forth on his boots, clearing his throat on a loop. The poor guy had so many nervous tics it was a wonder he didn’t short circuit.

Eliot lowered his brow, slightly concerned. “What’s up?”

“I just—I wanted to thank you,” Quentin said quietly. He swallowed, throat bobbing as his eyes cast upward. “I know I’m not always the—the easiest person to be around and you’ve been really patient and, um, nice to me, when you didn’t have to be. I just wanted you to know I appreciate it.”

It was rare that Eliot was at a loss for words, but right now he felt like he was sinking into wet cement.

“I’m not sure what to say to that,” he admitted, eyes closing in a slow drip blink. His husband’s face fell and he hugged himself tighter.

“It’s fine,” Quentin said through a cough. He kicked the ground. “I’m not, like, trying to—I was just—I wanted—”

“Quentin,” Eliot said firmly, his capabilities flooding back. “You know I like you, right? I value your help and enjoy your company.”

Quentin’s eyes widened like the thought had never occurred to him. Jesus.

“Oh. Well, uh, okay,” Quentin said with a shy smile that made Eliot’s chest go tight. “I mean, uh, thanks. I—I like you too.”

Eliot’s heart jumpstarted like it had been hit by a taser.

His pulse circled frantically in his chest, flooding with memories of Quentin moving under him, of the overwhelming feel of everything, everything right and good and home, in his skin, in his eyes. All the shit he had been working on burying, as the effect of a spell and nothing more. But no matter what he did, it filled him to the bone, the visceral desire and urgent want. It was the depth of unknown need, woven through his ventricles like diaphanous threads on a loom. It was sorrowful, in its ache for wholeness.

But Eliot was a professional. So he swallowed, got his shit together, and wiped his brow in mock relief. “Whew. Glad we cleared that up.”

Quentin grinned back, rolling his eyes at himself. “Yeah, yeah.” But then he bit his lip, furrowing his brow. “Still, uh, this all could’ve sucked a lot more than it does. So… thanks.”

Quentin’s sweetly earnest eyes peered up at Eliot over a soft smile. Eliot huffed a breath out his
Quentin was storming down the corridor. The stone was rough and cold on his bare feet, but he didn’t care.

With an inward grunt of determination, he reached the ornate metalwork of the massive entryway. He nodded in acknowledgement of the head guard, Soren, and also stupid smug-faced Rhys as they opened the double doors leading to the High King’s private quarters. One of the benefits of being Eliot’s husband was that no one ever questioned his presence. That meant he didn’t have to wait for them to check in with the king to see if he was welcome or wanted. It always helped, but especially so tonight.

This way, Quentin didn’t have a chance to lose his nerve.

He had spent a good amount of time in Eliot’s incredibly large and elaborate room before, but never so late at night. His palms were sweaty as he made his way through the dressing room, firelit in silver details and stained glass of the High King’s own design. The gray walls towered high above him as he rounded the bend, following the flickering light of floating candles.

“—have to be responsible, Eliot.”

Shit.

Quentin hissed in a breath, plastering himself against the stone. He should have realized Margo would be there but somehow he didn’t anticipate it. Shit.

“I have been nothing but responsible since we got here,” Eliot’s rough voice returned, with the sound of parchment fluttering underneath. “Just because I want a goddamn break doesn’t mean—”

“Breaks are for sports games and middle managers,” Margo shot back. “Get your shit in order.”

“My shit is labeled and color coded,” Eliot snapped, the rhythm of their natural banter a more beautiful dance than anything choreographed. “You just—don’t understand.”

He could see the High Queen’s snarl as clearly as he heard it. “Except that my crown is as heavy as yours.”
“Fuck off,” Eliot said, though he sounded more tired than angry. “You can leave whenever you feel like it, you can go back to Brakebills, you can do whatever you goddamn want.”

The bed creaked under new weight as Margo sighed. “I know, honey.”

“I just—I don’t think I belong here. I’m not ready to be a king. I wasn’t done being me.”

“But you said—”

“I know what I said,” Eliot grumbled before he laughed, harsh. “You know what the really fucked up part is? I should be doing it for its own sake, but I’m mostly worried about disappointing…”

He never said though. He just trailed off as papers shuffled.

“About disappointing who?” Margo asked the question with a pitch upward, too sweet and too probing.

Eliot swallowed audibly. “Um, the Fillorian people.”

“Uh-huh.”

Quentin’s foolish heart picked up in his chest, blaring with hope, even as his logical brain sneered don’t be stupid at him. Eliot was probably talking about Queen Julia. Margo didn’t seem to like her much, but the king always spoke about her like she lived in rarefied air. That much was especially obvious as she crowned him.

( Eliot knelt on the sand and his tiniest friend stood over him, long hair shining in the gray light and eyes resolved.

“I’ve thought a lot about kingship, since yesterday,” Julia said, turning the crown in her hands. “More than I’ve thought about it in my entire life. I’ve also thought about sacrifice, and friendship, and what it means to grow from a shitty situation.”

She let out a breath at that, hands shaking. Eliot started forward, perfect postured wavering for the slightest second. Like he wanted to stand up and hug her. Quentin felt his own heart warm in his chest, outside the

“Most of all, I’ve thought about why you did this,” Julia said. She braved a smile at Eliot, watery and wavering. “What drove you to take this on, for all of us. For me. God, everyone knows you’re strong and resilient and audacious in every incredible way. You were more majestic on the day you were born than the rest of us will see in a lifetime. But I don’t think that’s why you’re here.”

As Julia lifted the obsidian and ruby circle high in the air, her eyes were bright with unshed tears. Eliot tilted his gorgeous face up, brows wrinkled and eyes imploring, with a touch of fear, like he wasn’t sure what she was going to say.

“And that’s why I am honored and humbled to dub thee—High King Eliot the Kind.”

Eliot’s whole face crumpled like burned parchment. His jaw trembled and his eyes closed as the crown hit his head, taking a deep breath. As he stood back up, to the subdued claps of the noble crowd surrounding them, he wrapped Julia in a tight hug, whispering in her ear. Then he stood tall, looking every bit the High King he was in his blood, as he nodded in austere acknowledgment of the crowd around them as everyone kneeled to bow in unison.

But when their eyes met across the sand, Eliot gave him a small smile and a sheepish little shrug.
“—crack the fuckers wide open and add a spicy little cherry on top,” Margo finished as he broke out of his thoughts. Quentin may have missed a couple of things. “Ta-da, motherfuckers. Bridge infrastructure.”

“I love when you’re needlessly violent,” Eliot purred. “And erotic, for that matter.”

Yeah, Quentin hadn’t totally gotten the context. But the weird segue meant their topic had switched to purely political matters, so it wouldn’t be as weird for him to interrupt. Cracking out the tension in his neck, he took a deep breath and licked his lips. He could do this.

Loudly clomping his feet on the ground and coughing for good measure, Quentin slowly peeked his head around the corner just as their voices had registered him with a what the fuck was that? He gave them a tiny wave and Margo arched an eyebrow.

Eliot blinked from where he was lounging in bed. “Quentin.”

Quentin stepped into the room, shocked that his legs were working as he drank in the sight of the High King. His mouth went dry, eyes fixed on Eliot’s bare chest and long neck, washed in golden candlelight. He wore a purple silk robe that looked really nice, curls loose and mussed atop his head. He was sprawled out on about a hundred throw pillows, and over about a hundred more pieces of paperwork.

He looked exhausted and beautiful.

“Hi, uh, sorry,” Quentin said with a swallow, glad that his voice wasn’t wobbling too much. “The guards let me in. Do you have a second?”

“Of course,” Eliot said, sitting up. His robe slid off his shoulder as he did. “Is everything okay?”

“Oh, yeah,” Quentin said, throat tightening up again. Was he a total fucking idiot? “I just—uh, wanted to run something by you. Um, in private, if you don’t mind.”

As Eliot pinched his brow in deeper confusion, Margo leaned across the bed and waved her whole arm in his face. “Hi Quentin.”

“Hey Margo,” Quentin sighed. She was still fully dressed for the day and he was wearing his sleepwear from the Cove. The soft, worn fabric had been thoroughly washed, but he swore it still smelled like the sea. He loved it, but it also made him feel inadequate. Shocker.

Margo clucked her tongue. “How’s my favorite Fillorian?”

“I’d be flattered but I feel like that’s a low bar for you,” Quentin said and Margo scrunched her nose in delight. “But I’m good. How, uh, how are you?”

“Oh, I’m fabulous,” she said, perching on the bed and leaning back on one arm. “You know, I actually have a lot of stories I should tell you. Wanna hear?”

“Bambi,” Eliot said warningly.

Quentin twitched his lips down so he didn’t smile. It was such a weird nickname. But he was also suddenly aware that he was the one interrupting their meeting. Or sleepover, or whatever. Maybe that was rude.
He pointed behind his shoulder with a frown, “Um, if it’s a bad time, I can come back.”

“Don’t be silly,” Eliot said, waving his hand. “Margo was just leaving.”

Margo twisted on her hips to stare at him. “Was I?”

“You were,” Eliot said blithely, smiling without looking at her.

At that, Margo snorted, before dropping a sharp kiss on Eliot’s cheek. Then she stood, strutted over to Quentin, and looked down his whole body like she was judging, evaluating. She put her hands on her hips and rolled her mouth into easy superiority, eyes glinting.

“Nice jammies,” Margo murmured.

“Thanks,” Quentin mumbled.

With a grin at that, she blew another kiss to Eliot from over her shoulder before sauntering off like she’d never been there. Quentin turned around to see Eliot darkly glaring at her retreating form. But when their eyes met, he was all tired friendliness.

“So what’s going on, Quentin?” Eliot asked, warmer than the fire. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

It was a good question.

Luckily, Quentin had already thought of a good answer.

“So, like,” he said, holding out his hands even as they shook, “I’ve been thinking about the primary drivers of the mammalian cerebrum.”

“Oh,” Eliot said, eyebrows twisting in disbelief. “Ah, should I take notes? Is this a talking animal thing?”

Quentin clenched his jaw. Okay, alright, maybe this wasn’t as clear as it sounded in his own head.

“Um, no. I’m more talking about, uh—how humans have basic needs, like you know, air, food, water, and, uh, you know—”

He decided to just fucking go for it. “—Sex.”

Eliot’s mouth fell open. “Quentin.”

“So, like, as a class, or even as a genus, we seek physical connection with others members of our species, right? It’s, like, biological, I think,” Quentin said, pacing back and forth by the foot of the bed. “Though, uh, I know asexuality is a thing and I wouldn’t ever want to deny that as part of the human spectrum of identity by ascribing—”

“Quentin.”

“No, uh, sorry,” Quentin squeezed his eyes shut tight. He was losing focus. “My point is—our, as in you and I, our respective biologies follow a specific order and—and have some specific requirements that are—”

“Quentin.”

“That are practical, even if not, like, the thing we or, uh, you would have chosen out of every possible option at your disposal, right?” He licked his lips and stared down at his hands, gathering
all his words to the finish. “But maybe that’s a—a—an unfair bar to put on ourselves when we have an immovable reality in front of us that was, like, I don’t know, at least kind of good the first time? I thought? Or maybe I’m losing my mind and I don’t—”

“Quentin,” Eliot said, voice commanding and eyes dark. “Are you asking me to fuck you?”

His stomach clenched, pooling hot and cold. The last of his nerve fluttered like butterflies in a locked cage. But he forced himself to look his husband in the eye and answer truthfully.

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“Um, if it’s not a bother.”

Eliot’s mouth formed a wobbly smile. “A bother?”

Quentin shrugged, flicking his eyes over at the pile of messy parchment. “You seem busy.”

“I have never been less busy in my life,” Eliot said, low as the flickering light. He sat up, reaching his long body toward Quentin. “Come here.”

He wrapped his hand around his wrist and tugged, an invitation onto the bed. Quentin shivered, following to splay a hand across Eliot’s chest. His fingers finally tangled into that teasing smatter of dark hair and his thumb brushed against the stiff fabric of the robe, golden and glinting at the edges. Eliot wound an arm around his waist and pulled until they were pressed together.

“How do you want me?” Eliot scraped his teeth against the hinge of his jaw, hand sliding up his thigh. Quentin let his eyes fall shut.

“I want—um, I want—” he breathed out, gripping at Eliot’s shoulders, unbalanced. “I—”

“Yes?” Eliot nosed at his cheek, stroked a free thumb against his jawline. He pressed a soft kiss to his chin, then to his nose, the corner of his eye, tingling and light and teasing. “I need you to use your words, please.”

Quentin’s heart was out of control, beating frantically, as he tilted his head back, exposing his throat to Eliot. “I—I, uh, I—shit—”

He knew what he wanted. But he had no fucking idea what he wanted. The possibilities were dizzying, overwhelming. He wanted everything.

With a soft chuckle, Eliot palmed at his already painfully hard dick, just grazing over the thin fabric. Quentin let out a whimper at the touch, which would have been embarrassing if Eliot hadn’t immediately sucked at his pulse point at the sound.

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“Anything,” Eliot whispered into his ear, rolling the soft skin between his teeth. “God, anything you want, please just name it.”

“Kiss me,” Quentin said through a moan, grinding into Eliot’s hand. “Like you did in the hallway, like—like—please.”

Eliot wrapped his other hand around the nape of Quentin’s neck and smiled, brows quirking like it was the last thing he expected to hear. But he complied, leaning in until their mouths melted together. At the brush of soft and slow lips, sparks rushed down Quentin’s whole body.

It was different this time.

It wasn’t kissing Lord Eliot of New York, the witty and haughty Earthling with haunted eyes and
pristine fashion who was taking on a task he didn’t understand. It wasn’t even kissing High King Eliot, strong and bold and always ready to make a point. It was—or it felt like—kissing Eliot, sharp and soft and warm and cool Eliot, who valued his help and enjoyed his company. Eliot, who made dirty jokes and gossiped about the guards’ love lives. Eliot, who doted on Margo and baked cupcakes in his rare spare time. Eliot, who could sneer down an enemy with one lip curl and Eliot, who earned his title every day, in new and surprising ways. Eliot, who claimed not to care about policy but always had his eyes buried in *History of Political Magic* when he thought no one was looking. Who was fair and caring and good, in spite of all his apparent instincts, when he thought no one was looking.

But Quentin was always looking.

It wasn’t love. It wasn’t romance. He knew that. Eliot had been extremely clear about that. Even if he occasionally suffered from flights of fancy, Quentin wasn’t Fen. He knew the score, he knew that there was no other world where this would be happening between them. No other world where Eliot would want Quentin. It was better to know that, better to be aware of the facts. He knew that.

But still—whatever it was, it was good. Really good. Brain-melting good. For once in his fucking life, it was something that felt simple. Didn’t he deserve that, after so much godsdamned uncertainty and godsdamned complexity for the whole of his life? Even if Eliot was only doing him a favor, it was easy, easy enough that he could at least pretend. Gods, he wanted to pretend.

“Quentin,” Eliot murmured, breathy and soft into his lips, hands sliding higher into his hair. “God, you taste so good.”

He wanted to burst into the embrace, needy and restless. But Eliot slowed him, as if by instinct, moving with that quick and efficient effortlessness that drove Quentin insane. Their tongues slid together, deep and near tender. There was part of Quentin that wanted to stay like that, cushioned between colorful pillows and Eliot’s beautiful body, kissing for hours.

But his hands had a mind of their own. They trailed up the velvety skin of his husband’s naked thighs and loosened his robe, aching for skin and friction and touch. Eliot shifted with a gasp, pressing into Quentin as he cupped his ass and bit his lower lip.

“Oh, baby, you should have come to me ages ago,” Eliot said, nosing a line back down his cheek. “Shit.”

Quentin frowned. “I didn’t think you wanted—”

Eliot answered with a groaning kiss, rolling on top of him. Quentin sunk down into the throw pillows, heart racing as Eliot worked off his clothes and pressed his lips against every new inch of bare skin he could find. His fancy robe laid in a rumpled pile beside them and Quentin couldn’t stop staring at him, at the alabaster lines, his perfect dark hair, his pebbled nipples, his dick.

“Fuck, you’re still gorgeous,” Eliot said, dragging his eyes all across Quentin, like Quentin was the wonder. “I’m gonna blow you now if that’s okay.”

“Yeah, uh,” Quentin laughed, a sharp and giddy sound as Eliot licked a long stripe down his chest, kissing and biting at his stomach. “That’s—that’s not a problem.”

“Yeah?” Eliot chuckled. “Not a bother?”

“Shut up,” Quentin breathed out, sliding his hands into the temptation of curls. Whether in retaliation or just because he felt like it, Eliot bit down on his hip bone, while slowly wrapping his
hand around him and stroking.

Quentin bucked once, seeing stars. “Fuck, Eliot—shit. Please, gods—”

“Shh, it’s okay, I’ll take care of you,” Eliot shushed, right before sucking the tip of his dick right into the heat of his mouth.

Quentin let out a yelping sound, the sight of Eliot sinking down on him almost as unbearable as how good it felt. His ribs convulsed with fast breaths and a racing heart, working overtime to keep his body from ripping apart at the seams.

“Oh my gods, Eliot,” he moaned out, tightening his grip into his husband’s scalp, thanking Ember for his strength and Umber for his wisdom. “Please don’t stop. Don’t stop, don’t—”

The edge of Eliot’s mouth sparked up into an arrogant, well-earned smile, all while obeying Quentin’s command. He didn’t stop. The king painstakingly worked his way down, all warm pressure and soul-piercing eyes that never left his, rendering him to dust, never giving him one single chance. Eliot moved his tongue and lips in a delirious pace, in a worshipful rhythm, relentless in his pursuit of perfection until Quentin let go. Until he let it be simple, let it be right.

Rocking his head back, the sins of Fillory melted away, and they were just two men.

After, in a sweaty and sated tangle, Quentin closed his eyes and rested his cheek along the satiny fabric of a green throw pillow. Beside him, sprawled out and speaking in quick low tones, Eliot ran his fingers lazily through his hair. It was like he was petting a cat. A boneless and well-fucked cat.

“—wasn’t that I didn’t want to,” Eliot finished explaining, practical and casual like they were discussing the day’s schedule. “It was that I worried there was no way to communicate my want without making you feel forced.”

Quentin blinked his eyes up at him, confused. “Forced?”

“You know,” Eliot said with a breathy laugh. He swallowed and looked away. “Because I’m your king.”

It wasn’t that Quentin had forgotten that. That was impossible to forget. But it genuinely hadn’t crossed his mind that Eliot would think he would ever feel obligated, like Eliot was one of those other kings, ones who had expectations for their consort. He had more than proven that he wasn’t like that, had kept his distance so well, even in all their interactions, that Quentin had actually thought he wasn’t even interested. Like, at all. He was respectful and courteous and gentler than he ever would have imagined, ever could have dreamed of.

“I—I wouldn’t have felt forced,” Quentin said honestly. He rolled onto his back, held up by his elbows to look at Eliot seriously. “Not by you.”

“I appreciate that, at least as the fucking lowest possible bar,” Eliot said with a laugh. He leaned forward and pressed a surprise kiss to Quentin’s mouth, a soft and languid thing. “But the fact that we have to even have this conversation makes or made things less simple than they normally would be.”
Quentin wanted to know everything about Eliot. Every day, he wanted to know more and every day, he was haunted by how little he actually knew. “What would normal look like for you?”

“Anything but this,” Eliot said wryly, but didn’t elaborate. He didn’t often elaborate. Quentin was the human embodiment of elaboration and he rested his head on Eliot’s chest with a sigh, kissing his sternum.

“I was actually just thinking that this—uh, this feels simple,” he said, petting and twirling chest hair, over and around his fingers. “To me.”

Eliot brushed his nose along his hairline and pressed a firm kiss to the crown of his head. “You continually surprise.”

Quentin’s heart lurched and he tilted his head up, meeting his eyes. “Bad thing?”

Sighing, Eliot pet his hair back from his face and smiled, a touch exasperated.

“How about this?” He slid his fingers against his scalp, scratching and massaging in circles. “Presume I mean anything I say in the most neutral-to-positive light possible unless I tell you otherwise.”

“I can do my best,” Quentin said with a shrug. He was never going to make promises he couldn’t keep. Or at least, he would prefer to try his absolute best to never make promises he couldn’t keep.

“There you go,” Eliot said with a smile. Then he let out a deep breath, trailing his hand down Quentin’s still-flushed back, like he just wanted to touch him for the sake of it. “But no, you’re right. This is simple in the ways that matter. We’re friends, or on our way there, and we’re attracted to each other. Release is good.”

Quentin furrowed his brow, cursing the tiny sharp point poking at his heart. “Yeah.”

“It works, this thing between us, in all ways. Like you said. And I think we’re a good team so far,” Eliot spoke casually, almost faraway, before he snorted. “Plus, our mammalian cerebrums will thank us.”

_Poke, poke, poke._ “Yeah.”

“It is what it is, right?” Eliot stretched his long neck along the pillows, turning his face away. “Even if this wouldn’t be our choice, it’s still—it works, right?”

“Yes,” Quentin said, flat. But when Eliot darted a tentative look at him, he melted, just a little. “Yeah, it works. I think it works.”

Eliot took a deep breath and swallowed. “So is it okay if I sometimes—if I approach you? For…?”

“Yeah,” Quentin snorted that time. “Safe to say that’s fine.”

“Okay then,” Eliot said, lips pulling up and eyes softening. But then they went firm and serious again. “To be clear, you can say no at any time. No questions asked.”

It wasn’t funny. It shouldn’t have been funny. But Quentin bit his lip to stop a laugh. “All the other High Kings are rolling in their graves at your progressive agenda.”

“Oh, but wait until they hear about my plans for music education,” Eliot said with an eyebrow waggle. “The bards will sing nothing but Lady Gaga by year’s end.”
“Whoever that is,” Quentin said as he snuggled deeper into the pillows. “I’m sure the people won’t riot over the lack of Feliz Navidad at all.”

They would literally riot. If only José Feliciano knew.

But Eliot gave him an odd look, throwing his arms up on the pillows. “What music did you listen to on Earth?”

That sent a bittersweet pang to his heart. Quentin missed Earth music, all the time. It had so much more variety and so many more elements of fascination, of surprise and spark. It had a life to it, held private within every song, even when it was terrible.


“Jesus,” Eliot said, eyes narrowed. “Okay. So you were predictable.”

Quentin wasn’t sure what was predictable about those specific musical choices, but he also didn’t have as extensive of an Earth background as Eliot. He was trying to be open minded to everything they said. They knew better than him.

(He also purposefully left out his unironic enjoyment of Celine Dion. Some things were just for him.)

But Eliot was still looking at him—staring—trying to puzzle something together. Self-conscious, Quentin darted his eyes around the bed and landed on the sweet bliss of parchment.

“So, uh, what were you working on?”

“Citizen petitions,” Eliot said with a grand sigh. He threw his arm across his eyes, dramatic. “I want everyone to stop wanting things.”

Quentin snorted. There was no way Fillorians were going to be anything but nagging and vicious, no matter what he did. “Good luck with that.”

“I don’t feel like you’re being sincere,” Eliot said lightly, arm unmoving. Quentin smiled into the knit blanket, sunset colored and soft over his naked lap.

He reached across Eliot to grab the nearest page and wagged it at his husband. “Need any help?”

“Oh my god, that would be amazing,” Eliot said, as breathless and grateful as when he came. He sat up and gave Quentin a soft smile. “Thank you.”

“That’s what I’m here for,” Quentin said, holding his hands out.

Eliot shot him a sidelong glance, like he was about to say something suggestive. But he must have rejected whatever indecent quip was on his tongue. He just shook his head and grabbed his robe to slide it back on, tying at the waist.

“Oh, relaxing in bed, après-sex with paperwork,” Eliot said, shuffling a few new petitions into a fanned pile. “We’re like a couple of DINKs.”

Quentin wasn’t familiar with that term. “Is that another word for spouse? Like twink?”

Eliot bit his lip. “Uh, is that what they taught you at Exeter?”
“No, Margo used it once,” Quentin explained. “She said I’m your—”

“Jesus. No,” Eliot said with a shoulder shaking laugh. “No, DINK stands for double-income, no kids. It’s like a type of professional couple, with class connotations.”

“So like yuppies,” Quentin said, snapping his fingers. But he only got that same odd look in return.

“Sort of,” Eliot said, pursing his lips. “Haven’t heard that expression in awhile though.”

“They talked about yuppies a lot when I was in school,” Quentin said with a warm laugh. “Because of, you know, the shows, uh, Friends and Seinfeld. Started by Thirtysomething, a little while before.”

The odd look intensified. “Thirtysomething.”

“Yeah, I watched the series on VHS once,” Quentin said. It had kind of been Baby Boomer nonsense. He didn’t get it. “It was okay, I guess.”

Eliot smiled slowly, leaning forward on his elbows. “Okay, Quentin. I’m going to ask you a very important question now and I need you to be completely honest with me, okay?”

“Uh, of course,” Quentin said. His heart stuttered anxiously. “I—uh, I mean, yeah. Is everything —?”

But before he could finish, Eliot raised his hand in the air for silence. “What year did you graduate from high school?”

“Class of ‘97,” Quentin said, brushing past that to get to what actually mattered. “But what’s—?”

Eliot laughed, husky and deep, as he touched the tip of his tongue to his teeth. “Oh, I knew you were a fucking time traveler.”

It was really sexy, but Quentin was confused.

“Wait, when did you think I—?” He twitched his face into a frown. “What—what year is it on Earth right now?”

Time could get weird between Earth and Fillory.

“It’s 2017,” Eliot said slowly, eyebrows high. “Did you not know that?”

… But usually not that weird.

The blood drained from his face. “Twenty years have passed?”

Quentin’s chest felt tight and he flopped back on the bed. Twenty years. That meant his high school girlfriend, Ashley, was almost forty years old. It meant Bill Clinton definitely wasn’t president anymore. It meant Voyager probably wasn’t on the air. It meant—it meant—

“Oh shit. Oh my gods,” Quentin grabbed at his husband’s arm, the purple silk robe bunching under his tight fingers. “Oh gods.”

Eliot covered his hand with his, concern spiking in his eyes. “What is it?”

Quentin took a deep breath, willing the panic to subside. “Whatever happened with Y2K?”
Eliot paused to blink and a new wave of fear gripped icy at his heart. Quentin sat up and tapped his fingers, swallowing.

“Was it—okay, was it really bad? I told everyone before I left to make sure they stocked up on canned goods and water,” Quentin said, letting out a shaky breath. “But I didn’t want to be a tin-foil hat kinda guy, right? So I didn’t push it that much but now—I mean—was it—how bad was it? Just tell me.”

After another moment, Eliot laughed.

It was a small breathless sound, almost fond. Then he smiled with his whole face, like Quentin had said something outrageous and endearing all at once.

“Oh, no,” Eliot assured him, biting his lip. His eyes were watery. “Sorry, no. It was fine.”

Quentin pressed his hand to his heart, trying to slow its pace. “Are you sure?”


“Thank gods,” Quentin said, shoulders slumping down. He had been really worried about the people in hospitals in particular. He was such an asshole for forgetting about it. Fuck, what else had he forgotten? What else had happened?

But when he turned to ask Eliot, his husband was just smiling down at the papers in his lap. “You’re very cute.”

There was that word again.

Everything else disintegrated.

Quentin tucked his hair behind his ears and blushed. “Uh, hey, uh, what exactly do you mean by that? When you say I’m cute, do you mean, like—?”

“It’s impolite to fish for compliments from someone who’s just had your dick in his mouth,” Eliot said smoothly, rearranging the petitions into a neat pile. “Now, are we going to get some work done or not, Mr. Coldwater? You’ve been nothing but a distraction.”

“Sorry,” Quentin said quickly, sitting up and pulling up the covers as he did. “Yeah, no, my bad.”

But Eliot bit the inside of his cheek and looked away, still smiling. “Jesus.”

“What about this one?” Quentin squinted down at the shaky calligraphy, clearly written held between blunt teeth. “It’s between a goat clan and the Northern Marsh Llamas.”

“Oh, yes,” Eliot said with a scowl. “The dispute regarding the disruption of the goats’ prized hedges through, quote, boisterous merrymaking. I already rejected that one.”

Quentin furrowed his brow. “Wait, you—rejected it? Why would you reject it?”

“Because there’s no planet, even one as strange as this, where a king should be involved in that kind of petty minutiae,” Eliot said, holding up another paper to the light. “I recommended that they form an HOA and leave me the fuck alone. Paraphrased, of course.”

With a sigh, Quentin reached over the side of the bed and pulled on his pants. This wasn’t going to be the kind of conversation in which one should be pantsless.
“The disdain in your voice,” he said carefully, as sat crossed legged on the bed, “could probably be
taken down, like, three or four notches.”

“It’s not so much disdain as incredulity,” Eliot said, blowing air out his mouth so hard his cheeks
puffed out. “I’ve got important shit to deal with. As in actual shit, if you’ll recall.”

“It just—it just does,” Quenitin said, a prick of annoyance shooting his hands out. “It matters
because it matters.”

“Not the most compelling argument I’ve ever heard,” Eliot said softly, peering down over his nose.
Even when he was being kind of a dick, he was gorgeous. Maybe especially then. It was super
annoying.

“It matters because,” Quentin ran his teeth over his lips, taking a deep breath. He didn’t want to
stammer when he said this. “It matters because the life of the average Fillorian is hardship,
desperation, and more often than not, early death. So these minutiae , these petty
concerns are
things that a good leader can actually change. They’re things they can actually… make better. In a
world where there’s so little better , that’s all the difference, you know? Glimmers of hope in a
dark abyss.”

He swallowed, looking down at his hands. He was acutely aware of Eliot’s stillness beside him, his
silence. He hoped he hadn’t fucked up too badly. Been too presumptuous or something.

After a moment, Eliot sat up slowly. His eyes were pinned on Quentin in the low firelight. He
didn’t say anything. Feeling awkward and more than a little exposed, Quentin cleared his throat
and shrugged his shoulders tight against his jaw.

“You should handle the citizen petitions,” Eliot finally said, his voice like crumpled velvet.
“You’d be better at it than me.”

It was a remarkably kind thing to say, which shouldn’t have surprised him. Eliot always insisted
that Queen Julia was “high” when she gave him his title. He claimed he would have preferred High
King Eliot the Debonair , said it was more in line with his “id.” From where Quentin sat though,
that wasn’t true.

Still, Quentin shook his head. “They don’t want my help. They want you to see them, to hear
them.”

“Hope I’m worthy of that,” Eliot said, so quiet that the whisper of candlelight almost drowned it
out. Then he laughed, more casually. “Maybe someday.”

“The fact that you want to be is more than any of the rulers in my lifetime or, um, even my father’s
lifetime,” Quentin said, ducking his head to meet Eliot’s eyes. “That’s extraordinary, honestly. It’s
why I trust you. Or, like, I’m really starting to.”

It was kind of remarkable how quickly he was starting to trust Eliot, both as a king and a man. He
never would have expected it when he first met him.

Eliot was silent, brow wrinkled and eyes shifting through light and shadow, like he couldn’t
believe someone had said that to him. Warmth unfurling in his chest, Quentin almost reached up to
softly kiss his mouth. He wanted to brush his loose curls back and whisper soft assurances, the
kinds of things Quentin wished someone would whisper to him.

But that wasn’t who they were. Which was okay.
“Well, that’s terrifying,” Eliot said with a tight grimace, though his voice was delicate. “No pressure or anything.”

“Yeah, but you know,” Quentin shrugged, maybe helplessly. “Uh, I think the best leaders are probably always a little scared shitless.”

At that, Eliot cracked a smile, wolfish and wide. “Oh, I’m gonna kill it then.”

Quentin laughed, surprising himself with the fullness of the sound. Eliot softened and he reached his hand out to tuck a fallen hair behind his ear.

“See?” Eliot said, stroking his thumb down the curve of his jaw. It tingled. “Cute.”

“You’re cute,” Quentin grumbled petulantly. He wanted to lean into his touch. He wanted to suck his dick again.

(He sunk down on Eliot, finally, finally, finally getting that gorgeous dick in his mouth. It had been so long—too long—and he was going to savor the moment, the stretch, the burn, the taste, the insane length of him. He licked up the head, tracing the tip of his tongue along the sensitive slit. Eliot let out a breathless moan, and Quentin swallowed him down as far as he could go.

“Oh, fuck, Quentin,” Eliot said, rocking his head back. His thumb traced the shell of his ear as his hips bucked once. “That’s it, baby. That’s—oh, mother of god, fucking hell.”

As his husband braced himself on the bed, hands clenching the sheets and eyes going dazed, Quentin would have smirked as he reached a coarse bramble of dark hair. But his lips were a little busy. )

But these dreams were not meant to be.

Eliot smirked, holding up a new petition and sighing. “So, next up: ‘We the undersigned formally request that the king lower the taxes on the citizens of Fillory.’” He glanced over and clicked his tongue. “What’s your take, Whitespire Whisperer?”

“I mean, I’m not going to have something heartfelt to say about all of them.”

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tbc.

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Chapter End Notes

I'm on Tumblr! Find me @HMGfanfic. :)

Roll to Me

Chapter Summary

"So if you want to talk the night through / Guess who will be there?

Chapter Notes

Thank you all so much for the lovely, lovely comments on the last chapter! I just wanted to let you know that I'll be responding to them over the weekend, but I'm home with a sick kiddo who needs pretty much constant attention so I wanted to prioritize getting this guy out first while I could. But seriously, I appreciate all of you so much--commenters, kudos-leavers, and readers all. <3

Three Months Later

* 

Castle Whitespire
Southernhaven Province, Fillory

* 

A Tuesday of Beginning Wintermoon
Year Fortyember

* 

Friday, January 27, 2017

Eliot didn’t usually fuck boys more than a handful of times. Even then, it had only been by necessity.

At Brakebills, he’d been a blue whale in a puddle, where his class of sixty or so included maybe eight or nine fuckable prospects. Slim pickings, to say the least. But all Hope hadn’t been entirely lost—there were still alumni, occasional faculty members, visiting international students, Encanto Oculto, random muggles out in the great cities yonder... really, plenty of ways to be creative once the buffet at his easiest disposal had run low and only the old cantaloupe remained. For so long, he
had never wanted for varied and interesting company. For even longer, he had never wanted anything but varied and interesting company, save the singular constancy of his perfect tiger shark partner-in-crime.

Suffice to say, Quentin was new territory.

They were married, but they weren’t together. They fucked like rabbits, but they only kissed in public if Tick Pickwick was looking at them. They spent nearly every waking minute together, but they were very much strangers from alien planets. Eliot had no tricks up his sleeve, no moves in his arsenal for this turn of events. Quentin managed to make him feel both more at ease and more tripped up with a single stammering um, uh than anything else in his entire life.

There were times where it was as easy as breathing, natural and sustaining. Like when Quentin rolled his eyes and smiled, or shot back a nerdy, snarky joke at Eliot’s cool sophistication. But other times, Eliot was trapped on a sunken ship, legs broken under the wreckage and water filling his lungs, all from watching Quentin run his thumbnail under his lower lip, squinting in concentration. Those were the times he couldn’t move, couldn’t breathe, where he was at the mercy of a gentle, unassuming Fillorian shipkeeper, who was also the most terrifyingly complex person Eliot had met in his life. Honestly, sometimes, he didn’t really know what to do about it.

But one thing Eliot always knew he could do was make a damn good cocktail.

The throne room was empty, but the fires flickered bright as the evening slipped well into nightfall. The rest of the monarchs had retired to their chambers—or back to Earth, again, in the case of Julia, which was fine, whatever—but Eliot was mixing concoctions, that favorite meditation from a lifetime long gone. He poured a shot of the newest alcohol into the swirling mixture, moving with a surety and fluidity he hadn’t managed since leaving Brakebills. Meanwhile, at the nearby table, Quentin sat squatting on a chair, hands buried in his hair as he hunched over a giant book about criminal justice vis-à-vis weasel insider trading. Which wasn’t what it sounded like.

“—issue is that they’re disenfranchised,” Quentin explained out loud, tapping his fingers on the pages in a beatless rhythm. “So, like, we’d be compounding the problem over time with harsher punishments. I think if we did, uh, a variation on community service for repeat offenders along with well-rounded education, then maybe that would give the right incentive to stop grave robbing kidneys for lack of any other option, right?”

Eliot smiled as he plopped three ice cubes in the finished drink. “For the record, it’s been thoroughly noted that you think Fillory needs stronger public education.”

“It’s the societal rotten core,” Quentin said, his eyes flaring with that intoxicating intensity that rippled right through Eliot every time.

But speaking of intoxication—

“Here, try this,” Eliot said, holding the goblet out with a flourish. “You need a break.”

Quentin accepted it but lowered his brow over the rim with an insulting air of suspicion. “What is it?”

It was his greatest creation yet. It was a stroke of ingenuity and dazzle.

“A Fillorian margarita,” Eliot said with a bow. “You, sir, get the honor of the first sip.”

“Fine,” Quentin said with a bitchy little eye roll. He didn’t like being interrupted. Tough shit. “Bottom’s up.”
“Sip it, you ingrate,” Eliot commanded as Quentin tilted the whole thing back into his mouth.

But instead of responding, Quentin squeaked, freezing in his chair with wide eyes. His cheeks ballooned like a chipmunk, liquid sloshing around. Then slowly, painfully slowly, he swallowed. Eliot could trace the line of the alcohol as it gulped down and left Quentin green around the gills.

“Uh. Okay,” Quentin cleared his throat. He licked his lips. Then he cleared his throat again, hand grasping at his Adam’s apple. “So. Um. What’s—uh, what’s this made of exactly?”

“It’s a work in progress,” Eliot said, crossing his arms. The intricate silver threads of his sleeves shone in the firelight. Gods bless the magic that gave him his immaculate wardrobe.

Quentin turned wide eyes over to him, jabbing a finger downward. “What the hell is in this, Eliot?”

“The thanks I get for trying to do something nice,” Eliot snapped, grabbing at the drink. But his shithead of a husband held the goblet out in the opposite direction, just out of his considerable reach.

Then Quentin snorted, lips quavering.

“Do. Or do not,” he droned, in a frog voice. “There is no try.”

Eliot’s heart slammed in his chest.

His fingers moved to his lips to hide the sun-bright smile trying its best to burst out. He couldn’t give him the satisfaction. He couldn’t. It went against his every fiber, his every atom. He had to remain calm and cool. He was a king, goddammit.

But the smile won. “Oh my god.”

“Shut up,” Quentin huffed, cheeks burning characteristic red. He pushed his hair back, grumping into himself.

Eliot brought his hands together in a prayer position. “Please use that voice again.”

“Fuck you.”

“You’re a natural actor.”

“Fuck you,” Quentin said, sloshing the affectionately crafted libation in his direction. “This is the worst drink I’ve ever had in my life.”

“But because you’re a Philistine,” Eliot accused sharply over the smallest pang of hurt in his stomach.

“That’s not relevant to how bad this is,” Quentin countered. “Seriously, what did you use?”

“It’s tangfruit wine, sugar, salt, and the coup de grace—agave alcohol,” Eliot said with a tight smile. “It’s as close as possible. I’m working with meager shit here.”

But Quentin narrowed his eyes. “Wait, like, agave from Earth?”

“No, from Fillory,” Eliot said with a quick nod over at the translucent blue bottle. “I sent Benedict to get a bundle of it.”

Quentin’s smile grew into that one he sometimes got, when Eliot had charmed or amused him or
both. It usually made his feet feel lighter, skipping over the air. But this time it sparked a thudding fire of foreboding.

“Um, okay, so it’s not agave,” Quentin said with all the patience of a cloying teacher. “It’s pronounced AG-ehv here. It’s medicinal grade, meant for treating river serpent wounds.”

“That can’t be right,” Eliot said with a scoff. It smelled exactly like tequila. Maybe mezcal, with that touch of smokiness. But it was obviously from the same basic kind of plant and distilling process.

“Did you even try it?”

… He hadn’t.

Eliot was preoccupied by kingship and matters of state and pretty boys and the intricacies of the Fillorian black market, and he had cut a couple of corners. But it was fine, because he knew how to make a cocktail better than his heart knew how to pump blood.

So Eliot scoffed. “It was a dramatic reveal.”

“I don’t know shit about making drinks,” Quentin said slowly, “but I’m pretty sure you’re supposed to at least try the discrete—”

He did not need amateurs with no taste to explain his process to him. “I told you, you had the honor of the first sip. I meant that from the bottom of my—”

“Try it,” Quentin said, holding out the goblet as his hair fell over his eyes. “Just—just fucking try it.”

With a tetchy sigh, Eliot grabbed it and took a big sip. Quentin slumped down into the chair, sitting almost like a human, eyes glued up at him.

The first wave of flavor was sour and bitter.

—The second wave was indescribable.

“Holy god, motherfucking fuck,” Eliot spit the liquid out all over the stone floor, scrubbing at his mouth until it was raw. “That’s horrifying.”

Quentin pinched the bridge of his nose. “Yeah.”

“Jesus,” Eliot said, sticking his tongue as far out as it could go as he fell into the chair next to Quentin. “Fuck, you were being nice.”

“I was being super nice.”

“Oh my god, is it even safe to drink?” Eliot stared at him, his stomach roiling and skin jumping. “You swallowed it.”

Quentin shook his head, sighing into his hands. “Good chance I’ll be dead in the next hour.”

He was stone faced, except for tiny wiggles at the corners of his lips. Eliot broke, cracking up and laughing into his lap until Quentin joined, eyes crinkling and shoulder blades bouncing.

“I’m so sorry,” Eliot laughed, laying a hand on Quentin’s knee. “Oh my god, what the fuck?”
“Well, you know,” Quentin said with a shivering snort. “You can, uh, make it up to me.”

Eliot smiled. “I’ll make Penny get you a nice bottle of Lagavulin next time he’s on Earth.”

“I don’t know what that is, but I was actually thinking more, like—” Quentin placed his hand over Eliot’s, sliding them up his thigh.

Eliot stopped breathing.

His eyes flicked down to the bare stretch of his husband’s collarbone, visible under his loose bateau shirt. The trace shadows flickered in the moving firelight, and Eliot dug his fingers into the soft fabric and softer skin.

“So like… last hour on Earth kind of thing?” Eliot dropped his voice low, moving closer. He ran a finger across the orange-gold light on Quentin’s clavicle, leaving a satisfying trail of gooseflesh in its wake. Quentin’s eyelashes fell to his cheeks with a tremble.

“Or, you know, um,” he said, thumbing at Eliot’s jaw, up to his ear in soft, slow movements like water on silk. “More like a palate cleanser.”

“To be clear,” Eliot murmured, tugging him in by the waist until his tight little ass was in his hands. “Are you talking about sucking my cock?”

With a nod that brushed their lips together, Quentin brought his warm hands to Eliot’s face before kissing him properly, long and lingering. Eliot’s heart hammered, whole body on fire as he pulled him down, closer and closer. They kissed with open mouths, with tongues sliding and teeth biting and hands groping until breath was impossible.

“Quarters?” Quentin finally panted out after a thousand hours and not long enough, lips red and chafed. “We should—I don’t want a quickie. I want to blow you for awhile and then I want you to fuck me but—but first I want you to take your time working me, um, open.”

He was getting so good at asking for what he wanted. Eliot rolled their hips together. “Sounds amazing, baby.”

“You have the best hands, the fucking best hands,” Quentin moaned, bringing Eliot’s fingers to his lips. He sucked the tips of them, hot and wet. Eliot’s ears whooshed with frenzy. “Want—want your fingers in me, El.”

“Of course you do,” Eliot descended his lips down to his neck. “You take them so well. Made for it.”

Quentin was a goddamn dream.

At every word, he squirmed in his lap, desperate and delicious in every harsh edge, every soft touch. Every breath he took plastered against Eliot’s skin—his neck, his lips, his cheeks—like he wanted to be completely surrounded by Eliot, to be filled in every way by Eliot.

Quentin’s fluttering hands buried into his curls, his throat whined, his lean shoulders rippled with charged up want, his ass clenched as he ground into him in time with the way Eliot was fucking their tongues together in his perfect mouth, that warm and soft and sweet and snarky and so, so smart mouth that always found its way into his veins, like a hearth, like home, like heroin, like—

It was new territory.
But Eliot fancied himself an adventurer.

The Wintermoon season crept further on, that dreariest time of year. Quentin used to think he understood the season change on Fillory; how it happened, why it happened. But Earth was a massive spinning sphere, with orbiting axes angled toward or against its sun. Once he had more or less wrapped his mind around the galactic logistics of it all, it made sense. There was a sensible pattern, if nothing else. In contrast, Fillory’s seasons were inexplicable, even in their consistency.

Quentin settled back against the soft blanket, laid on the balcony’s hard marble. It was warm, charmed with a complex heating spell that Eliot could apparently do with his eyes closed and a hand tied behind his back. It seemed like Eliot could do most things like that. But especially magic.

“Hold your hands out wide, at a 45-degree angle,” Eliot said, long and lean beside him. “Then curl your pinkies at the exact same time, at the exact same speed.”

Quentin tried his best.

Eliot shook his head. “Don’t move any other fingers. You’ll start a wildfire.”

“Maybe teach me something with, like, less devastating consequences then,” Quentin grumbled, pulling his hands back in automatic defensiveness. He learned better by reading. He didn’t like scrutiny.

But Eliot said books were okay for understanding theory, but doing actual magic was an active state and needed hands on instruction and that it was just a reality, Quentin, my god. Eliot was an asshole.

(He wasn’t. It was very nice of him to spend his spare time this way. Quentin was the asshole.)

“Don’t grump at me,” Eliot said, wrapping his fingers around Quentin’s wrists. He brought them back out into the cold night air. “Focus on the space below your pinkies. Let them curl, slow as you need.”

Quentin didn’t want to be slow. He wanted to be quick, efficient, effortless. But he wanted to do magic more.

He tried again.

From his steady, winding hands, a flash of heat flew from his fingers and out into the sky, exploding in the distance. A glimmer of falling sparks.

Quentin sat up all at once, arms shaking and hands trembling, his whole body vibrating with magic and adrenaline. Every breath was as labored as his heartbeat was quick. “Holy shit—I—I did it, did you see—?”

“I saw,” Eliot said simply. He tucked one arm behind his head, still lying prone. “You have a knack for physical work.”

“I don’t think I have a knack for anything,” Quentin said breathlessly, skin buzzing. “But that was—that was—”
But whatever it was, Eliot didn’t seem to care. He sat up in a single graceful movement. Wrapping his arms around his knees, the king leveled Quentin with a glittering stare.

“You know, everyone struggles in some way with magic,” he said, rubbing his chin into his forearm. “I had a bitch of a time my first year, when we had to go to Antarctica.”

Quentin was still distracted by a sheer sense of ground-crushing awe, but couldn’t quite contain his confusion. He hadn’t thought people ever went to Antarctica, under any circumstances. It seemed even less habitable than the highest peak in Loria. “Like, the South Pole?”

“Indeed. We have a campus there,” Eliot said with a grin. Then it dimmed. “Had.”

Quentin darted a careful look at Eliot. Margo had told Quentin that Queen Julia had recklessly, pointlessly summoned an evil trickster god who murdered everyone because she felt like it and also because she sucks. It didn’t feel like the most nuanced explanation. But anytime he tried to broach the topic with Eliot, all he got was a roughly crafted witticism and sharp subject change.

So he didn’t push it, even as curiosity beat relentless with his heart. “I can’t imagine you struggling, uh, ever.”

Eliot let out a strange sound, so quick Quentin wasn’t sure if he’d imagined it.

Which, maybe he did, because in the next moment, not even a fraction of a blink later, Eliot leaned back on his arms and hummed. He tugged his smooth face into a thoughtful frown. “I suppose I have natural talents that I rely on. But I’m about as bad at psychic magic as Penny is at physical.”

King Penny also didn’t strike Quentin as actually bad at anything, which was irritating as fuck. But he didn’t contradict Eliot, mostly since it would be nice if Penny did suck at something. He could settle into that fantasy for awhile.

“Mayakovsky zeroed in on my inability, or resistance, or whatever,” Eliot continued, staring up at the sky. A glowing pink cloud bridged the moons. “Tortured me to force out basic shit, in some misguided belief that all Magicians can and should do all things.”

Holy shit, Quentin recognized that name. “Wait, Mischa Mayakovsky?” Eliot gave him an amused look. “We know him. He—he came to Fillory once, when I was a kid. They tried to give him the crown, but he told Dint to fuck off and then stole a bunch of moss from a protected environmental zone.”

“That sounds like him,” Eliot said with a snort. He gathered the fabric of his light purple pants, embroidered with dots of yellow flowers, and squeezed until his knuckles were white.

Quentin could still remember Mayakovsky's stern face, his black eyes. His strange voice. There was still a small part of him that feared what he now knew were Russian accents.

“He’s the second most wanted man in Fillory, after Paytono the Pigeon Pickler,” Quentin said. But when Eliot opened his mouth in question, he shook his head. “Uh, you definitely don’t want to know.”

“Well, Mayakovsky’s dead,” Eliot said with a flat thud to the word. “So the moss can rest easy.”

“It’s not sentient,” Quentin said even though that was definitely not the point. “But, I mean, sorry. I mean, uh, I offer my condolences.”

Quentin was weird about death. He wasn’t good at talking about it.
“That Mayakovsky died?” Eliot laughed, the sound sparking up to the sky like the magic had.
“God, no. I don’t give a shit. I should, but I don’t.”

Mayakovsky was a loathed man in Fillory, but Quentin had never felt any personal hatred towards him until that moment, as he took in the bitterness that rattled under Eliot’s teeth. Rage spiderwebbed across the span of his skin. “When you say he tortured you—?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Eliot said, straightening out his back, looking every bit a king even without his crown. “I lost the thread of what I was saying. All I meant was that magic is designed to be fucking difficult, especially when you’re tackling the shit that isn’t innate. Feeling like it’s hard doesn’t mean you don’t have talent or capability. It’s a burden as much as a gift, for all of us.”

Magic wasn’t a burden to Quentin. It was the only thing that made sense, the only thing he could rely on. But its role in his life had been—yeah. *Yeah*. For every problem magic had solved since he discovered it within him, something new and terrible had emerged in its place. It had saved his life. It had ruined his life. He resented it, he hated it, he loved it more than *anything*.

It was complicated.

Whatever Eliot read in his long silence led to a nudge at his hip, an inquisitive thumb knuckle at the bone. The moons glowed off the white stone around them, reflecting silver onto the strong lines of his husband’s face. Under his lashes, his charcoaled eyes were shadowed, haunted. But he smiled, making Quentin’s heart clutch in his chest.

“Let me show you something,” Eliot said quietly, taking Quentin’s shaking hands in his. He hadn’t even realized they were still trembling until they were enveloped by the steadier ones, the warmer ones. “Close your eyes and take a few deep breaths. It’ll calm you.”

His tongue was heavy in his mouth. “Yeah, opium tends to.”

“Uh, yeah, we’re gonna circle back to that, but just do it, okay?” Eliot squeezed his fingers and Quentin would have given him the universe if he asked. “Please.”

Quentin breathed in through his nose, out through his mouth. He closed his eyes, stomach tight as Eliot brushed trails of electricity along the soft skin of his palm, his skillful fingers—*gods*, his *fucking fingers*—uncovering nerve endings that had never been there before.

He took another breath in through his nose, out his mouth. Heat pooled downward, rushing toward his dick, as Eliot stayed silent, scraping the edge of his neat fingernails across his life line.

“Keep breathing,” Eliot said in undertone, lips unexpectedly close by, brushing against the shell of his ear. He wanted to lean in until Eliot flicked his masterful tongue in small circles inside his ear, until he gripped the small of his back and crawled over him, until Quentin drowned.

“Focus on your hands,” Eliot said, breath like wine and spiced cake. “Stop thinking. Focus on what you feel.”

Quentin really didn’t want to do that.

Quentin had never known how he felt about anything, in his entire life. It hadn’t changed with Eliot. The confusion had only *compounded* when he was with Eliot—his friend, his colleague, his husband, his king. The only thing he ever knew was that he wanted Eliot inside him, all the time, in every way. To stop him from thinking, to stop him from feeling whatever the fuck it is he felt in his hands and under his gaze. To just be.
“Quentin,” a chuckle coursed right down his spine. “Seriously, stop thinking. I can see your eyes moving.”

“I can’t,” Quentin breathed out, a spike piercing his sternum. “I don’t know how—all I do is think—never be able to—”

“Shh, shh,” Eliot soothed, his big hands bracketing his jaw. “You can. You can do this. Breathe.”

Quentin sobbed out a laugh, heart raw and dick painfully hard. “I don’t even know what I’m doing. I don’t know what I can—this is impossible—I’m impossible. You don’t know, you can’t. How can I—?”

Eliot kissed him.

It was featherlight, shared breath rather than passion. Eliot’s long fingers massaged into his scalp, a grounding pressure that blurred his thoughts and made his palms burst into tingling fire, radiating a brighter light than all the torches in the castle combined. Quentin gasped into his mouth, chasing freedom.

But then Eliot pulled away, gripping Quentin’s hair as he growled, “Breathe. Let go, Quentin.”

With a roar of frustration, years in the making, Quentin screamed on an exhale until he was floating.

His eyes snapped open, energy thrumming through his veins. The wind beat at his back, howling below in the void where his body was supposed to be, where gravity should have forced him down. His lungs filled with light and hazel eyes, peering up at him from the moonlit dark.

It only lasted a few seconds.

Then Quentin bounced down onto his ass with a thump, twisting his ankle as he crashed. His hands scrabbled at the warm blanket, sucking in shallow breaths in panic and awe.

But beside him, the High King was casually lounging, drinking from a goblet of wine. He lifted one half of his mouth with a wink. “Knew you had a knack for it.”

Quentin’s mouth dropped.

Eliot was the most irritating, exasperating, maddening person he had ever met in his entire fucking life. He pulled up on shaky legs, brushing back the long hair falling in his eyes. His jaw tightened as he stared Eliot down, as his skin whirred and sang with what he had done, with what Eliot had brought out of him, so quickly, so efficiently, so effortlessly.

So, naturally, Quentin smacked the goblet out of Eliot’s hands.

It clanged onto the ground, metal echoing on the marble, and the High King of Fillory pivoted his head to stare him down. But because he was Eliot, he did the most maddening thing he could have done.

—He said nothing.

The red liquid pooled to the corner, running down the lines of the balcony. And Eliot just tilted his head, stubble catching in the starlight. His lips pursed and his dark eyes shamelessly dragged down Quentin’s body with a low hum of appreciation.
Everything went blank and bright white.

When Fillory finally plunged back into focus, Quentin was on top of Eliot, pinning his long arms over his head. He bit at his lower lip, tugging it between his teeth and pulling until Eliot groaned, straining under him.

Drunk with power, he slid his hands down Eliot’s strong arms, down his silk covered ribs, until he was tugging down pink pants in one motion. Brain haywire and blood pumping wildly, Quentin mouthing at coarse hair and satiny thighs, while Eliot’s dick stood rigid and proud in the chilled air, like a valiant sword in a hero’s hand.

“Oh, scandalous,” Eliot said, with a wolf smile that lit up the dark. “Didn’t think sweet little Quentin would have an exhibitionist streak.”

Sweet little Quentin froze, lips parted above the fat head of his husband’s cock.

Because, yeah, shit, technically, they were in public.

Sure, the guards were positioned outside the heavy closed door, and the windows had no direct line of sight due to assassination prevention protocol. The balcony walls were imposing and fortified. But they were outside, in the air, and they could hear the nightly celebrations of the off-duty servants below.

“Oh, sorry. I should have asked,” Quentin said with a furrow of his brow. “Is—is us being outside too risqué for you?”

Eliot snorted, loud and near graceless.

“Oh, baby, you’re cute,” he purred, sliding his hand into Quentin’s hair. He tapped the fingers on his scalp in two firm movements. “Keep going.”

Quentin didn’t need to be told twice. He lowered his head and wrapped his lips around Eliot, relishing the taste of sweet-salted skin, the press of hard desire stretching his jaw.

He loved giving head, as Earthlings called it. He loved making someone fall apart under his mouth. He loved the precision and the patience, the burn down his throat. He loved working his tongue up and around, finding the sensitive spots and zeroing in until his partner was shaking and breathless. He loved pushing himself to go further, to scale the heights of someone else’s pleasure. It was an art. It was a science. It was a mission.

“God, fuck, you were born to suck dick,” Eliot moaned out, tugging tight on his hair with happy little zings of nerves and sparks. And maybe Quentin should have taken issue with that on, like, a moral or philosophical level, but it just set butterflies loose in his belly.

It was one thing to make any given man go wild and boneless under his lips. He’d hooked up with enough Earth guys and even some Floater sailors to know he could do it, pretty easily. But gods, making Eliot’s eyes squeeze tight, peppering a hot flush of red heat on Eliot’s cheeks and neck, setting off Eliot’s breath like an overworked steam engine was a better high than magic. Honestly, it was even better than when he used to make Bay—

Quentin slammed his eyes shut, throwing himself into his task and swallowing Eliot to the root. With one bracing hand on the blanket and the other gripping a thigh, he levered himself up and met the king’s wild eyes.

And Eliot mewed , high-pitched and keening, when Quentin pulled off to demand, “Fuck my
“Are you—are you real?” Eliot choked out, wine and kiss stained mouth falling slack. “Are you a real person?”

“Fuck my mouth,” Quentin repeated, sliding his thumb over the slit just to make Eliot shiver. “Your Majesty.”

The back of Quentin’s head snapped back as a strong hand grabbed and pulled his hair, exposing his throat to the sky. Eliot sat up and huffed out a breath from his nostrils, black eyes painted on him.

“Open those goddamn lips,” he whispered in his ear, staccato and commanding. “Then you’re mine.”

Quentin swallowed tightly, his own desire rearing its agonizing head as Eliot brushed a delicate kiss to his lips, soft and slowly drawn out. Honey dripping from the comb. Then with all the power and majesty in his blood, Eliot pushed Quentin’s head down and rocked his hips into him, until he was moaning out “Fuck, Quentin” all the way up to the moons.

Long hair fanned over the curve his shoulder and panting lips softened against his cheek. The world sunk into that low lit glow at the close of a satisfying fuck. Eliot gripped Quentin’s hips tight, stuttering up into him one last time, seeking that last drop of pleasure, that last squeeze before their bodies parted, too sensitive for more than skimming hands and slowing heartbeats.

“Gods, Eliot,” Quentin breathed out, scraping his teeth along his jawline. “That was—that was—”

Eliot took a low breath of his own, running a single finger down Quentin’s knobby spine. “Yeah, solid eight-point-five.”

“You’re an ass,” Quentin snarked, biting the slope of his shoulder like it was a punishment. Silly rabbit. Eliot stole a slow kiss for that, needing the contact as his body rearranged itself back to solid ground. Really, as always, the sex had been scorching, damn near life changing. In a way he didn’t want to think about too much.

But then Quentin shifted on his cock and he physically couldn’t think about anything but the nerve shattering wave of heat down the back of his legs. Eliot moaned, reluctantly pulling out.

Quentin took a sharp breath of his own, gripping the pillows on either side of his hands. “Want me to clean up?”

“Mmm, actually, I was thinking I could just stay like this,” Eliot said with a grin, lowering himself onto the pillows. His chest hair was covered in come. “To the victor go the spoils.”

“You know,” Quentin said with a grunt as he rolled away, settling into the blankets, “everyone thinks you’re so classy, but you’re actually, like, really fucking gross.”

“Lecherous is the preferred term, darling,” Eliot said with a bite in the air.

Quentin did his favorite eye roll-smile combination, which always made Eliot feel better than
anything, even better than the first glimpse of his crown on the day of his coronation. Though that
was partially because if he had gotten pick of the litter, he would have chosen Bambi’s. But that
was neither here nor there.

In any case, since Eliot wasn’t actually a troglodyte, he swept his hands through the air. Everything
was new again.

Quentin shot him a sour glare. “I said I’d do it.”

He was ridiculous. “There are plenty of opportunities for you to do magic in this literal fantasy
world of yours, dear husband.”

The line of Quentin’s throat tightened, his brow pinching into those worry lines of his. He averted
his eyes and Eliot once again felt like he had intruded on something private, something intimate.
Quentin was a jumpy guy on a good day, but there were times when they talked about magic when
he seemed deeply anxious, even scared, in a way that juxtaposed his usual childlike obsession.

(Truthfully, Eliot kind of knew what it was. But also he didn’t know, not really. Not officially. Just
context clues and basic critical thinking.)

It often seemed like Quentin had a thousand and one secrets crawling under his twitching muscles
and Eliot was the last person on Fillory or Earth he wanted to confide in. Which was fine,
obviously. Quentin was under no obligation to share any of his shit whatsoever. They were
married, but they weren’t *married*. It was just—

Eliot wanted him to be okay.

That was all.

As always, it took Quentin longer to shake his funk off than the average person, but eventually he
did. He closed his eyes and rested his face against Eliot’s chest, scratching through his dark hair
languorously, casually. Eliot brushed his nose into the soft tangles of hair, enjoying the peppery
musk of the sex sweat woven through the strands. The air was fire-warm, but Eliot pulled up one of
the blankets to wrap around Quentin’s shoulders, already dotted with goosebumps. He ran cold.

“Fillory’s not a fantasy world,” Quentin mumbled into his skin, pedantic as shit. “Fantasy means
imaginary. Fillory’s not imaginary.”

“Hm, I’m unconvinced this isn’t an elaborate fever dream,” Eliot mused, curling onto his side and
running his big toe up Quentin’s calf. “Or a prank from one of the Illusion kids I pissed off.”

Sometimes he hoped that was true. For Julia’s sake if nothing else. He would much rather be
currently convulsing in a puddle of his own drool while Todd ate Cheerios out of the box and kept
an eye on his drugged stupor than have anything she went through in the past year or so be real.
But as it was, Julia was still on Earth, doing god knows what. He was going to hear it from Bambi
later. Fucking exhausting.

That was why *this* —this time with Quentin, the press of their bodies, the crest of their physical
pleasure, the heat-shimmer comedown, sedate and hazy with their arms around each other—was so
goddamn crucial to his survival. It was as essential as the crown on his head. Having Quentin over
him, under him, shivering and still, was grounding and humbling. It made him feel like a person,
instead of a crazed caricature. It was when he could remember that he was still Eliot Waugh
underneath it all and not High King Eliot the Kind, whatever the hell that meant. The only other
person who could offer that to him was Margo, and he would never make that comparison lightly.
(But to be clear, Eliot in no way preferred post-fucking cuddles with Quentin to actually fucking Quentin. May the record reflect that, Your Honor.)

“Which of your rings is your favorite?” Quentin asked out of nowhere, holding each of Eliot’s fingers between his thumb and index finger, one at a time, like a meditation.

Eliot shrugged, too distracted by the gentle hands to think much about it. “The moonstone.”

“Moonstones are rare on Fillory,” Quentin said, like he was speaking more to himself, as he swiped his thumb around the precious gem. “They’re alive. You have to mate them.”

Eliot watched the firelight shine off his husband’s fingernail, moving back and forth. It glinted, it shadowed. It glinted, it shadowed. “What does moonstone sex look like?”

“Hot and heavy,” Quentin said, raising his dark eyebrows with a teasing grin. “Definitely big money there for pornography.”

Eliot propped his head up on one elbow. “It must have blown your little pubescent mind when you discovered porn for the first time on Earth.”

Quentin met his eyes seriously. “It was an intense week.”

The smile that bloomed on Eliot’s face would have embarrassed him in another life. And any other boy would have quaked at the sight, wonderstruck and reverential. But Quentin somehow managed to pull that fondness out of him, both without trying and without dwelling on it. Like it was natural.

“Hey, whoa, shit, this is cool,” Quentin said, sitting up and squinting down at the ring. He flipped open the hinge. “It’s, like, a secret compartment.”

Eliot smirked. “Sure is.”

Quentin fussed with it, opening and closing the mechanism in full experimental mode. “Is it—like a locket?”

Well, that was just the most adorable thing anyone had ever asked him, now wasn’t it? But when Eliot tried to answer with his usual practiced, witty, dripping condescension, his throat closed around the clever quips.


That made it worse.

His jaw ticked and his Margo voice scolded him for being weird about it, for giving a shit about Quentin’s judgment. Like it mattered, like Eliot would or could or should feel shame for who he was.

Big bright eyes peered up at him. “So what did you use it for?”

Eliot ran his tongue over his teeth.

“Nothing important,” he said, smoothing out the sheets and avoiding his husband’s earnest gaze. “It’s more, ah, aesthetic than anything.”

“Well, maybe you could keep a tiny picture from Earth or a tiny lock of Margo’s hair or maybe, uh, a—a spell or something?” Quentin’s dimples burst onto the scene and Eliot’s heart did
something strange in his chest. Something painful. “Maybe one that’s small and helpful, or small and entertaining.”

“There are nice ideas,” Eliot said quietly, trying to force his mouth into a smile. The muscles weren’t working right, hopping at odd angles. Quentin was harmless, he reminded himself. He was just a nice Fillorian village boy who loved books and boats. Certainly nothing to be so scared of.

Quentin shrugged, pushing back a fallen hair. “I mean, you can do whatever. Sorry. I can be—sorry.”

Eliot had never wanted to kiss him more. He swallowed, heart beating faster. That wasn’t—

That wasn’t part of their arrangement.

They fucked, they cuddled for aftercare, they parted. But they didn’t make out without intent, or hold hands or any of that bullshit. They definitely didn’t gently embrace to show support, to offer reassurance. That was something real husbands did and they weren’t real husbands. At the end of the day, they wouldn’t be fucking each other if they had any other choice. Mammalian cerebrum, motherfuckers.

“If you think of a good spell, let me know,” Eliot said lightly, clicking the ring shut. “I don’t have the bandwidth, but you can charm it if you want.”

“Um, okay,” Quentin said with a dangerously shy smile. “Yeah, maybe I’ll take you up on that. Once I get more practice.”

Reassurance with words was more of a friendly kind of thing. So Eliot could do that. “You’re doing well. You pick it up quickly, which is half the battle.”

“You’re being nice,” Quentin said with a typical snorting eye roll. Which, yeah, maybe he was. A little. “But thanks. I figure I’ll get there if I keep working at it. If I keep trying.”

“Physically strong, mentally awake, and morally straight,” Eliot said with a wink. But Quentin just frowned, looking confused. “It’s part of the Boy Scout oath. I’m saying you’re a Boy Scout. It’s devastating.”

“Wait, were you a Boy Scout?”

“God, no,” Eliot said with a shake of his head, reaching for a goblet of wine on the nightstand. “Couldn’t hack the ’straight’ part.”

“Well, thank gods for that,” Quentin said with a laugh, like that was a thing people just fucking said. Eliot opened his mouth to respond, but couldn’t speak. So he blinked instead.

Such masterful control and eloquence.

Quentin offered a halfhearted grin as he reached over the side of the bed to grab his pants, tugging them on. Eliot watched him get dressed, rolling over onto his side and resting his cheek against the cool silk of his favorite pillow. This was definitely part of their arrangement—Quentin getting the fuck out of his room and retreating to his own quarters.

It was good.

Eliot liked having his huge bed to himself. Liked the space around him, liked being alone with his erratic emotions and disordered thoughts, he liked not having a warm body to curl into, to silence
his screaming demons. He liked it so much.

(Margo was a starfish. As she put it, Sometimes a bitch has to stretch to get some goddamn sleep, El. He respected it. Hated it, but respected it.)

Quentin threw his hair back into a ribbon and slung his hideous feathered bag across his body, patting his pockets to make sure he had all his personal effects.

“So, uh, Council meeting tomorrow?” Quentin thumbed distractedly at his collar, at a wine stain. “Is there any prep I should do?”

“I have no fucking idea,” Eliot said, stretching his arms out over his head. “Tick sounds like the adults from Peanuts specials to me.”

Quentin grinned down as he licked his fingers and rubbed at the stain like a goddamn neanderthal. “The droning trumpet, right? Apt.”

“Apt indeed,” Eliot said before twisting his hands to make the stain disappear. Quentin froze over it, hushed and awed. “You’re welcome.”

“Show off,” Quentin grumbled instead of thanking him. Then he patted his legs and nodded, eyes going wide. “Anyway, I guess I’ll see you.”

That was what he said every single time he left the room.

“Probably,” Eliot said in his usual smirking answer.

It was better than what he really wanted to say. Better than the hey, why don’t you—or the you know, if you ever wanted to—that lingered on his lips. It would have been pointless. Stupid, even. Their arrangement was working.

No need to complicate it.

The path grew darker. The winds whipped louder and stung colder the higher they climbed, bracing themselves against the steep incline while they followed a mockingly happy magic blip of light, dancing a few meters ahead.

Getting to even the lowest peak of the Nameless Mountains wasn’t for the faint of heart. Especially where he and Eliot were headed, the journey required a steeled mind, a sturdy heart, and good hiking boots. Quentin’s were made of oxen leather, fortified by dwarven iron. In contrast, Eliot had reluctantly borrowed Quentin’s trusty old work boots—spelled to fit—since all he had were decorative knee-high boots made of shiny leather and with three inch heels, despite the magic in his closet. It had been something of a battle.

Of course, Eliot could have been, you know, grateful for having something to wear that wouldn’t break his neck as they scrambled up the sheer rock cliffs. But instead, the High King made sure Quentin knew that he found both the shape of the boots and their orange color grotesque and illegal in thirty-nine states and soul murdering. But when Quentin shot back that Eliot could have worn his own hiking clothes, Eliot had just repeatedly given him a blank stare and refused to say anything other than, “I’m not familiar with the concept.”
It had been a long day.

But it mattered to Quentin that Eliot saw this. It mattered to him that he knew, that he understood, that he was aware of the complexities and the beauty of this dangerous kingdom he now ruled. So onward they pressed, the cloak of eternal night lending easily to conversation.

“—I barely talked to anyone, unless they talked to me first,” Quentin said into the chilled air ahead of him, feet sliding on a wet stone. He reached his hands out for balance and Eliot grabbed them, a warm and steadying presence behind him. “I was basically a recluse for months, kind of drifting by.”

“That makes sense,” Eliot’s voice said in his ear, rich and gentle and not at all like the hissy fits he had been throwing earlier in the walk. “You were literally on a different planet. High school’s hard enough as it is.”

“It wasn’t just that,” Quentin said, squeezing his hands to let him know he was okay. It took Eliot a moment to let go, clearly not trusting that Quentin was stabilized. “I was so overwhelmed, you know? By all the stimulation. Like, I was obsessed with television. My whole free schedule was based around prime time shows.”

Eliot laughed, the sound echoing off the onyx walls around them. “Yeah, I guess this was before Netflix, huh?”

“No, I used it once or twice, my last year in college. In ’99. It was new, but my roommate had a subscription,” Quentin said with a shrug. “It was a way to get DVDs without having to take a train to Blockbuster.”

“Jesus.”

That was always how Eliot responded when Quentin said something particularly ‘nineties.’ He liked to think it was filled with affection, but maybe he was kidding himself.

“Eventually though, like, Earth made more sense to me and—and it was so much more to me than Fillory? Which is a fucked up thing to say, I know.” Quentin continued, turning around the bend. The crackling sound of electricity—the zinging and popping and booming—could be heard in the distance. “But it was like this—um, have you ever read Hemingway’s A Moveable Feast?”

“I haven’t gotten around to it,” Eliot said lightly, as his foot crunched down on his next step. “Shit, I think I just stepped on a beetle. Is that considered involuntary manslaughter?”

“If they’re on the path, they’re not sentient,” Quentin said, pulling out a pair of gloves and slipping them over his fingers. “Or if they are, then you sped up the inevitable. Darwin Award.”

“Brutal,” Eliot said and Quentin swore he could hear that one smile of his, the one he would personally murder a thousand beetles for every damn time. “But, ah, it sounds like you’re saying you think Earth is more interesting than Fillory.”

“Which, like, I know is easy to say when you’re the alien,” Quentin said quickly. “But even after shit became mundane to me, I realized that it has, you know, thousands of cultures and a million terrains and it’s just filled with people who really fight for their own worth. For themselves, you know? Cross cultures, cross barriers, in pursuit of something—I don’t know—uh—”

“Bigger.”

Quentin stopped in his tracks.
Eliot’s voice was quiet, and closer to him than before. His breath was low and heated along his neck. His hair stood on end, and he had no idea if it was from the growing static in the air or the way he could feel the rise and fall of Eliot’s chest against his back.

“Um, yeah,” Quentin said as a flush ran down his spine. “Yeah. Bigger. Fillorians don’t—they don’t usually want that.”

Lips brushed up the line of his throat, a hand splayed across his chest. “But you do.”

His lungs collapsed as Eliot wrapped his hand around his waist, pulling Quentin back against him. He bit a trail up the hinge of his jaw and caught the shell of his ear between his teeth.

“Yeah,” Quentin breathed out the truth, his eyes falling closed. “Yeah, I do.”

Eliot hitched a breath, nuzzling his nose into his hair. He was still for a moment, and all Quentin could feel was his warmth. All he could hear was the pounding of his own heart.

Fingers laced through his own and Quentin turned his face into Eliot, so their lips almost touched.

“I can definitely give you,” Eliot breathed out, cheek rounded up with a teasing smile, “something bigger.”

The tension deflated, air from a squealing balloon.

Quentin grumbled, pushing the chuckling jackass away and burying the barb of disappointment that Eliot couldn’t take him seriously for even two goddamned seconds. “You’re not getting out of this hike. We’re almost there anyway.”

With a overdramatic lamentation, Eliot moaned something like, *That’s what you said thirty minutes ago* (really forty, but who was counting) but gave in. They continued on in silence, the terrain going blacker and blacker, night and onyx rising with each step they took. The small glow that guided them grew dimmer ahead, its luminance cloaked by the dark. But Quentin grabbed Eliot’s invisible hand and pointed it toward the sides of the stone, which still reflected the light clearly.

Finally, they pushed their way through the narrow crevice and stepped out onto the top of the flat black plateau. They stood above a distant shimmering lake of rolling, swirling water, crashing in waves. And above, from the sky, lightning flashes crashed down, illuminating the space around them brighter than the moons, more golden than the sun.

The storm was constant. The lightning never stopped. Eliot took a step forward and his eyes reflected back every bolt, electric and incandescent.

“Holy shit,” he said, breathless under the loud cracks and roars and burning light, carrying over the sweep of land, water, and sky. “Holy shit.”

Quentin breathed in the charged air, hands shaking. He stepped forward, so their elbows touched. “It’s actually—that’s not what it is at all.”

Eliot frowned down, the dips and angles of his face glowing with every flashing strike. “I know it’s not shit, Quentin. I’m using an Earth phrase.”

“I say *holy shit* literally all the time,” Quentin said with a jolt of his hands outward, in time with a particularly brilliant bolt that hit a tree. But Eliot just grinned and, right, he was messing with him.
Quentin shook his head and tore his eyes away from the constant temptation of Eliot, of his husband, to look back out at the vast and savage landscape. He had only been there once before, three nights before he went to Earth. He had conspired with the very young Ursidae in the middle of the night, to bring him here, to let him finally see if the hushed stories were true. It was dangerous as shit, for both of them. His father had been right to be so furious, so anguished. It had been worth it.

“I meant that it’s not holy,” Quentin said, heart pouring toward the light. “It’s a phenomenon outside the realm of the gods. Ember and Umber won’t go near it. No one knows why it’s here, what it serves. It just—is.”

Eliot raised his face to the sky, with a faraway smile. “So it’s like a godless void?”

“Kinda, yeah,” Quentin said, stomach twisting at the idea. “Beautiful, right?”

Eliot hummed an affirmation, lowering himself down to the cold and shining ground. He rested his chin on his knees, staring out without blinking. Like he didn’t want to miss it. “There’s something like this on Earth. In South America.”

“I know,” Quentin said, sitting beside him. It rushed energy down to his goddamned soul that Eliot knew that too. “That’s why I love it. It has Ember’s chaos and Umber’s sense, in its consistency and its wildness. It’s like it shows up throughout the—the—the multiverse wherever the fuck it wants, wherever it wants, yet never without a pattern of its own making. It’s not beholden to shit.”

He tilted his gaze up at Eliot. He was giddy, his skin staticky from the lightning and the freedom around him. He expected to find the same exhilaration on the king’s face, that same unfettered wonder and relief at finding something real, something true, out of all the bullshit around them. But Eliot just looked at him. His eyes crinkled, maybe sadly, and his lips were tense. After Quentin met his eyes for more than a moment though, trying to find the answer, the expression smoothed away into a wry smirk.

“I’m surprised this wouldn’t freak you out more,” Eliot said, tapping his fingers along the ground. His rings chimed. “Since you know your gods are real. Not like it’s a matter of faith.”

Quentin watched the waves, the way they reached out to the electric sparks like a yearning lover, trapped in the underworld. “Just because I know gods are real doesn’t mean I believe in them.”

Lightning crashed.

“What do you believe in?”

Eliot asked the question casually, like he could take or leave knowing the answer. But his eyes were as dark as the night around them and pinned on him with more current than the light from the sky.

Quentin swallowed.

...He believed in everything.

Even the gods, fucked as they were. It was overwhelming, all the time. It was like he had to rub his skin raw, down to the bone, to eviscerate it, to make it bearable. Like the only way it wouldn’t flatten him to the ground, incinerate his organs, was if he clawed into his own matter, until he
disappeared.

“I don’t know,” Quentin said. Some things were too much to tell other people. “Um, I think I want to believe in the inherent goodness of people. Their strength. I want to believe that magic can be used to make things better, not just fuck everything up all the time. And, like, uh. Love. I guess.”

Eliot didn’t respond, though his gaze softened. Quentin blew his hair out of his eyes and chuckled, a strained sound. “You know, cliche shit.”

“Sounds nice,” the king finally said, leaning back on his hands. He looked relaxed despite the everlasting tempest. “Exhausting, but nice.”

The whites of Eliot’s eyes darted around, taking in the splendor. Not for the first time, Quentin desperately wanted to know more about what lurked below, what built the bones of the man beside him. Eliot was adept at making you feel like you were close, like he had nested with you and brought you into his world, his inner circle. But he did it without revealing a single drop of himself.

“What about you?” Quentin wasn’t sure if he’d get an answer, but he was compelled to try. Eliot slid a confused glance toward him. “What do you believe in?”

The winds rolled over their skin as the lightning silenced, taking a breath. A pause. The night was so dark that nothing was visible until a golden-pink-white flash illuminated the whole sky above them. Eliot stared off into the distance, jaw clenched.

“Me?” He stretched a thin smile and took a pull from his flask, the shiny steel glinting back at the sky. Just like his eyes. “I don’t believe in anything.”

Quentin didn’t know if that was Eliot revealing nothing or everything. It was the kind of thing that should have ended a conversation, should have let them both ruminate on their private inner worlds that belonged to fucking no one but their own minds. But he had always been terrible at leaving well enough alone.

“That kinda means you believe in the lightning then, right?” Quentin offered with a shrug. “That’s something.”

Eliot let out a breath, turning his whole face to look at him. He squinted, reading Quentin like he was a wide open book with scribbled margins. But whether the story passed muster wasn’t for Quentin to know. Because the High King only held his flask up to the sky, inclining his head like a bow.

“To the lightning.”

He swigged the container back, bouncing curls falling behind him as he did. Then he tossed it over to Quentin. He caught it on the first try, surprising himself most of all. The metal was as smooth and cold in his hands as the ground was below his legs.

“To the lightning.” Quentin said, taking the flask and turning it over in his hands. Then he snorted. “To the godless void.”

At that, Eliot let out a baying laugh, caught off guard and delighted. And Quentin drank, lifting his brows. The silence turned comfortable, punctuated by the wild storm.

Eliot stretched his legs out, so their shins bumped together. It sent a rush of warmth up Quentin’s leg. “Thank you for bringing me here, Quentin.”
“Of course,” Quentin said easily, offering him a companionable smile. Eliot returned it, though he cast his eyes down to his knees. Tentative. Almost shy. It sent a shot of fervor up his spine.

“Oh, actually, you know what?” Quentin took a deep breath. “Hey.”

“Hey,” Eliot said, eyes lifting again. When Quentin stilled in word and movement, his smile widened. “What?”

It was so stupid.

Quentin was so stupid. He shouldn’t have said anything.

“Nothing,” he said, rubbing the back of his neck. His eyes ticked like a clock. “It’s dumb.”

Eliot’s smile lit up his whole face. “What?”

“It’s just that—I don’t know,” Quentin clenched his hands into fists and let out a stuttering breath. He was so stupid. “Forget it. Not important.”

“Shut up. It’s stupid,” Quentin said, kicking at the ground. His boot slid out too far, without traction. Eliot kept staring him down. “Okay, fine. It’s just—”

The words died again and he shook his head. It was stupid. The lightning laughed at him.

Eliot bit his lip. “There’s no way whatever the fuck it is will live up to this anticipation.”

“Fine,” Quentin snapped, but it just made Eliot look even more gleeful, because he was a dickhead. He sucked in a breath through his teeth. “Um, it’s just that sometimes my friends—uh, sometimes they call me… Q?”

He lifted his eyes back up at Eliot, heart thumping. His husband fell back onto his heels, face dimming into something more thoughtful. More inscrutable. He opened his mouth once and then closed it.

Quentin swallowed and looked away. “So, like, if you ever wanted to—do that. That’d be… you know. That’d be fine.”

There was a beat of silence.

“Okay,” Eliot finally said, with a slow smile. “Q.”

A blush rose on Quentin’s cheeks and he was glad it could be blamed on the colors of the lightning. If Eliot even noticed it. He may not have. Probably didn’t. He glanced back up and his hands tingled at the gentle look in Eliot’s eyes, still staring at him like he was a book. But one he enjoyed, maybe.

“I mean, like, you don’t only have to call me that,” Quentin said, the need to speak too urgent. His heart was labored and quick at once. “You can call me both Quentin and Q, if that works. Like, you know, one at time in any specific situation, or, uh, mix it up when you want or whatever. Or, like, you could—”

“I know how nicknames work, Q.”
Days later, after Quentin was once again sequestered by the dull courtly intrigue of Whitespire, he had one hand in his hair and the other around a thick policy portfolio as he walked down the stone corridor leading to the Armory. The pages flew all over the place, barely keeping together, his margin notes blurred with coffee (latte) stains and finger smudges.

He had just left Eliot’s quarters with a quick *I guess I'll see you*, and even more quickly engrossed himself in godsdamned Tick Pickwick’s latest taxation scam attempt. Apparently he now wanted fucking Dwarven steel sites to be entirely relieved of their property taxes, which was just a total slap in the face of—

(“I don’t *care*,” Eliot had said over his explanation, annoyed hands palming his eyes as he laid on his mountain of pillows. “Just tell me if I should reject it—or if it needs to be modified and how—and then suck my dick.”

… Quentin had opted to do the latter option first. For efficiency purposes.)

Point was, smaller smithing farms like Dint’s would be devastated by the move. It was a nonstarter. But he had to at least make sure Eliot could present the rejection as his own idea. Tick was about to have an aneurysm over Quentin’s continued involvement in Council matters. Diplomacy wasn’t exactly Quentin’s strong suit, but it mattered. He guessed.

Diplomacy seemed to be something like Eliot’s strong suit though, as much as the High King didn’t give three shits about Tick Pickwick in particular. Still, Quentin figured it was better to lean into Eliot’s natural abilities, rather than trying to get him to be something that he wasn’t. So off to the Armory he went, in search of the old dog-eared copy of *When Dwarves Do Not Want to Pay Their Rightful Crown Tax And How to Solve the Conundrum Without Genocide*, a seemingly niche book that got used at least once a quarter from his understanding.

The idea was that Quentin would write up some Cliff’s Notes (or ‘Q’s Notes,’ as Eliot had just started calling them, hopefully fondly) so the king would sound like he had taken even the shortest amount of time to consider the proposal before demolishing it. But when Quentin lifted his face toward his favorite wooden doors, he could feel it fall and blanch.

Penny and Margo were making out. Right against the Armory.

Fuck.

The High Queen rocked her head back, long neck dappled in light from the patterned window frames behind them. Her hair was curled and braided around her crown, eyes closed as Penny dug his fingers into the fabric of her dress and slid his mouth against hers.

They looked—

Um.

So for the most part, Quentin found Margo way too intimidating to have more than a lingering attraction to her. But Penny didn’t have that problem, as he slid her short dress up and gripped her bare thigh. He tilted Margo’s head back with a tug at her braids, licking into her mouth and—oh, *gods*—sliding his thumb across the gauzy fabric covering her nipple.
Quentin’s mouth went dry.

Officially feeling like a fucking creep, he averted his burning face away. He covered his eyes with one hand, braving his way forward. Then he stopped, remembering that he could, in fact, decide not to go to the Armory at that very second and turn around instead. But would that be weirder? If they saw him retreating? They seemed pretty busy, so they probably wouldn’t even notice. But, like, if they did —

“Always so eager,” Margo cooed breathily, catching Quentin’s jumping attention. She wasn’t talking to him though, at least not by the way she ran her red fingernails down Penny’s silk-covered back. “It’s like I have a magic pussy or something.”

Penny rubbed his face into her breastbone, growling. “This works better when we don’t talk.”

“No fuckin’ argument,” Margo said, though she laughed as she bit the tip of his ear.

“Then shut up,” Penny said, wrapping Margo’s legs around him and backing her into the door, “and let me eat your pussy.”

—Yeah, Quentin was gonna turn around.

Taking a few deep breaths, he moved as quietly as he could, tip-toeing down the hallway as they made out behind him. But just as he reached the stairwell, his heart jumped when a voice called toward him.

“Aw, honey, you’re not gonna stay for the show?”

Tensing his knuckles around the sweet railing of freedom, Quentin winced and flipped back around. Disheveled hair plastered against the wall, Margo pouted her smudged lips. Her eyes were dark and tracing down him, like he was her next meal.

Penny shot bullets from his eyes. “Go the fuck away.”

“Yeah, sorry—I was just—” Quentin shifted on his feet, pulse hammering with nerves and something that made him feel so godsdamned creepy. “Like, uh, the Armory is right—”

Margo purred and rolled her shoulders against the door of said Armory. Penny squeezed his eyes shut.

“Don’t care,” he said, one hand clenching into a fist. “Leave.”

“On it,” Quentin said, clapping his hands once for good measure and moving his eyes as far away from them as possible. “Sorry to—for the inconvenience—I’ll just—”

“Oh, come on, stay for a sec,” Margo said in her usual no nonsense tone, waving her hand in the air. At Penny’s incensed expression, she rolled her eyes and jumped off him. “Moment’s dead. Get over it.”

She twisted her hands into a tut, as Eliot said it was called, and her hair was perfect again. Her tiny face lit up with a trademark wicked grin.

For his part, Penny kept heaving panting breaths, eyes unmoving from Quentin. “I hate you.”

Quentin shrugged, a tiny little thing. “I understand.”

“So,” Margo said brightly, adjusting her dress with a wink. “I don’t get any time with you lately,
little Quentin. Have you had a nice sexual hibernation, baby bear?”

He squinted, confused. “I just saw you a few hours ago.”

Margo had burst into Eliot’s room as they were—uh, studying the syntax of Weasel Fillorian, declaring that Quentin could stay but that she needed Eliot’s undivided attention. It was granted until she left again, just as abruptly.

“And what, pray tell, have you been doing in the interim since our paths crossed?” Margo put her hands on her hips and cut him off before he could mumble something noncommittal. “If the answer isn’t Eliot, I’ll give you my crown right now.”

Quentin stared at a dog-shaped scuff mark on his boot. “He has a stressful job.”

“Oh-huh. Well, I’m very happy for your dick,” she said, almost like she meant it. She stepped forward and patted his cheek, eyes gleaming with a weird pride. “Glad you boys are playing so nicely together.”

“Playground rules and all that,” Quentin said, because he was trying to be witty or something. Margo snorted a laugh, but he suspected it wasn’t because she found the joke funny.

“At that note, Penny,” Margo continued without a pesky sequitur, turning to her paramour or something. “You should make sure you come before we see each other next. I have hyper specific plans and you need to be able to last.”

“Damn, woman, could you not?” Penny protested, pretty fairly. “In front of the loser?”

… That part was slightly less fair.

“Don’t call me woman,” Margo countered, sticking a finger in his face. Then she grinned over her shoulder as she walked away, because apparently the conversation was over. “Bye, Q.”

With a prick of annoyance, Quentin pulled a face and waved at her retreating form. “Bye, Bambi.”

The click of sauntering high heels froze.

Margo spun around, eyes hollow and black, fangs bloodied. “Never.”

Quentin didn’t have many self-preservation instincts. But the few he did all engaged at once. “Sorry. Yeah, uh, sorry. That was—I’m sorry. I’m really sorry.”

Tongue running across her bared teeth, High Queen Margo the Destroyer jutted her chin out at him once, threateningly, before slipping her face into a sweet smile. Looking between Penny and Quentin with a scrunch of her nose, she blew a kiss into the ether.

“Toodles, gents,” she said, waggling her hand high in the air. With a final figure eight twist of her hips, she was gone.

Quentin swallowed, avoiding Penny’s raging stare by pulling his shoulders up to his ears. Keeping his eyes down to the ground, he started to turn away, trying to call as little attention to himself as he could.

Didn’t work.

“Don’t move,” Penny commanded, crossing his arms. “Get over here.”
Quentin darted his eyes all around, stomach tight with what his father always called the collywobbles. “Uh, which one?”

Penny didn’t clarify. “We need to talk.”

Running his shaking hand through his hair, Quentin shifted his weight and tucked the portfolio under his arm. “Look, I’m sorry I, like, cockblocked you or whatever—”

Eliot used that term a lot, whenever something annoyed or frustrated him. It took Quentin using the interesting new word in an inappropriate context (“Rafe, please impart to Her Slowness that I, uh, understand why she would feel deeply cockblocked by the new private sector supply-side policy in regard to Sloth infrastructure, but—”) and a full thirty seconds of shaking laughter from the king to learn its actual meaning.

… There were a lot of Earth phrases, okay?

In the meantime, Penny had lifted a fist like he was about to pound it on top of Quentin’s head until he was a crushed soda can. But instead, he brought it to his own forehead, gritting his teeth.

“Do not for even a second take this the wrong way,” he said with a low huff, not looking at him. “But I need your help.”

That was literally the last possible thing Quentin expected to hear. “Uh, my help?”

“Yeah,” Penny said, eyes closing. He looked ashamed.

Quentin’s mouth fell open. His brow lowered. His mouth closed. “Is this a prank?”

“You are not worth the energy.”

“Then I don’t understand.”

“I get the sense that the Fillorian people don’t always trust the Children of Earth,” Penny said, understating the godsdamned obvious. “So I want to change that. Now.”

King Penny was such a douchebag. He was curt and rude. He was mean. And apparently, he was arrogant and not in the hot way.

“You can’t be serious,” Quentin said with a sharp laugh.

Penny laughed right back, with an exaggerated and cocky twist of his face. “Why the fuck not?”

… Okay, it was a little bit hot.

But Penny didn’t have even an ounce of Eliot’s warmth or humor or poise, so at the end of the day, he really was just a total dick without any actual redeeming qualities.

Quentin sputtered, “Because you’re talking like you can single-handedly change years of—of—of—”

The lower king squinted. “Who the fuck said single-handedly?”

“Okay, uh, fair,” Quentin licked his lips and tightened his armpit around the portfolio. “So you and I guess... me? Randomly?”

“I have a plan,” Penny said, ducking his annoyingly tall head down, “if you’d shut the fuck up for
three seconds.”

He said *fuck* a lot. Which, like, sure, so did Eliot. But Penny was just obnoxious about it. He didn’t understand shit about Fillory, didn’t seem *give* a shit about Fillory, and so his whole sudden *help me Fillorian boy, you’re my only hope* act was pretty fucking rich. Quentin clenched his jaw and stared off at the window, watching the cool Wintermoon sunlight stream in between them.

“Look, Penny,” Quentin said, taking a deep breath. “Like, I don’t know how much you—uh, I mean—it’s just. Let me start over.” He brought his fingers to his lips and nodded. “So, like, where are you from?”

Penny somehow closed and rolled his eyes at the same time. “Earth.”

“No, uh,” Quentin shook his head, rolling his lip between his teeth. “Like, more specifically.”

Penny slowly reopened his eyes. Something vicious glinted there. “The great state of Florida.”

“No, I mean—”

“You mean,” Penny took a menacing step into Quentin’s personal space, “where am I *really* from?”

“I’m trying to talk to you about imperialism,” Quentin said, pushing his hair back. “But I don’t want to assume which type of imperialism you may be, uh, most familiar with.”

“Ooh,” Penny said with a razor laugh. His smile was wide. “Tread *lightly*, white boy.”

Quentin frowned, “I don’t see how the color of my skin is relevant to—”

“Or you could not be a little limp dick who cries behind your sugar daddy every time someone calls you on your bullshit.”

Penny stepped back with both feet flat on the ground, stance bitter and wide. Quentin’s stomach trembled, feeling like a bullied child all over again.

King Penny was a dick.

“That was really mean,” Quentin said quietly. He swallowed air down his windpipe, the dust mites choking him. “But, uh, fair criticism, I guess.”

“Fairness and friendliness ain’t bedfellows,” Penny said, voice flat and unyielding. “Get used to it.”

“Okay, uh, sorry,” Quentin said to his feet, shuffling them along the stone. “Sorry.”

Penny took a stalking step forward, his silver crown casting a cold glare into his eyes. Quentin retreated.
“To be fuckin’ clear to your tiny idiot brain, I know it’s bullshit that foreign leaders get to swoop in like this,” the king said, voice deep and resonant in a way Quentin’s would never be. “You’re not imparting a revelation here. I may as well have colonize the colonizers tattooed on my spine.”

“I don’t—” Quentin ticked his eyes back and forth, anxiety drowning him. “I don’t really know what that means.”

“But when magic is so directly involved, rather than acting as a weapon behind the curtain?” Penny breathed out a laugh. “It’s a different ballgame. I can’t control it, Eliot can’t control it, and you sure as fuck can’t control it, mouseboy.”

That was definitely his second least favorite nickname, only beat out by when the bulldog pups in the Cove used to call him a *whiny wombat rear butt*. Because he was whiny. And looked like a wombat rear butt.

“So do not lecture me about the system,” Penny continued, teeth so close to his face Quentin could practically taste them. Definitely not in a hot way. “I know the system better than you know your own asshole, got it?”

“Yeah, I got it,” Quentin said, trying to make himself as tiny as possible as he scooted back against the wall. “Though, like, there are nicer ways to—”

Penny sniffed. “I don’t owe you shit.”

The band of anxiety and anger along Quentin’s spine snapped and he thrashed forward, face hot and neck veins popping with his pulse.

“Except if you believe what you’re saying, then you know you’re a public servant,” he spat out, papers falling to the ground in a fluttering mess. “So, actually, yeah, as one of my kings, you kinda do owe me shit.”

He took the small flicker on Penny’s face as a fucking epic victory. But it quickly disappeared, and the king made himself all the more taller.

“Systemically,” Penny said. He cracked his neck. “Not individually.”

Quentin’s really didn’t like Penny. “What do you want from me?”

“I have an idea. If it works, it’ll improve the quality of life for Fillorians, cross the board and long term,” Penny said with a jaw pop. “Since I do know this is bullshit, I figure it’s the least I can do.”

Quentin blinked.

“Well, uh, okay. Wow,” Quentin moved his eyebrows all around. “I can respect that.”

Credit where credit was due.

“I don’t care if you respect it. I care if you’ll help me,” Penny said with a giant roll of his eyes. “Otherwise, stop wasting my time.”

“You’re the one who—” Quentin bent down to pick up his papers, needing to look away from this dickhead so his spirit didn’t die. “I still don’t know what I have to do with this.”

Penny crossed his arms even tighter across his chest, pecs flexing under his open shirt. “You have magic, right?”
Quentin took a steadying breath and surreptitiously glanced behind his back. “Why do you ask?”

“The psychic grid here is fucking wack,” Penny said as a nonanswer. “I can’t make heads or tails of it.”

“Uh, well,” Quentin bobbed his head back and forth. “That’s probably because you’ve only been on Earth.”

“Swing and a miss, dumbass,” Penny seethed out and Quentin wasn’t sure why he bothered. “I’ve been to other worlds before. It’s more than that. It’s more like, uh, fractured electricity lines, ready to burn the house down.”

Gods, he was a dick. “What are you getting at?”

“Shit is broken here,” Penny said exactingly, punctuating his words with wide eyes. “It’s painful and visceral and I can’t ignore it. It’s all fucked.”

“Yeah, that sounds about right,” Quentin said with a sigh.

Everyone kind of knew that. Ember had fucked over the parts of Fillorian magic he could, over centuries or even a millennium ago and out of petty rage. And the impartial Umber had done nothing to stop it, thinking it all part of a larger arc of balance. At least, as far as Quentin could surmise—not like the gods bothered to explain themselves. Such was life.

“Except you,” Penny said, lifting his chin up. He stared Quentin right in the eyes. “You’re the only Fillorian who can do real magic, aren’t you?”

Quentin’s vision blotted out. He trembled as he hissed, “Keep your fucking voice down.”

Penny grinned. “Am I wrong?”

“I’m not—it’s—” Quentin gripped the portfolio to his chest, so it would keep his heart in his body. “That’s a complicated fact. Socially.”

“I could not be less interested in your social life.”

“That’s not what I—”

“But I do think you could help me get some answers,” Penny finished with a slow tilt of his head. The necklaces around his neck clinked together, the gems shining angled glints in the light.

Quentin was briefly mesmerized by them, before he blinked back to focus. “How?”

“Your mind is incoherent as shit, but that’s just you. Like, it’s your terrible personality,” Penny explained helpfully. “But not only can you do magic like a Magician, but when I zero in, your psychic lines are clear as a fuckin’ bell.”

Quentin huffed and shook his head. “Okay—?”

“I wanna know why, moron,” Penny snapped. Though he always talked like that, so maybe it was neutral. “I wanna know what makes you different and apply it to the problem.”

The idea of Penny spending time in his head was akin to some, like, really severe form of Earth torture that he would have wanted to protest in high school if he hadn’t been so terrified of crowds. Or the Infinite Waterfall. “I don’t know if that’s a good idea.”
“I’m not gonna go pokin’ around in there,” Penny said, having obviously done just that. “I’m teaching you a ward ASAP, trust me. But I think if I study how you do magic and how you can do magic, I could start to get a handle on why it doesn’t work for—”

“It’s because of the gods,” Quentin said, losing patience. He wanted to go read in peace. “There’s nothing you can do. You can’t teach Fillorians magic.”

Penny swiped his thumb against his nose, his own threadbare patience fraying dangerously. “But if I understand why your magic works, I could maybe tweak the atmosphere, if not the people.”

That sounded like some Earth fantasy genre bullshit. “Huh?”

“There are these things called psychic patches. Julia was interested in them back before shit went to shit because they’re, like, the perfect combination of psychic and physical magic. She wouldn’t shut up about them,” Penny said, grinding his teeth as he spoke. He stopped looking at Quentin. “Point is, by getting to know how you do magic in context of this dickhole of a planet, I think I could make it so even god shit stops fucking up the frequency.”

The light from the window illuminated the corridor with a burst of sun, out from a cloud, golden and glittering with something that felt suspiciously like hope.

Quentin breathed, “Seriously?”

Penny nodded. “That would mean more consistent Wellspring flow, easier enchanting, better regulation management, all kinds of—”

“No, I know,” Quentin swallowed. The magic of Fillory didn’t belong to the gods. But Ember found every means possible to fuck it up, out of spite and his own sense of fun. “This would be—this would be—Penny, can you really do that?”

“Not easily, but it’s worth a shot,” Penny said, shaking his arms like they’d been stung by bees. “I have to do something, if only because it feels like buzzsaws under my skin all the time.”

“Oh, Quentin licked his lips. Okay. “So what do you need from me?”

Penny narrowed his eyes. “From now on, I teach you magic, not Eliot.”

A cloud blocked the sun again.

“Uh. No,” Quentin said, choking back shaky panic. “No, I—I think that’s—”

He had a feeling the lower king’s tactics would be a little different than gently kissing him on a heated blanket under the moons’ light.

But Penny just scoffed. “Fuck off, you’re already glued to his asshole—”

“Please don’t put it like that.”

“—so it won’t kill you to be away from him for an hour a day.”

Quentin’s blood turned to dry ice, crackling and smoking in his veins. “An hour a day?”

“That’s what it’ll take,” Penny said. His voice indicated a shrug, but his body stayed still. A shrug was probably too equivocating, too weak for someone like him.

“You want to hang out with me every day?” Quentin couldn’t keep his hands still. The portfolio
was sliding all around his tunic, a total fucking mess. “For a whole hour?”

“I’d rather get my balls waxed by cobras.” Penny rolled his lip between his sharply smiling teeth. “But I don’t do shit halfway.”

Margo had crowned him King Penny the Persistent. She had mostly meant it as a double entendre, but it suited him, Quentin had to admit. He didn’t actually doubt that Penny was serious about wanting to try these psychic patches or whatever. He didn’t doubt they could help. But—

“It’s just, like,” Quentin averted his eyes, “Eliot said you’re not that good at physical magic and that seems to be more my—”


Shit. “I mean, maybe he was just, you know, being Eliot—”

“Yeah, a petty motherfucker,” Penny concluded, adjusting his stance wider and more looming. “I am excellent at all magic. You will learn.”

It sounded like a threat.

But it was for Fillory.

“Fine, okay,” Quentin agreed. He tilted his head back and forth with a thought. “I mean, uh, as long as it’s okay with Eliot.”

“It’s none of his fuckin’ business.”

“It literally is.”

“That asshole is not my boss.”

“He literally is.”

“Nah.”

Julia returned on a cold winter evening, six months to the day after their coronation. She had been gone two months, though she said had ‘only’ been three weeks for her.

Too long either way.

She had a black duffel bag slung over her tiny shoulder and a wan smile on her pretty face, chastened at her absence. But despite the misgivings in his gut, Eliot greeted her with a warm hug, a fascinating anecdote, and a glass of spiced wine in his quarters. The alcohol was still way too sweet, but it got the job done.

Sprawled out on his massive bed, still in flowy blacks and yoga pants, Julia chattered, her popping vocal fries a soothing sound as Eliot arranged his rings by hand in his jewelry box. The only one he always wore was his wedding ring, for the reminder of it all.

The buzz of conversation and the swirl of wine blended together in the firelight of his room, hazy
and syrupy. It was easy and comforting, and it reminded him of easier and more comforting times, short lived as they were. He remembered the first night they had gotten drunk together, over a good bottle of gin and a game of twenty questions. They had fallen asleep together on the Cottage couch, limbs cuddled together until a sour Margo woke them up the next morning.

“—the portal tree stays consistent here, but the input and output can be anywhere on Earth,” Julia said, making lazy light patterns with her hands. She often tutted without realizing it. “But it was like—I knew where it was. Always. I can’t explain it.”

Eliot hummed. “Must have been your throne calling you home.”

He was aiming for a gentle, welcoming, teasing tone. But Julia must have read something else in it. She stilled and sat up, eyeing him with her most careful hooded gaze.

“Oh,” she said simply. She sighed. “You’re pissed.”

“I’m not pissed,” Eliot said with a delicate sip of his wine. He wasn’t.

“Mhmm, of course not,” Julia said, falling back onto the bed and stretching her arms out behind her head. Her hand grasped his ankle, bare under his crepe de chine robe. “Being pissed would be so declassé.”

Eliot swallowed the wine with a gulp. He put the silver goblet on his nightstand and leaned back against his pillows. “I’m concerned.”

With a groan, Julia rolled across the bed, propping herself up next to him. Looping their arms, she gave him a small puckering smile.

“That’s way fucking worse,” she said, scrunching down into the curled hair around her face. “Asshole.”

He kissed the top of her head. “Sorry.”

“I’m fine, El. I just—I needed to go back,” Julia said, tracing over her triangle tattoo, the one on her left index finger. “Persephone had… loose ends, I guess, for lack of a better word, and I had to face Bigby, and—and I just really couldn’t leave shit like that with Kady.”

Shitstorm aside, Kady was the love of Julia’s life. Losing her had been as hard as anything, maybe the hardest when all was said and done. The Penny of it all didn’t help either, with their mutual obsession and a venn diagram of broken pieces. Then there was the pain of Alice, who wasn’t just a rebound for Kady as Julia had originally assumed. It had been all kinds of pain. Heartache and betrayal, loss. Real loss. Eliot knew all that. He just—

He sometimes struggled to care as much as a good friend should. Especially in light of all the higher stakes shit they had dealt with. Had to deal with.

He stretched his fingers wide, watching his silver band reflect fire. “Did you resolve it all?”

“Work in progress,” Julia said quietly. “I still have atonement left.”

Eliot sighed, resting his head on her shoulder. Her hair was soft on his cheek and it smelled like rose oil. “Agree to disagree.”

“I even hated leaving things on such bad terms with Josh, you know?” Julia said with a sudden blink of tears into her hands. Instinctively, Eliot almost said who’s Josh? but he read the room and
stopped himself. “He gave up so much, for nothing but the goodness of his heart. Because he cared.”

That was some revisionist history. Josh had wanted to explore the multiverse and get his dick sucked by a nymph. “I don’t think it was quite that selfless.”

“Oh my god,” Julia said with a startle. Her still-glassy eyes went wide and bright, but with humor. “And I almost forgot to tell you. You won’t believe who the interim dean is at Brakebills.”

Eliot wanted to find it funny, whatever it was.

He wanted to gossip with her so badly. He wanted normalcy more than he wanted the opium in the air. But his heart sunk with a wet and bloody thud to his stomach. It was a shivering feeling, like a mixture of numbness and dread. He was getting shittier at pretending.

“I, ah—” Eliot cleared his throat and stared at his goblet. “I can’t talk about Brakebills.”

Julia stared at him. Her eyes spoke multitudes of anguish and guilt that he hadn’t meant to put there. But in turn, she didn’t put it on him. She just patted his hand and tried for a smile.

“Then we won’t,” she said, the words skating across her lips. “What I’m saying is that it’s all still such a mess, back there. So I needed to do my part in the resolution, beyond the deal, beyond Fillory.”

“But you’re also a queen now, Julia. Of an actual land, with actual problems,” Eliot said, trying to sound as much of a benevolent elder as he could. He had never been her mentor, in any way; she surpassed him in everything “You have to do your part here too.”

“I know, and I will. I’m here,” Julia said, squeezing his hand. She painted on a wide smile, rolling her eyes. “So you can tell Margo you had your chat with me and we’re all squared away, so she can—”

“I’m speaking for myself,” Eliot said, low and quiet. His heart rate spiked with anger. “Honestly, kind of fuck you for suggesting—”

But Julia had already squeezed her eyes shut tight, a conciliatory hand in the air.

“Yeah, I know. Sorry,” she said, letting out a shaky breath. “Her wrath is easier for me to swallow than yours.”

Eliot ran his thumb knuckle under her chin until she looked at him. “Again, no wrath. We could just use your help.”

“Again, I’m here now,” Julia said, bringing their foreheads together. “I promise. Fillory is my priority.”

“Then we’re good,” Eliot said lightly, giving her a winking smile. “Isn’t it great when people just fucking talk to each other? About their thoughts and feelings?”

“Yeah, we should lead a communication seminar,” Julia said with a snort. He chuckled back, kissing the top of her head. She had a very kissable head. “So on another note, tell me about—”

But before Julia could finish her thought, a loud crash and a theatrical clomping sound came from around the corner. Eliot bit his lip.
Jesus Christ.

But because she was unaware of the subtleties of palace life (mostly because, you know, she had disappeared for eight fucking weeks), Julia looked both ways with a frown. “Uh, did you hear that?”

Closing his eyes, Eliot held up three silent fingers, rhythmically lowering each one until he pointed at the bend and—

“Uh,” Quentin said, peeking his head around the wall. “Sorry to interrupt.”

—He’d been eavesdropping again.

Little Spymaster.

Without further context for his appearance, his husband trudged his way into the room, long hair tangled and swept around his face. Eliot’s heart gave a little thump when Quentin—Q—scratched at his eyebrow, lifting his mouth into an imitation of a smile. There was something so lovely about his sulkiest angles.

Julia’s whole face brightened. “Hey Quentin.”

“Hi,” Quentin said, darting his gaze away. He didn’t say anything more.

Julia’s face pinched into concern, mirroring the sharp jab in Eliot’s gut. Normally, Quentin melted under her attention. They had soft spots for each other. But tonight, Quentin was cagey, looking everywhere but at her or him, shifting his weight back and forth, body still angled toward the door. His eyes had really dark circles under them.

Julia tried her best, like she always did. She smiled at Q, even though he couldn’t really see it. “How are you?”

“Fine,” came the monosyllabic and monotonous response. Quentin wrung his hands together, knuckles bright white even in the heat of the fire. The sharp jab in Eliot’s gut turned to a cold spike up his ribcage.

Something was wrong.

But before Eliot could say anything, Julia slipped off the bed and walked over to her bag, unzipping the top with a grin behind her back at his husband. “I actually have something for you.”

“For me?” Quentin actually blinked his tired eyes up at that. He pursed his lips. “Why?”

“Because you have such a sweet face,” Julia teased, holding the tip of her tongue between her teeth. Quentin only set said face into harsher lines. “No, you said that you like Star Trek: Voyager. But I did the math and realized that you left Earth in May 1999? Right?”

“June,” Quentin said to the floor. “But yeah.”

“So it was still running,” Julia said with a knowing smirk, hiding something behind her back. Quentin stared at her like she had grown tentacles out of her head. Or whatever an appropriate Star Trek allusion would be.

“How do you—like, know that?” Q pushed his hair back, frown lines deep in the orange glow of the room. “You don’t exactly scream Trekkie to me.”
“I’m omniscient,” Julia said with a wink. “Anyway, long story short, I found this for you.”

She held out a small paperback book, the cover painted with a planet and a sleek spacecraft hovering over it. The title read *Star Trek Voyager: Endgame*. Quentin stared at it like someone was handing him the keys to the Taj Mahal for personal use.

He reached out a shaking hand. “It’s—”

“The novelization of the final episodes,” Julia said proudly, shaking the pages at him gently. “I make no claims for quality.”

Quentin let out a strangled sound, gingerly taking the book from her hands with his fingertips. He cradled it in his palms, stroking the spine with a bright sheen over his eyes. Eliot’s pins-and-needles limbs sunk into the mattress. His breath quickened, hypnotized by the scene before him.

“Um, thank you,” Quentin said, barely audible. He swallowed and his Adam’s apple jumped. “That’s, like, really nice of you.”

“Well, when I saw it, I knew I had to get it,” Julia said easily, reaching out to tuck Quentin’s hair behind his ear.

… He jolted back like he’d been burned.

Eliot felt weirdly comforted that he wasn’t the only one who was constantly two steps forward, a million steps back with Q.

“Sorry,” Julia said sincerely, brows ticking together. She held up two pinched fingers out to the light. “You had fuzz in your hair. See?”

Sure enough, there was a tiny blue fabric pill between her nails. Quentin nodded, ducking his head so his hair fell over his face. “Oh.”

The silence stretched thin over the tableau and Eliot was acutely aware of his own taciturn lack of contribution. As if he’d felt the discomfort radiating off him, Quentin raised his face up and met his eyes, peering softly and silhouetted by the fire. Eliot’s stomach flipped over.

Anyway, I’ll let you two confer over whatever it is you need confer over,” Julia said with a tiny smile. “Eliot, can we do lunch tomorrow?”

She ran a hand along his shoulder, grinning down at him. He caught her fingers in his own and pressed his lips to her knuckles.

“It’s a date,” he managed to get out, his own vocal cords shocking him in their vibration. She patted his cheek and turned around to walk away, only briefly stopping at Quentin’s side.

“Hope you feel better, Quentin,” she said softly, not touching him. But she wanted to, Eliot could tell. Julia was almost as tactile as Eliot was. And Quentin looked so damn sad, it was impossible that the urge to touch him, to comfort him, wasn’t drowning her right there on the stone.

“Uh,” Quentin said, still not making eye contact. “Thanks for the book and, uh, welcome back.”

She left with a final wave and without further adieu, never one to draw too much attention to herself. When Eliot heard the door click shut, he dragged his eyes over to his husband and tilted his head.
“How may I help you, sir?”

Quentin squinted at him for a second. “I don’t want to have sex.”

Eliot pulled the corners of his mouth in tightly, willing himself not to laugh. Quentin definitely wasn’t trying to be funny. “Did you come all the way here to tell me that?”

“No,” Quentin said, staring back at the ground. He didn’t say anything more.

Sighing, Eliot rubbed his hands down his face. “Then what’s up, Q?”

The fire crackled in the wide space for so long that Eliot assumed Quentin wasn’t going to speak again. But then he shifted his feet and crossed his arms. “It’s stupid.”

The cold fear in his chest clashed with the hot wave of impatience.

“Jesus, can we not?” Eliot groaned, throwing his head back on the pillows. “It’s been a long day.”

They were all long days. It had all been so fucking long. The permanency of his decision, of his promise, of that knife that had ripped through his skin, was sinking in. It pulled Eliot down along with it, like an undertow, like quicksand. His bones were aching and his body felt aged. There wasn’t enough wine in the multiverse.

“Then I won’t bug you,” Quentin said with a curt nod. “Sorry.”

“Not what I meant,” Eliot said up to the ceiling. He didn’t even bother to hide his annoyance. Sometimes he really just wanted Quentin to spit whatever the fuck he had to say out. He hadn’t actually signed up to wheedle a motherfucker into the basics of social interactions all the goddamn time.

But guilt grabbed his heart and dug its claws in when Quentin’s whole face fell in profile, the fire shadows making him look young and vulnerable and very much like someone who had also not signed up for any of this, who never had a choice in his entire life. He hugged his new book to his chest.

—Eliot was an asshole.

“No, like, sorry, I’ll just—I’ll go—” Quentin said and fuck, his voice was cracking fuckfuck fuck . “I don’t even know why I—”

“Quentin,” Eliot closed his eyes and gripped at his blanket. He was such an asshole. “I’m sorry. Talk to me.”

“No, it’s—”

“Q,” Eliot said softly, giving him an even softer smile than that. “Please.”

The muscles of Quentin’s gorgeous jaw twitched and Eliot’s own bitchiness melted away with the urge to run his fingers over the rolling, popping movements. The dark circles looked like bruises, sliding down from the delicate skin under his eyes all the way to his cheekbones.

“It’s just—you know how I said that I—I have brain shit?” Quentin was still looking at the floor, still turning his nose and chin down low. “Well, sometimes it’s not good for me to be alone. Uh, especially at night. I’m not ungrateful or anything, my quarters are beautiful. But they’re, like, dark and, um, big. The windows are really high and I just—I don’t want to be alone.”
“Okay,” he said, trying to keep any tremor out of his voice. “Okay. I didn’t realize it was that bad.”

Quentin flicked his eyes up through his hair, the tips of his feet slowly twisting toward Eliot. A prodigious sign of sorts, he supposed.

“Yeah. Always been,” Q said, hand traveling up to rub his neck. “I wouldn’t—it’s not like—but I’d rather not be around any, um, you know, with my thoughts and—”

“I get it,” Eliot said, reaching an arm out toward the foot of the bed. “Hey, I get it.”

“At home, I had my father and Fen and—” Quentin cut himself off, squeezing his eyes tight. “But here, I’m all alone and I just—sorry.”

“You’re not alone,” Eliot said firmly, the bubbles of fierce protectiveness exploding in snapping sparks all along the bones of his ribcage. He couldn’t offer much, but he could offer that. “Come here.”

Quentin shrunk into himself. “If it’s weird—”

Eliot slid over and lifted the covers, without hesitation. “It’s not weird. You can stay. Anytime. You don’t have to ask.”

First tentatively and then quickly, Quentin made his way over to the bed and sat on the edge. He put his book on the nightstand, and toed off his shoes. Then he pulled off his shirt, the gentle muscles of his back shadowed by the angles of his strong shoulder blades. Eliot swallowed, fingers jumping. He was used to being able to touch and bite. But he kept still, maybe a little too proud of his own restraint.

Slipping under the covers and into a fetal position, Quentin kept those giant eyes open and on him, ripping Eliot apart. It was late evening, early nightfall, well before either of them had ever been inclined to go to actual sleep. So with a long sip of his wine, Eliot wet his mouth for the second best thing it knew how to do.

He talked.

He talked, and talked, and talked. He told Quentin about his day, he filled him in on the latest scandalous servant gossip. He mused about Fillorians’ relationship to Patrick Swayze and whether he should declare the anniversary of his death a national Day of Mourning. He shared conspiracy theories about Abigail—by far the most psychotic of the Council members—and outlined the ways in which he would corrupt Rafe, were he a single man. He finally explained who Lady Gaga was. He just—talked, so Quentin knew it was true, so he knew he wasn’t alone, even if he only had an asshole for compulsory company.

And eventually, miraculously maybe—

Q started talking back.

He started by answering, then elaborating, then contributing in his own right, until they were both curled toward each other on their pillows, not touching, but sharing a universe of their own all the same.

“—Earth was the weirdest, best, worst thing I’ve ever done,” Quentin said with a low chuckle, rubbing the tip of his nose into the pillow cover. “Sometimes I still don’t know what the hell I was
“That’s how I feel about coming to Fillory most of the time,” Eliot admitted quietly. “My life was—different before.”

If someone had told him a year ago that he would be cuddled in bed, in a castle, with his husband, surrounded by complex taxation forms and massive books on how to speak Sloth, all because he was the High King of a mythical kingdom?

… Well, Eliot would have told them to stop doing so many drugs.

Quentin’s expressive eyebrows lowered, achingly sweet in his natural earnestness. “Do you miss it?”

“No, no,” Eliot said quickly. His life was entwined with Quentin’s now. It wouldn’t be fair to say things like that. “I wouldn’t say that.”

Quentin gave him a smile, still sad at the edges. But his eyes had softened, genuine and teasing. “You won’t, like, offend me if you do.”

“I miss it a lot,” Eliot said, the truth pouring out of him like wine. Quentin had a way about him. Had since the beginning. “But it wasn’t always—I didn’t always make the healthiest—pros and cons.”

Apparently, his eloquence was drunk. Eliot bit down on his molars, treasonous eyes casting over toward his jewelry box, where his moonstone ring mocked with him a glittering wink.

Quentin nodded, no trace of confusion or judgment in his eyes. “Right. I understand.”

Eliot wasn’t sure if he really did or really could. Still, he appreciated it all the same. The effort to try, the quiet acceptance. It was surprising. It was nice.

He curled his legs up, until his knees brushed against Q’s. “But at least you were able to return home, after all of it. That must have helped.”

But Quentin just shook his head.

“I was gone for six years,” he said, eyes going dark and unfocused. “You can never go home again.”

The only home Eliot had ever known was Brakebills University. Even then, it was just a place. A thrilling place of sensation and magic, of debauchery and freedom. The Cottage has been an oasis for his most devious ways, his most self-destructive. But at the end of the day, it was where he met Margo Hanson and Julia Wicker. Even when the world ended in bloodshed and terror, home hadn’t escaped him. Not really.

Eliot wasn’t sure if it would help, but he shrugged, “Home doesn’t have to be a place.”

“Helps when it is,” Quentin said, gripping the pillow tight. Then he released it with a sigh. “Sorry, I know what you mean. I’m not trying to make it harder on you.”

But Eliot didn’t care about that. “Why didn’t you finish school? You only did two years at Columbia, right?”

Quentin was quiet for a really long time.
“Because my—my family needed me to come home,” he finally said, not looking at Eliot. “I had already stayed away for—I pushed my luck.”

“Sounds like you didn’t want to leave.”

“I wanted to go to Brakebills,” Quentin said, so quietly, with a shattering close of his eyes. “I hoped if I—if I stayed long enough, I’d get invited. Then I could learn, for real. I’m not—magic is rare here for—like, to the point that I’m the only—”

“Q, I know.” Eliot had figured it out awhile ago. “I know.”

Quentin had never told him directly and he didn’t push it. It never seemed like Q wanted to talk about it. And it wasn’t his business, not really. Eliot just really hoped he was okay.

Quentin still didn’t seem like he wanted to talk about it, sniffing past the acknowledgment with red rimmed eyes that opened fiercely. “But I always planned to go back to Fillory, of course. Like, I wasn’t going to abandon everything. I wouldn’t do that.”

Eliot almost laughed. The thought of Quentin abandoning anything or anyone was completely absurd. But instead of laughing—which Quentin definitely would have misinterpreted—he pushed his own luck and cupped his husband-slash-friend-slash-fuck buddy’s cheek.

“You would have been invited,” he said, knowing how fragile and weak Quentin thought his magic was, how much he questioned his own ability without cause. “No question.”

Quentin’s eyelashes were wet and heavy against his cheek. “Are you just being nice again?”

“First of all, I’m not nice.”

“Okay, High King Eliot the Kind.”

“Secondly, stop that,” Eliot said, trailing his fingers up to scratch into his long soft hair. “You’re a Magician.”

“I’ve never been able to call myself that,” Quentin said, leaning into Eliot’s touch. “My father always said it was dangerous, that I had to hide it. So for the most part, I did.”

Eliot would never claim to be an expert on Fillory. But he knew there was a small-mindedness there, something that Quentin always kindly, so hopefully, chalked up solely to a lack of good education. But it was easy for someone like him—someone like the thoughtful, intense, sincere Q—to get eaten alive, to be shoved into dark corners instead of shining in the sun like he deserved. He would never believe it himself, but there was a magnetism to him. He could even make a believer out of someone like Eliot.

For fucking obvious reasons, Eliot said exactly none of that. “He seemed nice enough though.”

“My father?” Quentin confirmed with a snort. “Uh. Good way to describe him.”

Eliot soundlessly implored him to continue, endlessly fascinated by any detail Quentin was willing to give.

“So culturally in Fillory, fathers aren’t really involved in child rearing,” Q explained, twisting the sheets in his hands again. It took everything in Eliot not to lay his own over them, to kiss their every spasm. “He had to do it because he was my only parent, but it wasn’t natural for him. Fathers here aren’t always, um, sources of support or affection.”
Eliot hissed a laugh, a curl tickling down his nose. “That’s not just a Fillory thing, Q.”

Quentin smiled tightly, guilt sliding over his beautiful eyes. “My father wasn’t—he isn’t a bad father. He was always more like a, uh, a _complacent_ father.”

Eliot knew that was in reference to the deal. He hated that it was in reference to the deal. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine. He did his best. Does his best,” Quentin said, clearing his throat. Subject closed. “What about you? What was your father like?”

Everything shut down. Eliot couldn’t breathe.

“Bad,” he said lightly, but a heavy stone weighed his stomach down into the ocean, into the Neitherland galaxy Fillory floated in. He didn’t think about that shit for a reason. He wanted to chug the whole bottle of wine, but he couldn’t even move to grab it. Couldn’t use his mind to call it.

( _Pussy._ )

But goddamn Quentin’s eyes saw right through him and Eliot was out of his mind. “So the thing is, I grew up… on a farm. In a small backwards town in rural Indiana. My parents were both farmers and coincidentally, the most terrible humans in the known universe.”

Q’s mouth dropped. “What?”

“Yeah,” Eliot breathed over his hammering heart. What the fuck was wrong with him? What the fuck was he doing? “Do you—even remember what Indiana is?”

“It sounds familiar. But I definitely know rural and—and farm and _terrible_ ,” Quentin said too gently, each word a lash on Eliot’s skin. He pinched the corners of his eyes. “Oh my gods, I’m a total fucking asshole.”

Oh. He was thinking about the shit hauling. Eliot pulled his hands down. “You’re not.”

But Quentin shook his head, hands _shaking_. Jesus. “No, I am, I—”

“Q. It’s fine. I don’t want people to know,” Eliot said, giving in and wrapping Quentin’s hands in his tightly because he couldn’t stand it otherwise. “Your belief in my bullshit was a compliment, really.”

Quentin breathed out. “So you’re really not from New York?”

Well.

Okay.

Calling his own story _bullshit_ was... a misnomer. It was an oversimplification.

“I am in every way that matters,” Eliot said, conviction coursing through him. “I created myself, like a project. But it was also sort of like, ah—does Fillory have phoenixes?”

“No,” Quentin said with that one smile, the one that meant Eliot had charmed him in some unknown way. It was the one that always burrowed under the skin, hot and painful and addictive. “But I know the myth.”
Eliot managed to catch his breath because he was a professional. “I’m like that, only instead of a bird from ashes, I’m a fabulous dandy who rose above the wet hay and homophobia.”

He meant it to be pithy and offhand. But Quentin looked at him like he had pulled a sword from the stone. “That’s remarkable.”

“Remarkable will be my epitaph,” Eliot said quickly, forcing a smile. He needed to change the subject, he needed to stop looking at Quentin. “Did your mom pass?”

(He succeeded at one of the two.)

“Who knows?” Quentin said without inflection. Eliot frowned and Q sighed, like it was an annoying subject rather than a devastating one. “Uh, she left us shortly after I was born. Because I wasn’t a girl.”

Eliot bit the inside of his cheek, genuinely trying to parse all that out. “That seems a tad incongruous with the whole Hooray-for-the-Patriarchy thing you all have going on.”

“Yeah, well,” Quentin shrugged, too casual. “You know. I’m told she was ambitious and planned my birth strategically and, uh, well, High Kings don’t choose husbands.”

The world slowed to a halting crash, paradoxical in its narrowing din. Acrid bile crawled up Eliot’s throat and he couldn’t swallow it down, no matter what he did. He let out a breath but couldn’t take a new one in.

“Holy shit. Fucking hell,” Eliot said, closing his eyes. He bit his lip too hard. “I’m so sorry.”

“Honestly, I never really noticed,” Quentin said, curling in closer to Eliot even though he should have pushed him out the goddamn window. “Except that my father did. He, uh, he never blamed me for it, but he was so in love with her. He never moved on.”

Eliot’s internal organs were shuddering. He wanted to pull Quentin into his arms and never let go. But he had zero right to that. “Shit.”

“He’s probably hoping she’ll come crawling back now, since it happened,” Quentin closed his eyes, finally looking like he felt an emotion about it. “Wouldn’t put it past her.”

Then he yawned.

… Or maybe Q was just tired.

His eyes fluttered closed, lending credence to the idea. Eliot felt his cheeks lift to his eyes as he watched his eyelashes shiver against his cheek, watched the firelight glint little flecks of gold and even the tiniest touch of silver off his stubble. He had known it from the first time he saw him, but Quentin was just so unspeakably lovely. But the odd thing was that Eliot found lovelier things about him every day, instead of it fading with the slog of familiarity. There was no slog at all. Just new discovery and new fear.

Eliot brushed a single stray hair from Quentin’s face, lingering by his temple. “Get some sleep, Q. You need it.”

“Bags under my eyes again?” Quentin said wryly, lips tilting up. Eliot was overwhelmed—fevered—with the urge to kiss him, and kiss him, and kiss him. His stomach went tight and he barely let out a breath.
“Massive,” he murmured, unconvincing to anyone. “But I meant so you feel better.”

Quentin opened his soft, sleepy eyes and just—

He decimated Eliot.

“Thank you,” Q said quietly. He stretched an arm out toward the cold edge of the bed. “I’ll, uh, stay on my side, so I don’t crowd you. Or the other side, I mean.”

Eliot touched his wrist. “Is that what you want?”

Hopeful, dangerous (dangerous, dangerous, dangerous) eyes darted over to him. “What?”

“I could hold you,” Eliot said, voice wavering, skin on fire, lungs like stone. “If it would help.”

“I could never ask you—”

“Quentin, we know what this is, okay?” Eliot slid their legs together, rejoined their hands and pulled them to his heart. “I know what this is. But peace is so hard to come by and you’ve—you’ve done so much for me. Please let me offer you what I can.”

He was well adept at pretending not to be a selfish fuck in every other way. Why should this be any different?

Quentin breathed in through his nose, eyes tracing up the long line of Eliot’s face. He nodded, almost imperceptible. It was more audible than visible, the slide and scratch of his hair against the pillow a low affirmative. He scooted in closer, pressing his cheek to Eliot chest, a quiet word of thanks murmured into his thundering heart.

*Oh, no, this is a mistake*, a tiny squeak of a cowardly voice exclaimed as Quentin pressed his nose into his collarbone, wrapped his strong arm around his waist. But as the scent of citrus and sage and parchment filled the air around him, and as the fire died and breaths evened out in sweet torture along his skin, Eliot closed his eyes and fell into a deep sleep far too quickly to overthink it.

tbc.
Head Over Feet

Chapter Summary

"You've already won me over / In spite of me"

Chapter Notes

Welcome to the unofficial start of Part II and arguably the start of the story proper! (Yes, I’m serious.) There’s about four parts total to the story, to give you a sense of where we’re at. <3

I hope you’re all doing as well as possible in these strange times. I’m sorry again for the slowness of my responses to the incredibly generous and kind comments, but please know I appreciate every single one of them with all my heart. Fandom is always a source of community in dark times and I maintain that The Magicians has an extra special one. Sending my love to everyone!

One Year Later

*

Castle Whitespire
Southernhaven Province, Fillory

*

A Thursday of Beginning Wintermoon
Year One-and-Fortyember

*

Monday, April 24, 2017

Someone had to invent the printing press or Eliot was going to lose his shit.
They lived in a magical gold mine, yet all the parchment and scrolls were handwritten by a medieval quill spell. On every memo and message he received, the edges were smudged and the letter S always looked like an F. It was an aesthetic outrage, masquerading as calligraphy. He was near to beheading someone for it.

Rubbing his bleary eyes, Eliot shuffled the papers on his bare chest, leaning back on one arm, with three pillows propped behind his tense back. The late morning sun streamed through the cut patterns and stained glass of his windows, making the firelight only necessary for warmth. So far, it was a milder Wintermoon than the first he’d spent in Fillory, but the chill still came through the cracks in the magic. The unpredictable hits of cold on the stone floor—uncomfortable on bare feet—were part of the reason he hadn’t gotten out of bed yet despite having been up for hours. That, and the pursuit of actually trying to get his work done.

It was awful.

The Nugget Beetles of the Outer Islands—the ones who shat precious stones and kept the treasury coffers full as long as they had enough fiber in their diet—were currently on strike. They wanted vision coverage in their health insurance package. Which would have been reasonable, except they all had twenty-four eyes each and the only eye doctor with beetle training charged outrageous prices by the eye, which was untenable even for the crown’s coin. So the choice came down to upping taxes and inciting riots, again, or rearranging the master budget in painstaking detail. Again.

Honestly, Eliot had tried to push for the riots.

But a certain Destroyer had gone off-brand to tell him that that was irresponsible and so here the fuck he was. Doing math. On purpose.

Worst of all, the numbers weren’t working out, in a completely nonsensical way that had already added a full hour to his workload and stripped a decade off his lifespan. And the odd thing was, it wasn’t in the Fillory is broke kind of way, which had been their biggest concern once the tiny picket line went up. Rather, it was more of an—

Inexplicable surplus.

It wasn’t a typical problem. He wasn’t even sure it was a problem at all. But it was odd, even for a place that often made no goddamn sense. The Fillorian royal budget was separated into three categories for spending—mandatory, discretionary, and arbitrary—with several mysterious sources of revenue, most of which could be chalked up to magical nonsense. But each of the revenue sources was in some way fed by the beetles, which was what made them so crucial. That meant, by all measures, Fillory should have been in dire straits during the strike. But instead they were… good.

Really good. Totally in the green. They were even able to afford that (also irresponsible, El, god) boat party passion project of his if he wanted to start drafting up plans. Hell, they could have built half of a new Whitespire, if they wanted.

Which made no fucking sense.

Eliot took a deep breath and smacked the pages down on the comforter, pinching the corner of his spinning eyes. He hated math. He hated money. He hated being a king. He hated state-funded health insurance. He hated always having to do shit himself. There was absolutely nothing redeeming about any of it, so he may as well—
An arm splayed across his chest and open lips hocked out a snore into his shoulder.

Eliot’s indignation melted away in a fell swoop, a small smile rising on his lips.

—There may have been one other reason he hadn’t managed to get out of bed yet.

To be fair, it was an especially rare occurrence, like a double eclipse, that the insomniac slept later than the king. He had to enjoy it while he could, since the next day was sure to bring a gentle shake of his own shoulder and an El, hey, uh, are you up yet? as was customary of every other dawn. So as Quentin dug his forehead into the slope of Eliot’s neck, letting out a thready groan around a yawn, Eliot savored it. For a moment, he watched his lovely husband roll his neck back, tilting his face up to the light, sleepsoft and lovely. But then, abruptly, Eliot glanced away, flattening his hand on the sheets and swallowing down a rush of uncomfortable emotion. Best not to look at the sun and all that.

With a slow stretch of his arms out wide over the pillows, sleepyhead Q frowned in disorientation, eyes finally making their way open. He squinted at the light, levering himself up on his elbows. “Uh, what time is it?”

Eliot sucked at telling Fillorian time. The sun changed positions based on its mood, which was somehow connected to a set geometrical pathway that changed every twenty days. But Quentin always argued that it was basic shit, so Eliot simply wrapped an arm behind his head and avoided the question.

“Does it matter?”

“Well, if the king says it doesn’t…” Quentin trailed off with a grin. Eliot tugged on the end of his hair for his cheek, twisting the strands between his fingers. It was getting longer than when they had first met, reaching his collarbone in a swath of framing layers. It looked good.

He always looked good.

And Eliot’s cock concurred, stirring to attention for the first time since he had looked at a number. But before he could transition the tease into something with intent, something that would let him get those lips on him, those hands, Q stilled beside him and brought his eyebrows together.

“Oh my gods,” he said, mouth falling open. “Are you—working?”

His wide eyes were fixed on the pile of papers strewn about the bed. Eliot took advantage of his shock and buried his fingers deeper into the tangle of his hair, scratching at his scalp, sliding his thumb up and down the grooves.

“You’re insultingly surprised,” he accused, flicking his eyes across the line of his stubble. Whenever Quentin went even a day without shaving, his beard filled in like a dusky shadow. It was insanely hot.

“You’re working and I slept in?” Quentin leaned over to grab a page, his strong naked thigh pressed between Eliot’s legs. “What the fuck is happening?”

Eliot clicked his tongue over his steadying breaths, running a hand down the warm expanse of Q’s back. “I liked you better when you were deferential.”

Dark brown eyes bore into him, not joking around. “You’re working on the budget without me?”

“The Royal Treasury waits for no Sleeping Beauty,” Eliot said with a smile, tucking Quentin’s
falling hair behind his ear. He skimmed his thumb along the shell of it, hoping to distract from Fillory’s most boring topic with something more stimulating.

“Yeah, but, like,” Quentin said without breaking focus, worry lines deepening between his brows, “you could have woken me up.”

Eliot would have strangled a dragon with his bare hands first.

“You looked so peaceful,” he said, pulling up a grin. “Like a newborn bunny.”

“Bunnies are mobsters,” Quentin said without inflection, completely missing the point. He pulled the paper right up to his nose. “Damn, and you’re basically done.”

“Mmm,” Eliot said, nosing at the point of his jaw. “You wanna check my work, baby?”

“I mean, I do,” Quentin said, running a finger under a few particularly convoluted figures and _completely missing the point_. “So, like, from a scale of extremely to colossally, how fucked is everything?”

Eliot sighed, resigning himself to the conversation. “ Weirdly, it’s not. We’re better off than last quarter.”

“What?” Q craned his neck toward him in confusion. “How is that possible?”


Quentin rolled his eyes and ignored that. “But, like, without the beetles and with the new construction of—”

“I know, it doesn’t make any sense,” Eliot said, rubbing the heels of his palms into his eyes. His brain was murky. “I’m sure I got the numbers wrong somewhere, but I can’t stand to look at it anymore.”

“I mean, that’s probably not—” Quentin sounded like he was going to try to reassure Eliot of his math skills before he sighed. “Yeah, let me see.”

His pragmatism won out.

But unfortunately for Q, Eliot was _never_ pragmatic.

So as Quentin reached back across him for the rest of the draft, Eliot grabbed his wrist and flipped him on his back, hovering over him with a smirk. Quentin went bright-eyed and sweetly surprised under him, free hand cupping Eliot’s jaw. Like a reflex.

Closing his eyes with an irritating rush of heat, Eliot trailed slow kisses up the most tender points of his neck, drunk with it, mindless with knowing exactly what Quentin liked. Their stubble scratched against the grain and Eliot crushed their lips together, desperation spiking.

Q’s other arm fell back, a silent request to be pinned down. Eliot obliged, and swore he could feel Q’s pulse thundering under his skin. He nipped at his husband’s lower lip, kissing him deeper at the sound of his warm moan.

“Oh, shit, okay,” Quentin breathed once Eliot let him up for air. “Like, right now?”

He circled his tongue in Q’s ear, gripping his hip. “If it’s not a bother.”
(That joke was a fine wine.)

“Uh,” Quentin said, pulling away with a glint to his grin. “Yeah, to be clear, I only said that back then because I had no fucking idea how insatiable you are.”

Something in Eliot’s chest sparkled, bubbling champagne all the way up to his smile. “Incorrigible too, they say.”

Quentin closed his eyes, teasing his face up. “That shit was obvious before we even spoke.”

“Kiss me, you brat,” Eliot whispered into his lips.

Never needing more encouragement, Q surged up and Whitespire fell away.

Eliot sunk into him, letting go of his wrists to hold his face in his hands. He kissed his mouth open, sliding their tongues together, morning breath be damned. Quentin still tasted like Earth scotch and Fillorian anisefleur tooth powder anyway, Eliot realized with a shiver. He was so perfect.

Strong hands skimmed over his shoulders, painting trails of fire and gold as they explored. Quentin dragged his fingers down Eliot’s chest, brushing the points of his collarbone and dipping his mouth low to mouth at his throat. Eliot groaned, rolling over onto his back and gathering Quentin on top of him, squeezing his ass and drowning.

“Gods, I love your chest hair,” Quentin said as he scratched his fingers through it, kissing down into the bramble and rendering Eliot into a frayed live wire, sparking and shaking in the wind. The word—that word, that goddamn word—bounced through his skull, shuttering his eyes shut. He strained under Quentin, needing to feel him everywhere. Needing skin and touch and sensation, his lips and tongue and his perfect hands. His hands drove him crazy. Every day, every minute.

“Q,” Eliot breathed as Quentin sucked at one of his nipples. “Baby. Please—”

Quentin ground into him with a breathless murmur. “What do you want?”

“I need your hands,” Eliot said, bringing one to his mouth and kissing his palm. “Jerk me off, then I’ll take care of you.”

And Quentin smiled down at him, all dimples and early crow’s feet. “I know you will.”

Eliot swallowed, heart ticking out of his skin. Sometimes when Q looked at him like that, like there was trust, like there was faith, everything around them just—stopped. Time, light, his breath, the spin of atoms. Suspended in the beautiful nothing, where Eliot was worthy of any of this, of fuckall, of even the approximation of what could be.

But sensation—the feeling of Quentin under him, the heady rush of pleasure along his skin—always grounded him. It brought him back from the brink of ephemeral things.

Dangerous things.

Eliot gripped the nape of Quentin’s neck to pull his mouth to his, thrusting his cock into one of those perfect waiting hands. Quentin brushed his lips against the corner of his mouth, murmuring under his breath and tutting around his strokes like a pro. Rocking his head back with a burst of fire in his gut, Eliot gasped at the oil slick feeling of a calloused palm moving fast and firm, hitting every pressure point, every nerve ending, that made his legs twitch, blood run hot, and mind disappear.
“Quentin,” he moaned, holding at his neck as they kissed, as Quentin stroked and stroked and stroked. “Q, you’re—fuck, you’re so good. So good for me, aren’t you?”

“We wanna be,” Quentin said softly, looking him right in the eyes as he kept moving his hand. “Always wanna be good for you, El.”

Those eyes had torn him apart from the first time he saw him. That nervous boy in the front of the crowd, wearing his Sunday best and not knowing what he was about to get thrown into. Fidgeting with his sleeves and shifting on his feet, but staring up at Eliot, like Eliot was beautiful, like Eliot was something to behold. It was only times like now—times when Quentin had his hand wrapped around him, times when all the tension in his body pooled and unfurled—that his heart sang the hymn it always hummed, deep under the surface.

“Is it—is it good for you, El?” Quentin asked against his throat. “Does it feel good?”

It was perfect. He was perfect.

“Yeah, baby,” Eliot managed to get out, running his hands up the warm expanse of his back, burying his face in his soft hair. “Feels incredible. God, you’re so incredible.”

Quentin whimpered, a hot vibration on his skin, and Eliot was gone.

He had been gone from the start for those eyes. And now he was a goner every day for his lovely Quentin, for his strength and his kindness, his gentleness and his jaggedness. He didn’t only make Eliot feel alive—he made him feel like it was good to be alive, like there was a reason to try, a reason to stoke the fires of hope, to persevere. He was beautiful, making Eliot burst into flames every time he looked at him, every time he deigned to touch him, to let Eliot touch him in return.

Staring up at his gorgeous husband—lips pink and parted, hair tangled and full, eyes wide and black—Eliot felt all the tenderness in his soul crest in the pit of his stomach, aching toward release as his cock kept disappearing in a perfect perfect perfect hand.

“Tighter, baby,” Eliot breathed out, nuzzling their noses together, brushing their lips, thrusting into him. “Make me come, I’m close.”

Quentin gripped and twisted, mouth opening over his with quickening breath, like he could feel Eliot’s pleasure, like Eliot’s pleasure was getting him off. He whispered his name—El, Eliot—not Your Highness, not Your Grace, but Eliot—over and over again into his skin, kissing him everywhere he could reach until it was nothing but breath and heat and teeth and lips, and nothing but his perfect hands, his beautiful hands so twitchy and deft and lovely and—and—

“Q, fuck, darling,” Eliot moaned as he came, spilling over Quentin’s knuckles. “Perfect, oh my god, you’re perfect. Holy fuck.”

His eyes rolled back and flashes of red-gold-white thumped in rhythm with his pounding heart. His breath caught as his body floated down, zig-zagging and delirious. Eliot’s hands found Quentin’s face and he kissed him, kissed him, kissed him. He never wanted to stop kissing Q. He wanted to kiss Q forever. Forever.

“Eliot,” Quentin whimpered, clean hand shaking along his jaw. “El, please, I’m so—”

“What did I tell you?” Eliot whispered, kissing up his wrist and sucking the tip of his thumb. “I’m going to take care of you. Do you want my mouth or my hands?”

“Oh, gods,” Q said, keening into his throat and rutting into his hip. “El, Eliot. Just—please.”
Dealer’s choice it was.

Eliot pulled him into a searing kiss. Starting with a slow pace, he stroked Quentin firm and tight and hot, just like he liked, just like Eliot knew he liked. As he kissed him and tugged him—as Quentin kept moaning, kept saying his goddamn name—his heart started catching up with his brain, whispering untamable and untenable things about Quentin’s eyes, about his lips, about their life together.

*Maybe this could be real, maybe you don’t have to pretend*, the stinging words whipped his skull. He plunged his tongue into Quentin’s mouth, seeking silence in the depths. *Years from now, he could still be yours, he could be your husband,* in every word, in every—

“Gonna suck you now,” Eliot growled, scraping his teeth roughly down Quentin’s chest, relishing the whine that came from his stupefied throat. Sensation always brought him back, always grounded him, it always crashed him down. It was like the sun, always consistent, always reliable. Thank god.

He wrapped his lips around him, sucking slow. His tongue twirled across his slit, across the heady sweet taste of him, the sharp cum already dripping. He lowered painstakingly as Quentin groaned, choked off and stilted, making the most gorgeous sounds he’d ever heard.

“Eliot, oh gods,” Quentin barely breathed, clean hand gripping into his curls as his thighs trembled against his cheeks. “Eliot, shit, I’m gonna—”

He came abruptly, just as Eliot dragged his lips up his shaft, worshiping every line, every vein. Q spurted down his throat with a yell to the high ceilings, still with Eliot’s goddamn name in his mouth like a prayer. And Eliot worked him through it, swallowing and wrapping a warm hand around the base of his cock, until he was melting into the mattress and pulling Eliot up into his arms, kissing him open mouthed and filthy.

Somehow, they were a tangle of sweaty morning mess, even after a quickie, and it almost made Eliot hard all over again. It didn’t matter how often he got to have Quentin. It was never enough. He was never satisfied. *Never.*

“Quentin,” Eliot murmured, hands shaking as they smoothed down his face. “Quentin, I—”

He didn’t know how to finish his sentence.

So he kissed him again, light and breathless as the sunlight shone patterns on the surprising angles of Quentin’s face. The asymmetrical dip under his right cheekbone, the wide flat of his prominent ears, his frowning brow, his curving lips. Eliot could have spent hours, or centuries, studying the strange and beautiful contours of his features and how they shifted with his every thought.

Eyes closed, Quentin nodded as their lazy mouths slid together, breathing each other’s heat more than embracing. “El, that was—it’s always so—”

God, it was always *so.*

Wrapping his arms around Quentin’s shoulders and burying his lips in his hair, Eliot stayed like that for awhile, with Quentin’s fast heart slowing against his own. Their afterglow seemed to get longer and longer, the need for grounding touch stronger and more urgent, near desperate in a way they didn’t talk about. Or, at least, in a way Eliot didn’t dare talk about.

Because they weren’t together.
He knew that.

It was all still part of the sacrifice the crown required. They had been thrust together from insane circumstances, making the best of a shitty situation. Against all odds, it was working as well as it possibly could, while Fillory thrived and a friendship blossomed and an attraction kept their bodies sane. Eliot would have been a fool and a masochist to wish for anything more than the miracles that had already graced them. But still, goddamn. Goddamn.

Quentin was beautiful. In every way.

Right as Eliot swallowed down his heart—annoyed at its impertinence, the way it scratched and clawed at his vocal cords like it had something to say—a snap of magic hit the air and the mess was clean. Quentin had barely moved his hands, yet the tut had done its job. He smiled, glowing pride illuminating his whole face. Eliot was grateful that Q kept his eyes closed, for fear of the too stark fondness Quentin would have been sure to see in his eyes. How he would have seen the unadulterated pride there, for how much Q’s magical ability grew every day. Leaps and bounds. It was stunning to witness.

…Only downside was that Penny was a smug dick about it.

(“Guess I’m not so shitty at physical magic after all, huh?” Penny had shot at a minding-his-own-goddamn-business Eliot, after he had successfully shown Q a basic mending spell. First year kind of stuff. “Petty ass motherfucker.”)

He did not see the irony.)

But the truth was, Penny actually had nothing to do with it. Neither did Eliot. Quentin had a truly unique ability to harness the insane power grid around them. He had grown up here, and literally knew it down to his soul. It carried his energy like nothing on Earth. His tuts were clunky, but his magic was effortless. Even if he couldn’t see that himself.

Of course, darkness lurked below that ease. What it meant about Q’s psyche, the pain that must have entrenched itself in his bones. But Eliot didn’t dwell on that, said nothing but kind words of praise when Quentin learned a new spell, when his bright eyes reached for Eliot’s approval. Magic made Quentin happy, despite everything. Fuck anyone who ever tried to take that away.

Then Quentin opened his eyes and sighed, offering Eliot a tiny smile that drilled its way between his ventricles, per usual. Eliot chuckled, curling into him and cupping the swell of Q’s ass, to chase that necessary sensation, to keep himself tied to reality. And also because Q had a really great ass.

“Gotta say, I’m proud to remain your sex magic tutor,” Eliot hummed with a nip at Quentin’s chin. “Penny’s just not up for the task.”

A feathering huff sparked against Eliot’s throat. “I think Penny would rather move in with Rafe and Abigail as a third roommate than even say the words sex magic to me.”

Roommate. Eliot briefly nuzzled at Quentin’s temple to hide his laughing smile. Sometimes Q was much more innocent than he would ever admit or want to know.

“His loss,” Eliot said with a waggle of his brows. “You two would be hot together.”

Quentin slid an irritated look at him. “You’ve mentioned.”

“Eh, I’d subscribe to the PornHub channel,” Eliot shrugged. What could he say? Chemistry was chemistry.
But at the unfamiliar term, Quentin lifted his eyes up.

“What’s—” he breathed “—PornHub?”

Every time he learned a new word, Quentin asked about it with the same awed and bright expression, the same reverent tone. It didn’t matter how ridiculous it was, didn’t matter how much it was dumb dirty joke. Q always wanted to know everything.

Feeling unsteady all over again, Eliot brushed his nose along his hairline, breathing him in.

“Context clues, Q.”

(He deserved to know everything, to see everything, to experience fucking everything.)

“So, like,” Quentin frowned with his whole face, “a hub for porn? On the internet or something?”

“Look at you, smarty pants,” Eliot said with a shaky grin, bracketing his face in his hands. He tilted his gorgeous face up, kissing him, slow and lingering. Couldn’t help it. “You’ll be ready to navigate the modern world in no time.”

But Quentin only responded by pushing up and kissing Eliot again. He wasn’t going to complain, sliding his hand to the nape of his neck and savoring the feeling of his stubble under his thumb. Q sighed into him with flick of his tongue past his lips and everything blanked out except soft lips and strong hands and Quentin Quentin Quentin.

They only did this in bed, only moved into each other like magnets when they were alone, together, in the morning and night and the occasional lazy afternoon. Much as it lowkey horrified and fascinated him, Eliot kind of lived for it—the scent of him, the feel of his skin on his, the way he fit in his arms. It was familiar and exhilarating, wanderlust and home at once. He never knew if he was an adventurer or keeper or a usurper anymore. But when they kissed, Eliot didn’t care.

Quentin broke away with a few panting breaths, trailing his fingers up Eliot’s chest and neck, eyes blown out and wide. “Shit. We should probably—like, be useful.”

He was always happy to be useful.

“Absolutely not,” Eliot argued, pressing his half-hard and fully oversensitive cock against the divot of Q’s hip bone. “I propose a useless day in bed. To make up for our many days of truly shameful usefulness.”

“Okay,” Quentin said with a bratty little purse of his lips. “You can tell Margo the new plan then.”

Eliot narrowed his eyes. Shithead. “That’s playing dirty, Coldwater.”

“I never claimed to be a white hat,” Q said, the cutest nerd in the multiverse. Eliot rolled his eyes and Quentin kissed him again. For some reason. But he would never question it.

Answers were overrated.

“Is it weird that I like,” Quentin pressed forward again, smooching his lips, “uh, that I like tasting myself? On you?”

“Only if by ‘weird’ you mean hot,” Eliot promised, scratching their chins together. The sandpaper burn curled his toes. “I used to semi-regularly fuck a guy who would insist on mouthwash before we kissed again.”
Marc the Illusionite had been such a persnickety asshole.

(Coincidentally, he had also had a persnickety asshole.)

“Shit,” Quentin said, mouth stretching wide and wry, “That makes me seem, like, kinky or whatever.”

“You’re totally _kinky or whatever_ ,” Eliot said with a giant grin, tugging Quentin onto his chest.

Quentin’s dark eyes lowered to back to Eliot lips, tracing the line of his pout with his finger. “But it’s just so bitter and metallic—”

Eliot ignored the painful flip of his heart, smirking instead. “Are you about to wax rhapsodic about the taste of your own semen?”

“—but there’s something clean and, uh, maybe arcane there too? I don’t know. Something I can’t put my finger on.”

Eliot couldn’t help the laugh that delighted its way out. “ _Arcane_ ?”

Christ, he was perfect. His perfect little weirdo.

“I’m trying to say it reminds me of the sea, jackass,” Quentin said with a harumph, like that was any less wonderfully absurd. Eliot chuckled into his hairline, heart wrapped in a security blanket.

“I don’t know,” Q continued, curling a single chest hair around his finger. “Sometimes I can remember just—just loving the taste of seafoam, as a child. Enough to feel like maybe I still do. Like maybe that’s what calls to me about it.”

Eliot shook his head. “That’s almost poetic, Q.”

His heart was about the burst through his goddamn chest, right into his husband’s gentle hand.

“I miss it. I miss the waves, the tide, the wind,” Quentin said, faraway and wistful. “The Banks are beautiful, but it’s not the same.”

Eliot swallowed, blood going cool.

—There it was.

The inevitable dampening of the light.

There was always a reminder that all of this—their arrangement, their partnership, their marriage, whatever the hell you wanted to call it—was _loss_ , not gain, not choice. There was always a reminder that this wasn’t where Quentin wanted to be, not really. That the whole endeavor was sacrifice and duty, made brighter only by their effort but never their will. Eliot knew that. He knew it all the time. It was just…

Sometimes his heart struggled to keep up.

But he owed Quentin everything, so he wanted to give him _everything_ in return. Everything in his power. It may not have been what Q wanted, not really. But maybe one of these days, he’d be able to offer something worthwhile, something that took the edge off, that made the burden lighter. At the very least, it was always worth trying.

Eliot let silken hair fall through his fingers like water. “There’s a small castle down the path from
Corian’s Land, along the southern cliffs of the Ochre. Tick says it’s basically a beautiful storage closet.”

“Hades,” Quentin said with a stretch of a disgusted tongue. “What a fucking waste of tax coin.”

“Take it up with my predecessors,” Eliot said with a shrug, making Quentin blink, brow twitching slightly. “Anyway, you can have it, if you’d like.”

That made Q blink again, all the slower. “What?”

“No one’s using it,” Eliot said in an aim for casual, throat going dry. “So if you want a little seaside retreat—”

“Eliot, you can’t just give me a castle.”

Quentin said it with such certainty that it made Eliot frown. “One of those weird rules?”

“No, I mean,” Quentin’s eyebrows popped and dipped over wide eyes. “*You can’t just give me a castle.*”

—Maybe it was a little much.

Eliot could be a little much.

So at Quentin’s shocked stare, Eliot did what he did best. He pushed down a feral scream to laugh his airiest laugh and twirl his twirliest hand. “Now, what’s the point of being a king if I can’t give my friends awkwardly extravagant gifts?”

But Quentin didn’t move. He just looked at him for a long moment. Then his jaw clicked tightly shut, muscles stiff.

“Sure,” Q said in a flat tone.

Eliot sighed.

He’d miscalculated somewhere, again, and the chances of Q explaining the issue were slim to none. He shouldn’t have said anything to begin with. Quentin could be sensitive about Fillorian tradition and the ways Eliot, you know, *occasionally* bended it. Which made sense. There was a lot Eliot didn’t understand, a lot he was still learning. He was bound to fuck up, even with sincere efforts.

(Still, sometimes it would be nice to be given the benefit of the doubt.)

But Quentin surprised him, clearing his throat instead of descending into sulky silence.

He pressed his hair behind his ears, fingers tightening in tense little knots around the ends. “But, uh, no, I don’t need my own fucking castle. I’ll just, you know, take a carriage for a weekend trip like a normal person. Thanks though.”

… Okay, Quentin didn’t surprise him that much.

Eliot raised his eyebrows. “The snark level was unnecessarily elevated there, mister.”

“Sorry,” Quentin said, voice still low. He glared away toward the corner of the room. He did not sound sorry.
“Did I seriously piss you off?” Eliot asked, baffled. “I was joking.”

He hadn’t been. But for the sake of argument.

Thankfully, Quentin didn’t push it. His face fell and he rubbed the bridge of his nose with an acquiescing sigh.

“No, sorry, I’m just—being Quentin,” he said weakly. He swallowed. “Brain mites.”

That was Quentin’s term for when his overactive, broken, beautiful mind acted up and threw irrational and invasive bullshit at him.

It was also how he shut conversations down.

Because who could argue with the brain mites? Who could rationalize with them? Who could push through to get to anything real? Certainly not goddamn Eliot.

But he still braved a hand on Q’s shoulder, squeezing once. “Need anything?”

“No thanks. Sorry,” Quentin said, a small, genuine smile at the edges of his lips. Eliot nodded, happy to let it go. “Though, um, maybe we could look at the budget? Or you could explain what’s —?”

Eliot did not want to look at the budget. Eliot never wanted to look at another number ever again.

“Yes,” he said, stretching an arm out and gripping the scattered pages between his fingers. “Maybe you can make sense of this shit.”

The thing about the budget was that the numbers updated themselves, but the categories needed to be confirmed manually at the High King’s consideration. Because there were so many categories within the categories, it was easy not to have a sense of the whole until each section was checked, cross-referenced, and double checked, after which the figures could be moved around until they either ended with more debt or not. It was literal hell as far as Eliot was concerned. But Q loved it, often likening the activity to a puzzle but with “actual stakes,” like it was a good thing.

He was very cute.

But even a puzzle master such as Lord Quentin Coldwater of the Coldwater Cove Coldwaters was no match for whatever the fuck was happening now. Fingers tightly buried in his hair and eyebrows permanently stitched together, Q bit his lip and shook his head as Eliot finished walking him through his work and thought process, the sinking feeling of not being wrong ricocheting through his every word.

“—ergo, free money,” Eliot said with a sigh, pointing to the giant number at the end. “Despite no new sources of revenue and massive expenditures and a strike from the beetles. Unless I fucked something up.”

“If you fucked something up, I’m fucking up the same thing,” Quentin mused, flipping back a few pages with a grimace. “But, like, this shouldn’t work out. There is no free money. Even on Fillory, there’s always—like, there’s always an impetus. There’s always a mechanism or a mirror action or —”

Eliot nodded, palms flat over his eyes. “I know, but everything we should have lost was replenished doubly.”
“It must be... some kind of blessing, then,” Quentin said softly and Eliot tried to hold back an eye roll at the sentimentality. “I guess Umber maybe? He does like to do that kind of thing quietly. But it’s been decades since he intervened.”

Oh.

Right.

The gods were real.

To be fair, it was easy to forget that sometimes. Both Ember and certainly Umber had been hands off since Eliot’s reign began in earnest. It was kind of easy to forget about them altogether, until some new strange or horrifying fact came to light.

“I forgot that you mean blessing literally,” Eliot said with a slow smile. “Like, I thought you were being weirdly pious out of nowhere.”

That sparked his favorite smile, a glimmer of affection and teasing. “No, yeah, sometimes they literally give us free shit when the mood strikes.”

“Probably that then,” Eliot said in an exhale, heart fluttering. “Why though?”

But uncharacteristically, Quentin just shrugged.

“The gods are—I’ve learned that trying to make sense of them is a fool’s errand,” he said, rolling his shoulders back. “Even Umber is logical from an eternal and universal standpoint. It doesn’t necessarily look like logic to us.”

Yeah. That made sense. Eliot lifted his mouth into a smile, even though he didn’t really feel it.

“So, I guess, at the end of the day, you know what they say,” Q continued with a sigh. “Don’t look a pig in the rear butthole.”

Eliot squinted at his husband’s sweet, earnest face.

“... Is that what they say?”

---

The Whitespire gardens were bursting with kumquats and orange pears, dots of fiery gold in the rich green. It was early Wintermoon, but the air was still temperate under an elated sun, the chill only passing by in the breeze. It was a perfect day to be outside, pressed against an ancient tree and watching the royal unicorn do her late afternoon trots along the line of fountains. It was the kind of day that almost nothing could ruin, almost nothing could bring down, in its perfect balance of humors and twinkling white light.

... Almost.

“Pay attention when I speak,” Penny said with a snap of his fingers in Quentin’s face. “I’m not doing this shit for my health.”

Quentin rubbed his eyes and sighed. “Doesn’t it get exhausting to be such a dick all the time?”
“It’s what gets me up in the morning,” Penny said blankly, waving a piece of spell paper in the breeze. “What are the three types of contract spells and which circumstance affects their application in the inverse of the others?”

“Seriously?” Quentin slumped against the bark. “Is this a fucking pop quiz? The point is that I do magic.”

Penny sprawled his legs further out on the blanket soft grass, cocking his head like an angry ostrich. “Yeah, well, you doing magic is worthless to me if you’re going to end up turning all the wine in the castle to poisoned blood anyway.”

The tips of Quentin’s ears burned. “That was, like, one time.”

“You’re a moron,” Penny said, black eyes burning down at him. “But you’re my ward, so I gotta —”

“I’m not your goddamned ward.”

“—make sure you don’t end up accidentally poisoning us all to death with blood.”

“It was one time,” Quentin repeated, tucking his knees under his chin with a huff. “It’s not a pattern.”

“Contract spells,” Penny said with a lift of his brows. “Circumstance.”

Quentin rubbed his eyes into his knuckles and narrowed the focus of his mind. He hated the work of magic, kind of hated the theory behind it. And that fact surprised no one more than him. In every other part of his life, theory ruled supreme in his heart and mind. But Eliot had been right—magic was best when it was done, when it had already accomplished what you wanted from it, when you succeeded. The process of pulling it out was torturous. It was probably why Penny was so enthusiastic about it. Sadistic asshole.

“Fucking—fine,” Quentin said with a sniff, pushing his hair back. “Um, there are müqavilə binding spells, Word as Bond, and collatio bonorum. To set the terms, Magicians have to invert the position of the play-dus.”

The magic solidifying his marriage was an example of a müqavilə. It had been uncomfortable to read about them, and the way they affected the recipients both physically and emotionally. In marriage, it connected a lifeforce. Not quite a soul or a shade, but a functionality that kept the two parties working together in tandem, no matter how physically far apart they were. It lended to amplified understanding, to trust, to…

Anyway, theory sucked.

“Moron,” Penny breathed out into his palms. A spike of defensiveness speared up from Quentin’s stomach and he set his jaw.

“Uh,” he looked back and forth, annoyance burning across his skin. “How is that wrong?”

“It’s pronounced play-uh-dees,” Penny said, throwing his hands down and overenunciating. “Pleiades.”

Quentin bit the inside of his cheek. “Did I get the answer wrong?”

“By a goddamn miracle, no,” Penny said, which was about as much praise as he ever offered.
“Now, for Word as Bond—”

But before Quentin could start to take notes on the always aggressively punctuated lecture, the two of them were interrupted by a pretty whistle overhead. A graceful hand waved in the air over a flowy gray dress and a bright smile. Quentin grinned right back, lifting the tips of his fingers in greeting. Penny craned a look behind his shoulder and sighed.

“Afternoon, gentlemen,” Julia said, floating down beside them to sit. The lace of her dress had spiders woven through the pattern. “How are my favorite magical academics?”

“Working,” Penny said tersely. “So unless you have the shit—”

“Lucky for you,” Julia cut him off with an eye roll, reaching into her pocket. She pulled out a huge portfolio that shouldn’t have been able to fit. “I do have the shit.”

Penny snatched it from her hands without another word.

Quentin bounced on his feet up into a squatting position, stretching his neck to try to see the strange writing. “This is everything about—?”

“Psychic patches, from Henry’s personal collection,” Julia said with a tiny smile, her eyes dropping at the name of her dead mentor. “What you guys are talking about doing is ambitious, but I think if it’s possible, the connecting elements will be in here.”

“What I’m talking about doing,” Penny corrected her, still flipping through the intricate writing in concentration. “Q’s a guinea pig.”

Quentin frowned. “What’s a guinea pig?”

“You speak Klingon,” Penny snorted as he traced his finger across an equation, “but you don’t know what a guinea pig is?”

“It doesn’t all stick,” Quentin said as he kept trying to read upside down. Earth was a huge place. “Anything good off the bat?”

Penny shook his head. “Nothing new. Until I get a better replication of your frequency—”

Julia pursed her lips and looked between them. “Have you been able to replicate it at all?”

“I’m working on it,” Penny growled, snapping the book shut. “Anyway, I can’t concentrate on this with you assholes staring at me.”

Julia laughed, looping her arm through Quentin so they both leaned back against the tree. She nudged him. “Pen’s such a delicate flower, isn’t he?”

Quentin leaned in conspiratorially. “I hear if you play ‘The Wind Beneath My Wings,’ he just, like, totally breaks down. Every time.”

Julia laughed, looping her arm through Quentin so they both leaned back against the tree. She nudged him. “Pen’s such a delicate flower, isn’t he?”

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“You know ‘The Wind Beneath My Wings,’” Penny squinted, “but not guinea pig?”

“Classic deflection,” Julia said quickly, with a serious nod. Quentin concurred with a hum, rubbing his chin. Penny glared ferociously at them as they murmured things like indeed and case study in the making and perhaps we should make tea as we discuss, increasingly austere expressions growing on their faces.

“You two bring out the worst in each other,” Penny finally said, making them break into laughter.
He sighed. “Fuckin’ assholes.”

Julia closed her eyes as she laughed, big teeth happy in the sunlight. Really, she was anything but an asshole from Quentin’s point of view.

Quentin could still see that despondent woman, pale and shaking and about to cause a huge scene at his wedding, curled into the tiniest shell of herself on a wooden bench. He felt really privileged to have had the chance to get to know her over the past year, to see her thrive into one of the most effective lower monarchs he’d ever seen, and maybe in Fillorian history. She had a knack for the details and a passion for the big picture—and more than the whole of the native Fillorian council combined. It was amazing.

Julia had told him once, when they had fucked off from a late night Council meeting to get wine drunk together, how she had dreamed her whole life of Chatwin’s Torrent, of finding healing in the one place she had felt safe when she was a child. How she longed for freedom in the world of the Fillory & Further books, in the place she always thought of as her own, once upon a time. How conflicted she felt now, years later, after she had once long ago abandoned Fillory—for young adulthood and the complexities of magical pedagogy—to be living that healing in actuality after having brought about such unspeakable horrors.

And as she tilted her face into the pale sunlight with shining hair and eyes, Quentin couldn’t help but think she was exactly where she belonged, simply and truly. He was glad for it. And he knew it made Eliot happy to see her like this too, which made it all the better.

It had been a good year for Fillory.

The hope in the air was palpable, like one could grab it and hold on tight. After years of fanciful falsehood, of vicious and superficial and weak rulers, it was a solace he never thought he’d see in his lifetime. For once, finally, the people had good and just rulers, and Quentin had magic. In more ways than one.

Above in the trees, the halcyons tweeted and tittered, their bright feathers winking through the leaves. Quentin knew how to speak most bird languages well enough and caught a few observations like, King Penny’s coat is lustrous, shall we defecate on it to make it ours? and the quality of the courtyard seed has improved greatly, among other trivialities and tidbits. It was enough to lull him into a hazy limbo, half-focused and half-dreamy, like lapping waves. That is, until one of the birds unmistakably cried, the High King approaches, long live the king.

Then everything was crisp and distinct, focused on the point where Eliot strode along the stone path.

He wore Fillorian red and gold over white silk, with brown riding boots and painted-on breeches climbing up his long legs. He was getting back from some grueling meeting with the Lorian advisory delegation, and he had specifically chosen the outfit to be patriotic. But on his arm, Margo was dressed in a drapey, scandalously cut dress in blood red and black, specifically chosen to be threatening. As always, they were a sight to behold, forces to be reckoned with both apart and especially together.

Quentin smiled as Eliot threw his head back in laughter at something Margo whispered up at him, his crown catching the light in a shimmer of quartz and obsidian. Every day, Quentin was sure that Eliot had reached the limit, the humanly possible height of beauty and elegance and magnetism. And every day, Quentin was proven wrong.

Eliot murmured something back to Margo, wrapping a tight arm around her shoulder, the kind
Quentin knew made everyone feel cared for and at home, and gesturing precisely with his hand as he made his point, which sparked a big grin on the High Queen’s face in her own right. Then Eliot scanned his eyes over the garden—

Until they locked on Quentin’s.

Even from a distance, Quentin saw them soften into gentle waves of brown and gold and green, sweeping him under. With a rush of heat to his cheeks, he swallowed and dropped his gaze to the grass. When he glanced back up, Eliot was still smiling at him, eyes moving up and down with crinkled edges. His heart did a cartwheel in his chest.

But Julia gently brought him back into the conversation with her and Penny—rude to abandon her, probably, since the two lower monarchs still had some, uh, issues—and Quentin did his best to ignore the steady increase of his heart rate, the electric tightening of his stomach, as he could feel Eliot (and Margo) approach. It all turned into a dissonant clamor of jitters and joy when a warm weight of smoky amber and musk sunk down beside him, casual and calm and stretched out, tantalizingly long.

“Ms. the Righteous, Pennykins, hubby,” Eliot said in greeting, and probably because Quentin had once mentioned he thought the word *hubby* was stupid. “Your High King and Queen have diplomatic tales to tell.”

“Oh, my favorite genre,” Julia said, biting her tongue between her teeth. Margo grinned down at her.

“More like how I made a sloth lick from my clit to my ass and thank me for it,” she said with a proud twist of her hips, standing tall. She sighed then, looking preemptively at Quentin. “Metaphorically, Q.”

He knew that.

But what he didn’t know was what would happen if he leaned into Eliot. What would happen if he rested his head on his shoulder like he wanted. Maybe Eliot would smile down at him, surprised and pleased. Maybe Eliot would slide his hand up and play with his hair, like it was natural. Or maybe he would stiffen, tense and uncomfortable at the presumption.

So Quentin let his head fall back against the tree. The hot press along his arm was enough.

“And all while you degenerates have been wasting the day away,” Eliot said with a shaking stretch of his limbs, shifting himself closer to Quentin. Their legs were touching now too. “I’m both jealous *and* have a new bottle of champagne to contribute to your fainéant goings-on.”

Sure enough, with the same magic as Julia, Eliot procured a fancy looking bottle from his coat pocket. He popped the cork and took a swig, grinning over the top. When he drank, he only shuddered once—a marked improvement. He passed the bottle to Quentin without a glance, and Quentin tried not to feel like a giddy school kid when their fingers grazed and lingered.

“Dammit,” Penny said, eyes falling shut and tapping the Earth pencil to his brow. “Quentin and I are working, people.”

“Yeah, sure,” Quentin said, taking a gulp of the booze. It was bad. But not terrible. “On our super regimented schedule.”

“You think I want to *extend* the time I spend with you?” Penny scoffed. “Arbitrarily?”
Margo pointed between them with a razor sharp nail. “I think you two should bang it out.”

“I’ve been saying,” Eliot said with a wide grin, taking the bottle back from Quentin to offer it across to Julia. She scrunched her nose and shook her head. Eliot twitched a teasing glare at her before bringing it back to his own mouth.

Quentin watched the line of his throat swallow from the corner of his eye.

“Damn infidelity clause,” Margo sighed. “Literally the only reason they aren’t bareass fucking in front of us right now.”

Eliot nodded solemnly. “Hot.”

“Are you done?” Penny asked, shoulders tensing and dark eyes darting behind them. But his voice was softer, almost imperceptibly so. Margo flicked her eyes up and bobbed her head.

“No,” she landed on, predictably, before clapping her hands together. “But I’m taking a brief hiatus so I can tell my story. Settle in, kids.”

Eliot was a good storyteller.

…But Margo was a great one.

Quentin genuinely could have listened to her retell every single story ever known in the history of man and died narratively fulfilled (He could hear it now—“Okay, so there’s this Achilles motherfucker and he is a total raging dickhole, but handy with a sword if you know what I mean.”)
She was evocative and witty, with the right mix of quick pacing and sharp crescendos to keep everyone on tenterhooks. Her voice undulated and modulated like she was born for it, capturing attention with finesse even in all her coarseness.

As it was, the story itself was actually about fairly basic governmental proceedings. The Lorian delegation came with a border tax dispute, the Council tried to negotiate, Margo threatened to kill all of them for even the suggestion of compromise, and Eliot talked everyone down. But Abigail had apparently taken a stand, making the argument that the Lorians were in the right and not at all because her most thriving brothel would take a hit if Margo’s plan was pushed through. That was just a coincidence, of course.

“So naturally, I said, Eeeaaaahh bbeegaga aaaa eehrrahddd amaaaaga ,” Margo croaked with a smirk. “Which is Sloth for, You can suck a cockshaped rock, you knotted ball of crusty pubic hair .”

It was.

Across from Quentin and faced away from Margo, Penny’s lips spasmed once, not quite a smile. But it wasn’t not a smile either. Quentin shuffled the spell pages, carefully not looking at his tutor as she continued. But on the other side of the small circle, Eliot sighed and gazed up at her, baldly besotted.

“Anyway, long story short, Abigail and I are getting drinks next Wednesday,” Margo concluded, always with the surprise ending. “She’s a good egg, for being psychotic. Real entrepreneur.”

“I don’t think she likes me very much,” Julia said with a frown. “Apparently, she always says things like you look healthy today, Queen Julia .”

“Oh, no, she’s a total cunt,” Margo agreed, even though Quentin didn’t really understand the
problem. “But I love her for it.”

“Fabulous as your destructive diplomacy always is, Bambi,” Eliot said, tilting the bottle up high again and passing it right back to Quentin. Looked like they were getting drunk. Cool. “You’re leaving out the most important part.”

Margo yawned, “Yeah, yeah, we’re also, like—”

“Throwing a massive, glittering ball,” Eliot announced with a wide smile and wider hands. Fondness coursed through Quentin’s whole body. “In honor of the longevity of our reign.”

“Sounds stupid,” Penny said, rocking his head back. “Besides, we’ve been in power for a year and half, max.”

“First of all, you’re banished forever,” Eliot said with a quick point at Penny, who rolled his eyes. “Second of all, a year and a half may sound slight to our foreign ears, but it is by far the longest any Children of Earth have ruled since the Chatwins.”

“Uh, yeah, that’s true,” Quentin confirmed, taking another pull from the bottle. He grimaced at a particularly sour flavor. “The next longest was maybe six months? Seven? And they were in comas the whole time.”

Spell gone wrong.

“Not to mention,” Eliot said, pulling out a scroll from his charmed pocket. “I adapted a polling spell and my current approval rating is exactly 39%. Even more to celebrate.”

Julia furrowed her brow and squeaked, “Um, is that… considered good?”

“It’s a bit better than the 7% I started with, yeah,” Eliot said with a soft smile. He held the champagne bottle aloft, like a toast.

“Wow. Holy shit,” Julia said with lifted brows. She reached across Quentin and held her hand out for a high five. “Nice work, buddy.”

Eliot smiled queasily and tapped her palm with his fingers before snatching them away. Julia snorted.

“Anyway, we’re all doing fairly well—though some of us better than others,” Eliot said, tracing his finger in a line down the numbers. “Bambi rings in with a very healthy 41% and Julia with 40%.”


As Julia rolled her eyes, Penny tilted his head with a studiously blank face. “Do I have one?”

“Yeah,” Eliot said with a wince. “Yours is 22%.”

“What the hell?” Penny wrenched his hand forward and tried to take the page, but Eliot held it up high in the air. “I work my ass off for these people. Way more than any of you.”

Eliot shrugged, deadpan. “You should smile more.”

“Fuck you.”

“You know, I won pageants all the goddamn time when I was a kid,” Margo said, finally sinking down to the ground and elbowing Penny with a sly grin. “I can teach you a thing or two.”
“God,” Julia said with a shaking laugh. “Of course you did pageants.”

But before Margo could respond with something sharp and sour and quick, Eliot continued, feet bouncing with excitement.

“And while I thought Tick’s utterly inexplicable 62% approval was high, someone else takes the cake,” he said. He flashed a small smile down at Quentin. “You’ve got a whopping 87% approval, hubby.”

Margo’s smug face dropped. “It’s rigged.”

“Uh, why am I even being measured?” Quentin asked, stomach tightening.

“And who are these thirteen-percenters I need to beat up?” Julia held a tiny fist up and shook it mock-threateningly. Eliot gave her a bright smile and nod. But at Quentin’s continued questioning stare, he sighed.

“You’re involved,” Eliot said lightly, putting the scroll away with a tiny tut. “It all paints the picture of the administration. Never bad to have more information.”

Quentin hated it when Eliot used his own words against him.

“It’s only so high because I don’t actually do shit, as far as they know,” he argued. “Easy to like the First Lady, until she decides to try to rehaul healthcare.”

“For such a nineties reference,” Margo said, “that’s weirdly topical.”

“Your pretty face is also a likely factor,” Eliot said with a soft smile, running his thumb along Quentin’s jawline. The sun shone down between the branches, twinkling white gold and feathering shimmers. Quentin’s cheeks lifted with his warming skin.

“With that logic,” he said, rolling his sleeves down over his fingers, “then you should be at, like, 110%.”

Eliot opened his mouth but didn’t say anything, hand dropping back to his side.

… Quentin kind of wanted to die.

Especially at the pointed glances Julia and Margo exchanged.

Which, like, okay, was it really shocking that he was attracted to Eliot? Everyone knew that, it wasn’t a revelation, there was no need to be weird about it, it wasn’t weird—and also, like, Eliot had just said that Quentin was pretty and no one batted a godsdamned eye, so why was that considered normal but the second Quentin said anything—

Eliot’s hand curled around his knee and oh, okay, maybe everything was fine.

“Point is,” Eliot continued, unfazed because why the fuck would he be, “I finally have an excuse to throw a party with the kind of resources I’ve dreamed about since I was a little boy.”

Penny grumbled under his breath, “Jesus Christ.”

“Also,” Eliot said, the point of his jaw ticking slightly, “I’m opening it up to the public.”

Julia’s eyebrows shot up. “Really?”
Margo flashed a look at him. “We haven’t finished discussing that.”

But Quentin felt a hopeful seed in his chest grow to a bloom. “Are you serious? That would be amazing.”

Eliot shrugged, smiling down at the ground, twirling a blade of grass between his ringed fingers. “I’m sure by amazing,” Margo snapped, pinching her lips right at Quentin, “you mean a goddamn security risk.”

“I agree with Margo,” Penny said with a serious nod. Eliot laughed out the side of his mouth. “Shocker,” he scathed, cracking his neck once. “No, the way I see it, its reason for being is that we haven’t been violently overthrown and/or we haven’t fucked off for fear of being violently overthrown. A private event defeats the purpose.”

Fuck, Quentin’s heart *sparkled* at that. “Right, uh, it’s about the people. For the people. I think that will go a long way.”

“Yes?” Eliot looked at him through his lashes, with one of those rare shy smiles. “I hope so.”

“It will,” Quentin assured him, resting his hand over Eliot’s, where it was still burning through the fabric of his pants. He felt his fingers twitch once and Eliot slowly, almost tentatively, turned his palm over.

“Jesus Christ,” Margo sputtered her lips, eyes rolling back into her head. “You know you’re already fucking him, right?”

Quentin and Eliot separated with a jolt. Eliot’s soft smile turned murderous as he glared up at Margo.

She shrugged.

“Just wanna make sure you don’t end up with your beautiful shirt drenched in blood,” she said simperingly. “It’s easy to romanticize the people when we aren’t around them all the time anymore, but we need to remember that they’re violent as shit.”

“That’s reductive,” Julia said firmly, so Quentin didn’t have to. “They had reason not to trust us and we’re still building that foundation.”

“You don’t fix undereducated and trigger-happy in a year and half,” Margo shot back. “We’d be offering them a banquet of our choppable heads.”

Penny sighed, rubbing his eyes. “Look, I’m all about the rise of the proletariat—”

“You get less attractive every time you say shit like that,” Margo said with a point of her finger.

“—but we also have to be smart. Even if we don’t get literally murdered, if anything does go wrong, we’re back to square one.”

It wasn’t a terrible point. But Quentin never wanted Penny to be right.

“So the best at what he does,” Eliot said, speaking of the head of his guard. “He assured me that with the right wards and with all hands on deck, it’ll be as smooth as any private proceeding. If we want the people to trust us, we have to trust them.”
Margo pulled her face into a scowl. “That’s not how it works, El. It’s not tit-for-fuckin’-tat.”

“Look, I’ll take your perspective under consideration, but—” Eliot started to say, and the *Jaws* theme song started to play in an eerie undertone. Margo placed both of her hands on the ground, eyes zeroing in on him.

“If you try to pull rank on me,” she said in a low promise, “I’ll slit your throat myself. With all love and affection.”

“That’s such a waste of time,” Quentin sighed, pulling out a hair ribbon and tying back a bun. “I have better shit to do.”

“Ooh, I know,” Julia said excitedly, patting his knee. “What about wearing your navy blue outfit?”

“He’s half-agree with that,” Eliot said with a nod. He grinned at Quentin. “The first part, not the second.”

“Clothes make the man,” Penny said. “Meaning you’re half a man at best.”

“That’s such a waste of time,” Quentin sighed, pulling out a hair ribbon and tying back a bun. “I have better shit to do.”

“You half-agree with that?” Eliot said with a nod. He grinned at Quentin. “The first part, not the second.”

Quentin rolled his eyes at Penny. “Clothes keep me warm. The end.”

“If only we had magical fucking tailors at our disposal and every whim,” Penny said, squaring back his shoulders with a groan. The gold trim of his velvet black coat glittered in the light.

“Wait,” he said, chewing on his lip. “So will I have to get dressed up?”

Quentin slumped his shoulders. “I have nothing to wear.”

“If only we had magical fucking tailors at our disposal and every whim,” Penny said, squaring back his shoulders with a groan. The gold trim of his velvet black coat glittered in the light.

“Table it,” Julia said definitively before Eliot could bark back, her big eyes darting around at each of them. “Sleep on it.”

That was always what they did, when tensions got too high. It sometimes led to no decision, but it was better than bitter in-fighting.

Margo slowly sunk backwards. Beside him, Eliot relaxed, with the exception of the tight fists his hands were clenched in. Quentin cleared his throat and pushed his hair back, a question drawing out his own frown.

“Wait,” he said, chewing on his lip. “So will I have to get dressed up?”

Eliot fixed him with a sighing glare, though it was half-fond. “What do you think?”

Quentin slumped his shoulders. “I have nothing to wear.”

“Clothes make the man,” Penny said. “Meaning you’re half a man at best.”

“I half-agree with that,” Eliot said with a nod. He grinned at Quentin. “The first part, not the second.”

Quentin tilted her head and whispered out the side of her mouth. “There are other colors.”

“I’d fuck my wardrobe if I could,” Eliot said, to the shock of no one. “It already keeps me warm on cold nights when Quentin’s sick or busy studying or temporarily in the dungeon because we aren’t sure if he was possessed by a bloodwitch hellbent on murdering all of us or—”

“It was one time!”
Tick called an emergency Council meeting in the middle of a particularly tedious day.

Quentin had been trying to get Eliot to quote-unquote *fucking finally* learn about the different kinds of Fillorian mineral deposits. It was duller than the dirt one apparently found in a particular subclass of *metaorganic* minerals, but the nerd wouldn’t even be deterred by Eliot kissing his neck (“Stop that,” Q said with a halfhearted swat, not looking up from the drawing of some gray rocks or whatever.) So things were looking grim until the messenger burst through the Armory doors with a breathless declaration.

Of course, Tick had called emergency meetings before. They were always misnomers. Once, he brought them all to the throne room in the middle of the night to discuss the code of regulations vis-a-vis non-sentient fish fermenting spices, and whether they needed to shift the date of expiry by a plus-minus of three days. In her only response, Margo had burned his mustache off.

(It grew back.)

Anyway, Eliot could have—probably should have—told the messenger to tell Tick to fuck off. But a responsible king never took such reckless chances and he was trying his damnedest to be an exceptionally responsible king. At least, that’s what he told the annoyed Quentin as they walked out the door and scurried far away from dry discussions of *cost-competitive concentrations* and goddamn *geology*.

The throne room was filled with Council members and hangers-on, speaking in low tones amongst themselves. Under the watchful eye of the court, Quentin leaned up and pressed a soft kiss to Eliot’s lips, as was tradition. Eliot held him close and let the kiss linger for one second longer because, well.

They broke apart and Quentin gave him a final glare, muttering, *I’m doubling the curriculum* under his breath. Eliot’s heart skipped its usual beat.

In any case, it was go time. Eliot cracked his neck and became the High King.

“Allright, let’s get a move on,” he said, letting his voice boom as he swept his way over to his throne. The murmurs stopped and all eyes turned to watch him sit, legs crossed between a placid Julia and a preemptively pissed off Margo.

(Penny looked annoyed too, but that was probably just his Resting Bitch Face.)

“You interrupted my serious and scholarly examination of our country’s natural resources,” Eliot said, widening his eyes at Tick and trying not to smirk at Quentin’s covert eye roll. “So this better be good.”

“And an actual motherfucking emergency,” Bambi snarled. “Or your pubes are next.”

Tick turned an unblinking and smiling bow to Margo, subtly crossing his legs.

“Your Majesties, I’m afraid we have an unusual situation on our hands,” Tick said, hands wide and face grave. “A citizen has been placed under arrest.”

Penny let out a loud grunt of frustration. “That happens all the goddamn time, Tick.”

Julia leaned forward, ever cool and collected. “Why are you elevating this to us?”

“I understand your confusion, Highnesses,” Tick said with a swallow, looking behind him. “Normally, we would, of course, throw the prisoner in a filthy hovel or *immediately* execute, but in
this instance, the circumstances are…”

Tick trailed off and his smile became all the more syrupy, his eyes all the more wide.

“Are what?” Margo demanded. “Spit it the fuck out.”

Another murmur of indistinct voices filled the fire-warmed space, with the other Council members looking similarly unnerved. Even Heloise looked uneasy, which was especially unusual. Tick brought his hands together and bowed at the waist, like a nervous habit.

“Perhaps we should bring the prisoner in?” Tick said in a falsely light tone. “That may be best. I think that’s best. That’s for the best.”

“I’m losing the will to live,” Eliot said dryly, though not really as impatient as he sounded. Fucking with Tick was just too much fun. “Get on with it.”

Tick twisted his lips up around his big teeth one more time and then slowly turned around, nodding to the guards at the doors. After a few moments, they swung open and another four guards paraded in, spears held out at a prisoner in a red jumpsuit. Eliot frowned.

The woman looked really familiar.

“Oh shit,” Margo chuckled breathlessly, blinking into a half-smile. “Plot twist.”

The prisoner was pretty, with bright blue eyes that peered out from charcoaled lashes. Her dirty blonde hair was pulled back in tight braids and her lips pursed defiantly as she walked forward toward the thrones with a slight swagger in combat boots. Several knives were visible on her person, which frankly seemed like a poor security move. But before Eliot could loudly comment on that oversight, Penny and Julia sat forward too, exchanging bewildered looks.

“Wait a minute,” Penny said, brow going dark, eyes saucer wide as he stared at the woman. “Isn’t that—?”

“Let her go,” Quentin’s voice echoed clearly as he broke away from the Council, taking huge strides until he grabbed at one of the guards’ arms, pulling it down. “Let her go right now, there’s been a mistake.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Q,” she said softly, shaking her head. “This wasn’t—I hadn’t meant for you to be here. I wanted to speak with you privately. After.”

Quentin reached for her elbow, but was rebuffed. He frowned. “What are you talking about?”
“Pardon me,” Eliot said with a hopefully kind smile, to break the tension, to ease the pounding of his heart at the tenderness in Q’s voice toward this...person. The woman furrowed a brow up at him. “But I feel like I’ve seen you before. Have we met?”

Her eyes turned stony.

Quentin snapped his neck toward him. “Are you serious?”

“Do you have the memory of a fucking goldfish?” Penny asked with lifted brows, like he was genuinely asking. “That’s your would-be wife, numbnuts.”

Eliot’s eyes fell shut.

Shit.

It was Fen.

Quentin’s heart-cousin, the wife candidate, the most important person in Q’s life. Shit. Shit.

Eliot tried to meet Q’s eyes, to silently apologize, but his husband was entirely focused on Fen, who was refusing to look at him. In all, a bit of a clusterfuck. Eliot hadn’t helped. He saw that now.

“Sire, if I may interject,” Tick said with a finger in the air at Penny. “Our esteemed citizens The Golden Fish are actually quite known for—”

“Not the goddamn time, Tick,” Margo bit out, hand in the air. “What the shit is going on here?”

“Obviously, Quentin must be correct,” Julia said. “Lady Fen is a de facto member of our court and a highly valued member of our personal community. I move to release her immediately so we can get to the bottom of this.”

“That is very merciful of you, Your Highness,” Fen said, squaring her shoulders back and keeping her eyes on the ground. “But I ask you to reconsider, so that I may—”

Quentin squeezed his eyes closed and clenched his fists. “You don’t have to be so deferential, Fen. It’s okay.”

“I’m not being—” Fen swallowed, hard “—deferential.”

“Your Majesties, the prisoner—the prisoner turned herself in,” Tick said, dropping an atom bomb on Quentin. He staggered back and his eyes went kicked puppy dog. “In every other instance, as I said, we would have immediately executed her for the crimes professed, without disturbing your royal spare moments.”

At that, Quentin threw his head up. His eyes were bright and red and fierce as he decimated Tick where he stood. Eliot’s heart raced, hands twitching to reach out. If that had happened—

Well. Some hypotheticals were probably better left as such.

Tick shrunk under Q’s gaze, twisting his thumb in his palm. “But she also invoked an obscure bylaw that requires us to bring the issue to the monarchs.”

“Fen, what—?” Quentin ran a hand through his hair. “What the fuck happened? Why didn’t you contact me?”

Fen stared at her feet, speaking low. “Why are you in this meeting?”
“I attend all Council meetings,” Quentin said, bushy little brows coming together. “I’ve told you that in my letters. Like, repeatedly.”

“I’ve—” Fen closed her eyes and bit her lip. “I’ve been burning your letters.”

“What?” Quentin’s face spasmed, almost trembling with clear worry and confusion. “But you’ve—you’ve responded.”

Fen wrote Quentin back every month or so. They weren’t in particularly close correspondence, but Q had explained that they had always been able to pick up where they left off. That when he was on Earth, they once went two years without speaking at all, even through Bunny. And since all of Fen’s letters had about a 34:1 ratio of happy doodles to words, it seemed like there was never reason to worry.

But the way she looked now was not heart heart winky face exclamation point.


“Fen, what the hell happened?” Quentin tried to take her hand again, but she didn’t move it from her side. She kept staring right ahead. “Fen.”

“Your Highnesses,” she said with a bell-clear voice, looking Eliot right in the eyes with a low bow. Perfect form. “As High Councilman Pickwick conveyed, I invoke the call of the rams’ bloodied heartstring.”

The murmur of the Council members turned to a din, loud whispers crossing the room in a rush. Quentin blanched, stepping closer to his heart-cousin with painfully worried eyes. Eliot wanted to rush down to his side, to place an arm around his shoulders for support, emotional and physical. But the world grew more narrow, the breathless trepidation zeroing in on Fen and Fen alone.

But Bambi never cared much about emotional weight. “What the fuck does that mean?”

“It’s a form of political asylum,” Julia said quietly, her lips flattening into a line. “A serious form of political asylum.”

“Granted,” Penny said firmly. “Requests for asylum should always be granted.”

“Calm your tits,” Margo said, leaning over Eliot to look at her fuck buddy or whatever the hell he was now. Her voice was gentler than usual, which was annoying. “Let’s find out what’s happening first.”

Eliot’s stomach turned, but he pulled his shoulders back to project calm. That was his job. To be calm all the goddamn time. But the foreboding air around his skin grew thicker, like humidity, like the wave off a fire.

“Fen, what happened?” Quentin tucked his hair behind his ears, imploring her softly. “Are you—shit, are you okay?”

“I didn’t think you’d be here for this,” Fen said again, finally looking at him, tears gathering in her eyes and making them even bluer. “I didn’t think you’d be here, Q.”

“Fen,” Quentin said so gently, so sweetly. It made Eliot’s insides liquify. “Fen, we’ll figure it out, okay? If someone is threatening you or—”
But Fen shuddered her eyes closed, taking a long slow breath. Then she turned back to Eliot, face set into a serious mask. She swallowed and stood tall.

“For the past nine months,” she said with all the gravitas in Fillory, with only a tiny tick of the muscle near her eye giving any anxiety away, “I have been a ranking member of the dissenter organization known as Fillorians United.”

The words reverberated through the quiet hall. Every pin on Earth and every rolling marble on Fillory clamored. Eliot glanced over at his fellow monarchs with a bit lip. Because from his perspective, at least, the announcement was…

Anticlimactic.

Thankfully, they all looked as flummoxed as he felt. None of them had ever heard of it either. At least he hadn’t been remiss. Or stupid.

But unfortunately, and much more concerning—

Quentin shot back like he’d been punched in the stomach.

“What?”

His face was as white as the stone around them. He swallowed over and over again, like he was about to vomit. His fingers clamped onto the top of his head.

Fen didn’t look at him. Kept talking at Eliot. “The original intent of the group has shifted in a way that I do not believe will serve Fillory well. So I have turned myself in to provide information, in exchange for safe haven.”

“Okay, before we get into that,” Margo said with an impatient sigh. “What the fuck is Fillorians United?”

Eliot couldn’t take his eyes off Quentin, off his moving lips, his shaking knees, his darting white-knuckled hands.

“We are—they are an activism group,” Fen said with clear diction, well practiced, “that believes in a Fillory for Fillorians, a Fillory that—”

Quentin set his jaw and turned his face back toward Margo, voice hoarse and deep. Too deep. “They wanna overthrow you.”

Margo popped her lips into a pucker.

“Well now,” she said, rolling her shoulders back into her throne with a molten glare. “That, Mama no likey.”

But Fen shook her head quickly, finger shaking.

“That’s a mischaracterization. The goal was a peaceful separation, with a blessing from the gods,” she explained and Quentin started smiling wide, showing all his teeth, a really bad sign. “However, lately, the leadership has grown more, um, radical and—”

Quentin cut her off with a hysterical laugh. “Ember’s asswipe, are you fucking kidding me? The leadership?”

“I have reason to believe that they are working with the Lorian government,” Fen said, still looking
at Eliot, lashes fluttering quickly even as her voice remained steady. “To sow discord from a foreign invasion before making a move toward civil unrest.”

“Jesus,” Penny groaned, scrubbing his hands down his face. “Jesus.”

Eliot filled his lungs with air and exhaled. Another day at the fucking office. He shook his head and began to thank Fen for her honesty, at least, and her willingness to help, when his words were stolen from him by an uncannily booming voice.

“Out. Get out. Everyone get out,” Quentin said, staring straight ahead with a curtain of hair around his face. When the court just stared at him, dumbfounded, he snapped his teeth forward, red neck bulging with veins as he roared in a sweeping circle. “Everyone get the fuck out.”

Eliot must have startled, must have jumped, because Julia rested a calming hand on his knee, stroking her thumb there. She hummed a soothing sound, but didn’t move her eyes from Quentin.

“You heard him,” Bambi said, quicksilver cutting. She crossed her legs, a power position noir. “This is officially a private matter. Get out.”

It was a mistake to make Margo repeat herself. Everyone knew that. So the throne room was evacuated in double-time, until all that was left were four kings and queens, a Fillorian rebel, and a man on the verge of a breakdown.

“Quentin,” Eliot said gently, fingers itching to reach out. “Hey Q? Why don’t you grab a seat?”

“You’d like that, wouldn’t you?” Quentin snarled nonsensically, pacing at a dizzying speed. “You’d love if I grabbed a seat.”

Okay.

Best not to poke.

“Here’s the deal,” Margo said to Fen, staring her up and down from over her nose. “We need the information before we can grant you shit. So keep talking.”

But Fen shook her head, a brave soul. “I need assurance that I won’t be executed once the information has been given.”

“Don’t be absurd,” Eliot said with a rough laugh. He wasn’t going to execute Quentin’s Fen, no matter what she did. “Of course we’re not going to execute you.”

(Margo flashed yet another annoyed glare at him.)

“Most in your position would, Sire,” Fen said, keeping her head bowed in a cool respect. “But I do hope you will hear what I have to say, as well as my promise that everything I did was based on nothing but my deep love of Fillory.”

“Bullshit.”

Every head turned to Quentin.

He had stopped pacing, heaving breaths as he turned his slouched shoulders toward Fen. His hair was almost as wild as his eyes.

“It’s not,” Fen said quietly, looking at him with a sad and strange expression. “Q, I really believed that it was for the—”
“Bullshit,” Quentin seethed again between his teeth. “You know what I think happened, Fen? I think things didn’t go exactly the way you perfectly planned, so now you want revenge and that is —”

“You asshole,” Fen breathed out, face going slack like she’d been slapped. “Oh my gods, you asshole.”

Quentin sniffed, looking at the ground. “That’s an Earth word.”

“Well, better to speak your language, isn’t it?” Fen snapped back and Quentin flinched. Julia squeezed Eliot’s knee tighter.

“I like her,” Bambi said under her breath, leaning in with her eyes glued on Fen. Eliot wasn’t sure he agreed.

“Sorry, uh, but someone who joined a fucking terrorist group,” Quentin said, stretching out his jaw and running his hand across his chin, “doesn’t get to be so godsdamned delicate about hearing hard truths.”

Penny let out a sharp breath from his nostrils.

“I’m sorry, did you just say terrorist?” He rocked his head back, sliding his fingers down his cheeks and pulling his eyes down. “I hate this place.”

“We’re not terrorists,” Fen said with a tiny catch in her voice. She blinked up at Quentin, wide-eyed and desperate. “You know we’re—you know they’re not terrorists.”

Quentin didn’t budge. “What you’re describing is textbook —”

Fen shook her head. “No. It’s not like that. I just—I had to do something.”

“Why?” Quentin rolled his lips into his mouth, popping his eyes out with a dangerous shrug. “Fillory is better than it’s ever been. It’s thriving. Why the fuck would you want to fuck with that if not for selfish reasons?”

“Come on,” Fen said. She met Quentin’s eyes and snorted. “You can’t be serious. You think we don’t know why it’s thriving, Q?”

“Because we’re incredible monarchs,” Margo shot out, a glove slap of a challenge. “No?”

Julia swallowed and leaned across Eliot, dark eyes flitting up at her concentrating ex. “Pen? Any read?”

Penny shook his head, squeezing his eyes shut tight. “I can’t get a thing.”

At the same time, Margo poked Eliot’s side and hissed, “You’re the High King. Say something.”

But he couldn’t. All he could do was watch Quentin yelp another hyena laugh and snarl. “You’ve got to be fucking kidding me, Fen. Hades in a yellow bathtub.”

(The weirder the Fillorian phrase, the more harrowing the situation.)

Fen stared at Quentin for a long time before letting out a loud laugh of her own.

“You know what?” She grabbed at her pants legs, breathing back tears. “You’re right. Maybe I am a little selfish, a little angry. It’s just that my life was ruined the second the High King passed me
over, and since then you have done nothing to help. You didn’t think at all about how it might be different for me than it would have been for you. You just whisked away with your beautiful husband, off to your beautiful life—"

“Right, yeah, because I begged for this position,” Quentin snapped, hurling something sharp right at Eliot’s solar plexus as he did. “Don’t revise history to suit your—your pity party, Fen.”

“Wow, another cute turn of phrase. Pity party,” Fen said with a blink of fury. “Who are you?”

Q threw his hands up in the air, smile near dazzling in its fury. “Someone who actually wants to help Fillory without turning to godsdamned treason.”

“Because you’re the noble Quentin of Coldwater Cove, right?” Fen sniffed, a tear finally loosing onto her cheek. “Like you aren’t loving the continuation of your Earth fantasy, with all your shiny new Earth friends.”

Quentin swallowed, narrowing his gaze down to a point on the ground. “I went to Earth so I could learn more than what’s offered here, so—so—so I could try to see where potential leaders were coming from, so I could think beyond the fucking small-minded—”

“Cat’s scat,” Fen said simply. “You went to Earth because you are always trying to escape —”

Quentin slowly brought his face up to look her straight on. “I returned, didn’t I? Before I even finished university, and at whose beseeching, Fen?”

Eliot was always thrown for a loop when Quentin’s speech turned more formal, more Fillorian. He hated himself for how much he hated it.

Fen nodded slowly, pressing her lips together. “So now you punish me for it. For needing you, when I was trying to keep our family from falling apart at the—”

Quentin deflated.

“I’m not—I’m not punishing you, gods,” he palmed at the sides of his head, eyes ticking all around. “But this is a bad decision you made. This is actually really bad. This is beyond any of our other shit.”

“It’s not why I did it, I did it because I love Fillory and it’s my home and I want the best for all of us,” she said carefully, emphasizing each word. Quentin sniffed hard and turned his gaze away. “So what else was I supposed to do?”

He reinflated, the fight and nerves returning tenfold. Quentin burst away with a strangled yell. “Literally anything else!”

“What prospects do I have, Q?” Fen cried. “I can’t marry, I can’t have a family, I can’t take a vocation, I can’t study, I can’t do anything but wait to die alone.”

Quentin faltered, eyes flying up to the ceiling. His jaw trembled. A stinging crawl of worms burrowed their way under Eliot’s skin, tight and painful and cold. He let out a shaky breath and clenched his fists. But it wasn’t guilt.

It wasn’t.

“So yeah, this seems like a private conversation,” Penny said suddenly, the rising emotions drowning him as surely as they were drowning Eliot. “Should you two head to another—?”
“No way,” Margo said, slinking forward with a smirk. “This is the most entertaining shit I’ve seen in weeks.”

“Shut the fuck up, Margo,” Quentin snarled without looking at her. Bambi shrugged, unperturbed as ever. But Fen let out a hyena laugh too, very much like Quentin’s, eerily like Quentin’s, glaring the daggers on her hips right into his eyes.

“You live in a world where you can tell the High Queen to shut the fuck up without a second thought and yet you condemn my means of survival?” One corner of her lip lifted. “Fuck you, Quentin.”

Quentin clacked his teeth together and jabbed a finger out at her. “If you can’t see how joining the FU Fighters—”

“Um,” Margo held her hand up, stuttering out a laugh. “Did you just say Foo Fighters?”

“Margo,” Eliot hissed out automatically, not having realized he was still capable of speech. What a treat.

Quentin continued like no one had spoken “—is a completely different choice than survival, then I’m not sure how in line our principles actually are, Fen.”

Fen opened her mouth wordlessly before clamping it shut. Her eyes shone with more unshed tears and she let out a choked laugh, her hand covering her mouth.

She sniffed and closed her eyes, shaking her head. “Umber’s bumpkin, what was that one charming Earth phrase you used to use, right when you came back from the education I was denied?”

Quentin clenched his jaw. It was going to break at some point. “Fen, come on, that’s not—you know I don’t—”

“Oh, of course!” She snapped her fingers and smiled, sweet as can be, looking him dead in the eye. “You can shove your ‘principles’ up your ass, Quentin.”

A long and torturous moment sunk the room into an airless void. Quentin stared at her, unmoving, unblinking. Then he smiled, wide as the horizon, and threw his hands in the air. He laughed and laughed, wild and frenzied, like he’d been untethered from Fillory itself.

“You know what? Forget it,” he said, hands smoothing over his hair on manic repeat. “I’m—I’m done. I’m done. I’m fucking done, I’m done, I’m done, I am done.”

Fen swallowed. “Quentin—”

He stormed his eyes up at her. “You’re on your fucking own.”

Lips trembling, Fen let out a mournful whimpering sound. But she didn’t say anything more.

Quentin ticked his head to the side and nodded to himself, decision made. He turned around and walked away, his shoulder slamming against hers before he slammed the doors behind him.

As soon as his body caught up with his mind, Eliot shot up from his throne, blood pumping fast and hot. But before he could run after him, before he could find him and hold him and talk him down, a cool hand grabbed his forearm and pulled him back.

“You’re a king first,” Margo said low, still staring straight ahead. “Act like one.”
For a fiery second, Eliot hated her.

But she was right.

He nodded at Margo and she pursed her lips, before melting them into a bright smile. She turned to Fen, all charm.

“So I don’t think we’ve officially met,” Bambi purred. She scrunched her shoulders up, cute as a button. “I’m Margo.”

“I apologize, Your Majesties,” Fen said, inclining her head. She wiped under her eyes. “That was—my heart-cousin and I—”

“Trust me, girl,” Margo said with a snort, cutting her off as she relaxed back into her throne. “We all know by now how much of a little prick Q can be.”

Penny concurred with a deep nod. “The smallest, tiniest, littlest prick in all the land.”

Julia pinched the bridge of her nose. “Guys, focus.”

But Fen’s eyes darted to Eliot, fear painted clear. He held his head high and chose his words carefully.

“Family matters are complex. No judgment here.” Eliot paused. “In that regard.”

Fen bowed lower, something close to a true smile playing on her lips. “The bards do sing of your kindness, Sire.”

He tried to return it. “Well, they sort of have to.”

Margo adjusted her dress, still grinning at Fen with all the warmth of a gala hostess.

“So,” she said sweetly, pressing her hands down on her lap and shimmying her shoulders. “No more brother-cousin-whatever-the-fuck-Q-is-to-you interruptions now. Finally, we can get to the heart of this terrorist matter.”

Fen shook her head, the first edges of rightful fear glinting in her eyes. “Again, they’re not—”

But Margo’s whole face turned dark and she bared her teeth, staring down Fen like the barrel of a gun. “Talk,” she growled, a low tremor. She smiled again. “Now.”

Fen gulped.

Quentin hated his quarters.

They were cold and dusty, and all the books in the whole of Fillory didn’t make them feel like home. The long corridor leading to his bedroom was dotted with those arabesque patterned windows, casting twisted shadows and glinting light that blinded him.

He never spent time in his quarters anymore. It had been weeks since he’d stepped foot inside. Months since he’d slept there. Still, Quentin perched on the end of the bed, shaking hands covering
his shaking face, not daring to go to Eliot’s, not daring to seek that comfort whenever it may come. Because Quentin deserved to feel alone. He deserved for his insides to turn to blistering ice, to melt against his blood until he drowned. He had brought this all on himself, he had been the one to ignore, to push aside, to decide, to decide —

Quentin fell over on his side, pulling his knees up to his chest as his lungs overworked themselves. He had kicked off his shoes at some point and his toes were numb in the musty air. Tears were falling down his cheeks but he only knew because he could feel the cool rivers diverting in crossed pathways down his hot cheeks.

Fen was right.

She was right about everything. He was an asshole who had abandoned her. He had wanted to forget everything so badly, wanted to be swept away so badly, that he had turned off everything that had once mattered to him. It was exactly like when he went to Earth. He never changed, he never grew, he was always doomed to be the same motherfucking fuck up who had no home, no loyalty, no sense of self. He was worthless. He was a fuck up, he was a worthless fuck, he was worthless, worthless, worthless, a fucking worthless fuck up.

Quentin squeezed his eyes shut tight, twisting and yanking at his hair as his shoulders shook with frantic sobs. He couldn’t feel anything. He felt nothing. Nothing but the tremors of his tears, the pitting in his gut, ripping the whole of him wider and wider, like a black hole, like a monster ready to devour all the light in his path. He felt nothing, nothing, nothing —

Except a warm hand pressed between his shoulder blade.

He closed his eyes tighter. Quentin didn’t deserve it. He deserved to be alone. But his muscles were traitors too and so they melted, deep into the mattress. Fucking pathetic.

“You left before I could ask you what you wanted me to do,” Eliot’s warm voice said from beside him, his familiar thumb massaging into his back muscles. “So I made the decision and I’m going to tell you what it is now.”

Quentin sniffed in acknowledgment and somehow said, “Okay.”

“Fen will stay at the castle, under political asylum. She will not be put in the dungeon,” Eliot explained in low tones, voice steady. “She is going to have long conversations about Fillorians United with Margo, wherein Penny is going to try to extract what he can through the psychic ward that was forced on her.”

Godsdammit. Quentin hitched a breath and his voice cracked as he asked, “They forced a ward on her?”

(He forced a ward on her.)

“All members have one,” Eliot said, voice unwavering from its soothing, kingly tenor. “They worked with some hack enchanter, but it’s airtight. More importantly, she said it didn’t hurt her and Penny confirmed it from a brainwave standpoint.”

Quentin swallowed broken glass. “Okay.”

“We’re not going to punish someone for joining an activism group.”

“Okay.”
“Julia pointed out that it’s basically freedom of assembly. Fen left once it crossed into criminal or treasonous territory, and that’s what we’re basing our decision-making on.”

“Okay.”

“Q,” Eliot breathed his name out so tenderly, leaning over to speak right in his ear from behind. “Darling, can you look at me?”

“No,” Quentin sobbed, heart latching to that darling with all its weak might. Eliot only called him that in the throes of passion or to tease him. Never so earnestly. “I—I can’t. I can’t.”

A warm forehead rested against his temple with a sigh. “What can I do? How can I help?”

“I don’t—I can’t—I’m not—” Quentin forced himself to a seated position, swollen eyes blinking open as he looked at Eliot. He was breathtaking, eyes bright green in the firelight and pooled with more compassion than he knew what to do with. “Eliot, I can’t, this was all my—”

“Hey, breathe with me,” Eliot said, taking Quentin’s hand and placing it over his own heart, over the exaggerated heaves of his chest. “Match my breath. Everything is okay. Fen’s okay. You’re okay. We’re all okay.”

They breathed together. The jolts and jumps of his hateful heart bruised his rib cage, but he breathed. He breathed. Eliot took long slow breaths through his nose and out his mouth, deep and slow. He clutched Quentin’s hand almost too tight, stroking the delicate skin with beautiful fingers and pressing their heads together, until Quentin wasn’t crying, until he was getting oxygen and opium in a swirl of almost calm.

He blinked his hazy eyes open, the blur of his lashes and tears still obscuring his vision. But Eliot was so clear, so piercing in his beauty, right through the most fragile seam of Quentin. The long slope of his nose, the pink of his lips, the dusting of dark stubble across his jaw—there was nothing about him that wasn’t remarkable, regal, ravishing.

Quentin needed to touch him.

With a shaky breath and keeping his eyes open, so he could see him, could see his beautiful Eliot, he brought a hand up to his cheek. Eliot leaned into it automatically, tracing the tip of his nose along the heel of his palm, breath quickening.

“El,” Quentin whispered, hovering right over his lips, stroking his cheekbone. “El, can we?”

Eliot’s brow came together quickly, almost undetectable, though he didn’t pull away. “I don’t know if that’s—”

“Please, Eliot,” Quentin begged, closing his eyes and gripping at his shirt. The thick fabric bunched in his hand, solid and silken. “I need you.”

Eliot gave an audible swallow around a ragged breath.

“Yeah, of course,” he murmured, lips brushing at his earlobe. He wound his arms around him and pulled him closer, so Quentin straddled him. “Come here, baby.”

He was right there. He was always there, always ready for Eliot. He wrapped his legs around his waist and savored the gasp of breath he pulled out when his hard dick pushed into Eliot’s still soft one. Quentin breathed in his skin, nosing up the line of his long throat. Eliot gripped at the small of his back, burying his face in his hair. He kissed the hinge of his jaw, lightly, and Quentin could
feel his eyelashes flutter against his cheek.

“Q,” Eliot whispered softly, and that was all it took.

With a rush of animal lust, Quentin pushed off Eliot’s beautiful coat and lifted his silk shirt, so he could drag his fingers down his chest, mouth at his chest and kiss up his neck.

“I don’t want to think.” Quentin gasped into his ear, already pathetically grinding himself into Eliot. But Eliot didn’t seem to mind—he just pulled him closer, finally kissing him and kissing him. His lips parted under him, and Quentin felt his mind click off, felt sensation turn on, felt himself surrender.

Eliot worked his pants off, slender fingers sliding the fabric down with a supernatural grace. Then his hands slid back up, cupping the swell of his ass for an indulgent moment, burning heat and perfect distraction into Quentin’s skin.

“Is this—is it okay here?” He felt the need to check, as Eliot moved his hands under his shirt, lips biting and sucking along his neck. “Or do you want to go to, uh, your quarters?”

Our quarters, his heart cried.

“Here’s fine,” Eliot said, placing a new kiss down Quentin’s chest with every button he undid. “God, anywhere’s fine.”

Quentin ducked down and captured his lips again, pouring all the pain and frustration and sorrow he felt into it, letting Eliot absorb him until he was whole again.

Eliot was long and limber, almost delicate in his finery and exacting frenzy. But with Quentin, he was steady as an oak, commanding and caring in equal measure, a strong mountain, the spark that kept the engine moving. He turned Quentin into a terrible poet, made him feel like he was worthy, like all of this was right and good and where he was supposed to be. Drowning in Eliot’s whiskey eyes and revived from his clever mouth in a single sustaining breath.

They made their way to the top of the cold bed, Eliot crawling over him in all his radiating glory, their lips never parting. He curled Quentin into him, spooning on their sides, hands skimming his chest and arms and down to his thighs with soft lips on his shoulder. Quentin whimpered and strained back into him, grabbing Eliot’s hand and pressing it wide against his chest. With a thrust, maybe involuntary, El’s hard cock nestled between his ass and Quentin bit his lip to hold back a gasp.

“Can I hear you?” Eliot murmured in his ear, wrapping his hand around Quentin’s aching dick, stroking slow, so godsdamned slow. “Please let me hear you.”

Quentin let out a loud moan as Eliot swiped his thumb around his head, grazing like gossamer. “The spell, please. Just—just do the spell. Need this, need—”

“Breathe,” Eliot soothed, stroking him harder and sucking his shoulder. “I’m here. I know what you need. I’m going to give you what you need.”

Quentin swallowed a thousand errant thoughts and brought Eliot’s free hand up to his lips. He whispered into his knuckles, “How are you always so patient with me?”

Eliot didn’t answer. “Focus on how I’m touching you, baby.”

He licked the sensitive skin behind Quentin’s ear, as his cock slipped up his tailbone. Quentin
could feel him shudder at the shock of friction, and then Eliot was mouthing frantically at his neck, sucking and biting hard enough to leave marks. But he must have been doing the spell at the same time, because sharp points pricked down Quentin’s spine and everything whitened out for a moment with a taut stretch and a swoop he felt down to his toes.

Quentin rocked his head back onto the crook of Eliot’s neck and he bit at his jawline, dazed. “Gods, yes.”

Eliot huffed a staccato laugh and kissed messily at the side of his nose. Quentin could feel his amused smile. “Not the typical reaction.”

“It means you’ll be inside me soon,” Quentin said dreamily, tilting his head up as high as he could, nuzzling into his skin, smelling like peppermint and booze and Eliot. “Means you’ll be inside me.”

Eliot let out a breath from his nostrils, stilted.

Then he pulled Quentin in firmly by the stomach. Their skin slapped together as Eliot craned his neck down to kiss him, deep and slow and dirty, like Quentin was about to get the most thorough fucking of his life. Quentin reached back and threaded his fingers in Eliot’s hair, pulling himself closer, spreading his legs to urge him on.

Eliot broke away with a gasp, using his free hand to grip at Quentin’s hip and line himself up. He pushed in slowly, torturously, taking his time like he was savoring every inch. The stretch of him was spine-melting, and Quentin groaned with a tremble as Eliot breathed into his hair. Quentin swore he could feel his wobbly smile as his hips settled into his ass.

“Quentin,” Eliot breathed, tongue flicking in his ear. “Quentin, goddamn.”

His heart thudding in his fragile chest, Quentin rocked back into him and almost whined, needing him, needing Eliot. He was always so goddamned needy, but Eliot made him feel like that was okay, that it was good, that it was hot. But Eliot didn’t obey, not this time. He just kept stroking a slow pace on his cock and kept moving his mouth on his neck, tenderly kissing each bite mark away.

“Talk to me,” Quentin heard himself beg. He needed it—his voice like velvet, his voice like the sea. “Please talk to me, El. Tell me it’s good for you.”

“You’re so fucking gorgeous,” Eliot whispered in his ear without hesitation, dripping warmth as he stroked and stayed still, stroked and stayed still. “Do you have any idea what you do to me?”

Quentin couldn’t speak, mind spotted and body on fire. He let out a tiny sound from his throat, stuttering his hips in both directions. Eliot slowed his stroking and finally started to move at a steady pace. Quentin broke with a sob, burying his fingers deeper into his curls to beckon him on, beckon him closer.

“Nothing feels better than fucking you. Nothing, Q,” Eliot whispered into his shoulder, stubble scratching against his skin. “I’m only so insatiable because you—you’re so incredible, so irresistible.”

Quentin messily kissed his jaw, overwhelmed by the scent of him. “Oh my gods, Eliot.”

“From the first time I saw you, I wanted you,” Eliot promised, thrusting back up with a catch in his throat. “Before I was a king, when you were just a face in the crowd. I wanted to take you right there, I wanted that beautiful boy on my cock until they all died of envy.”
He slowed the pace of his thrusts, sliding back into him deliberately, slowly, so slowly. He wrapped his arms around his chest and breathed in his hair, rolling his hips and kissing his neck, his shoulder, his jaw. Quentin whined deeper, leaking onto the mattress. They stayed like that for a moment, then another, then another, and then—

“Hades, Eliot,” Quentin finally broke, arching back with a burst of hot indignation. “Move, jackass.”

“Always so bratty,” Eliot teased with a click of his tongue, finally moving again, still with a too-slow pace. He panted happily and bit his ear. “So fucking cute.”

Quentin felt the ghost of a frown on his lips at that, going slack against Eliot. He turned his face into his neck, soaking up the salt of sweat, the scent of firewood and peppermint and something uniquely Eliot, like lilacs and dusk and amber. Cute was that word, it was the word. He felt it vibrate in his bones, felt it flush up his chest.

But then Eliot tipped up his jaw and looked him right in the eyes.

“When I say you’re cute,” Eliot said softly, eyes devouring and tender, “I mean you’re—you’re surprising and lovely and dear.”


When he couldn’t take it anymore, when he was too overwhelmed, he dropped his eyes, nosing at the hollow of his throat. But Eliot nudged his face over, nudged his lips to his.

“You’re so dear to me,” Eliot murmured, kissing him as his eyes closed. He increased his pace, holding a hand to Quentin’s heart. “You know that, right? You know—you know how dear you are to me, right?”

He knew.

But Quentin didn’t want to be dear to him.

Quentin wanted him to love him, the way he had stupidly grown to love Eliot. Every minute, his veins glowed, his heart ached, he wanted to run down the stone hallways screaming at the top of his godsdamned lungs. He was consumed with it, endlessly, intrusively. But even as he knew Eliot cared for him, the thing was, Eliot didn’t love him. He had told him that from the start. He had been perfectly clear and Quentin was a selfish asshole for trying to disregard it.

I know this isn’t the start of a grand romance, he had said. That’s not even what I want, he had said.

Eliot dug his fingers into his chest and kissed his shoulder over and over again.

I know this isn’t the start of a grand romance.

Eliot moved inside him, whispering his name.

That’s not even what I want.

Quentin turned his face away, eyes falling shut. Eliot picked up speed, thrusts turning harder, slapping against his skin and gasping out hard breaths. He palmed at his wet cock, wrapping his fingers around the girth of him.
“Q,” El stuttered out, voice frantic. “My darling Q, I—"

_I love you_, Quentin thought desperately as he wrenched back to kiss him hard, to stop whatever else he was going to say, whatever sweet nothing wasn’t _I love you I love you I love you_.

“So good,” Eliot murmured as they parted, wrapping Quentin’s _aching_ dick in his big hand and stroking in time with his thrusts. “God, Q, so good. You feel so good, amazing, perfect. Shit.”

“Eliot,” Quentin cried, rocking back into his cock and thrusting into his hand. “El, I’m close.”

“Come for me, Q. Come for me, darling. You’re so good, so gorgeous.” Their open lips found each other and Eliot smiled. “God, you kiss like a dream.”

Something about that, about Eliot speaking sweetly about his kisses with his cock bottomed out inside him tipped him over the edge. Quentin twisted his hand in the sheets, letting out a wild sound as he came and came. Eliot pounded into him, grunting into his neck, and holding Quentin tightly against him. Then he stiffened, halting to still, and his cock pulsed inside him, as he moaned loud and low in his ear. Together, they vibrated, the world resonated, and everything was golden, as Eliot sunk into Quentin and softened his mouth on his shoulder.

They stayed like that for awhile, before Eliot slowly pulled out and tutted the clean up without a thought. He wrapped Quentin in his arms easily, kissing the top of his head and letting Quentin rest his ear on his chest, so he could settle with Eliot’s heartbeat.

For a few tide-slow moments, it worked. Everything washed away, except the light making its way through the scant space between their bodies. Eliot was still kissing his forehead, kissing his hair, whispering his name (Quentin, my Quentin) as his passion floated back down to the ground, as his mind returned to itself.

But soon, the cold winds whipped his back.

“Eliot,” Quentin croaked, heart clenching at his husband’s contented hum of acknowledgement. “El, I have to tell you. About—with Fen—I have to—”

A hand raked through his hair, steady and gentle. “No, you don’t. I don’t care.”

Quentin steeled his eyes shut, hating himself so much. “But El—”

“Whatever it is,” Eliot swallowed hard, the movement rolling down his chest. “I don’t care, okay? I don’t care what you used to be before we met.”

Oh.

Oh, no.

...Eliot thought Quentin had been a FU Fighter.

He levered himself up, turning to look him in the eyes. “El, no—that’s not—”

But Eliot cupped his cheek and gave him a low smile, dim and sad and full of affection. “Just get some sleep, baby.”

Quentin felt the pinpricks of tears burn at the corner of his eyes and they shuddered close. “I really need to—”

“Please rest, Q,” Eliot whispered, sounding pained. He kissed Quentin’s eyelids with a murmur of
inaudible words. His pillowy lips fanned along his eyelashes, featherlight. “I’ll stay with you, as long as you want me here.”

Quentin huffed a breath, heart giving in. He would tell him. He would. When he was feeling better and when Eliot wasn’t so worried about him, when they could talk about it like partners, he would tell him. Quentin wouldn’t keep another secret from Eliot as long as he lived.

But yeah, for now, Quentin would rest.

He needed to rest.

“You can—you don’t have to stay if you don’t want,” Quentin said, settling into the pillow next to Eliot and tracing every line of his face with his eyes. Like he didn’t already have them memorized. “If my quarters aren’t comfortable for you or if you, uh, have work.”

Of course he had work. He was the goddamned High King of Fillory. But Eliot lifted up half his mouth. “It’s no trouble.”

For that, Quentin kissed him and Eliot melted into it like Summersun snow. Something tight unfurled, and he kissed him again and again, intoxicated, dreaming.

“Q,” Eliot murmured, cupping his face with so much gentleness Quentin thought he would die. “Q. baby.”

And Quentin almost said it.

Almost threw it all to the goddamned wind.

But he was tired and in a shitty state of mind, and he wanted—he needed—to Eliot to believe him, even if he didn’t feel exactly the same way, even if the hope growing in his heart was a liar. Right now, Eliot wouldn’t believe him, and Quentin couldn’t risk that kind of confusion fucking up something that worked, something that made everything bearable despite itself. So instead, he curled himself into Eliot and kissed him, gently and without intent, endless and unhurried.

There would be a better time.

tbc.
Eliot was rarely awestruck by Fillory.

First, it had been a questing hellscape, filled with crude people, haughty animals, and dangerous magic. He had hated it without hesitation.
Next, Fillory had been his gilded cage, his noble sacrifice for the lives of his friends and the good of all earthly humanity. Which was admittedly a fantastic cinematic trope, so dramatic and tragic and delicious. Eliot made it all look good, obviously. He definitely wasn’t saying that he didn’t make it look good.

It was more just that it was—you know, the reality of it was slightly less romantic than the trailer tagline promised. The loss of autonomy, an absence of choice, even for honorable reasons, generally worked better for archetypes than real people. He saw that now, as time pressed on, as he developed more depth and character with each passing day, all against his will. It was an unexpected realization. It was what it was.

But then, even more unexpectedly, Fillory became his day-to-day. It became familiar and even boring, the oddities and marvels woven into the threads of his life without note and as something to work around rather than to gawk at. And the strangest things seem suddenly routine, et cetera, et cetera. Point was, after nearly two years on the alien planet, Eliot didn’t feel like an alien anymore. He didn’t feel Fillorian—wasn’t sure if he’d ever feel Fillorian—but he didn’t necessarily feel like an outsider either.

He was something in between, something betwixt, which was far more than he had ever thought he would be. Fuck, it was far more than he had ever thought he wanted to be. That alone maybe should have made him feel awestruck, made him feel like he was actually fulfilling what he had told Margo so long ago—that he wanted to be part of something bigger. As always, if someone had told him three years prior that he would be the High King of a mythical land, complete with meetings about battle magic wartime strategy and teatime diplomacy with talking Sloths, he would have done a lot more drugs.

Now though, Eliot shrugged and kept moving. He was a king. It was what it was.

Adjusting the fluttery silk of his silver cravat, Eliot stood in a hidden alcove and gazed out over the splendor below him with a tug of pride at his heart. Because all that was to say—

Even he had to admit the Whitespire Ballroom was a grand architectural wonder.

The stone walls swept up to the heavens in a long interconnected arch, circling around a painted dome in a Moorish style, streamlined and majestic. The underside of the rotunda was done in the colors of the rainbow bridge—deep greens, pale blues, vibrant pinks and purples—all forming images of crowns and dwarven swords and dancing unicorns. They were drawn in broad strokes and fit together like a stained glass mosaic, luminous and stunning from magic and moonlight.

The evening fires were burning bright from the quartz chandeliers Eliot had custom-made for the event and the Fillorian orchestral troupe was readying their instruments. Fiddles, lutes, and pan flutes strummed and tinkled discordantly in the center of a large marble platform as nobles and dignitaries mingled in their finery. Food from every corner of the country was laid out on banquet tables—disgusting in flavor, but well presented at least—and enchanter crystals strung through the air to keep the illusions flowing across his champagne-ish fountains, his signature scent magic, and a spectacular everlasting light show.

Just like the one at his wedding.

Eliot swallowed, heart tugging anew.

The truth was, things had been weird lately. There was the growing Lorian threat and the news that a small but increasing subsection of Fillorian humans were strategizing toward civil unrest. He didn’t kid himself that any of it was a good thing, that it wasn’t a total crisis mode as far as the
Council and the monarchs were concerned. They were right. But at the same time, things lately had also been…

Really incredible.

And fuck, he definitely felt like a selfish asshole for finding it all so incredible. He was undeniably a selfish asshole for finding anything so incredible. A good king would be frantic in thought and steady in action, graying at the temples and sleeping in restless fits over the potentiality of what faced them. Nothing should have brought him giddy feelings and tingling palms. Certainly nothing should have been characterized as ‘incredible’ in the current circumstance.

But.

—But god, everything was incredible.

In the weeks since Fen had made her dramatic reappearance in all their lives, Quentin had been more than a little off-kilter. He completely refused to see her, only angrily muttering that she was a traitor and never elaborating beyond that. Eliot didn’t know for certain, but he was pretty sure Q wasn’t talking solely about Fillory. It was something more personal. There was a deep sea of shit that was none of Eliot’s goddamn business, one that wasn’t his concern to mull over or worry about.

Even though, you know, it was pretty obvious that Quentin had once been a FU Fighter himself.

He wasn’t all that mysterious.

Which, sure, maybe that wasn’t the ideal origin story for their arranged marriage. Most good kings would be at least a little cautious about the idea. But on the other, more important hand, the idea of Freedom Fighter Q was hot as hell. So. Give and take.

As it was, Quentin kept trying to tell him about his sordid, reckless, treasonous, sexy past, and Eliot always shushed him, in as many ways as he could. Why, just that afternoon, Eliot had shushed him on the floor of the dressing room, on his knees, pretty face pressed into the rug. It always started out with, “El, there’s something I need to tell you” and always ended with his gasping breath in his ear, lips and hands everywhere. It was a worthy trade, and Eliot had honestly started to develop a Pavlovian response to the words.

More seriously though, as Quentin struggled with his demons—与 his fractured familial relationship—he had been turning to Eliot more and more. They spent nearly all day together, almost every day. They shared secret smiles and teased each other with gentleness, with something like joy. When they fucked, they looked in each other’s eyes, they laughed, they whispered sweet words to each other like it could imprint on their skin. They held hands when they walked down the corridors, even when no one was watching. Eliot had never held a boy’s hand before, for the sake of it, and it was—fucking overwhelming.

But good. Really good.

Incredible.

Eliot took a deep breath and gripped the cool stone of the railing, blood rushing in his ears. Fear pricked at his spine, taunting him with all the ways he could fuck it up, all the ways he could lose it, even if it was technically impossible to lose. Which—well, shit, that wasn’t exactly a source of comfort. It was the biggest part of the fucking problem.

He wished he could will his mind blank, the way he used to do all the time. He wished he could
compartmentalize the messy nonsense that had always tried to crawl its way through his veins since he was younger—when he was weaker—and instead focus on the perfect ball that was coming to fruition just below his royal magic fingers. But because weakness was a lifelong burden, Eliot’s magnet eyes pulled to their lodestone below, standing alone by a plate of hors d’oeuvres.

Quentin’s long brown hair was pulled back into a low ponytail, errant tendrils falling around his beautiful face. He wore his signature color, though Eliot also happened to know that silvery threads depicted the moons in a recurring pattern through the fabric, subtle as the stars under misty clouds. Q shifted back and forth on black boots, frowning at a canapé and giving it a tiny lick, before pulling a face. Then he licked it again.

Eliot smiled. Quentin was the brightest jewel in the room. The most beautiful thing, lighting up the rafters.

...And even better, the drama wasn’t over.

After much deliberation, Q finally brought the food to his mouth, taking a slow bite before he startled at the sound of the orchestra tuning their final warm up. He dropped it on the ground and he set his jaw around a low curse, hand instinctively flying to his hair. He bent down, picked it back up, and furtively looked both ways. He stared the canapé down, eyes narrowing into an anguished question.

Anyway, in the end, Quentin opted not to eat it and got a new one instead. But it was a very close call.

A warm bubble of laughter made its way up Eliot’s throat, sparkling like the lights as he bit his lip to keep it in. He was fucking fool, but maybe a fool wasn’t such a bad thing to be anymore. His heart beat quickly and all he could think was that maybe, just maybe, it was okay that all he could see was Quentin.

“—even fucking listening to me?” Sharp fingernails grabbed at his coat and Eliot wrenched his focus back to Margo, who glared in fury up at him. “Hello?”

“Of course I was,” Eliot lied smoothly. “And if that’s what you think is best, then I agree.”

Her red lips puckered into a poison circle. “You’re a dick.”

Yeah.

He sighed and plucked her fingers off the fabric, so it wouldn’t bunch. “Sorry, I got distracted. Trying to think through any last minute details I might have missed.”

“Sure,” Margo said, flat. “In the meantime, Julia is still MIA. We have to deal with that.”

Julia had gone back to Earth two weeks earlier. When she had gone to get some of Henry’s personal spellwork to help Penny with his Fillorian frequency project that Eliot only half-understood, she had been contacted again by Persephone, who needed her assistance with some Underworld bullshit. Apparently, the clause of servitude when getting involved with deities was one with a lot of goddamn strings.

“We don’t have to deal with it now,” Eliot argued, pushing back a curl that fell over his eyes. He had gone big and bouncy for the occasion. “This is supposed to be an enjoyable evening, Bambi.”

“No, it’s supposed to be a politically expedient evening, to keep us in the good graces of the most powerful Fillorians and our very few allies,” Margo said, crossing her gold-sequined arms. “We’re
Eliot ticked his eyes back and forth. “She had to go. She said she had to go and I believe her.”

“Well, that’s stupid,” Margo snarled and he flinched. “She also told you she’d be back by tonight.”

Things had warmed between Bambi and Julia over the past year or so, the way a single sunbeam melted a glacier. Margo was never so easily swayed, never so easily changed. This definitely wasn’t going to help.

“Time gets fucked up,” Eliot said softly, fingering the ancient stone of his cufflinks. “She has to see it through. Long game kind of shit.”

“Far be it from me to question Queen Julia the Righteous,” Margo said, using the epitaph Eliot gave her like a lash. “But that doesn’t make this a great pattern, El.”

“This is only the second time she’s been to Earth in over a year.”

“Within a matter of weeks,” Margo said, stretching out all the words to a thready imitation of patience. “She’s always been a loose cannon and now she’s firing up again.”

“Ignoring a vision from Persephone might have been bad, to say the fucking least,” Eliot said, now checking in on his crown. As suspected, it rested perfectly atop his head. “She’s trying to be diligent from all angles.”

“Except she’s basically a magic junkie,” Margo said in a low voice, almost sounding apprehensive, even worried. “Going back to Earth is like a relapse.”

“Don’t be dramatic,” he said, though his stomach clenched cold. “Besides, if it was really about that, she would want to stay in Fillory. Way more magic here.”

Margo just shook her head. “Magic itself isn’t the thrill she’s chasing. You know that.”

Eliot did know that. He knew that Julia was drawn to the strangest edges of magic, its imperfections, and how to manipulate them. She lived for fitting circles in squares. Fillory was easy, it was safe. To her, it was likely boring.

None of that meant it was happening again, though.

“When it comes to god magic,” Eliot said with a patient inhale, “Quentin said—”

Margo cut him off with an annoyed growl. “Oh my god, I don’t care what Quentin said. I’m talking to you.”

Eliot let out a slightly less patient exhale. “Q is more knowledgeable than me.”

“Because you don’t trust yourself,” said wide-eyed Bambi, eyebrows painting her frustration in slanted lines. “Even though you should.”

“Humility isn’t actually a negative trait for a leader, Margo,” Eliot shot out before he could stop himself. But instead of the anger he expected, Bambi merely chuckled, stepping back on one foot with a smirk.


Eliot sighed, closing his eyes. “Margo—”
“Listen up, bucko,” Margo snapped her teeth in his face, voice dipping to its lowest register. “You are a king in your blood. You are a bastard and a bitch and you are fucking spectacular. I’ve magnanimously put up with this the Kind bullshit because I’m so damn reasonable, but I won’t anymore if you’re gonna go soft on me. Not now, not when I need you to be tough as a twat.”

“Listening to trusted advisors isn’t weakness,” Eliot snapped back. “Quentin is a native Fillorian. He is smart and wonkish and—”

“And you’re in love with him,” Margo finished with a death knell. “Which is clouding your judgment.”

Heat fired from his back up to his neck and the ground was unsteady. Eliot swallowed. “That’s—that’s not—I’m not—”

“Please. He’s mooning, you’re mooning, it’s bare asses galore,” Margo said with a stride across the alcove, draping herself opposite him along the railing. “But making him happy can’t be your only guidepost.”

“Jesus, it’s not,” Eliot said fiercely, gesturing around at the private proceedings, “obviously.”

Once the Lorian threat had been explicitly connected to the Fillorians United machinations, making the ball public had been a total nonstarter. They were surrounded by dignitaries and not a single peasant. It hadn’t been an easy decision, especially with Quentin’s big bright eyes on him, but it was the right one. He knew that in his gut.

But Margo flashed nothing but a crocodile smile.

“I hate when you try to bullshit me,” she said lightly. “You think I don’t know Quentin also thought it was the right choice, considering everything? It’s not like you broke his little heart.”

…but Margo was a goddamn court reporter. Jesus Christ.

“So—so—so what?” Eliot’s voice went pitchy and hysterical, wanting to pace away as fast as he could. “You hate Quentin now?”

“Don’t be dumb,” Margo said with a scrunch of her nose. Fine. Fair. “Quentin and I are totally copacetic. He’s an asset and a friend.”

Eliot narrowed his eyes and breathed calm over the steady pound of his heart. “Then what’s the problem?”

“You’re a king, El,” Margo said softly, stepping closer to him. “War is on the horizon. Yet you’ve been floating around this place like Mary Poppins getting a blowjob. Like it’s not even affecting you.”

Eliot turned his face away, grinding his teeth. Margo placed a hand on his elbow. “Hard decisions are going to have to be made and Q isn’t going to like all of them. I need to trust that you’ll put Fillory before your feelings or his.”

The fucking nerve of her.

He placed his palms flat on the railing, hunched over and focused into the void. “I put Fillory before everything, if you’ll recall.”
Margo faltered for a hair of a second before hardening her face all over again. “You think what I’m doing is any less because it’s a choice?”

Eliot sniffed. “By definition.”

“Right,” Margo said slowly, jaw tightening. “I’m just the figurehead queen without any fucking power, despite putting my whole soul into this goddamn—”

“When the hell have I ever treated you like we aren’t equals?” Eliot asked, struck breathless and disbelieving. “Like we aren’t partners in this, in every conceivable way?”

Margo burned her eyes out toward the crowd, looking away from him with a burning wistfulness. She closed her eyes and for a moment, she almost crumpled. She looked exhausted, with fluttering eyelashes and rounded shoulders.

Unable to resist comforting her, Eliot touched her back, concerned. But she just stiffened, as he knew she would.

“None of that changes the fact that shit is different between you and Q than even six months ago. It’s changed your decision making,” Margo said quietly, realigning her spine. “You gotta get your house in order.”

Eliot’s house was perfectly ordered. It was beautiful, and everything had its place, as it had always been and always would be. Things were just arranged differently. And he didn’t owe anyone an explanation of his tectonic shifts.

—Well, except maybe Margo.

Even if they hadn’t always been good at “communication,” Eliot had to at least try. She really had given up everything for him. His house was one thing, but Bambi was his home. She deserved to know what the fuck was going on with him. Or at least an approximation of it, since he hardly knew himself.

“Things are good,” Eliot said, watching as the orchestra started playing their opening number and the noble people offered their most raucous golf claps. “He and I—things are good. You don’t have to worry.”

“Honey, it’s not actually your relationship I’m worried about,” Margo said with a surprise smile, reaching over to rub his back. “But, hm, is this where I’m supposed to pretend to have the patience to mediate your love life?”

“Of course not,” Eliot said, kissing her forehead. “A queen must never concern herself with busywork.”

Subject closed.

“You two have been giggly as shit for weeks,” Margo said, reopening it immediately. “Something’s different.”

Eliot sucked his cheeks into his teeth and offered a tight smile. “He’s just—needed some extra support lately because of the Fen stuff.”

Margo snort-laughed at extra support but didn’t make the obvious joke. “Honestly? He’s being kind of a baby. More and more, based on what Fen’s told me, it really seems like a whole lot of nothing. Glorified debate club until some asshole got a lock on a Lorian contact.”
His kingly blood rushed through him. “Do we have a lead on that yet?”

“Nada,” Margo said, drumming her fingers on his arm, impatience at the slowness of the information drip seeping through. “They didn’t trust Fen with any real shit because of her connection to Q.”

“So they’re not totally stupid,” Eliot said with a sigh. “Well, I’m still hoping it’s all a moot point anyway. The Lorians hate us, but King Idri’s not reckless.”

“That we know of,” Margo rolled her eyes. Eliot raised his eyebrows and shrugged. The Lorian king steadfastly refused to meet with them. But Quentin had said that he was a respected and beloved leader in his native land, if a bit on the bloodthirsty side. Smart and noble and loyal though, which offset his preferences for head-chopping. So all in all, Idri didn’t sound like the worst. Stubborn, maybe, but not bad.

But bringing up Q’s knowledge again wouldn’t be the best move. Eliot was also not totally stupid.

“My only point with all this is that Quentin can be a little sensitive sometimes,” Eliot said and Margo laughed again. Fine. Fair. “There’s a lot about his life before that we don’t know, that we can’t understand. I’m trying to help him deal with that without forcing him to talk about it.”

“There’s so much we don’t know, yet you trust his word and ideas implicitly, even over your own,” Margo said, softer than before. It wasn’t a question. “Because you’re in—”

Eliot stiffened and watched light beams waver in the illumination spell. “What do you want from me?”

Margo pressed her lips together and took a breath.

“Okay,” she said, holding her hands up delicately. “I’m going to suggest something that’s a little off-brand.”

Eliot sighed and beckoned her on with a reluctant hand. He knew what was coming. He didn’t even have to look at her to see the way she steeled her face, set her jaw.

“You need to talk to him. Get on the same page.”

“Sounds terrible,” Eliot said easily, stretching his limbs out and pacing away once before returning. “Besides, there’s no need. We are on the same page.”

Margo tilted her head. “You’re preoccupied as shit.”

“I am not.”

“El,” she said, ducking her eyes to stare right at him. “I know you better than anyone. You’re not focused. But I think if you figure out your shit with your—I’ll remind you— literal husband who you cannot divorce, I think you’ll get your head back on straight.”

Margo said that like it was a good thing, like it wasn’t the biggest part of the goddamn problem. Like it was good that Eliot could never know if Quentin truly felt anything for him or if he was making due in a shitty situation.

Eliot stared at his fingers, at his wedding ring. “My head is perfectly balanced.”

She ignored that, waving her hand in the air.
“Don’t even think of it as a sappy blah,” Margo said with a sigh, the most emotionally articulate woman on all of Fillory and Earth. “Think of it as—a battle tactic.”

Eliot turned his head to smile at her, unable to help the warmth spreading in his chest. “A battle tactic?”

“You’ll be a stronger ruler if you aren’t obsessing over a cock,” Margo said, before rolling her eyes. “That, and I also want you to be, you know, happy.”

His wonderful Bambi spat the final word out with a full-body shudder. But despite her theatrics, it resonated down to his toes. She knew him well, damn well. Better than anyone.

Margo would never say it lightly.

Eliot swallowed around a lump in his throat and let out a breathy laugh. She tilted a grin at him and shrugged. She was trying her best and he owed it to her to meet her halfway. She deserved it.

“It’s—” Eliot shook his head. “It’s still complicated. I have no idea what he would want, if he wasn’t obligated to be with me.”

“Who gives a shit?” Margo asked genuinely. She leaned into him, cheek to his arm. “Hypotheticals are torture devices.”

“I give a shit,” Eliot said, finding Quentin in the crowd below. He was stuck in a conversation and shifting awkwardly on his feet, moving his goblet back and forth between his hands. “I want—”

He wanted so many things. He didn’t dare name them.

“If the contract went null and void tomorrow,” Margo asked quietly, following his line of sight out to the yellow glow of the ball, “do you think you’d still want him?”

The question vibrated his bones for a moment.

Eliot nodded, throat too tight to speak.

“Why would it be different for Q?” Margo threw her head back, long dark hair cascading in waves down her scandalous bare back. “You two aren’t exactly cold political spouses, honey. Isn’t it worth asking?”

“No, it’s not,” Eliot said firmly, pulse ticking up. She gave him an exasperated look and he sighed. “I mean, I don’t know. There’s the binding spell element too.”

He really, really fucking hated thinking about the binding spell element. His chest went cold and tight, and for a moment he wasn’t sure he could breathe. The idea that Quentin’s affection for him, his faith, his trust was in any way—

Eliot exhaled sharply through his nose.

But Margo was skeptical as ever. “You seriously think that if the contract went away, poof, you’d hate the kid?”

“I—I liked him from the start.” Eliot swallowed a painful crawl of acid up his throat, closed his eyes against a horrifying sting along his lashes. “But he didn’t like me. It wasn’t until after—”

Margo shushed him, squeezing his hand in hers. “I talked to him before you fucked. He liked you.”
Eliot let out an embarrassingly wet laugh. Yeah, maybe. Like, *a little*. Quentin had warmed to him *a little*, maybe, at the end of their first conversation. And he had been accommodating and earnest and kind of funny right before their night together. It had been nice, in its own way. Like they were on the same proverbial page that Margo was harping on about in the present.

But it wasn’t like they had stayed up all night, talking with their eyes glued to each other and fascinated by every shift in the other’s face. They hadn’t laughed over wine and debated music and immediately felt at ease with each other, in that way you were probably *supposed to*, with someone you were going to spend the rest of your life with. It had been rote, it had been an arrangement, it had been political, a handshake deal. At best, it had been hot and maybe fun, but hardly—anything deeper than that.

Until the binding spell.

“It still wasn’t exactly love at first sight,” Eliot said, swiping his thumb along the silver edges of his coat. They were embroidered like fire and smoke, reaching high up his arm. His jaw was trembling and he hoped to every deity that Margo couldn’t see.

Bambi placed her hand over his and met his eyes seriously. “Did you fall for him at first sight or were you a horny moron?”

Eliot snorted. “Is there a difference?”

Margo grinned, before jutting out her hip. “He didn’t know you. You didn’t know him.” She shrugged, ever so sympathetic. “But you know each other now.”

“Still complicated,” Eliot said, pressing his shaking hands to the sides of his legs. “We have a good rhythm. We—it’s working. Why risk fucking that up?”

“Because, like I said,” Margo gently stood on her tiptoes and kissed his cheek, whispering into his skin. “It’s eating you alive. You’re ineffective like this.”

“Overstatement,” Eliot said wryly, nuzzling his nose to her forehead.

“Understatement,” Margo said with her usual air of finality. She stroked his jaw and sighed. “I’m not saying you declare your undying whatever. I’m saying open the conversation. For Fillory, if nothing else.”

Defensiveness coiled in his stomach. He was so fucking sick of doing things he didn’t want to do for Fillory, even if that was the whole damn deal.

“All this from the woman who’s been fucking Penny for two years,” Eliot said, kindly leaving out the word *exclusively* as to not totally rub it in, “and still calls him a friend.”

But Margo just looked up at him with narrowed and confused eyes. “*Friend* was a big upgrade. Not sure what your point is.”

Eliot smirked despite his own jittery frustration.

If Margo knew that Penny had fallen ass-over-tits for her, she wasn’t letting on. Since she was hardly lacking in savvy, he had to assume she was just politely ignoring the fact that he hadn’t brought up Kady’s name in months, even in passing, even in his daily bursts of anger at the bullshit of Fillory. She must have been politely ignoring the way his usually hard eyes went soft every time Penny thought she wasn’t looking.
So Eliot just rested his chin on her head and tickled his fingers down her spine. She laughed into his lapels and took a deep breath, breathing in his cologne. He had chosen an especially nice one that night, with hints of jasmine, ginger, and moss. Not coincidentally, it was her favorite.

It was much better than talking.

But time waited for no cuddle session and the wooden door behind them creaked open, then slammed. Speak of the devil: Penny stalked onto the balcony, a vision in speckled emerald green. He cleared his throat impatiently and looked them up and down, rolling his eyes.

“Move your asses,” he said, in lieu of wow, everything looks great, Eliot, I can tell how hard you’ve worked. “They’re announcing us in five.”

Margo and Eliot grinned at each other and spoke in unison. “Thank you, five.”

“I hate you both,” Penny said, black scarf fluttering with his inhale. But his lips twitched as he looked at Margo. “Nice dress.”

“Thanks, boo,” Bambi said with a wink. Penny closed his eyes in deep frustration. As he did, his eyelids caught the light and Eliot frowned.

“Are you—” Eliot blinked, smile slowly forming “—wearing eyeliner?”

Penny tilted his head, jaw set challengingly. “Are you wearing eyeliner?”

That was a fair enough point.

He sometimes forgot that Penny was secure in his masculinity from every possible angle. It was both very hot and very annoying. Mostly because it was easy for him in ways it had never been easy for Eliot.

But still, he said, “Touche.” Then Eliot smiled at Penny lightly, moving toward the door. “Looks good.”

“Thanks,” Penny said, clearing his throat. “But seriously, we gotta move.”

Margo wrapped her arm into Eliot’s and snapped her neck back to glare at Penny. “We’re the High King and Queen. They wait for us.”

Penny threw up his hands. “Sure, if you wanna be rude as hell.”

“I love being rude as hell,” Bambi pouted.

“Also, recall, you once screamed at a vast majority of my wedding guests to go fuck themselves,” Eliot said with a sidelong glance of his own. “Our palaces are all such elegant glass enclosures, are they not?”

Penny’s jaw muscles popped. “Look, can we please just go? Get this part over with?”

So they went.

The stone steps cascaded down in a spiral, and both Eliot and Penny held one of Margo’s hands so she could descend without tripping on her gown’s flowing train. When they finally reached the ground floor of the ballroom, they were immediately met by Tick Pickwick, in his formal councilman uniform of brass and reds, bowing to them at the waist.
A collection of trumpets sounded. The calling song was short, with those same four notes from every movie about royalty Eliot had ever seen in his life (der-der-ner-NER), most likely brought over by one of the former High Kings who didn’t have an ounce of creativity.

“Most esteemed citizens of Fillory,” Tick spoke loudly from his diaphragm with a performative smile. All the guests turned in unison, stony looks of boredom hooding their eyes. “I present our much venerated monarchs, on this the day most blessed by Ember’s strength and Umber’s wisdom.”

“Praise be The Rams,” the noble people said in monotone unison. “Bahhhhh.”

Eliot scanned the crowd and found Quentin in the corner. He was pouring wine down his throat.

“In absentia, I honor Queen Julia the Righteous,” Tick said to a smattering of polite applause. Margo’s vicious eyes caught Eliot’s and he offered a tight smile back. Seriously, what the fuck was he supposed to do about it? “Her travels to the Great Planet Earth will surely bring Fillory good fortune.”

Margo squared her shoulders back as she hissed, “It fucking better.”

“Your point’s been made,” Eliot hissed back.

“Guys,” Penny hissed in the third, “shut the fuck up.”

“Now, ladies and gentlemen, Sloths and Bears, leprechauns—” (Eliot rolled his eyes. Leprechauns were annoying assholes in every world) “—and Centipedes, I present His Royal Highness King Penny the Persistent.”

The applause was similarly polite as Penny stepped forward, quickly bowing his head and then retreating back like it was the most irritating thing he had ever done.

“It is also my privilege to present Her Royal Highness, High Queen Margo the Destroyer,” Tick said, as Margo stepped forward and held her head high. She bowed to no one. The applause increased, as was customary. “And great dignitaries, it is my great honor, privilege, and most sacred duty to present His Royal Majesty, High King Eliot the Kind.”

The applause stopped, so that every knee could fall to the ground, so that every mouth could say, “Long may the High King of Fillory reign.”

But the only thing Eliot could see was Quentin’s sweet face and his beautiful smile gazing up at him, from where he knelt, still in a back drab corner with a plate of food balanced precariously in one hand. He bowed his head with a cheeky grin, and Eliot’s heart fell on the floor in front of him.

Drums pounded and the moment broke.

With a blink to reluctant attention, Eliot immediately reached out to greet various ambassadors with a polite smile. It was torture, when all he wanted was to find those eyes again, to run to those arms, to give Quentin a thousand types of shit for almost eating a floor canape, to smile at how he quickly blushed when he realized that someone—and not just someone, but Eliot—had seen. He wanted to dance with him, to drink with him, to laugh with him like it was a Cottage party, like nothing else mattered.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Margo craning her head at him with a raised eyebrow and pursed lips. Her eyes were sharp and knowing.
Eliot gulped.

Okay.

Maybe she was right.

The white stone balcony was painted in cool blues and whites, with the two crescent moons shimmering off the Silver Banks in the cold evening air. The ballroom’s glass doors glowed with bursting yellow and gold, bright lights and beautiful music. Of course, everything about the ball was perfect. Every detail was thoughtful and precise, every shift in the musical arrangement evoked awe, every piece of magic was gorgeously chosen and played. Eliot always outdid himself, every time. Because that was who Eliot was.

But Quentin was Quentin.

He needed a moment to withdraw. He needed to feel the sting of Wintermoon air on his face, to get the fuck away from the suffocating titled crowd with their swinshark circling, always looking for blood. He needed to wrap his arms around himself, braced in the chill from the water, and thinking of as little as he could. But since Quentin was, as noted, Quentin, that meant he was still thinking about pretty much godsdamned everything.

The winter crickets let out their usual mournful hymn and firelight bugs lit up the grass below the wall. Feliz Navidad played muffled behind him in odd three-quarter time and he could hear happy laughter from a roaring bear, perhaps the well-admired Humbledrum who had been overjoyed to receive an invitation from the High Queen herself. But Quentin’s eyes reached up the spires, looking for lit rooms, wondering which one Fen was sitting in as she refused to join the party in her performative penance.

…That was harsh.

Quentin knew Fen was technically invited. She wasn’t actually a prisoner of Whitespire but a guest, which gave her open access. But she probably had nothing to wear and even less interest in socializing with the people who had dismissed and ignored her the second Eliot had. Though at the same time, Quentin knew exactly how much Fen loved parties. She and Eliot would have a lot in common when it came to that, even if their tastes differed as vastly as two tastes could. They both thrived around people, they both knew people and how they worked, their intricacies. Watching either of them weave their way through crowds was a marvel he would never understand in his entire lifetime. They were similar that way, in their warmth and vivacity.

But if Eliot had ever had any interest in getting to know Fen, that seemed to have been killed with everything that had gone down.

Quentin would probably regret that once he and Fen got past it all, which they would, eventually. But at the moment, it just—felt really good to have someone firmly on his side. Even if he and Eliot didn’t really talk about it. Because Quentin didn’t want to talk about it and Eliot always respected when Quentin didn’t want to talk about shit. But just because he didn’t want to talk about it didn’t mean he didn’t think about it constantly, with Fen-shaped mites gnawing at his amygdala without end.

Such was life, such was his fucking brain.
Two days after Fen had arrived and completely blown up Quentin’s world with the words ‘ranking member’ and ‘Fillorians United,’ he had received a handwritten letter addressed to Eliot’s quarters, with a heart-shaped wax seal. It took him another day to open it and when he did, he instantly regretted it. The tear stained pages had frowning faces doodled in the margins, along with even more hearts and the word FAMILY in bubble letters. It was painfully, achingly like Fen and his heart had seized in his chest, immediately drawing out his own tears.

(Based on his clipped, busied movements around the room and the tight set of his jaw as Quentin read, it didn’t help Eliot’s opinion. At the time, Quentin didn’t have the wherewithal to explain everything about his emotional reaction. Again, he would probably regret that. At some point.)

Then, of course, there were the contents of the letter itself. It was every bit as overwrought and earnest as she ever was, with an undercurrent of guilt-tripping in every shakily written word. Typical.

It read:

*Most wonderful Q, my family, my favorite person in the world,*

*Please forgive me :( :( I never meant to betray you. I only did what I did because I know that Fillory can be even better than it is. It is our home and we both care about it so much. The last year means that life could be better than it even is now and that is why I felt the need to make things right. I know you’re angry and I understand why :( :( But please know that I only ever had your best interests at heart. I will only EVER have your best interests at heart. That is why I left the F. U. Fighters when I did too. I wanted to protect you. I am also sorry I got so mad at you in the throne room. High King Eliot was very nice about that. I am sorry because I should have been more understanding of why you would be mad, but I felt like you weren’t listening to me and you jumped to bad conclusions without even talking to me. But I know what I did was worse since I did not talk to you about it. I am sorry :( :( Even though you can be an ass hole and you think you are better than me. I don’t care though because you are my FAMILY <3 <3 <3 I love you, Quentin.*

*Love and :( *

— Fen

*P.S. He did not ask about you and even if he did, I never would have said anything. I promise. <3*

She wasn’t a good writer.

Which was an asshole thing to think.

Quentin had torn the letter in two, to mirror his emotional state, his rage and his sorrow. On the one hand, he knew she meant every godsdammed word. But on the other, he also knew *she meant every godsdammed word*. Fen really believed that joining the godsdammed FU Fighters was the right godsdammed thing to do, which meant her respect for him and what he wanted was next to nothing, if anything at all.

Cruelly, he couldn’t help but think it also meant Fen was much more stupid than he ever thought she possibly could be. She had been taken in by zealots and delusionists, people who thought they could change the world without consequence. People who would start a war because they were stubborn and arrogant assholes without a conscience or a care, even in Fillory’s most prosperous peacetime, just to prove their godsdammed point, so they could be right, the only only thing that had ever fucking mattered to people like them. It mattered so much to those people, far more than being good or loving or true ever could.
But obviously Quentin still loved Fen.

Of course he did. No matter how angry he was, no matter how frustrated, no matter how justifiably so. It wasn’t the first time they had gone through shit together, where they were both at fault, where he openly blamed her and she privately blamed him or vice versa. But that didn’t mean healing was going to be instant, especially not this time. She had to understand that.

So all he had sent back was:

*I’m not ready to talk to you yet, much less forgive you.* — Quentin

*P.S. Don’t eat the Wednesday soup, it has gooseberries in the stock.*

(Fen was allergic to webbed feet and their byproducts.)

Quentin figured a short response would give him a breather, time to process. But Fen never gave up. She let only one full day pass before she started sending him little notes, sometimes sweet (“*Thinking of you and hoping you are having a very nice day*”) and sometimes sour (“*I’m sorry again that I called you an ass hole even though you were being one*”) and sometimes a mix of both (“*Miss you! I am sorry about everything! But you were mean and definitely being an ass hole! I love you!*”)

One time, she even sent a bunny, despite the fact that they were usually interdimensional messengers. It had landed right on Eliot’s naked back as he’d been starting to go down on Quentin, saying “*MISS YOU I’M SORRY*” in a gravelly smoker’s voice. And then a second one quickly landed on Quentin’s stomach, sniffing at Eliot’s mouth and his own hard dick as the bunny said, “*OH THIS IS FEN.*”

(Eliot had told both bunnies to fuck off, before crawling up the length of Quentin’s body to brush his hair back and kiss him gently.

…Then he had sunk back down to give him the best blow job of his godsdamned *life.*)

The strangest—and most dangerous—thing about Fen was how she mixed the earnestly saccharine and the coldly political. She leaned into one or the other like the change in the wind. Both sides of her nature came out in bursts, like one of Ursidae’s temper tantrums, like she couldn’t help either. For most of their lives, the political hadn’t mattered except in low and quiet moments that sent dread up the spine.

But now, both mattered… and both were wielded so improperly that Quentin couldn’t even imagine what she had been like in the Fillorians United meetings. What she had said or done, what kinds of plans she had gotten involved in, especially if the leadership was growing more radical which was—

Quentin swallowed, resting his forearms on the balcony’s stone railing. He took gulping breaths of the fresh air and closed his eyes.

Well, he didn’t think it was possible for the *leadership* to grow more radical.

He didn’t know what that meant. He didn’t know how much the *leadership* was getting involved in insurgency well above the *leadership*’s head. Didn’t know what it meant that the *leadership* was working with the fucking godsdamned Lorians. The *leadership* had never been easy to rationalize with. And Quentin had no idea how much that irrationality, that fervor, had grown and how much Quentin’s abrupt departure from the *leadership*’s life had affected that toxic growth, especially if it had already sent the *leadership* north of the border, if what Margo had said was true. Which it was,
because he knew the leadership really damn well and it was the exact kind of escalation that the leadership could happily justify. And Quentin was terrified to find out how far it went.

—Almost as terrified as he was to tell Eliot about any of it.

It wasn’t that he thought Eliot would react badly. Not necessarily. At least, not really badly. Like, Quentin knew Eliot wouldn’t execute him for it. He also knew Eliot would be beyond horrified that he had even had that thought, even in the hypothetical.

But Quentin also knew that it was something they had to talk about, if they ever wanted to be true partners and maybe (maybe, maybe, maybe) something more, something like the sunbright companionship they had been living in lately.

So Quentin did try to tell Eliot.

He tried to tell him almost every day. But every time, Eliot would cut him off with a subject change or press him against the wall or kiss him breathless. And every time, Quentin let him. Quentin was weak as shit.

There just wasn’t an easy way to tell Eliot why he had never told him any of it. There was no easy way to say, “A big part of my past is complicated and messy and almost entirely out of my control, but it felt like the only thing that was still mine and only mine, even though it was fucking painful. And for so long, I wasn’t sure if I could trust you with it until I trusted you so damn much that I fell in love with you and now I’m terrified it will ruin everything.”

Besides, you know, saying exactly that.

But Quentin wasn’t brave enough. He had too much to lose. Everything between him and Eliot right now felt as fragile as it was precious. Gods, it was the most precious thing in the world to him. Fucking that up would be so easy, too easy, and so he needed to figure out the right calculation of terms, the least painful and most effective way to communicate, even if it took more time and effort. Because Eliot was worth the time and effort, he was worth getting it right.

Three nights earlier, Quentin had been out of his mind for him, clawing up his body in fast movements, breathless and biting. Usually, Eliot was into that, was so into Quentin’s neediness, his keening urgency, his fretful desperation, the shit everyone else he’d ever been with found so off-putting. But that night, Eliot had slowed him. He had kissed him and laid himself over him, grounding and soft, as he ran his hands down his sides, as he trailed his lips across his skin.

“There’s no rush,” Eliot had murmured, his voice going straight to Quentin’s heart and nurturing it. “There’s no rush, I promise. I’m here, you’re here, we have all the time in the world. I promise.”

“El, I need—”

“Q,” Eliot had almost laughed, smiling against his mouth. “I know. But there’s no rush, darling. Breathe and let go with me. Please.”

Before Quentin could overthink it anymore, Eliot kissed him and touched him and held him and fucked him for hours—hours—and whispered nothing but his name in the scant space between them. Over and over again, until finally…

Quentin believed it.

There was no rush.
But there was also way too much to lose.

Back in the moment, Quentin let out another long exhale, his breath dancing in front of him in wisps of white. It was getting much colder as the days went by. He shivered and stared at his hands, the skin growing red and tight. He blew warm air on them, thinking distractedly that he should probably head back inside.

But a wave of smoky amber wrapped around him from behind before he could move. A big hand rested gently on his hip and a broad chest pressed into his back, a warm chuckle reverberating in his ear. Quentin closed his eyes and smiled, helpless.

“I believe it is customary for such a lovely young citizen,” that familiar velvet voice murmured, “to dance with his High King.”

Quentin schooled his smile and turned around, rolling his eyes just enough to give him shit. “I think you mean that to sound seductive, but it’s actually kind of—”

“Creepy,” Eliot laughed, dropping his head to Quentin’s shoulder in a surprise move. His forehead was warm through the fabric. “No, yeah, I heard it. Very droit du seigneur.”

Quentin nuzzled his nose into soft curls. “Is that the same as in Braveheart?”

Eliot popped his head up and narrowed his eyes with mischief. “Exactly. Also, FYI, Mel Gibson is racist, antisemetic, sexist, and homophobic.”

Fuck Hades up the rear butt.

“Seriously, again, I don’t need to know every celebrity who’s a dirtbag,” Quentin said, feeling irrationally sour. “I’ll just assume they all are, okay?”

(He had really liked Braveheart.)

Eliot snorted, shockingly uninhibited as he smiled wide enough to see the small gap between his molars, an imperfection Eliot surely hated but charmed the hell out of Quentin. As he swayed into Quentin, splotches of pink were raised happily on Eliot’s cheekbones and his eyes were bright. He let out a low giggle as he pulled on Quentin’s hands, tugging him into his chest. He hiccuped.

“Have we told you about Bill Cosby yet?”

Quentin’s stomach dropped. “Bill Cosby?”

“Oh yeah,” Eliot said with a nod, taking Quentin’s arm and pulling him further to the center of the balcony. “I’m gonna let Margo have that one though.”

Quentin could feel his frown lines getting deeper, physically cracking his skin. But they smoothed out as Eliot grandly spun him out and back into his arms. Before he even knew what was happening, they were in a waltzing position, with Eliot’s hand splayed on his back and holding his arm up, making Quentin feel almost graceful. He settled in close, peering up.

Eliot was gorgeous.

His hair was soft and loose, curls spilling over his crown. He was clean shaven, with the points of his jaw shining in the moons’ light. He seemed taller than usual too, decked in silks and velvet, in inky dark blues and shimmering silvers. Every detail shone like the flash of the Winter’s Doe in the corner of your eye. And this impossibly gorgeous man, a king in every sense of the word, was
standing outside in the cold with nerdy, antisocial little Quentin, looking at him like there was no one else in the world.

“Dance with me,” Eliot said, firelight eyes brightening to sparks.

“Here?” Quentin frowned, craning his neck past Eliot to look toward the ballroom, toward the light and the crowd. “We could go back inside and—”

“Here,” Eliot said firmly, leaning forward to rest their temples together. “I just—I want to be like people for two seconds.”

Quentin shivered with the reminder of their first conversation, the first time he had said that to him (“Can we just talk like people for two seconds?”) He wondered if it was intentional, if Eliot remembered.

It probably hadn’t meant as much to him. It had probably just been Eliot’s natural way of communicating. There was no way he could know how much it had shifted Quentin’s whole worldview, how much that one sentence had opened a crack in his heart to allow for the possibility of goodness in a man like him. Mostly because Quentin had never told him.

There was way too much Quentin had never told him.

“Okay,” Quentin said softly, wrapping his cold fingers around Eliot’s warm ones, leaning into him and letting him lead. “Let’s dance.”

Eliot’s lips brushed against his ear, skyrocketing his heart as he whispered, “Thank you, darling.”

The music from the ballroom wafted out the cracks in the closed doors and hung low over their silent shuffling. Warmth spread out from Quentin’s heart through his whole body as they swayed, rhythmless and close together. He let his eyes close, savoring the moment with a rush of relief.

Eliot had been a little off all night.

Ever since Tick had announced the royals at the official start of the event, Eliot had seemed unfocused, almost anxious. He had still been the perfect High King, of course. He held his shoulders back and danced with ambassadors in the formal tradition. He laughed with the Bear delegation and toasted to Fillory’s good fortunes.

At the same time, throughout the whole evening, the hands Eliot kept clasped behind his back jumped and popped with increasing intensity, in what seemed to be his only nervous tic. And when El thought no one was looking, he would let out sharp exhales into the ground, the muscles in his jaw tightening.

—But Quentin was always looking.

Whenever their eyes met throughout the night though, Eliot would do his usual Eliot thing, where he would straighten out in a flash and shoot him a winning smile. It was enough to almost make Quentin think he was imagining the whole thing. A year earlier, he definitely would have assumed that. But a lot changed in a year, not least of which was how much Quentin knew about Eliot—how much he knew Eliot—for better or worse.

Then finally, it had been dinnertime, the best time of any formal party other than the end. It was a long, multicourse affair, but Quentin always preferred structure in social events. The freedom of choice of people or conversations or activities was overwhelming. When he was expected to stay more or less in one place, along with everyone else, that was when he could actually relax a little,
even enjoy himself.

It also helped that he had been at a private table with only the monarchs for company. Well, most of them. Julia was still on Earth—for good reason, it sounded like—and the High Queen had mostly decided not to eat, sitting off to the side to discuss the recent increased salinity of the Milkwater River with the Water Vole ambassador and his translator instead.

Of course, Quentin missed both of them. He and Margo had especially been in a recent lively debate over the best Star Trek captain. He said Janeway and she said Kirk, which was an opinion one could have, he supposed. But even without a point to prove, it was still nice to get some time alone with El, especially in the midst of such a large event where Eliot was being pulled every which way the whole time.

(Also, Penny was there.)

Point was, for the first half of dinner, Eliot had seemed totally himself. Until he wasn’t again.

What had happened was this:

Midway through the meal, the three of them had been enjoying a dish of semi-soft cheese in a spiced milkrendered sauce. Quentin had happily talked them through every dish and its Fillorian significance, but especially that one. The cheese in milk sauce was an ancient delicacy, one of the first meals offered to Ember, lovingly prepared by the first farmers in the Northwest Province, right near The Retreat. It had been a petition for stronger cows, and legend had it that Ember had been so overwhelmed at its incredible depth of flavor that he had ignored the specific request and instead decreed that all cheese made outside of the region would be just a little bit poisoned, causing violent diarrhea and other gastrointestinal distress with a single bite. So needless to say, it was the only place anyone dared to make cheese even to this day. It was the cheese making region.

“Anyway, the texture and flavor is kind of like, uh,” Quentin’s brow furrowed as he reached the end of his explanation, with Penny looking bored out of his mind and Eliot watching him carefully, oddly quietly, “the cheese from—fuck, I can’t remember the name of the Earth country. It’s really big? In Asia?”

Eliot took a delicate sip of his wine. “China?”

“No,” Quentin said with a shake of his head. “It’s more of a—a subcontinent.”

“India,” Penny said, dry. At that, Quentin snapped his fingers.

“Yes, thank you,” he said and Penny rolled his eyes for some reason. It was like a fucking reflex. “It’s really similar to the common cheese from India.”

Penny sucked in a deep breath. “This tastes nothing like paneer. You’re talking out your ass.”

“I mean,” Quentin frowned, poking at the plumpest part with his golden fork. “It’s a little similar —”

“Shut up,” Penny said, before taking a small bite and chewing it. He let out a short hum. “It’s good though. Tangy.”

Quentin waited for Penny to take another hearty bite before saying, “It’s made from centaur breastmilk.”

The lower king’s fork fell to his ceramic plate with a clang and a clamor. His mouth fell open and
Penny wiped at his chin, eyes blinking rapidly. Quentin kept his face as still as he could, peering up at him with all innocence. Finally, Penny screeched his chair backwards and threw his napkin on the table.

He stormed off with nothing more than a, “I fucking hate this place.”

Meanwhile, Eliot still held his own fork. He widened his eyes, perhaps trying his best to be game and only halfway succeeding. Quentin felt the start of a blush on his cheeks and he shrugged, digging back into his own food.

“Oh, yeah, it’s goat cheese,” Quentin had said under his breath. “I was just being a dick.”

But Eliot didn’t laugh like Quentin expected.

He just stared at him, eyes crinkling with an intensity that increased the speed of the flush of heat on Quentin’s skin, prickling all over his face and stretching down his neck. After another long moment, Eliot inhaled over a wavering smile and he swallowed, Adam’s apple bobbing. Quentin ducked his head, overcome by the attention. But he didn’t avert his eyes. Couldn’t.

“Q,” Eliot had said, husky voiced. “Can I talk to you about something?”

“Um,” Quentin caught his breath, a shot of nerves hitting his stomach. “Okay? Is everything—?”

“Yeah,” Eliot breathed out, swallowing again. “It’s just—”

He cut himself off with an odd laugh, gripping a butter knife and fork in each hand with tight fists. Eliot opened and closed his mouth a few times before clearing his throat, looking away.

“Is it too warm in here? Do you think?” Eliot asked, voice higher pitched than usual. Quentin frowned. “I don’t want anyone to be uncomfortable.”

“I mean, I think it’s fine,” Quentin said, taking stock of his body temperature. There wasn’t much to report. “I run cold though.”

“Right,” Eliot had said quietly, eyes doing something complicated. “Yeah, I know.”

They stared at each other in silence, and Eliot’s face kept shifting in ways Quentin couldn’t read, no matter how badly he wanted to.

But before Quentin could say something— anything —Eliot had blinked and smiled, and the conversation had flowed normally, easily as ever. But the unnerving sensation of something being off kept gnawing at him, through dessert and through the third rendition of Feliz Navidad and across the boring idle small talk and out onto the balcony, until Eliot found him again and pulled him into his arms, dancing quietly in the moons’ light.

…With breath that smelled an awful lot like sweet fermented apple liqueur.

“You seem—” Quentin braved his voice into the night, only slightly muffled by the intoxicating warmth of Eliot’s cheek. “Uh, are you—?”

“Tipsy?” Eliot laughed, turning them once and humming along with the song Quentin didn’t know. It was from Earth. “Eh, I may have had a shot or two before coming out here. Or three. Or five.”

“Some of the Outer Island ambassadors can drink anyone under the table,” Quentin said, pulling back to get a good look at his husband’s wild and happy face. “Drinking games are a big part of
“That sounds amazing and like something I will absolutely partake in posthaste,” Eliot said quickly and Quentin couldn’t help but smile. “But no, I just needed some courage.”

Quentin looked up at him, confused. “For what?”

He couldn’t imagine Eliot needing the bravery found in wine sediment for anything. He always seemed to have it in spades, every second of every day. But even in his happy drunk state, Eliot’s eyes shifted at the question, a kaleidoscope of ferns and gold and evasion. He opened his mouth, fingers tightening around his own. But as Eliot cleared his throat to speak, Quentin—who had only had three glasses of wine the whole night—somehow managed to trip over the slow steps, faltering with a swear under his breath.

“Shit, sorry,” Quentin said with a small laugh. “I, uh, I have two left feet.”

But Eliot just smiled and shook his head, pulling him in closer by the waist, so their bodies were pressed together. “Do you know the Wizard of Oz?”

“Uh,” Quentin blinked at the nonsequitur. It was a weird old Technicolor movie starring Judy Garland. “I mean, I kind of remember it.”

“I’m the Cowardly Lion,” Eliot said, as though that was any explanation at all. “If I only had the nerve. You know?” When Quentin shook his head because, no, he didn’t know, Eliot turned them gracefully, tilting a thoughtful look up at the sky. “Though maybe I’m also the Tin Man. If I only had a heart. Or brains. I could also use some brains. Hm.”

“So, like, uh,” Quentin squinted, trying his best to understand, “do you want to talk about the industrial revolution?”

Eliot stopped dancing and looked down at him seriously. “Why the fuck would I want to talk about the industrial revolution?”

“Because The Wizard of Oz is about the industrial revolution,” Quentin said slowly. He was pretty sure he had read that. Plus, the whole farm-to-fantasy city-back to the farm thing. Kind of on the nose.

“No, it’s not,” Eliot said with surprise fervor. “Not at its core. It’s about a lot more than that.”

Quentin stroked a thumb over the soft skin of Eliot’s hand. “What are you talking about then?”

“That if I’m—all of that, then you’re Dorothy. You know, looking for home,” Eliot said, switching his tone back to casual only to knock the wind out of Quentin. “I want you to be home. To have a home. I think about that a lot.”

Quentin took a deep breath, heart beating faster. “Are you still trying to give me a castle?”

“No,” Eliot murmured, dropping his head back down to press their cheeks together. Quentin could feel his broad chest expand and release, expand and release. “I don’t know. Dance with me.”

Quentin wasn’t sure if his feet were still on the ground. “We are dancing, El.”

He felt the rolling ridge of Eliot’s smooth skin jerk in a short movement, like a nod, and a feathering of warm breath against his collar. Eliot didn’t say anything more as they swayed together in the cold air, silent except the muffled sounds of a fifth or sixth rendition of Feliz
Navidad, slow and full of harps.

Breathing in Eliot’s scent and wrapped in the warmth of his closeness, Quentin’s thoughts ran incoherently wild— what the fuck what the fuck what the fuck — and his pulse thundered with hope and fear and elation and something he wasn’t articulate enough to name, something that made him feel like his insides were about to break or renew or something in between. But he didn’t dare say anything, he barely dared to move except where Eliot led him, for fear of breaking the inexplicable, beautiful spell.

“I’m not good at this.”

Eliot’s voice was thin and every word trembled out of his mouth, but his words still rang clear in the still night.

“I think you’re a good dancer,” Quentin said, pressing the cold tip of his nose into Eliot’s cheek. He said it because he still wasn’t sure if he could just kiss him, if he could ask for that, if it wouldn’t make Eliot turn on his heels and run. Or worse, make Eliot give him that gentle look, the one so filled with understanding and support, the one that reiterated their own promises to each other, for their partnership, for what it was. I know this isn’t the start of a grand romance, that’s not even what I want I know this isn’t the start of a grand romance, that’s not even what I —

But that all rang so fucking hollow now, didn’t it?

…Gods, didn’t it?

“I’m a great dancer,” Eliot said, taking his warmth away to smirk down at Quentin. But almost as soon as he did, his expression melted and he tucked a loose hair behind Quentin’s ear. “You look handsome tonight.”

Quentin’s heart battered against his rib cage. “Oh, uh, thanks.”

Eliot swallowed, a slow spasm down his neck that disappeared under his silk handkerchief thing. His eyes averted down and he chuckled, shaking his head.

“Every night,” he said quietly, so quietly. Quentin wasn’t even sure his chest existed anymore or that he wasn’t anything but his own pounding heart. “But especially.”

“Um, you too,” Quentin breathed out, his palms tingling with a sudden rush of sweat and oh, gods, Eliot would feel that because they were still dancing. “I mean, you look—”

He was going to say nice, which was stupid. He was really fucking stupid. Thankfully, though, because the gods occasionally surprised with their mercy, Eliot cut him off by bringing his searing eyes back up at him, all intensity that contrasted his tranquil smile and elegant dance steps.

“Bambi would be so mad that I’m doing this now,” Eliot said. “She’d say it’s the dumbest way to go about it. That it wasn’t her point.”

Quentin brought his eyebrows together. “What wasn’t her point?”

“She’d say she meant for me to deal with this after the ball, very logically, like a renegotiation of terms,” Eliot stretched his jaw out, quirking his lips up into a sharper, tinier smile than before. “But if I don’t do it now, I never will.”

“What?”
“I—I don’t—” Eliot squeezed his eyes shut tight, before letting out a disconcerting bright laugh. “Shit, okay. Okay. I can do this, I can do hard things.”

Pinpricks of stinging cold made their way under Quentin’s clothes, raising gooseflesh. “El, you’re kinda freaking me out.”

“Don’t freak out,” Eliot said. They were still dancing, still moving, and Eliot’s thumb tapped restlessly against his own. “I just—I just need to talk to you about something, if that’s okay?”

Eliot wouldn’t meet his eyes again. Quentin licked his lips and let out a shaky breath, wishing to all gods that he could let his hair fall over his face or at least hug himself. He felt exposed, like an arrow might rip through him at any second.

“It is a little cold out here,” Quentin said, making a stupid fucking joke to cut the tension. He learned from the best.

Predictably, generously, Eliot straightened up. “Do you want me to do a warming spell?”

“No, uh, sorry. Just teasing you,” Quentin said, feeling awkward. That feeling increased when Eliot frowned like he had no idea what the hell he was talking about. “Because earlier you asked about the temperature? When you, um, said that? So I was just—you know. Sorry.”

“Oh,” Eliot said, a tiny sound. He didn’t smile, once again didn’t even offer his usual courtesy laugh. “Oh, okay. Well, no, that’s not—that’s, um, there was—there was something I—I wanted to—um—”

Quentin had never heard Eliot struggle with words so much since he met him. He wasn’t that drunk either, certainly not enough to explain it.

“El,” he said seriously, squeezing his hand once to try to call Eliot’s attention and eye contact. He received it, though with great effort and reluctance. “Are you sure everything’s okay?”

“Yes,” Eliot said quickly. “At least, I hope so.” He paused, letting out another shaky laugh. “That came out more ominous than intended.”

“Whatever it is,” Quentin said, tilting his head up to meet his gaze head-on. “You can talk to me. Partners, right? Come what may?”

“Shit,” Eliot murmured under his breath. His eyes moved all around Quentin’s face, pausing on his lips. “Shit, okay. Well, ah, here goes nothing. I was thinking about how we—we never celebrated our anniversary.”

“Like, our wedding anniversary?” Quentin blinked. “Seven months ago?”

“Yeah,” Eliot breathed out. He brought their tangled hands between their chests, eyes burning down. “The thing is, Q, I really…”

He trailed off and Quentin’s heart sped up all over again, racing and tumbling. But Eliot just closed his eyes and stopped dancing, gripping Quentin’s just shy of too tight.

“Sorry, ah, so at the risk of delving deep into my personal psychological trauma for the sake of a clumsy metaphor, I’ve been thinking a lot about—” Eliot swallowed, his pulse thumping so hard Quentin could see the tiny beat of it at the slope of his neck “—fertilizer.”

Quentin didn’t know that word. “What’s fertilizer?”
“Fertilizer,” Eliot said, flat. Quentin tilted his head. “For crops?” Quentin shook his head harder and Eliot narrowed his eyes. “Like, in a science class? Or in one of your Steinbeck books?”

He shrugged. “It doesn’t all stick.”

That reminder seemed to deeply frustrate Eliot, who let go of Quentin’s hand to pinch the bridge of his nose for a moment. Then he sighed, licking his lips and nodding.

“Okay, well, on Earth,” Eliot said slowly, like he still couldn’t believe there was a concept Quentin didn’t know or understand, “crops need some help to grow and, uh, the point is, Q, it’s shit. It’s literal cow shit.”

Quentin widened his eyes. “Yeah, I’m definitely not following you.”

Eliot smiled, but it wobbled everywhere. “I’m saying that things—ah, wonderful things, sustainable things—can grow from shit, right?”

“From shit?”

“It’s a messy, disgusting process,” Eliot said and Quentin had no idea what the fuck was happening. “But the—the—the shit is actually what allows, um, the crop to flourish.”

“This is a metaphor?” Quentin asked and Eliot nodded. “So, like, am I the shit in this metaphor?”

“No, of course not,” Eliot said, brows going dark. “Why would you think that?”

“Well, like, if you’re the crop,” Quentin said, bobbing his head back and forth, “then I’m the—?”

“Goddamnit, no,” Eliot bit down on his teeth and looked away. He took a deep breath. “Tactical error. Let me start over.”

“Um, okay,” Quentin said, finally hugging himself. He was really confused.

“Like I said, I was thinking about our wedding,” Eliot continued and his hands were shaking.

“And—and I was thinking how that day was—it wasn’t—it wasn’t what I would want now, you know?”

Quentin’s stomach plummeted cold.

Oh.

“Oh,” he said, swallowing down the tremor in his voice. He looked down at the ground, at his stupid feet that couldn’t dance right. “Well, yeah, I guess we should talk about that then.”

But a warm hand cupped his jaw and tipped his face up.

“Whatever you’re thinking, that’s not what I meant,” Eliot said in a whisper, stroking his thumb across his cheek. “Quentin, I’m not good at this. I’m really, really not good at this.”

Quentin was going to have a godsdamned heart attack if Eliot didn’t spit it the fuck out. “Not good at what?”

“I’m not good at—” Eliot squared his shoulders back and let out a slow breath “—expressing my emotions.”
“Well, um,” Quentin said, reaching up to rub the back of his neck. “Okay. I get that. But it might help if I had, like, some approximation of the emotions you were trying to express.”

“Join the club.”

“Eliot,” Quentin groaned, covering his eyes. “Come on.”

“Q,” Eliot breathed out, tugging their hands together with a dazzling smile. His golden eyes gazed at him and everything was light. Quentin felt the shimmering beams flying all around them in the cool dark moonlight, imbuing his pores and his heart with hope. With too much hope, with that aggravating, useless hope he had never been able to shake his whole life. The burden on his back, the movement of his blood, the taunting voice in his head that told him he could have what he wanted, that he was worthy of the world, worthy of joy, despite all evidence to the contrary.

...But gods, how could he not have hope when Eliot was looking at him like that?

“Oh, Eliot said with a deep breath. His warm hands squeezed Quentin’s cool fingers. “No more bullshit. I—”

“Your Majesty,” a sharp voice interrupted from the door, making both of them jump. Their hands separated and Quentin clutched at his chest, certain that the heart attack had indeed come. It would be about the right timing, considering his luck.

“Jesus Christ, are you fucking kidding me?” Eliot growled, before snapping his head to the open door and the shadowed figure standing there. “What, Benedict?”

Quentin brushed his hair back with the heel of his palm, forcing a pleasant smile at the royal mapmaker. It wasn’t his fault—he couldn’t have known that he and Eliot were having a moment. But in general, he was kind of an odd guy. Nice enough, but he made Quentin look like Jerry Maguire when it came to social interactions.

To the point, Benedict didn’t move from the door. Didn’t greet them pleasantly, didn’t really say anything. He just, like, stared at them, clutching at two scrolls with white-knuckled fists.

“I apologize for the interruption,” Benedict said after another long moment. He stepped forward, much to Eliot’s obvious chagrin. “But we have reason to believe that forces from Loria are en route, exactly now.”

The stomach plummet happened again and Quentin caught Eliot’s panicked eyes, work mode clicking on for both of them in a flash.

Eliot spun around, voice transformed instantly into a High King’s. “What are you talking about?”

“Fillory’s been invaded, Your Grace,” Benedict said with a deep sigh, furrowing his brow. “We received word just moments ago.”

The stomach plummet happened again and Quentin caught Eliot’s panicked eyes, work mode clicking on for both of them in a flash.

Eliot spun around, voice transformed instantly into a High King’s. “What are you talking about?”

“Fillory’s been invaded, Your Grace,” Benedict said with a deep sigh, furrowing his brow. “We received word just moments ago.”

“How much time do we have?” Eliot asked, adjusting his coat and stepping closer to Benedict, craning his neck to look behind him. “Has someone informed the High Queen?”
“Impossible to say, regarding the timing, my lord,” Benedict said, pulling out his scrolls and shaking them at Eliot. “And I’m certain someone will inform Her Majesty, but in the meantime, I have particular information to show you, from the sentient maps. It will hopefully make reaching your decisions much simpler and faster. But we cannot have that discussion here, for obvious reasons.”

“Good work,” Eliot said with a nod and Benedict stretched a tight, anxious smile back. “We’ll head to the throne room at once.”

“I wouldn’t recommend that, Sire,” Benedict said with a firm shake of his head. “We have alternate locales in case of burgeoning wartime.”

Eliot shot a questioning look at Quentin, who shrugged helplessly. That was above his pay grade. His shoulders shook as he lowered them again, reminding himself not breathe. They had known this was a possibility, based on everything Fen had said. But gods, Quentin hadn’t actually thought Idri would be so fucking stupid, so fucking reckless, no matter what grievances he had. Fillory and Loria had existed in cold peace for so long, for good reason. Idri had suffered diplomatic relations with so many different leaders, with tensions always simmering under the surface but never boiling.

Which meant that this wasn’t a declaration of war against Fillory. It was a declaration of war against Eliot, and his administration that didn’t go away as expected or planned.

“Fine, I’ll go with you, but someone has to get Margo as soon as possible,” Eliot said with a low rumble of frustration. “We aren’t making decisions without her.”

“Of course, Your Grace.”

Eliot patted down his pockets, aimlessly seeking in his nerves. Quentin stepped forward and laid his hands over his. Eliot stopped and met his eyes, taking a deep breath.

“Hey, I’ll get Margo,” Quentin said, ignoring the fearful rush of blood to his ears, the unsteady rhythm of his heart. Eliot needed him to be calm right now. “It’ll be fine. Go.”

“Q,” Eliot said gently, clearly pained. He darted his eyes. “I’m so sorry, but—”

Quentin cut him off with a shake of his head. “You’re a king, El. Go.”

“We’ll talk when I get back?” Eliot asked, taking a single step closer. “Okay?”

“I’ll be here,” Quentin promised. “Go.”

“Your Majesty,” Benedict said, voice low and impatient and so far away. “I must implore you to move quickly.”

“Thank you for understanding,” Eliot said to Quentin, breathless, smiling despite the urgency. He took a deep breath and nodded. “Okay, so then—”

Eliot stepped forward and kissed him.

It was delicate. Closed-mouth and achingly sweet, in a way Eliot had never, ever kissed him before. His fingers cupped his jaw, like he was holding something treasured, something wanted. He stroked his thumb along the line of stubble Quentin missed in his shave, canting their bodies together, slow, so slow, like there was no rush, like they had all the time in the world. But paradoxically, by the time Quentin had enough sense of self or grounding to gasp into the embrace, to deepen it, the moment was over.
When they pulled apart, Eliot’s eyes were hooded but shining. He fondly tucked Quentin’s hair behind his ear and let his hand linger there, affection for affection’s sake. It was a promise. And Quentin could have lived there, forever. He wanted to. He wanted everything to fall away, for nothing else to matter but him and Eliot and this moment between them.

—but war waited for nothing, let alone moments.

He could feel Benedict’s irritated eyes boring holes into his temples. He could feel the heavy weight of the crown on Eliot’s head, feel the marching footsteps growing closer.

“Good luck,” Quentin said, stepping back and letting his husband be the king, heart panging at the softness that remained in his gaze. He flicked his eyes over to the map maker—unable to bear Eliot’s staggering attention for a second longer, not if they weren’t going to leave for their quarters right now—and offered him a weak smile. “Um, thanks for being so watchful, Benedict.”

Benedict snapped his head toward him, eyes eerily wide.

“It is but my duty, Lord Quentin,” Benedict said lightly. His lips flew up at sharp angles. “Regardless, I do hope you can still enjoy the rest of your evening.”

“Thanks,” Quentin said quietly, his heart pinching and throat tight. That was a weird thing to say. He was so weird. “Um, if anything changes, come find me right away, okay?”

Benedict looked away like Quentin hadn’t spoken, refocusing on Eliot. “Your Grace, please follow me.”

At that, Eliot nodded once more. He squeezed Quentin’s shoulder and then strode away without looking back, the warm yellow light and the delightful music enveloping his retreating form like a false security blanket. And Quentin stood there for a moment, watching him go, frozen by the wind, by the cold moons, by his fear.

It was like a rushing blizzard, a deluge of paralyzing unease. Years ago, it would have rendered him catatonic, it would have made him think about flinging himself into the Banks. The uncertainty, the change, the unstoppable bloodshed on the horizon—one way or the fucking other—would have drowned him all on its own. He wouldn’t have wanted to fight the inevitable, wouldn’t have thought it was worth it.

But now—

Now Quentin had survival tactics. He wasn’t stronger, exactly, because it wasn’t about strength. But he could circumvent his worst instincts because he had trained to circumvent his worst instincts. At least, he had learned how to try. No matter what, Quentin would never stop trying, especially now that he had a duty to Fillory, a duty to his family, a duty to the crown. So with a steadying breath and a hand to his heart, Quentin got his shit together and made himself try as hard as he fucking could.

He went to find Margo.

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Eliot always knew when he fucked up.
It didn’t stop him from fucking up again, of course. But he always knew when he did, after the fact. It was a useless kind of self-awareness, one that existed solely in hindsight. It made for many empty apologies and few discernible life lessons. But still, if Eliot could give himself credit for one thing in his whole life, it was that he was always the first to admit his failures—his many, many fucking failures—with a steady voice and a mostly clear mind, depending on how much he had been drinking. The words mea culpa were always on his lips, ready to emerge and wipe the slate clean.

The current disaster was no exception.

The night was as cold as it was beautiful, but Eliot couldn’t focus on that. He followed a quiet Benedict out into the royal gardens, which were twinkling with nighttime flowers. The white stone under their quickly moving feet reflected silver from the moons and a great owl flew overhead, crying mournfully as it darted from tree to tree, on the hunt.

Eliot was on the hunt too—seeking strategy, seeking answers—as he was escorted to a safe place, in case the Lorians had managed some kind of enchantment to get them to the castle sooner than seemed possible. Apparently, to make up for their lack of Wellspring access, Idri had recently obtained the best non-Magician enchanter to serve on his court, a Fillorian defector. At least, that’s what Fen had said. So who the fuck knew.

In any case, Julia had been right. Weeks ago, she had argued that they—the Children of Earth—had brought the threat of war on themselves, regardless of whatever civil bullshit was going on under the surface. And despite Bambi’s insistence that they blow the Lorians right the fuck up when the rumblings were first uncovered, Eliot had known that he should have been doing more to make diplomatic relations stronger between the two border countries. That lack of foresight and lack of action was on him. It was his own negligence and nothing else.

It wasn’t an excuse, but he had really believed that his focus should be on domestic matters—because Fillory in and of itself was fucked up half the time. But he saw the error of his ways now. He knew he should have expanded his focus, tried to do more than one thing at a time. He wasn’t always great at that.

Winding further down the garden path, Eliot kept moving forward in every sense, thinking through everything he knew about the situation. Everything he knew about the mysterious Idri, and his forces, and their deep dissatisfaction at their paltry Wellspring share. He thought about the way it impacted Lorian infrastructure and ecosystems, and never for the good. If there was any chance to resolve this diplomatically, before soldiers reached Whitespire, it was a slim one. Their anger was sincere and justified.

Eliot took a deep breath and glanced over at Benedict, who was looking particularly stone-faced and constipated. “Well, were you at least having a nice time before everything went to hell?”

“Indeed, Sire,” Benedict said in a clipped voice. “It was a lovely ball for the many Fillorian dignitaries. I particularly enjoyed the obvious expense showered upon them as they’re so often neglected.”

Jesus.

Someone skipped their colonic.

But despite his first bitchy instinct, Eliot forced his frustration down. It was normal to be scared and lash out in a situation like this, especially as a member of the staff. It must have been terrifying to know more than the average citizen, but have no more power. He sympathized and would
forgive prickliness for it.

“Benedict, it’ll be fine,” Eliot said, all while keeping them moving. “If for some reason we can’t figure out a diplomatic solution, we have a much bigger army than they do and we have real battle magic to try, if it comes down to it. Fillory will be safe, I promise.”

The fear wasn’t that Fillory would be taken down. Enchanters were able to produce one off spells from their wands—enough to hurt or kill one or two people at a time, maybe, but the pale imitations of magic were showy more than anything. It was nothing like a cooperative effort the monarchs could pull off though, given the right circumstances and spells and a few of those Hedge emotion bottles, especially in the favorable power grid of Fillory. So truly, in so many ways, it would be an unfair fight, it would be needless bloodshed. Eliot wasn’t sure he could stomach making the commanding call for a massacre, even if he would be the assured victor.

—Which, as always, thank fuck for Bambi. Because that glorious bitch would do it while whistling and tap dancing.

“Kings promise many things,” Benedict sniffed, guiding them toward a small labyrinth of pale green and white hedges. “It is often in their interest to promise, but not to fulfill.”

“That’s true,” Eliot conceded with a frown. “But I mean it.”

Benedict growled low. “I’m sure you think you do.”

“Jesus, okay,” Eliot snapped. “Let’s try to keep shit in perspective and not say anything we’ll regret.”

Benedict said nothing more, which was probably a wise choice. He was an odd guy.

They walked closer to a statue, where a small gate shimmered with iridescent magic. The ward radiated off it in overwhelming waves of heat and Eliot faltered back once, feeling a little sick to his stomach. His head went woozy, those shots he had done to make his conversation with Quentin easier coming back to bite him in the ass.

(He definitely couldn’t think about that right now.)

“Step through, please,” Benedict said with an annoyed sigh, holding his hand out toward the gate. He flicked his eyes up to the sky and frowned with all the impatience in the world. “Time is wasting.”

Honestly, Eliot had never been a big fan of Benedict.

The map maker was off-putting in his obsession with his job, often making comments that implied he would put it before human life if it came down to it. But this was the first time he had actually disliked Benedict. He wasn’t making a difficult situation any easier.

Eliot lifted his brows. “And what is this place?”

“When you’re here, you can’t be tracked by an enchanted map, nor can battle magic be produced from a wand,” Benedict said with an eye roll, like Eliot should have already known. “You’ll remain safe from enemy forces if they descend during our strategizing.”

“Where’s the rest of the Council?” Eliot peered through the translucent gate, frowning. “Shouldn’t they be here by now?”
“Tending to last minute intel before making their way. Step forward please,” Benedict said robotically. But then his mouth curled in disgust. “Are you drunk?”

Eliot had swayed again from the heat. He hiccuped, the vile sweet taste of apple clawing up his throat.

“It was a party, Benedict,” he said irritably before waving him off. “But I’m fine, I can hold my liquor.”

“Always a sign of greatness in a leader, Sire.”

Eliot shot his most potent glare over, done fucking around. “I am your High King.”

“Apologies, Your Majesty,” Benedict said, once again without inflection. “Right this way.”

Eliot always knew when he fucked up. But he occasionally had good instincts too and he knew it was strange that the other Council members weren’t there yet. He wasn’t sure what Benedict was playing at, if he even was playing at anything at all and not just being a dickhead in his fear.

But if there was one thing in life that Eliot definitely knew?

It was always worth sending out for reinforcements.

Hey, Benedict’s acting weird, Eliot messaged out to Penny, temple throbbing with the unnatural effort. He hoped Mayakovsky was burning in hell. I’m by the East Garden Labyrinth, by a statue of Queen Beryl the Bad-Breathed.

You suck at psychic magic. The response was swift, clear, and bitchy as ever. Wait, did you say you’re with Benedict? What the fuck are you talking about?

No time for our unresolved sexual tension, Eliot swallowed, dizzy with mental exertion. It was easier to send psychic messages when drunk, but not that much easier. Area is warded, no locator or battle magic enchantments. Shit going down with Loria.

After a long and silent moment, Penny’s voice rang in his mind again, like an itchy sweater. But this time, he sounded less glib. Yo, hang tight, we’re on our way. Meet us at the western rose fountain. Get away now.

No, just meet me here. Eliot ground his teeth and seethed a breath through his nostrils. Don’t want to cause alarm.

Listen—away as—The line grew thin as Eliot struggled to hold it steady — you can. That’s not—

He lost the rest of the thread as soon as they stepped into the warded area, vision swimming and knees buckling. Eliot let out a sharp cry at the high-pitched feedback that rattled his skull, holding a shaking hand to his head.

In contrast to his behavior thus far, Benedict decided to act like a human being, rushing to his side. “Sire, are you alright?”

“I’m fine,” Eliot said, shaking his head to clear his vision. It only half-worked. “Show me the map.”

But Benedict just stared at him, eyes narrowing.

He exhaled and reached under his collar, pulling out a necklace. Attached to the leather rope was a
flat gray stone, etched in strange markings. Eliot had never seen them before.

“Is that something to do with Loria?” Eliot asked, wiping sweat off his brow. “Will that help us?”

“I was going to make this quick, but I want you to see,” Benedict said softly, fingering the stone between his thumb and index finger. “Call me sentimental.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Eliot shook his head, his ears popping. “Stop being weird and show me the maps.”

“There are no maps, you stupid chokesuck,” Benedict said, face twisting with venom. “Gods.”

Eliot’s pulse started racing and he looked behind him, a chill racing up his skin. “What the fuck —?”

But before he could press further, before he could fucking think to scream or run, Benedict let out a frustrated groan.

Eliot held his hands up in a casting position, pulse thrumming so hard he could hardly breathe. His brain screamed run, run, run, but his muscles couldn’t catch up, his body forcing an unnatural stillness as his instincts pushed and pulled at his nerves. The alcohol bubbled in his veins, mocking him, laughing at him. Here lies Eliot Waugh, the stupid fucking alcoholic.

“I want you to know,” Benedict sneered. “I want you to know who did this.”

Eliot at least had the common sense to try to blast him back, sliding his fingers together and pushing out his palms. But to no avail. Benedict laughed, a vicious sound, and his left hand glinted with something black and golden in the moonlight.

A knife.

“You are not welcome here, Child of Earth,” Benedict growled, jutting forward in one smooth movement before Eliot could blink. And then—and then—

Electricity hit his gut in waves of shock and heat, as the knife sunk in deep and drew out a gasp. All he felt was the charge in the air around him, the growing rush of magic, the way his blood went sideways and nausea overtook every sense. There was no pain. There was almost nothing.

Below him, glaring up at him, Benedict smirked and flipped the stone three times in his free hand—the one that wasn’t stabbing Eliot in the gut—and disappeared.

Meaning, Benedict disappeared.

In his place stood a handsome young man with burning green eyes and full lips. He was still dressed in Benedict’s brass and yellow robes, glaring the piercing hatred of a thousand cold nights right at Eliot, freezing him in place. He was windblown and fierce as he grit his teeth, giving the weapon a cinematic twist.

The Lorian hissed in his ear, “Long may the High King of Fillory reign.”

“That’s so cliche,” Eliot wheezed out mindlessly, before his weak knees collapsed him on the ground. Above, Benedict was back—that familiar face of that odd man, but not a murderer, not an assassin—smiling down at him, bloody knife dripping from his hand.

Everything spun and everything was bright and dark. The heat was overwhelming, the blood was
It was almost good timing, Penny.

A beautiful voice screamed at the top of her lungs as the magic around them broke. “Eliot!”

“Get on the the fucking ground,” said another deeper voice, and Eliot blinked slowly, so damn slowly, as he watched a figure slam Benedict down, until he was thrashing face down into the stone. The world moved like a series of still images, jumbled and without connection. He was so hot, the pain nothing compared to the heat and the sparks and the gushing release of pressure from his heart.

But then Eliot saw Quentin.

He tried to smile, tried to reassure him, but when he tried, something wet and sticky gurgled out his mouth.

“El—oh my gods,” Quentin said, crawling over to him, big eyes wide and filling with tears. “El—”

“No Benedict, that’s not—” Eliot knew he had to let them know that. “Lorian.”

The deeper voice, Penny maybe, was still holding not-Benedict down, yelling out past the wards. “Guards! I can’t hold him forever!”

“This isn’t over,” not-Benedict growled, spitting, still fighting with every breath. “We will execute you, every last one of you—”

Maybe-Penny lifted not-Benedict up and then threw him back down, forearm pressed into his head. “Move again, I break your neck.”

“Oh my gods, El,” Quentin was shaking. Eliot could feel him shaking. He wanted to hold him. “Don’t move. Don’t move, okay?”

Eliot was fizzy and dizzy. Fizzy and dizzy. Fuzzy. “Where’s... where's Margo?”

“Quentin, apply pressure. I could only heal the wound halfway,” the beautiful voice commanded and then he finally saw Margo, leaning over him and holding his hands. She tried to smile but her eyes were wide and red. “El, baby, hi. Penny traveled us here and more help is on the way. I need you to stay with me. Stay with me.”

He tried.

But Margo was getting angrier as the world went blacker.

“No,” her fierce voice wavered and cool hands hit his cheeks. “No, asshole. Stay with me.”

Eliot tried to speak to her, but that same wet slick gushed out his mouth. It tasted really fucking gross. He hoped he wasn’t getting blood on her beautiful dress.

Margo was grabbing at his lapels and her cheeks were shining. “Stay with me, you fucker.”

He tried to say, “I’m right here, Bambi,” but he must have been too tired. He really tried hard to say it though. He tried so hard.

But Eliot had fucked up.
tbc.

Chapter End Notes

In the final scene, Eliot gets stabbed by an assassin and there are some graphic-ish details (mileage may vary).
**Save Tonight**

**Chapter Summary**

“Fight the break of dawn / Come tomorrow, tomorrow I’ll be gone”

**Chapter Notes**

Hey folks! No real warnings this time around, except that I wanted to give a vague heads up that this next arc has a bit more angst than what we’ve seen yet. I’d like to take this time to profess my steadfast commitment to happy endings, while also noting 1) that this is a LONG story with a semi-twisty road, 2) that I recognize times are generally difficult and surreal right now, and 3) that the finale was... a thing that happened yesterday. So more angst transparency is better right now, perhaps? Perhaps.

All my love! xx

When Quentin was eight years old, his favorite place in the world was his heart-uncle Dint’s workshop. It was a large and airy space, full of light and hanging tools. Everything was centered about the forge, the smithing table, and the tunes Dint always hummed as he worked. It was cheerful for a weaponry, always filled with people and happy movement even among the painstaking crafting. The master knifemaker always grumbled about the distractions from his work, but he also never kicked anyone out and would even ruffle Quentin’s hair whenever he went by. It was one of the only times Quentin could come close to imagining what having a normal family could feel like.

On one otherwise nondescript sunny Springtime day, Dint sharpened a parrying dagger in his workshop. He had been particularly proud of the blade, muttering to himself about how it was solid and strong, the words reverent under his breath. Quentin was surprised he remembered that now, since he and Fen had been running around playing on the straw-covered ground. They certainly weren’t actively listening to him at the time, enraptured in their favorite game.

The game was called Tickle the Sweet Puss, the name of which would one day make High Queen Margo the Destroyer spit out her wine across the Whitespire throne room. But the origin wasn’t so salacious—it came from the boon of pussywillows. They were gentle sentient plants that ducked and hid in shadows until an adventurer captured them and lightly touched their flowering buds, all to receive a stroke of good luck.

In the rules of the game, one child was the adventurer and the other the pussywillow, and it was basically what Earthlings knew as tag. Only, when the adventurer caught the pussywillow, they had to tickle the pussywillow’s stomach until they did a dance and bowed to the adventurer. It was as light and sweet and innocent as childhood itself was supposed to be. At least, in a kind world.
But people often forget that in any world, kids are merciless as shit. So the game became an all out, to-the-godsdamned-death war. By their eighth round, Quentin was once again the pussywillow. He would never again, in his entire life, recapture that zeal he felt. He would never feel the same kind of sheer determination to best Fen and to remain uncaptured. The urgency and brutal savagery took over his bones and brain at once, carrying him around the workshop at zooming speeds, hollering out feral yells of I am a warrior pussywillow! I shall never taste defeat! Fen's a dungfart! all while throwing his tiny arms up in the air and jumping from chair-to-chair without regard.

Not to be outmatched, Fen had seethed as she snatched and clawed at him, trying to trip him by kicking at his ankles. With roars from deep within her belly, she lodged barbs like, I will set the fire to your pyre myself after I tickle your goodies, you weak pussy! while stomping her feet with such strength, the tools above them vibrated. “Calm now, rasks,” Dint had said into the table, mostly resigned to their barbarity as they kept screaming and baring their teeth at each other. “Watch for the metals.”

They didn’t listen.

In fact, in response, Quentin had thrown a wooden ball up in the air, both in defiance and to distract Fen. It worked—Fen ran after it with a burst of ferocious energy, hollering at the top of her lungs. But as she did, her unruly limbs smacked right against her father, right as he pulled the blade back. It made him lose his balance and spin the weapon on its side, slicing him from elbow to armpit. Dint howled to the ceiling and clutched at the wound, dark red blood staining down the side of his workman shirt and pooling on the stone below. All play ceasing, Fen jumped into action—trained for these kinds of injuries since toddlerhood—and grabbed meters of flowing white gauze. Before she rushed back to Dint, she ran her fingers in the distress call over the workshop’s Wellspring device to send for the Cove’s healing enchanter, who lived only a short gallop down the road. Then she expertly wrapped his arm, while yelling at Quentin, over and over again, to go get her older brother.

But Quentin hadn’t moved.

His heartbeat was shaking outside his body, like a landquake, emanating out through all of Fillory. Tears rushed down his cheeks, and only later had he realized that he had been heaving hyperventilating breaths. Everything else within him had frozen solid. He had slid down to the ground from the chair and wrapped his arms around his knees, silent and still. As Fen told it later, he stayed like that until it had been over, and Dint was safe and tended to.

And Quentin had learned that day, with a sinking heart, that he was nothing but a worthless pile of sobbing child when in an emergency. He had been useless, while everyone else around him had saved the day, and Dint’s life and limb. With more self-directed rage than any young child could feel, he berated himself for staying silent and still in a corner instead of helping, instead of being useful.

The worst parts of Quentin—the parts he really fucking hated, still hated so godsdamned much—were entrenched into the threads of his soul. He would never escape them. He would always be them, no matter how much he thought he had changed or grown or whatever bullshit lies he fed himself to keep going through the day. He would never be free of the prison of being Quentin of Coldwater Cove.

The present moment was no exception.
It was an hour after his husband, the High King of Fillory, Eliot, had been rendered comatose by an assassin’s blade... and Quentin of Coldwater Cove was as worthless and useless as ever. He was sitting on a bed with his knees tucked under his chin and staring off into space, pathetic and weak, as the flurry of activity around him grew to a fever pitch.

They had taken Eliot to the nearest guest room, laying him out on the bed as Margo continued her healing spells. It was apparently not her natural discipline but she kept comparing herself to a *motherfucking mother lifting a motherfucking car*. Penny spoke both quietly and urgently to the guards about what he had observed about the disguised Lorian, what Eliot had told him in their psychic correspondence, and everything that was still in question. Surely, Quentin could have figured out some way to contribute, some way to help. But instead he had just silently crawled onto the bed beside Eliot, holding his hand and refusing to budge.

Very useful.

Very fucking heroic.

(When one of the nurses tried to shoo him away—not because he was interfering, but because he was being improper—Margo had barked at her to *fuck off* and everyone had ignored him after that.)

As time ticked relentlessly by, the room became more and more frantic. A swirl of castle enchanters were working overtime on their own healing remedies and their diagnostic tests. Tick and Heloise were in and out the door, with various updates, and Benedict came in with the sentient maps, to prove the lack of Lorian forces approaching, to show that the Grudge Gap was still clear. His face was sorrowful and his voice wobbling. The map maker was obviously shaken by the assassin’s use of his face, both to get into the ball and to try to—

Quentin swallowed and swallowed and swallowed.

He could barely stand to look at Benedict.

It wasn’t his fault, of course.

It wasn’t his fault.

—But Quentin had talked to ‘Benedict.’

He had *thanked* him, for taking Eliot away, for tricking them both. It wasn’t Benedict’s fault, but Quentin couldn’t shake the image of ‘Benedict’ standing over Eliot with that bloodied knife, couldn’t shake how *close* they had all come to the worst hypothetical. Because if Penny hadn’t been talking to the *real* Benedict when the message from Eliot came through, they would have found him dead.

Quentin was horrified.

He couldn’t stand to look at Benedict.

Quentin was grateful.

He wanted to throw himself down at the real Benedict’s feet and sob his thanks, for being there at the moment that mattered most, however serendipitously.

But Quentin couldn’t stand to look at him.
Over the chaos, the head of the guard Soren walked swiftly to the doors to confirm the assassin was indeed Lorian. The prisoner had gone silent as soon as he was thrown into the dungeon, and the guards and enchanters were struggling to break the illusion spell to see his real face. But they got the weapon into their custody and it was easily identified as a well-known blade from Idri’s personal collection.

…A cursed fucking blade.

It was the same one that had been used to attack Queen Jane the Wise, during her third year as a monarch. As much as Fillorians respected the Chatwins, the Lorians hated them, due to their passage of the foreign wellspring usage tax. Jane had been on one of her usual travels through the rural areas of Fillory—her quarterly outreach to the village folk—when she had stayed overnight at Honeyclaw and Humbledrum’s. The assassin had shared drinks with her all night, before accosting her in the hallway. He stabbed her in the gut and left her to die, underestimating the deep and knowledgeable care of Bears.

She survived. Her heart had not been strangled by vines. Honeyclaw had gotten her back to the castle just in time, where High King Rupert had used his magic to burn her most prized possession—a doll—as a suitable sacrifice. It was a clean antidote, without any tricks or fine print. So that meant that now, all they needed to do was figure out what Eliot’s most prized possession was and he would be safe. He would survive, as Jane had, heart free from rose vines and deadly magic.

But unfortunately, the process was—

Not going well.

“Jesus, I have no fucking idea,” Margo said, pacing back and forth as fast as she could. “He’s not actually as materialistic as he seems.”

Penny twisted his face at her. “One time at Brakebills, Eliot threatened to curse me with everlasting swampass because I splashed coffee on his pants.”


Margo snapped her teeth at Penny. “Just because he’s particular about his shit doesn’t mean he loves his shit.”

“Well, we have to think of something. We have two and a half hours until his heart gives out,” Penny said calmly. But the words still made Margo flinch harder than Quentin had ever seen. She pivoted away from Penny and kept pacing at the foot of the bed, the lines of her face long and trembling.

“Margo,” Penny said with a soft sigh. He tried to reach for her arm but she elbowed him off. “Sit down.”

“I will sit down when Eliot is safe,” she said, eyes flashing up for exactly one second before reattaching to the ground in thought. “Not before.”

Eliot was shirtless as he laid on the bed, slack and pale. Margo had stopped the bleeding from the incision point by healing the puncture itself, both internally and externally. His blood loss had been significant, but not fatal. But the dark green brambles stretching and spiderwebbing out like a sickness under his papery skin were slowly, steadily crawling en route to his vital organs. That was the much bigger concern.

Penny raked a hand through his hair and licked his lips. “Then we need to start somewhere. We’ll
brainstorm him to death otherwise.”

Margo paused, eyes fluttering shut for a brief moment. She swallowed down her tears and nodded, eyes popping back with ferocity and steel.

“His scarves and cravats then,” Margo said, holding herself tall. “It’s a long shot, but he definitely wouldn’t kick them out of bed.”

A fierce fire roared up from Quentin’s stomach, forcing out words he didn’t know he had.

“No, his moonstone ring,” he said shakily, not a fucking pathetic lump for once in his godsdammed life. “It’s gotta be his monotone ring.”

Margo snorted, rolling her bloodshot eyes. “He doesn’t like cocaine that much, Q.”

Oh.

… Oh, El.

But Quentin shook his head. That didn’t matter and this was something he actually knew. “He said it’s his favorite. He told me that specifically.”

“We can’t start with burning metal, it’s—even Magicians can’t do that easily and the spell requires ash ,” Margo said more seriously, shaking her head right back. “Besides, either way, you’re wrong. It’s a random trinket.”

The spark in his belly snapped out, stinging and burning in its wake.

“Oh, right, but he has a spiritual connection to his fucking ties ,” Quentin shot back, knowing it was nastier than necessary.

Margo knew it too. “Careful who you’re pissy with, Coldwater.”

Quentin snorted, a bitter taste rolling around his mouth. “Because you’re my queen?”

“Because I’m me,” Margo said, voice gravelly and hard. She put both arms on the bed and stared him down. “If you’re not going help or at least stay the fuck out of the way, I will kick your ass out of here so fast your intestines will spin. I don’t care whose husband you are.”

Husband . With one word, Quentin’s anger broke in half to reveal the despondent core of itself. He almost collapsed, chin to chest, throat thick with sobs and screams he couldn’t let out. So he closed his eyes and brought Eliot’s hand up to his lips, pressing a soft kiss to his cool knuckles. Margo was right. Quentin had to get his shit together. They were all on the same team, which was Team Eliot.

Nothing else mattered.

It was time to be useful.

“Let’s burn everything he owns,” Quentin said, as he slowly lifted his head. He gripped Eliot’s hand as tight as he could. “Burn his clothes, burn his jewelry, burn his loofahs, burn all of it. Just—fucking sweep every last thing into the flames.”

Margo’s face melted into a sly smile. “Well, now we’re makin’ music.”

“Um,” Penny said, darting his eyes back and forth between them. “I’m not sure that’s—”
“Shit is replaceable,” Quentin cut Penny off, staring down at Eli’s white lips and too-still face. “It’s Eliot. We have to do everything we can.”

“Hard agree,” Margo said, jutting her chin out. “But we have to do it as quickly as possible, because tick-fuckin’-tock.”

Time was slipping through their fingers. Eliot’s heartbeat grew threadier and weaker and further apart the faster the vines grew. They had spread across his stomach, bursting through his skin in ominous blooms and snaps of magic.

Quentin pointed right at Margo, radiant with an idea. “Can—can—can we just set fire to his quarters? Incinerate the whole damn thing? So we don’t waste unnecessary time?”

“I don’t see why not,” Margo said, frowning thoughtfully. “All we need is the incantation. The vessel doesn’t really matter.”

“We should burn part of the kitchens too then,” Quentin said, adrenaline undulating through his veins. “His oven mitts and shit are down there. Cupcake tins and, uh, all his fancy crystal glassware. No time to separate it.”

“Good thinking, Q,” Margo said, before pulling a wincing face. “Though, technically, he also kind of owns the gardens and he once said he likes the flowers there. Are they—?”

“Not sentient,” Quentin confirmed with a nod. “Light it up, no stone unturned. Or un-burned.”

“Okay,” Penny said in a commanding voice, as Margo tapped her nose with a wide grin. “Not to break up the impulsive-as-shit party, but can I offer another idea so we can avoid burning the whole goddamn castle down?”

“Whitespire can suck my dick,” Margo growled. “I’d burn every castle on this whole goddamn planet.”

Quentin nodded, gripping Eliot’s hand. “Castles are also replaceable.”

“Your fervor has been noted,” Penny said, widening his eyes. “But I’m saying there’s a simpler, safer option. I can get into his brain and ask him.”

Okay, yeah, Quentin had to admit that was a—you know, slightly more rational course of action.

He took a deep breath and sniffed back a rush of tears, any break in either his dissociation or his zeal a dark threat for weepy storms. He looked up at Margo through his hair, begging for her guidance. But she was shaking her head, making his heart sink.

“Except you can’t,” she said, like Penny was truly stupid. “His wards are automatic and way too strong.”

But Penny looked to the ground. “Margo, uh,” he swallowed tightly. “Margo, they... just went down.”

Margo’s jaw trembled and her eyes went unfocused, glassy. She gripped the edge of the bed, like she was trying to stay upright. “Bullshit.”

Quentin felt his lungs start to overwork themselves in panic. He brought Eliot’s hand to his heart and closed his eyes, focusing on his breath. Focusing on Eliot’s breath, the feel of his pulse beneath his skin. He could count them, he could breathe with them, he could keep them going, if it
was the last fucking thing he did.

“His body can’t sustain them anymore,” he heard Penny say, but it was a million days’ gallop away. “He doesn’t have the energy.”

Margo’s voice broke into a sob. “Bullshit.”

Quentin’s teeth chattered at the sound of her screeching tears, her muffled howling. He opened his eyes and Margo the Destroyer’s tiny shoulders were shaking, her whole body wracked with sorrow, as Penny wrapped his arms around her and kept his lips against her temple.

“Margo, it’ll be okay,” Penny murmured. “I think—I know I can help fix this, okay? But I’m not doing it without you giving me the go ahead. You’re his proxy.”

“Of course you should do it,” Margo wrenched her voice out, pushing Penny away as hard as she could. Her face was shining with tear tracks and her eyes were black. “Are you fucking kidding me? Get the fuck in there now.”

At that, Penny nodded once, easily floating down to the ground into a cross-legged position. He stared straight ahead for a beat, eyes dark and intense. Then they rolled back into his head and his eyelids shuttered.

The commotion around them was still loud and frenzied, still a dizzying blur of movement and unfamiliar voices.

But Margo crawled onto the bed—still wearing her blood-covered gown—and slipped between Quentin and Eliot, careful not to disturb their joined hands. She curled herself into the fetal position and stroked Eliot’s face, his jaw, his hair. She cuddled into Quentin, taking his free hand and wrapping it around her waist. She was laying right on top of his arm, the one that held Eliot’s hand, turning it into pins-and-needles. But Quentin gave exactly no shits, comforted by her warm presence and unspoken solidarity, by the love for Eliot that radiated off her like the sun.

Quentin kissed the top of her head and breathed in the scent of her hair.

Together, they waited.

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_Eliot descended the stairs, whistling the Velvet Underground, a clear tone of highs and lows, drifting across the familiar space. It was, in fact, a Sunday morning and the Cottage was sleepy, the remnants of the last evening’s party still strewn about in the warm morning light. A few faceless kids were passed out on the couches, while nameless assholes passed bongs and hair-of-the-dog between them, chattering meaninglessly around the living room. Everyone was lazy and hazy, a joint groaning and moaning in shared misery and barely-there memories._

_It used to be his domain. Once upon a time, Eliot would have stretched his long legs out onto the coffee table and one-upped every last one of them with his own tales of debauchery—lewdly describing the intense pain of his hangover, his night’s dubious decision making, the taste of stranger come still on his tongue. It was once his truest court, the place where he shone like the sun. Where he was the Prince of Brakebills once promised and then forevermore revered._

_But things were different now._
So Eliot ignored them all, opting to turn toward the sparkling TADA sign, toward the glow of the kitchen. He could hear the hiss of butter on a frying pan and the smell of fresh coffee brewing around the bend. It called to him far more than the fading blip of no one and nothing behind him. As he made his way past the dining room, everything else disappeared forever.

The kitchen was bursting with light and music. The Smashing Pumpkins played without a source as the sun streamed through the huge windows. It was usually the most packed room in the house, with swarms of partying gossip mongers and bleary-eyed scholars sharing the everlasting pot of coffee with rare camaraderie. But at the moment, it was empty, completely empty, almost eerily empty—save for the pajama-clad boy at the stovetop.

Quentin had his hair pulled back in one of his dorky buns—the usual strands still falling loose around his face, of course—and his morning stubble was dusky dark brown. The sinewy lines of his strong arms flexed under his gray T-shirt, his cute little ass clenched tight under his red flannel, and his eyes crinkled with deep frown lines, all so he could pour batter onto the pan with far more concentration than strictly required.

Eliot’s chest expanded with shimmering, golden warmth and he leaned against the doorframe, watching and waiting until Q wasn’t so intent. Quentin startled easily and it had taken Eliot a long time to learn how to approach him without intrusion. It sometimes meant a little more patience, but it most often meant he just—got a little more time to look at Quentin. Well worth the effort. Because Quentin was the cutest man alive, and Eliot the luckiest.

“Morning, baby,” he said softly, once Q took a deep breath and pulled his face away from his bubbling creation. He got the startle-free reaction he hoped for, with Quentin just peering those big eyes over his shoulder with a small smile.

“Hey, you’re up,” he said, grabbing a spatula and looming over the stove like he might have to spring into action at any second. “You ruined the surprise. I was gonna bring this to you.”

“Breakfast in bed?” Eliot chuckled, walking over and dropping a kiss on his head. “Did I forget an anniversary?”

“Har, har,” Quentin said lightly, not looking up at Eliot in order to test the edges of the pancakes. “I can do nice things for you too.”

“You are a nice thing,” Eliot murmured in his ear, running his fingers up and down the bare skin of Quentin’s bicep. He grinned at the shiver he got for it. “Need any help?”

“Not unless you want to defeat the point,” Quentin said, finally turning his head to place a quick kiss to Eliot’s lips. It was soft, light. “Which is me making you breakfast.”

It was very sweet of him. He was very sweet, even when he thought he wasn’t. Eliot buried his face in the warm skin of Quentin’s neck, breathing him in for a moment as Q kept working, fussing about with the batter and pan. He smelled like maple syrup and stale smoke and Quentin.

“Mmm,” Eliot said, tracing his nose along his jawline, teasing smile at the ready. “You’re so sexy.”

“Good to know two-day-no-shower stank does it for you,” his nerd said with a magicless flip of a pancake.

“I love your natural musk,” Eliot laughed as he grabbed deep into Quentin’s ass and then laughed harder when Quentin spun around to brandish him with a spatula.
“Stop that,” Quentin said with a smack and a smirk. “Unhygienic.”

“Sorry, chef,” Eliot said, popping a kiss on Q’s cheek and holding him lightly from behind. “But seriously, want me to take over so you can get some coffee?”

“Nope, all good,” Quentin said, reaching over for his mug and briefly wagging it in the air. “Besides, this is my official romantic gesture of the month.”

“Of the whole month? I’m spoiled,” Eliot smiled into his hair. He trailed kisses along his jawline, thoughtful. “But I think Bambi might be making her famous mimosas. Go indulge yourself.”

“I’m gonna be done in, like, five minutes,” Quentin said as he glanced at the pan and his empty bowl of batter.

“All the more reason to let me finish it up,” Eliot argued, massaging his shoulders. “You deserve to relax.”

“Oh my god,” Quentin said, craning his neck around, eyes narrowed. “You can’t stand that I’m cooking.”

Eliot dropped his arms. “It’s my kitchen.”

“You know,” Quentin said lightly, not looking up at Eliot in order to test the edges of the pancakes. “I like to do nice things for you too sometimes.”

Eliot smiled. “Everything you do is a nice thing, baby.”

“Well, uh, I think it’s safe to say—” Quentin smirked and then set his face into a flat mask. “The feeling is mutual.”

“You’re an ass,” Eliot laughed as he grabbed deep into Quentin’s ass and then laughed harder when Quentin spun around to brandish him with a spatula.

“Stop that,” Quentin said with a smack and a smirk. “Unhygienic.”

Something dark and heavy crawled up Eliot’s back, clawing razors in his skin, sinking down and drawing out blood, too much blood, a fuckton of blood. Eliot was a stupid chokesuck, Your Majesty. Your Highness. Stay with her, you fucker.

—Eliot smiled.

Anyway, the first time Q had told Eliot that he wanted to be with him, Eliot had responded by only saying, “The feeling is mutual,” wide-eyed and standing straight up. Then Eliot had marched out of the room and walked around campus for an hour, in a daze. And apparently, for his part, Quentin had just kept standing where he was, gaping at nothing for that same full hour, not sure what had happened.

They were quite the pair.

Regardless, it had been the best day of Eliot’s life thus far. And somehow, miraculously, Q always said the same. He always said that finding the courage to tell Eliot how he felt, finally, had been the best decision he had ever made, the best thing he had ever done.

And Eliot—

Eliot mostly wished he could remember it all better. He couldn’t remember. His memories were
hazy. Disjointed. They felt like movie stills he couldn’t put together into coherence. He couldn’t remember, he couldn’t remember, he couldn’t—

—The veins in his temple jumped with pain, knocking the wind out of him. He doubled over with a scream.

“Shit, holy shit, oh my god,” Eliot gasped, palming at the side of his head. His vision went blurry, blacked out. “What the fuck?”

Quentin’s strong hands cupped his face. “Hey, whoa, El. You okay?”

The world softened again, the sunlight streaming into the kitchen and warming Eliot’s face. He blinked his eyes open and smiled at Q, who gazed down at him adoringly.

“Caffeine headache,” Eliot said, pulling himself up and dropping a kiss on the tip of his perfect nose. “All good.”

With a happy hum, Quentin tilted his face up and kissed him. He kissed him, and kissed him, and kissed him.

Everything became his mouth, his hands, his lips, his skin. They were fucking on their bed, on top of the comforter, Eliot’s fingers laced with his as they rocked together, sweat and moans trembling their bodies. Quentin was blowing him in the reading nook, slow laps of his tongue up his shaft, lips sinking down like heaven. Eliot’s fingers found their way home, Q riding them in a golden, heated space without shape, whimpering his name over and over again, mouthing at his throat, scratching his hands through Eliot’s hair. They fucked and everything was his mouth, his hands, his lips, his skin.

The shutter clicked.

They were back in the kitchen, the pancakes plated and waiting. They were kissing, and kissing, and kissing, and—

“God, you know how I feel about you, right?” Eliot panted his breaths between quick heartbeats, still kissing Quentin’s gorgeous, perfect, incredible face. “I know I don’t say it, I know I should say it, I know I’m a coward. But Q, baby, I—”

“Oh course I know,” Quentin said quietly, sliding his hands under the red silk of Eliot’s robe, gripping his back. “How could I not? Everyone knows. You’re so goddamn obvious.”

Of course he was. Eliot hoisted Quentin up onto the counter, wrapped his legs around his waist. “I never want you to doubt it.”

“Everyone knows,” Quentin said again with a small laugh, as though Eliot gave a shit about everyone, as though he gave a shit about anything but this stay with me you fucker as though there was anything else in the world.

“But I want you to know,” Eliot said, sliding his fingers into his hair, brushing their noses together. “Just you.”

Quentin closed his eyes, nuzzling him. He smiled, a soft and sad little thing, and wrapped his arms around Eliot’s neck. He held him close, their chests pressed together, their heartbeats thumping in rhythm.

“Well, you could say it now,” Quentin said, a whisper. “It’s safe here, baby. Nothing will hurt
Eliot turned his face into soft hair and breathed. “I love you.

He wasn’t sure if the weight of the world lifted off his shoulders or if he was being crushed by a falling universe. The sensation was the same. But the words had formed, they echoed through the heavy air, tumbling and reverberating and full of light. Eliot pulled away just enough to look Quentin in his beautiful eyes, to brush his hair back, to watch his lips curl up into a disbelieving smile.

“I love you,” Eliot said again. He brought a shaking hand to Quentin’s cheek and nearly sobbed when Q kissed his palm. “It’s—Quentin. I don’t know how I’m not falling apart every goddamn second with it. I’m just—I’m so in love with you.”

“You’ve never said that before, never really felt it,” Quentin said softly, leaning into his touch. His eyes were smiling, his dimples peeking through. “To anyone, with anyone. Just me.”

“Just you, darling,” Eliot said with a shaky laugh, his lashes wet. He cupped Quentin’s face with both hands, offering the last of himself to his mercy. “Tell me you love me too. Please. Tell me—tell me it’s real, that this isn’t in my head, that I’m not crazy—”

“El, baby, stop,” Quentin said with a low shush. He kissed him once. “I’m here.”

Eliot frowned. “Tell me you love me.”

“It’s okay,” Quentin said with a placid smile, stroking his arms. “It’s okay, honey.”

“Q,” Eliot brought his brows together. His heart thudded. “Please tell me you love me.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” Quentin swept the pad of his thumb along Eliot’s lower lip, his voice soothing. “I’m right here, El.”

No. That wasn’t—

Eliot shook his head. “No. That’s not—"

Quentin’s eyes went blank. “I will never leave you.”

The ground beneath his feet cracked wide open and everything was falling. There was a knife, there was blood, a river of it. He could taste it, the electric charge, the sickening heat. Stay with me you fucker stay with me you fucker stay with me you fucker. Oh my gods, El. Quentin stared at him, unblinking, smiling. The Cottage was gone Eliot was never going to see the Cottage ever again. Never again, Your Majesty. Quentin was covered in blood, Eliot was covered in blood, Whitespire was drenched in blood. Stay with me you fucker stay with me you fucker stay with me you fucker. Oh my gods, El—Eliot—stay with us, stay with us, stay with us—

—They were back in the Cottage.

Quentin was smiling and laughing, the pancakes done. Billy sang shakedown, 1979, cool kids never have the time. Eliot wore his favorite robe and he was telling Quentin a story, a good one, even if he couldn’t remember it. Everything was bright and beautiful, the sunlight golden and diffused around their magnet bodies, around their adoration. Their joy. There was so much joy.

Eliot, I’m coming in. Don’t be a dick about it, okay?
“Quentin,” Eliot said, with a warm rush of happiness. He wrapped his hand around the nape of his boyfriend's neck, smiled at nothing. “Oh, Q.”

“My Eliot,” Quentin murmured, before tugging him back in. And Eliot kissed him greedily, hot and open-mouthed and without grace. Q just felt so good, tasted so good, always did. He could have kissed him all day, for the rest of his life, just kissed him and kissed him. Forever, in the void, fuck the crown duties, fuck Loria and their godsdamned—

Eliot ripped away from Quentin, doubling over in screaming pain. His hands flew to his stomach, holding in his guts, his innards, so they didn't fall out. He fell to the ground, a pool of sticky liquid drowning him. He was covered in red. Quentin was covered in his blood. A golden ball gown washed away with the tide.

Yo, you here? Answer me, asshole.

Quentin and Eliot were kissing on the couch, they were kissing in the kitchen, they were fucking in their bed their bed their shared bed, they shared everything. Eliot bent him over a chair and fucked him hard, was gonna make him come on his cock. Quentin rode him in the bathtub, eyes rolled back and mouth slick open bright red like blood, no, not like blood, like he had already sucked him off, like his mouth was chafed from kissing and biting and loving each other so goddamn much.

They floated.

Their bodies moved together, meant for each other. Quentin kicked a stack of tiles to the ground, they fucked on a quilt, they fucked in the dirt, they fucked in the shower, they fucked, they fucked, they fucked. Eliot bit the crook of his neck as they fucked in his giant bed, built for a king.

“El—mmph, El,” Quentin said, tapping him on the arm between frantic kisses. “El, someone’s here.”

“It’s just us,” Eliot reminded him, sliding his hands up his thighs. He kissed him slower. “Only us.”

Eliot, where the fuck are you?

They were in the Cottage, in the kitchen, laughing and smiling. The pancakes were perfectly plated, dark syrup glistening, yellow butter melting down the sides. The front door slammed and loud footsteps stomped through the foyer. Quentin took a sip of coffee and waggled his eyebrows over the rim of his mug at a punchline Eliot couldn’t remember.

“Eliot!” A deep and familiar voice pierced the happy warmth. “Come out, come out, wherever you are, motherfucker. We don’t have much time.”

Penny came around the doorframe. He was dressed in odd formalwear—greens and flowing blacks, silks and sequins and velvet. He had a silver crown on top of his head and his eyes widened when he saw the two of them, before letting out an unmistakable sigh of relief. Eliot’s eyelids spasmed as he processed the new information.

—He smiled wide with a burst of delight.

“Oh my god,” Eliot spun around and beamed at Q. “Did you arrange this? A threesome?”

Quentin’s eyes crinkled warm and he lifted his mug high. “I thought it would be a nice Sunday funday treat.”
Overwhelmed, Eliot touched his hand to his heart. “Aw, baby. You are too good to me.”

“Anything for you,” Quentin said, reaching out to take Eliot’s hand. He brought his knuckles to his lips and kissed each one. “Anything.”

“Kill me,” Penny said suddenly, growling loud frustration into his palms. “Holy shit, just fucking kill me.”

Eliot frowned, looking him up and down. “So, okay, what’s with the get up? Is that, like, a Quentin fantasy nerd kink thing or—?”

“Jesus Christ, no,” Penny said, throwing his head back and scowling at the ceiling. “It’s actually me, idiot. This isn’t the Cottage, you live in Fillory now, all this is in your head. You’re dreaming.”

Eliot sucked in a breath.

Julia had summoned a distant goddess who was really an asshole of a trickster god, who killed all the Master Magicians at Brakebills, in the state, and beyond. They had traveled to another world to help her reverse it, only to find that some things could never be fixed, never reversed, not without destroying everything that remained. But somehow, they found resolution, they found hope and peace, in the neutralization of Reynard, an act of divine intervention that only required Eliot’s strange sacrifice—to be the High King of an entire land and to marry a stranger. To marry Quentin, who was not his boyfriend. Husband. Not boyfriend.

Margo.

Lightning flashed and Eliot held his hand to his head. He growled at Penny, who stood still by the door frame without moving, arms crossed and resolute.

“Why are you incepting me?” Eliot spat out, in no mood for games. “More importantly, how are you incepting me?”

His psychic wards were airtight. It should have been like running at a stone wall, even for Penny.

“Because you got stabbed in the fucking stomach by a Lorian assassin,” Penny said, overenunciating the syllables. “Your wound is healed but the blade was cursed. So I’m here to save your ass, again.”

The man had plunged the knife into his gut, staring him right in the eyes as he did. Eliot had been so stupid. He hadn’t reacted fast enough, hadn’t fought hard enough. He had slipped out of consciousness in Bambi’s arms.

Eliot flicked his eyes up. “That was real?”

“Very real,” Penny said with a sigh, flattening his mouth into a line. “We don’t have a lot of time.”

“Shit,” Eliot said, starting to pace. But he stopped himself, lip tucking between his teeth. First things first: “Are Margo and Q okay?”

“Uh, they’ve been better,” Penny said, more than a touch sardonic. “But that’s not really the point here.”

“You got stabbed?” Dream Quentin pushed his face into his shoulder, doleful eyes looking up. “That’s horrible.”
“Shut up,” Eliot said, hating Dream Quentin all at once. His hair was wrong, his lips were wrong, his voice was wrong, it was all wrong. This was just Eliot—stupid Eliot—not Q, not even close to Q. With an inhale to push it all down, he dragged his gaze back to Penny and focused. “Okay, so how exactly is popping in on my sex dream the solution?”

“Yeah, uh, is that what this is?” Penny broke his face into a wide smile, like he couldn’t help it. “Cause it kinda seems like—not that.”

“We’re making pancakes,” Dream Quentin the Traitor piped up, bright and happy as could be. Then he shrugged. “And we were gonna fuck on the kitchen counter.”

Eliot sidestepped with a lofty sigh right at Penny. “You said time is of the essence?”

“What’s your most prized possession?” Penny asked, delving right into it. “We need to burn it or you’re dead in two hours. It’s a sacrifice in place of your heart.”

That didn’t sound good.

“Christ, ah,” Eliot sputtered his lips, hand flying up to his chest on reflex, even though he knew his heart wasn’t really there. “I honestly have no idea.”

“The real me is probably so scared,” Dream Quentin interjected as he slumped into himself. “Shaking and crying and holding your hand.”

“He’s also threatening to commit major arson for the efficiency of it,” Penny said with a meaningful pop of his eyes and oh, that made Eliot tremble with the reminder of how much he loved the real Q. “He’s alone with Margo, so we gotta move.”

“I understand your dilemma,” Eliot said. Bambi would torch the place for much, much less than his life. “But none of that makes me a sentimental old broad. I don’t get attached to things.”

That actually wasn’t true.

But anything he had ever been sentimental about had been lost to time and intergalactic shifts. His Bowie records. The cufflinks he bought on his first trip into New York City. The photos of himself Margo had taken and had professionally printed. His paperback of Brideshead Revisited. The pressed flower from Ibiza. Cigarettes. All gone.

Eliot stared helplessly at Penny, who pinched the bridge of his nose. “Margo thought maybe one of your ties or some shit?”

“I could no sooner choose a favorite star in the sky.”

“Yeah, shit, okay,” Penny bit down on his teeth in frustration. He waved his hand about vaguely. “Um, so then, Quentin—the real Quentin, not this, like, creepy and amenable Quentin—”

“You’re creepy,” Dream Quentin shot out.

Penny squinted, clearly thinking his next suggestion was a reach “—he thought maybe your moonstone ring?”

Eliot swallowed.

Shit.

He closed his eyes. “Shit.”
Penny ducked his head, patience waning. “That it?”

“Ah, no,” Eliot said, licking his lips. Shit. Shit. He took a deep breath, stretching out his naked fingers. “But he was close.”

“Then what is it?” Penny asked and Eliot actually winced. “You’ll die, Eliot, so don’t fuck around.”

Eliot could still see not-Benedict’s cold eyes, his smile as he held the knife. Why hadn’t the assassin run? Did the Lorian really want to watch Eliot die that badly, had he really hated him that much, that he hadn’t hightailed it the fuck back as quickly as he could, to evade capture? God, Eliot tried so hard to be a good king. But good kings didn’t let themselves get taken away to a secluded locale by a fucking assassin.

But good kings also didn’t give up.

So Eliot wasn’t about to, much as part of him wanted to take this particular secret to the grave.

“Look,” he said, huffing out a stilted breath that wasn’t real because he was unconscious. “Just—just tell Margo to burn all my rings, okay? My most prized possession is the whole collection.”

It was a lie. But it would get the job done.

Penny slammed his eyes shut. “Any back-up options? We have to burn it to ash, so you get the issue.”

“No, sorry,” Eliot said with a sigh. That did suck and wouldn’t be easy, but. But. “That’s what will do it.”

“It fucking better, for your sake,” Penny said, exhaling. Then he looked at Eliot and nodded. “We’ll figure it out. Promise.”

Turning on his heels, Penny started to stalk away, his exit out the door a visual indicator of pulling his psychic nonsense the hell out of Eliot’s brain. Eliot was grateful that he had come in, that he had made the effort to save his life, obviously. But he was also glad to be rid of him, even irrationally angry that it had come to that at all, that Penny had seen parts of him he would never willingly share. Emotional complexity, holding dichotomies. Such was the Eliot Waugh experience.

To wit, Eliot whistled to stop the psychic intruder in his tracks before he left for good.

“Penny,” he said, voice dropped low. Penny turned around and lifted his brows as Eliot glanced down at his ringless left hand, clenching it into a fist. “Make sure she burns all my rings. All of them, okay?”

There was no sound after that.

Eliot’s mind had quieted itself, made all the movement crawl to a standstill. He peered his eyes back up at Penny, who furrowed his brow.

He understood.

“We’ll set it up,” Penny said quietly, without any other commentary. He was a good man that way. “See you on the other side.”

Eliot pushed down the first pricks of real fear as he waved, blithe as he could manage. “Au
revoir.”

Then Penny was gone.

Penny returned and all hell broke loose.

Eliot was worsening, the grotesque vines spreading up his arms and across his chest. Servants came down with his jewelry boxes, and dozens of rings—many of which Quentin had never seen before—dumped into a black bowl, while Margo slipped his moonstone ring, his silver wedding band, and emerald brass ring off his fingers with equal parts deep devotion and fretful frowning. She barked orders at random intervals, seemingly more for somewhere to put her erratic energy than any actual need, over the equally frantic scurries of the nervous staff.

Meanwhile, Penny flipped through an old workbook with a Brakebills seal on it, muttering under his breath about alloys. He talked aloud without looking up, explaining how the different types of metals in the bowl would or could interact with each other under heat. Apparently, he was especially concerned about what would happen without the use of something called an Emerson incantation, which would alter the basic metals—gold and silver especially—at a quantum level to allow for disintegration, but required Master level energy.

And Quentin just sat on the bed, useless again as he squeezed Eliot’s hand and tried not to slip too far away, into despair or rage. So far, he wasn’t succeeding on either count. His skin was numb, his heart on fire. He couldn’t breathe.

The commotion grew all the more clamorous as it soon became clear that their best option was to wait for a special kind of Fillorian flame, without knowing how long it would take for the delivery or its efficacy on Earth materials. It was all at the mercy of the Wormwood region enchanters, the Wormwood Witches. All at the mercy of their speed and their knowledge…and their unknown loyalties, as a famously reckless and ungovernable group of druids. It was a risk, to say the least, but it was the only plan with even half a shot at success if Penny were to be believed.

Margo didn’t exactly take that lying down.

“You will niffin the hell out,” Penny roared at her as she stormed across the room, shaking her hands in casting preparation. “Do you think Eliot wants to wake up to that? If it even works and we don’t lose you both?”

“You get to have an opinion,” Margo said sharply, cracking her neck, “when you have an idea.”

“Waiting for the flame is the idea,” Penny said, jabbing his finger on the foot of the bed. “It’s the safest—”

“Fuck safety, it’s Eliot,” Margo snapped. “I’m not going to sit around and watch him die because this backwards-ass land relies on horse and fuckin’ buggies for transport.”

“If Eliot wakes up and you’re a fucking niffin?” Penny reiterated with a grip around her elbow, the veins in his neck popping. “I don’t—I don’t honestly know what he would do but I sure as hell don’t want to find out.”

“Then come up with a better plan,” Margo hissed, bent at the waist yet yielding to no one. “Or I’m
doing the goddamn Emerson.”

“Margo,” Penny sighed, his eyes closing. The point of his jaw twitched and Quentin felt a small rush of sympathy. Margo was Penny’s person, but Penny wasn’t hers. It was often clear, but never so intensely as in that moment. It must have hurt.

But the flicker of empathy evaporated as Quentin caught the white lines of Eliot’s face out of the corner of his eye.

Candlelight flickered across his features, paler and more hollowed out with every passing moment, as the dark vines steadily crawled up his body and overtook his essence. But even as his lips shranked and the delicate skin under his eyes went bruise-purple, Eliot was the most beautiful person Quentin had ever seen, on Earth or on Fillory.

He was the most beautiful person in the universe, the multiverse, maybe of all time, past and future. Eliot was beautiful, and gentle, and strong, and kind, and Quentin hadn’t done anything good enough his life to deserve to have him nearby, to deserve his friendship or his—

Quentin choked out a sob and buried his face in the crook of Eliot’s neck, his soft skin cool and waxen. He wrapped his arm around his chest, where he could feel Eliot’s labored heart thump under his elbow, could count all of his ribs under his fingers. Tears slid down his cheek and onto Eliot’s shoulder, and Quentin wanted to scream at him, to beg him to wake up, to come back, to hold him. Please, please, please.

Far in the distance from his shaking sobs, Quentin could hear Margo gently say his name, so gently, too fucking gently. He ignored her, cuddling deeper into Eliot, pressing his body along his side, trying with all his might to give Eliot his strength—his whole damn heartbeat—if he would take it.

But the bed dipped beside him and a tiny hand rubbed in circles on his back.

“Honey,” Margo said gently, gently, tugging him up by the arm. “Q, sweetie, I get it, but he’s unstable. You can’t—they said we can’t, okay?”

Letting Margo peel him off Eliot, Quentin hugged himself across the chest, a curtain of hair falling over his swollen eyes. His skin was crawling with invisible insects and his brain was just, like, completely shutting down. He couldn’t breathe. He couldn’t breathe. He couldn’t breathe.

But there was only one thing that mattered.

Quentin found his voice with a tight whimper. “Penny—why can’t—can’t you travel to Wormwood, to the coven? Bring the flame yourself? That would save a lot of time, right?”

Penny shook his head. “Some materials don’t travel well. It’s Russian roulette.”

Quentin couldn’t help but think that an approximate one-in-six chance of dying to save Eliot seemed like reasonable enough odds. But he stopped himself from saying it. Mostly because Eliot would hate that. Eliot would want a zero-in-absolutely-no chance of anyone dying for him. Even Penny.

“Your wards are slipping, Coldwater,” Penny said with narrowed eyes. But Quentin just shrugged. He didn’t care. All at once, he couldn’t feel a goddamn thing. But before he could sink under, slender and cool fingers wrapped around his, gripping tight.

“Listen to me,” Margo whispered in his ear, her own long hair mingling with his. “We are going to
figure this out. I am going to figure this out. I will hunt down every god to the ends of the fucking universe and kill them one by one if Eliot slips away from us, okay?"

Tears stung at his eyelids again. He nodded dumbly.

Margo sniffed and pushed his hair back, tucking it behind his ear, just like Eliot always did. She pressed a blink-and-you’d-miss-it kiss to his temple, almost brusquely, before standing back up and walking over to Penny.

The two of them spoke, and fought, in low tones, hands flying in the air and teeth gnashing around flying spittle. The servants continued their lamentations and the fires burned too bright, too hot, as the world continued moving in a delirious thrall. Quentin collapsed into himself, until all that was left was the cranks and turns and desperate calculations of his mind. *Eliot, Eliot, Eliot,* it spoke into nothing. It was the only thing that mattered. The *only* thing that mattered. Time was growing thin, nearly lost.

And then the doors swung open.

“Where is he?” Julia walked so quickly over to the bed, she knocked Smedley on his ass. “Where’s Eliot?”

She was still in Earthwear—flowy blacks and olive greens that looked more like widow workout clothes to Quentin than anything else—and her eyes were red and puffy. Julia stopped at the foot of the bed, her hand reaching out to grasp at Eliot’s ankle in despair. She briefly glanced up at Quentin, her pretty face crumbling with a repressed sob as their eyes met.

He looked away.

“‘Bout time you deigned to show up,” Margo snarled, crossing her arms and straight up *murdering* Julia with her black eyes. Penny had sent Julia a bunny hours ago (ELIOT GOT STABBED, no other context), and all that time had gone by with no response, not even a confirmation of receipt. Until now.

“Fuck you,” Julia said, her long hair flying out as she turned to snap. “What’s the plan?”

“Undetermined,” Margo said coolly.

“We’re waiting for a flame that can burn metal to ash, arriving from Wormwood,” Penny said at the same time, refusing to look at Margo. “Enchanters are en route now.”

“Why the fuck are we burning metal?” Julia lifted her brows, eyes trained on the vines under Eliot’s paper-thin skin. “And what the *fuck* is that?”

Margo swallowed, jaw trembling. “If you had been here, you’d know.”

“Fuck you,” Julia spat out, though for once Quentin found himself taking Margo’s side over hers. “I’m here now, I can help. Tell me how I can help.”

“It’s a curse,” Quentin said, voice flat and low. Julia peered up at him, looking small and lost and sad. Good. “Um, from the Plover books, remember the Virgo Blade? Where Jane—”

“The rose vines,” Julia said, lips twitching as her eyes shone with unshed tears. “They’ll strangle his heart. Shit, shouldn’t we be burning a likeness of him then?”

Margo shook her head. “No, that’s not why Jane’s doll mattered.”
“Yeah, Fillory’s literal but spells aren’t,” Quentin said, tapping his fingers on his knees. His chest was frozen solid, no blood moved. “It’s really—it was a metaphor for her most prized possession. So for Eliot, we have to sacrifice his ring collection to the flame, until they’re ash.”

“Hence why we’re fucked,” Penny said, running his hands down his face. “At least until the flame gets here. But time is short, as you can see.”

Eliot was sinking into the bed, body losing fluid and muscles going slack. His skin was so white it was blinding. The black-green stretches of vines overtook his whole chest and roses were blooming blood red out his stomach.

“No, we’re not fucked,” Julia said, shaking her head and running over to the vessel. She stretched her fingers out, shoulders squared back. “I’ll just do an Emerson.”

Penny let out a yell of frustration, kicking at one of the fire vases until it fell over. Servants gasped and staggered back, before cleaning up his mess.

“Am I on drugs? That’s a goddamn Master spell,” Penny said in a strained voice, eyes wide and desperate. “Even you’re not that good, Wicker.”

“I can do it,” Julia said firmly. She didn’t look at any of them. “I’m—I’m juiced up.”

Margo recoiled, face curled in shock. “From what?”

Julia stared straight ahead, eyes never leaving the vessel. “Do you want the details or do you want me to do the fucking spell?”

With a harsh laugh, Margo swept her hand out. “By all means, bitch.”

Quentin knew Margo definitely didn’t care if Julia turned into a niffin on Eliot’s behalf. Julia wasn’t actually asking for permission anyway.

Before Margo had finished speaking, Julia was already drawing a blue flame from nothing, sparking it up from her thumbs. She stretched it wide along the black vessel’s rim, so that it simmered and snapped over the pile of glittering rings in the center. The rings exploded into puffs of dust in the fire. At first, the vines didn’t move.

But then, the flame wrapped around a ring near the bottom of the bowl—and it shot out brilliantly, white and black ash simmering up to the ceiling and falling back down. And as it did, the vines disintegrated into smoke, retreating and vanishing as though they had never been there at all.

It only took a few minutes until Eliot’s chest was clear of bramble and curse rot. And then slowly—so fucking slowly—color started returning to his cheeks, his lips, his hands. Eliot’s breathing evened out, his skin became more elastic, no one could count his bones anymore.

But he didn’t move.

Quentin couldn’t take his eyes off him, even as he felt Margo sit at his side, could feel her searing eyes not leaving Eliot either. Her hand gripped at his, tight and on tenterhooks.

Then—

Gods, then —

Eliot’s eyes fluttered open and he let out a shaky gasp.
“What the fuck?” Eliot sucked in air, his voice weak and hoarse. “Where—what the fuck?”

Margo was about to break Quentin’s hand, frozen by his side. He couldn’t breathe, still couldn’t breathe, but it was okay now. It was okay that his lungs didn’t work. Fuck lungs if Eliot was alive. And Eliot was alive. Something bright and hot knocked at his heart, but his body was still too shut down to let it in. Not yet.

Eliot licked his lips and grimaced, blinking right to Penny. Margo dug her fingernails into Quentin’s skin—it hurt but it meant he was there, it was happening, it was real, Eliot was alive—and neither of them dared to move.

“Is this real?” Eliot asked Penny and Quentin clapped his free hand over his mouth, overwhelmed.

Penny nodded, relief softening his face.

“Yeah, man, it’s real,” he said as the hint of a smile broke on his face. “Welcome back.”

“Eliot,” Margo whispered, but no one heard except Quentin. He squeezed her hand, silent and awed. His vocal cords were cut, sliced into pieces in his throat. They choked him.

Eliot closed his eyes again and his lashes spasmed as he groaned, “Thank you for incepting me. Never do it again.”

Penny snorted. “Don’t give me a reason to.”

“Copy that,” Eliot said, rocking his head back because he was alive, he was alive, he was alive.

“Shit, I am—I can’t—”

Julia collapsed onto the foot of the bed and reached out to him, her big dark eyes red-rimmed and exhausted. “The curse is out of your system, but it took a toll. I can—I feel how bad you feel right now, El. You’re going to be okay, but you’ll need a lot of rest and, like, soup. Ideally.”

Quentin would fill the godsdamned castle with soup. He was a terrible cook, but he would make as much soup as any fucking human could possibly eat in a lifetime. Because Eliot was alive and he deserved so much soup. All the soup. Nothing but soup ever again, until Eliot was pleading for anything else, literally any other kind of food. But unfortunately for him, Quentin would be, like, the opposite of the Soup Nazi and say, Yes, soup for you! every single time.

His arms were shaking and shaking and shaking. He held onto Margo for dear life.

But Eliot could barely keep his eyes open. His body was still limp on the bed, his muscles sagging him down and his chest panting with labored breaths. But he forced his gaze onto Julia.

“Julia,” Eliot said, voice scratchy and fading. He blinked, face still pale and weak in its movement. “You—” He coughed, closing his eyes. Julia moved further onto the bed, lips and arms trembling.

“El, hey,” she said with a sniff, glancing at Margo and Quentin in anguish before taking his hand in both of hers. “Hey, we’re here. The curse is gone, we’re all here, I’m here. Can you talk to me?”

“Julia,” Eliot said again, his beautiful voice rushing right to Quentin’s heart. At the sound, tears welled in Quentin’s eyes and he tried to swallow down the painful scratch up his throat. “Julia, you—you—”

“I’m here,” Julia said again. One tear slipped loose on her cheek, tracing over to her nose. “What
“You—are trying to say?”

“You—” Eliot peeled his eyes open as he smirked, a tiny spark on his gray features. “You’re underdressed.”

Julia let out a screeching laugh-sob, smiling wide as all her tears fell. “Oh my god, you dick.”

Eliot chuckled, though it sounded more like a cough, and Quentin felt all the light in the castle rush into the room at once, surrounding his husband with a gorgeous, otherworldly glow. Eliot smiled, lips cracking as he did—but gods, he smiled—and took Julia’s hands in his, bringing them up for a light kiss.

“All I’m saying is, you’re not slumming it at NYU house parties anymore,” Eliot said as he pressed a kiss to her knuckles. “Some decorum would be appreciated.”

“You know I went to Columbia, you dick,” Julia said as she shook her head. But her eyes were bright and happy, her hands squeezing his tight.

Eliot slid his lips up into a serene smile. “Hence why I said slumming it.”

Margo broke.

She let out a feral cry of near-miss sorrow, crawling over until she was curled into Eliot’s lap. She cupped Eliot’s face between her hands, and his eyes went joyful and fern green, glued on his Margo—his Bambi. His whole demeanor both brightened and melted at her touch, her lovely face spotlit by the gentle smile that was always reserved just for her.

“Nice of you to join us, asshole,” Margo said with a dazzling smile of her own, as Eliot gently thumbed her tears away. “You’re never leaving my sight again.”

“Lucky me,” Eliot said softly, kissing her brow. “Does my breath smell like shit?”

Margo laughed loudly, nodding. “We’ll get you a mint.”

So then, quietly, Eliot and Margo spoke to each other, their gazes never wavering, as the relief seeped into the room and into Quentin’s bones, liquefying and calm. The air and the light turned warm as Penny kicked the servants and advisors out, until only the five of them remained. But as far as anyone was concerned, it was really The Eliot and Margo Show, with the rest of them as fortunate spectators.

Quentin was more than okay with that.

He knew he would get time with Eliot. He knew they would have nights upon nights alone together, with each other, in all the ways his body was already seeking in its dizzy confusion and elation. Quentin knew he would fall asleep in Eliot’s arms, that he would wake up to his smile. He was the luckiest son of a bitch on the planet that way. And so, in the meantime, he also knew how important it was for Eliot and Margo to have their bubble—their partnership—uninterrupted for the few moments they had before courtly life would rear its ugly head and rip them apart with the call of duty. This precious time together was what they both needed. What they both deserved.

But as Quentin started to shift away, to give them space, Eliot’s hand slid over and entwined with his.

All he could feel were the tingling points where their warm skin met. With a big swallow, Quentin tangled his fingers tightly with Eliot’s and stroked the soft skin of his hand with his thumb, over
and over again, just to touch him, just to feel the warmth of him, the life of him. And when he glanced up to look at Eliot—just to see him, without expectation—Quentin’s heart stuttered in his chest as he saw his husband’s eyes fall closed, as if in response to his touch.

Everything was light.

Bursting, streaming, beautiful light.

Margo regaled Eliot with the tales of heroics, how she and Penny and Quentin had worked tirelessly over his bedside. She told him how they were going to burn the castle down, set fire to the mountains and hills, how little they gave a shit about anything but him (“Idea actually courtesy of your little fire demon of a husband,” Margo said with a quick wink at Quentin, “which I like for you.” And Eliot had smiled so hugely, Quentin’s heart seized.)

Then Margo actually apologized for letting Penny into his mind, calling it a necessary evil to which Eliot gently concurred. She rolled her eyes at Julia’s Emerson, brushing past that detail as quickly as possible. And Penny interjected here and there, especially when Margo’s retelling went a little tall and he had factual corrections to make. And Julia smiled at everything the High Queen said, like she and Margo hadn’t very recently been exchanging barbed fuck yous to each other. That was what family was like, Quentin supposed, as he kept tracing new patterns into Eliot’s skin, as he kept a silent watch over the burgeoning joy and relief.

(His heart briefly, annoyingly panged for Fen. But he ignored it.)

Quentin could have stayed like that for hours, contentedly watching the four most dynamic people he had ever met talk to each other, and smile at each other, and bitch at each other all at once. He could have held Eliot’s hand in silence for the rest of his life, the warm and grounding pressure of his fingers between his a balm to the jagged rips and scars on his soul. It was an honor and a privilege.

But that honor and privilege was no match for Eliot’s eyes on him. That was paralyzing. Heart stopping. Especially when Eliot looked at Quentin like that, curling away from Margo to give him his undivided attention. As he laid on his side, propped up by an enormous pillow, the whole of Fillory could have burned down and Quentin would have been none the wiser.

“Hi,” Eliot said, softly. He reached a hand out and brushed Quentin’s hair back with his fingers. “What’s going on up there, hubby? You’ve been quiet.”

There were a million things Quentin wanted to say. Thank gods you’re okay. I love you. I’m sorry I let you walk away, I’m sorry I didn’t strangle that asshole to death upon sight. Kiss me—here, now. I don’t care who’s watching. I love you, I love you, I love you, how have I never said that? How did I let you almost die without saying that? He wanted to say all that and more, so badly.

But before Quentin could open his mouth to speak and before he could stop himself, he just wordlessly threw his arms around Eliot’s neck and held on tight, tucking his head into the slope of his shoulder. And Eliot hugged him back with surprising strength, fingers tangled in his hair.

“You scared the shit out of me,” Quentin mumbled, his hot tears pooling in the divot of Eliot’s collarbone. “Fuck, El.”

“I’m sorry,” Eliot said in a shushing whisper, and Quentin could feel him pressing his lips to his temple over and over again. “I’m so sorry, baby. I’m here, it’s okay. I’m sorry.”

“Gods, you have nothing to be sorry about,” Quentin laughed—actually laughed, because what
the fuck, who apologizes for getting stabbed, only Eliot—pulling away just enough to run his hands over his chest, his neck, his gorgeous face. Eliot sighed and pressed his cheek into Quentin’s palm, eyes never moving from his.

(Vaguely, in the background, Quentin could hear Penny ask, “Should we, like, go?” and Margo scoff.)

“Shit, is this too much?” Quentin asked, even as he couldn’t stop touching Eliot. He slid his hand down over his bare chest, over his heart, his precious heart. “I didn’t mean to hurt you or—”

“Don’t go anywhere,” Eliot said, covering Quentin’s hand with his own, like he was afraid he might take it away. “Q, I—” He swallowed, shook his head. “It’s really good to see you.”

Quentin laughed again, tears gathering at the corners of his eyes. “You’re telling me.”

“Are you okay?” Eliot pursed his lips and Quentin smiled again, despite himself.

“I’m not the one who just got stabbed, El,” he said as light as he could. But his breath still caught in his throat. “I’m fine if you’re fine.”

Eliot slid his fingers deep into Quentin’s hair, massaging firm and warm and good at the base of his skull. He was silent for a few moments, before he nodded and leaned forward, pressing their foreheads together, brushing the tips of their noses against one another.

“Fine might be an overstatement,” Eliot said, his lips a hairsbreadth away. Quentin thought he smelled amazing, incredible, alive. “But I’ll get there.”

Quentin nodded. “Same. On both counts.”

“Glad that’s settled then,” Eliot said warmly, pressing a soft kiss to the apple of his cheek, making Quentin shiver. And then even moreso when Eliot’s mouth moved slowly over to his ear, voice pitching low. “But you and I still need to talk, okay? Once everything calms a bit?”

The world slanted to a narrow beam of light. Everything was hazy and floating. It was lovely, and Quentin wanted to hold onto Eliot forever. But instead, he nodded, moving his face back to the warm confines of the crook of his husband’s long neck. Sometimes, it felt like it was Quentin-shaped, like it was where he was always supposed to be. A cozy nook just for him.

Quentin closed his eyes and fell into the steady thrum of Eliot’s pulse, beating low and firm against his cheek. He listened to the idle chatter of his friends, the sound of Eliot scratching his chin along his hairline, the wind howling outside the castle window. He breathed in time with the cadence of their speech, exhaustion nearly overtaking him along with the hypnotic feeling of Eliot’s long, soothing fingers moving all over his shoulders, his neck, his hair—like he wanted to touch Quentin, without intent, as much as possible.

But then the cadence of the conversation turned energetic, as the topic of the assassin’s identity was inevitably broached.

“The fuckhead turned back into Benedict before the guards reached him,” Margo said sharply. “So none of us saw him and now Soren says he’s not talking.”

“I saw him. I’d know him anywhere,” Eliot said, running his fingers through the length of Quentin’s hair, twisting and twirling the ends. “But once we know who he is, who sent him, why they sent him—what’s the next step? Ship him back to Loria?”
Quentin loved his little bubble of warmth and Eliot, hidden away from the harsh and homicidal reality that awaited them all. But he couldn’t ignore that question. So he sighed, sitting up.

“No, uh, you definitely can’t send a war criminal back to their country of origin. That defeats the point.”

Eliot frowned. “What point is that?”

“Aw, honey, here’s the deal,” Margo said, taking his hand with wide eyes. “Sometimes when one country hates another country very much —”

Eliot scowled. “Okay, a little arch.”

“—the first country sends a shitty assassin after the other country’s king,” she continued, before dropping her voice dangerously, “and then the king executes the shit out of him.”

“I got it, Margo,” Eliot said, staring down at the duvet.

“I mean that literally,” Margo said with a tick of her brow. “Full disembowelment would be more than called for.”

“After a fair trial, right?” Julia said, twisting her mouth into a frown. “He’s still a human being, with rights and—”

“His rights can suck my clit,” Margo said. “He tried to murder Eliot.”

“I know that,” Julia said, narrowing her eyes. “But we’re heads of state. We have a responsibility to seek justice, above all, even and especially for those who have wronged us.”

Quentin glanced up at Eliot. The color in his face was almost back to normal, but his shining eyes were darting everywhere and the muscles in his jaw rolled. He was anxious—he didn’t want to execute anybody, ever, for any reason. Even for an attempt on his life.

One time, in the safety of the night’s darkness, Eliot had told him about the time during his childhood when he had accidentally killed a young kid with magic. He had telekinetically thrown a yellow school bus at the boy, a bully who made Eliot’s life a living hell, for seeming like a boy who liked other boys.

As he recounted the horror, Eliot had kept his face buried in Quentin’s chest and even let Quentin hold him, arms wrapped around his shoulders, instead of immediately rolling over and pulling Quentin to him. Lips whispering along his breastbone, Eliot quietly spoke of the darkness that festered and fueled his magic, and how he had sworn to himself that he would never hurt anyone ever again.

This wasn’t the same thing.

Quentin really wanted to tell him that it wasn’t the same thing. But he couldn’t, not in front of everyone. So instead, he took Eliot’s hand in his and squeezed, and tried to hide his sad smile when Eliot gripped back just shy of too tight.

“God, you’re annoying,” Margo said to Julia, calling Quentin back to the present. She flopped back on the bed, cuddling into Eliot’s opposite side. “Okay, so we slip some truth serum to a motherfucker ‘til he squeals, right?”

Penny shook his head. “He’s refusing all food and drink. Knows the score.”
“How do you even have all this information?” Quentin asked, looking around. “I haven’t seen Soren in hours.”

“No offense, Q,” Margo said slowly, sitting up on her elbows to shoot him a sidelong glance. “But you’ve been kinda catatonic. Not a surprise that you’ve missed some shit.”

Eliot blinked and stared down at him, an unreadable expression in his eyes. It was intense and heated, with a question mark, but one where Quentin had no fucking idea what answer to give. A bundle of squirming nerves wiggled in his stomach and he sucked his cheeks into his teeth.

“I feel like you saying no offense is what makes it offensive,” he grumbled and instantly, Eliot smiled brightly, so brightly, alive, and squeezed their joined hands tight.

But then El sighed and looked back up at Penny. “So identifying him is the first challenge? Does he still look like Benedict?”

“Yeah,” Penny said, crossing his arms. “He has an amulet that’s been magic’d up the ass by a powerful enchanter, probably a dude named Ilario who works for King Idri. It burns when anyone but the prisoner touches it.”

Margo gasped. “It hurts the guards’ widdle fingers?”

“More like threatens to make them spontaneously combust,” Penny said, glaring down at her from under his lashes. “But I appreciate you taking the most charitable interpretation as always.”

Quentin ran his free hand through his hair, tapping his fingers along his scalp. “So he looks like Benedict, won’t talk, knows about truth serum—sounds like we have to just wait him out then, right? Even the best enchanter work has a time limit. It’s not the same as a real spell.”

“Except we have to act fast, or it’ll be open season on all our heads,” Margo said, stroking Eliot’s arm. “We can’t look weak.”

Eliot’s brow pinched together and his face fell, making him look both older and so much younger than Quentin had ever seen before. “What do we do then? I’m not really—this is a new one for me.”

“Yeah, uh,” Penny said, rubbing his eyes. “I think for us all, man. But we’ve got your back. You know that.”

The words rang in the quiet room for a few moments, as everyone processed what had just happened. Penny pointedly looked away to the corner as Eliot blinked up at him in delighted surprise, matching the warm rush up Quentin’s chest.

Huh.

“Well, okay,” Julia said, standing abruptly and starting to pace. “So let’s go back to the start. If you’re up for it, El, maybe you can tell us a little about what you remember? If we dissect the sequence of events, as a group, we can start to piece things together?”

Just as abruptly, Eliot’s eyes fell closed and Quentin was overcome with the desire to shield him. El shouldn’t have to relive it all, not yet.

“Why does it matter?” Quentin asked, a threat in his voice. “We know he’s Lorian. That’s the important part.”
“Because without a positive ID, Idri has plausible deniability.” Penny the Usual Asshole returned to say, with an unnecessary eye roll. But yeah, fuck, that made sense. “On the other hand, if we know that this asshole’s, say, a Lorian soldier or connected to the court in some way? Our retaliation isn’t only inevitable, it’s justifiable.”

“Nah, I’m with Q,” Margo said. “Let’s go ahead and blow the motherfuckers up now. Idri’s head will look great on my spear.”

Quentin squinted a sharp look over at her. “Uh, that is not what I said.”

“I took your idea and added to it,” Margo shrugged. “Improv rules.”

“What’s improv?”

“Jesus, we do not have the time for that deep delve,” Eliot said, smiling between him and Margo before turning a grave look back to Julia. “But unfortunately, I don’t have much to report. He took me to the garden, said a bunch of weird shit that should have thrown me off but, alas, my heart is too pure and trusting—”

“And you were drunk,” Margo interjected with a finger in the air.

“—and I was drunk,” Eliot confirmed with a nod. “After which he stabbed me and I was like, what the actual fuck, Benedict? But then he changed to his real face because he wanted me to see what he looked like before I died, I guess. Not a lot to go on.”

“And?” Julia tilted her head. “What did he look like?”

Eliot was quiet for a moment, eyes going wide.

“Um,” Eliot said after another moment, licking his lips. He opened his mouth again and let out a wordless squeak. “Oh, uh, I don’t know how to—describing him would be—I wouldn’t say that he was any one thing or another, it was just—”

Margo scrunched her nose. “Are you having a stroke? What the fuck did he look like?”

“What does anyone look like?” Eliot said loftily, waving his hand in the air. “Far be it from me to ascribe any such—”

Penny rolled his eyes. “Oh my god, you thought he was hot, didn’t you?”

Quentin bit down on his teeth and glared up. “Come on, Penny, of course he didn’t think—”

“So hot,” Eliot breathed out, fanning himself. “Crazy hot. Before he stabbed me, he was all like, long live the king, with grit teeth and crazy eyes, but in like—a crazy hot way.”

Dread grasped Quentin’s heart like a vice, but he shook it off. He took a breath and rested his head on Eliot’s shoulder. Everything was fine. Eliot was safe. That was all that mattered.

Julia sat down with a sigh, patted Eliot’s knee with a tiny smile. “Note the emphasis there, El.”

“Just saying,” Eliot said, pressing a kiss to Quentin’s hairline, almost distractedly. “If the assassin and I were playing Fuck, Marry, Kill, the two of us would apparently have different answers for each other.”

“Too soon,” Quentin mumbled. And Eliot kissed his head again, firmer. Margo groaned and fell forward, forehead to her knees.
“Great, okay, so he’s bangable,” she said with a growl. “Can you describe the specific way in which that fuckdick was bangable or do we have to—?”

But before anyone could find out what Margo’s nuclear option was, the doors swung open. An agitated Soren charged in, hand gripping a sword with red knuckles.

“Your Highnesses,” he said with a bow to Penny, Julia, and Margo. Then he dipped lower to Eliot. “Your Majesty. Please forgive the intrusion, but urgent information has come to light.”

“Talk fast,” Margo said, rolling her shoulders back into her queenliest state. “We’re strategizing, so this better be good.”

(Margo always told anyone who interrupted that what they had to say had better be good. They rarely met her standards.)

Soren was a smart man and he didn’t waste any breath. “We were able to remove the amulet to reveal the man’s true face.”

“Good work,” Eliot said, just as Margo snapped, “About time.”

“But unfortunately, Your Grace,” Soren said, his face going pale under his ginger colored beard, “we had immediate reason to believe he was not, as originally suspected, of Lorian stock. He mispronounced their common phrase, Rhaffat jaras. With the aim to mock us.”

It was Lorian for, essentially, go the fuck away. But it was a sacred part of their dying language and no true Lorian would ever, ever, mispronounce it, even to jeer at Fillorian guards. Everyone knew that.

It was a message.

A familiar one.

Quentin tried to swallow, but his throat was too dry. Fillory started to slowly tilt on its side, everything falling down the long sloping surface. He gripped at the bedsheets, his eyebrows coming together.

“Your Highness,” Soren said with another short bow to Margo, “I took the liberty of utilizing the guest staying with us to identify the man, to confirm my suspicion of his identity.”

“Fen?” Quentin choked out, and Soren nodded. “You—you asked Fen because you thought—”

“I asked Fen of Coldwater Cove for her assistance due to her former association with the group known as Fillorians United,” Soren confirmed, before looking briefly down at the ground. “That, and because her father forged my first blade. She comes from honorable stock. Despite her misdeeds, she is a true Fillorian and one whom I believe the monarchs have been wise in trusting.”

“That’s great, but I’m losing my patience,” Margo snarled. “Do you want me to lose my patience, Soren?”

He did not. The guard continued.

“I’m afraid, to that end, I have unfortunate news,” Soren finally said. “The man is indeed a native Fillorian, a high ranking member of the FU Fighters. She says he is part of the, ah, the leadership.”

Every light on Fillory dimmed.
Quentin shivered, black spots pulsating in front of his eyes in time with his heartbeat. Winds howled and whipped at his back. A boulder free fell for a million meters and landed right on top of Quentin, crushing him. Demolishing him. Pushing him so far into the ground he would never move again.

No.

No.

Nononononono.

The fire-hot air of the room strangled his throat.

In a slow haze around him, like a joke, like a fucking joke, Julia and Penny exchanged worried glances, as Margo’s eyes darkened with untold fury. But Eliot just fell back against the bed frame, a soft frown on his lips.

“My own people are trying to kill me?” Eliot near-marveled. “So French.”

“She said they aren’t violent,” Margo snapped. “So, what, all the Lorian shit was a red herring for an internal coup? How the fuck did they get a Lorian blade?”

“I believe the Talking Fish are still loyal to the crown,” Soren said with a nod. “But I can confirm.”

“Jesus Christ, no, I meant—”

“So, wait, um, he’s—a—a native Fillorian?” Quentin’s voice quavered on the question. “A native Fillorian did this?”

“Yes, Lord Quentin,” Soren said with a sigh. “It is disheartening for me as well.”

Quentin would have screamed if he could have. He ripped at his hair, breath coming in fast pants. “A native Fillorian?”

“That’s been established, Q.” Margo’s voice came through, muffled and muted. “Maybe you should get some fucking sleep.”

A warm hand rubbed between his shoulder blades. “Bambi’s not wrong. Go rest, we’ve got this.”

Quentin let out a soundless gasp, arms wrapping around his stomach. There were only three words he could say. “A native Fillorian?”

His chest was stinging, ribcage tight, so fucking tight, like a giant’s hand clutching at his most nervy parts, the parts he had always tried to keep hidden away from the world. He jumped off the bed without thought, without any good reason as far as anyone watching him was concerned, his hands plastered to his head as he started to pace. He barely kept in the laughter that was threatening to spill out of his mouth, into the room. It threatened to spill all his secrets and vomit everywhere, until they were all drowning in his bullshit.

“Q,” Julia said, faraway. “Hey, you okay? What just happened?”

Margo’s voice came after. “He’s been like a goddamn rubber band this whole time. Quentin, sit the fuck down, you’re gonna pass out.”

“No. Give him space,” Eliot’s came next. “It’s been a lot. For all of us.”
Quentin looked around frantically, searching for solid ground. He found none. All he saw were Penny’s shark eyes lasered on him, narrowing into slits and watching his every move. His legs shook, jellied and unstable. Spitefully, he tightened his psychic wards.

Penny’s nostrils flared.

The ground lurched beneath Quentin’s feet and tears sprung hot and painful to his eyes. He ran his fingers through his hair. Quentin couldn’t breathe. He couldn’t breathe. He couldn’t fucking breathe.

“I have to get air,” Quentin said to no one, stumbling for the door. “I need air.”

Someone called his name—maybe El, gods, El, oh gods—but he couldn’t stop. Couldn’t stop moving, couldn’t stop his feet, couldn’t stop the way his heart was pounding and vibrating his every bone. He floundered his way down the corridors and across the golden magic moat, down the white stone steps as far as he could go down, down, down. Down forever.

His hands shook on the railings and he nearly ate shit more than once, but he didn’t care—his body didn’t care, dragging him toward his goal on autopilot. Quentin couldn’t feel anything, except the hard stone under his bare feet. He forgot that he had taken his shoes off, that he still wore his formalwear still covered in Eliot’s blood (EliotEliot Eliot), and the rush of whooshing adrenaline in his ears. Like the ocean that nurtured him, taunted him.

He froze at the bottom of the stairs, elaborate wooden doors looming over him.

…Quentin was in the dungeons.

Of course he was in the fucking dungeons.

The cell four doors to the left was swarming with guards, speaking low amongst themselves with their swords and spears drawn at the ready. Their faces were panicked, hurried and nervous. The tense scene was in direct contrast to the strange rush of calm that came over Quentin, the one that floated him to the door with an ease and poise he had never once possessed in his entire life. Never would again.

But Quentin needed to see for himself. He needed to see.

Yet before he could reach the door, a crumpled figure on the floor stopped him in his tracks.

Fen held her face in her hands and her shoulders shook with sobs that went unnoticed—rightfully ignored—by the guards around her, all of whom had much more pressing matters to deal with than a weepy girl.

“Fen,” Quentin croaked out somehow, voice outside his body, body numb. “Fen, get up.”

“Q,” Fen breathed out, standing on wobbling legs with big wet eyes. “Quentin, I swear to gods, I didn’t know. I didn’t know.”

“Go back upstairs,” Quentin said without inflection, without feeling. He couldn’t face Fen right now. They would reckon with it later. “You shouldn’t be here.”

“I’m so sorry,” Fen sniffed, reaching forward to grab his arm. “I’m so sorry that this happened. I’ve been a wreck since I heard, even before Soren came to me. I wanted to be there for you so badly.”

Quentin sniffed. He had no response for that.
“And—and gods,” Fen said, tightening her grip on his arm, peering up at him with those giant blue eyes with so much earnestness and care and naivete and lies. “Gods, I’m so glad that High King Eliot is okay.”

“Are you?”

The words slashed out from behind his biting teeth and Fen flinched backward, arms falling to her sides.

“Quentin,” she said, a tiny, hurt sound. “Of course I—Q, I’m sorry. I didn’t know. I promise I didn’t know.”

She sounded sincere. She sounded so sincere, so true. Fen blinked and blinked, trying to keep her tears at bay, trying to be apologetic, supportive, a friend, a sister, a heart-cousin, who also couldn’t believe the truth in front of her, the truth of what had really happened, of what everything had led to.

But Quentin couldn’t feel it. Couldn’t absorb it, couldn’t imagine that there would be a time when it wouldn’t matter anymore, that there would ever be a time when her sincerity was ever enough, that her love was enough, in the face of everything. He didn’t know how to forgive. He didn’t want to forgive. He couldn’t give a shit. Why the fuck was she even here if she was wrong about everything, if she couldn’t have stopped this?

“Go back upstairs,” Quentin all but commanded, and there was no reason she shouldn’t have obeyed. “I don’t know when I’m going to have time for your manipulative bullshit, but it’s sure as hell not right now, Fen.”

A low beat of silence passed between them as she didn’t move. Until she let out a small gasp, a hiccup. He cut his eyes to her once, to show he wasn’t fucking around, but he only found steel in her gaze anyway.

“Understood,” Fen said, lower lip trembling under her icy visage. “Then I shall take my leave.”

She sniffed, face twisting bitterly for a blink of a second. “Lord Quentin.”

He heard her leave, the slow and shuffling footsteps of repressed sobs. He vaguely registered that she was the biggest hypocrite in the entire kingdom. He vaguely registered that this wasn’t, actually, her fault. He vaguely registered his exhaustion. But Quentin would reckon with it later. He would reckon with all of it later. He would even reckon with himself later.

But for now, he needed to see.

Approaching the guards, Quentin nodded at the door as his heart thudded, thudded, thudded. He was the High King’s consort, so his request was not questioned. He outranked them, de facto or otherwise. If Quentin wanted to look this man in the eyes, they had no means of forbidding it. So under his firm silence, Rhys clicked open the lock and turned away.

Without further ceremony, Quentin stepped into the cool room.

It was a small enclosure. The air was drafty and dusty, surrounded in Dwarven stone and ancient wards. Across the short distance, a pair of strong shoulders were silhouetted by the moonlight streaming through the small window. The prisoner was facing away, but Quentin knew him. He would know him anywhere—his posture, his stance, his indefinable presence. He knew the way his light brown hair brushed against his collar, knew the way he jutted out his hip with a constant, underlying impatience, knew the steel of his spine. He knew him.
At the sound of the door closing, the man sighed deeply, rocking his head back and rolling his neck. He spun around on his heels, making a sound of annoyance at the intrusion. His eyes were cold and hard as they landed on the door.

But that changed once they registered Quentin.

Then— then those bright green eyes softened, glowing under the firelit torches. His shoulders relaxed, almost friendly, almost welcoming, as his mouth fell open, full lips parting in shock and pleasure. The prisoner—the assassin—shook his head, like he couldn’t believe what he saw before him. And those eyes, those fucking eyes, crinkled and filled with light.

“Well, hey you,” Bayler finally said. He grinned. “Guess you got my message.”

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Dust motes glittered in the silver light of the moon, giving the jail cell an ethereal quality. Torches lit up the white walls with orange and gold in the searing silence. Standing across the room, a Cheshire grin dropped into something softer and more serious.

Quentin inhaled through his nose, pulse thundering. The man he once knew well stepped closer, brow wrinkling under the dappled movement of the flames.

“It’s good to see you,” Bayler said, the cocky intensity gone from his voice. “Odd to find you so dressed up. But regardless, you look well.”

“What the fuck is wrong with you?”

Quentin clenched his jaw and growled over his shaking vocal cords. Time stood still until the tension was broken by Bayler’s barking laugh. He clicked his tongue against his teeth and spun in a circle, like a dance.

“You know,” Bayler said with a tiny smirk as his gaze locked back on his. “I’m not sure if there's anything I despise more than when you speak Earth as though you enjoy it.”

“You’re—you’re—you’re working with the Lorians?” That was not Quentin’s main question, definitely wasn’t his main grievance. But anything else was impossible to speak. “Since when do you work with the Lorians? Since when do you—do you—gods, you are not a murderer, Bayler!”

Quentin’s vision blotted out for a moment and his hand plastered to the top of his head. His stomach crashed to the ground under the crash of a drowning wave. Because Bayler was a murderer. An unsuccessful one, sure, but he was a murderer. He had wanted to be, he almost had been, he had almost killed Eliot. Quentin swallowed, heart tensing and mind spinning, compulsive
and dizzy. What the fuck? What the fuck?

“Revolution requires bloodshed,” Bayler said, pinching his brow with bafflement more than anything. “It was nothing personal against the prissy usurper.”

The world turned ice cold and gunfire bright. “Don’t you dare talk about Eliot.”

Bayler huffed a sharp breath.

It wasn’t a laugh. Bayler had the loudest laugh in all of Fillory. His laugh was a booming and exuberant sound. This was thin. Malicious. It was annihilating in its cold quiet. It was meant to slice Quentin down to nothing.


“The High King survived,” Quentin said, refusing him the reaction he wanted. He was long past the days when Bayler could shame him with a word. “Your plan failed. The monarchs will—”

“Save it, I heard,” Bayler said with a yawning nod. “The guards’ speech flows faster than their piss.”

He was always good for a turn of phrase, especially for a Fillorian. Quentin had once envied it in him because Quentin had once been a very, very stupid young man.

He slammed his eyes shut.

Memories flooding against his will, he took a deep breath of the heavy magic air, letting the metallic sting fill his lungs. He had no idea what the hell was supposed to do next, what the fuck he was supposed to do with all of this. He needed to get back to Eliot. He wanted to be with Eliot. He did not deserve to be with Eliot. But gods, it was all he wanted.

As always, Bayler was unconcerned with any of Quentin’s possible inner turmoil. He strode over to the wall and knocked on the stone once. “Can you do away with these wards then?”

“What?”

Quentin could feel his mouth fall slack at the audacity, but Bayler just shot him an impatient look over his shoulder. “You’re here to break me out, yes?”

“No,” Quentin breathed, because he couldn’t be serious. He was unbelievable. “No, I am definitely not here to fucking break you—”

Bayler cut him off. “Gods, here we go. In that case, do you have any wine?”

He was the same, he was the same, he was the same. This was who Bayler had always been and Quentin had always been a fucking blind idiot, willfully and willingly so. He buried a silent scream in his hands.

“No,” Quentin said as he lifted his head, spitting the word out. He scrubbed his hands down his face. “No, Bayler, I do not have any godsdamned wine.”

“Pity,” Bayler said blithely, sitting down on the foot of the fur-covered bed. “This already feels like a conversation that wine would serve well.”

“This isn’t a—”
“Quentin, take a moment, you’re tense,” Bayler said. He ducked his head and offered a soft half-smile. “I’m getting the notion that you’re perhaps angry with me over our last small tiff.”

“Oh my gods,” Quentin said with a sudden laugh, high-pitched and giggling. He couldn’t help it. “Our tiff?”

Yeah, actually, now that Bayler mentioned it, Quentin was still pretty angry about their tiff. But it wasn’t top of mind at the moment. He was fucking unbelievable. He was the godsdamned same.

“But you couldn’t have thought I was going to give up simply because we were briefly at odds,” Bayler continued, face going dark and intense. “You know that’s not who I am. Never will be.”

“You tried to assassinate the High King of Fillory,” Quentin said, sticking to the facts and leaving his emotions out of it. Otherwise, he’d kill him, years of history and complexity be damned. “You made some kind of treasonous deal with the Lorians to try to kill my husband. I don’t know who the fuck you are.”

Bayler rolled his eyes. “Your husband.”

“My husband,” Quentin repeated. Bayler’s mouth twitched into an ugly sneer, throat spasming at the word.

The torch lights flickered once, in unison, pitching blackness over them like a prolonged blink.

“I have to know,” Bayler’s voice choked off, almost small. He closed his eyes and looked recognizable for the first time. “Has he ever hurt you?”

Quentin felt his chest tighten over a gut punch.

“No,” he whispered. Gods, the idea of Eliot hurting him was—it was absurd. “No, of course not.”

When Bayler let another huffing false laugh, it was like a lash across the back.

“Of course not,” he says, like it’s a given,” Bayler growled, chest swelling with rage. Quentin ground his teeth, holding back his instincts, lest he sink as low as the snake before him.

“I don’t know what you’ve been told about Eliot, but he’s not like the others.”

“Oh, word travels fast,” Bayler sneered. “I hear he’s emotional. Easily wounded.” He listed the words off like the jaws of a snapping turtle. “Arrogant. Effeminate.”

“Caring. Brilliant,” Quentin countered just as sharp, digging his fingers so deep into the flesh of his arms they would bruise. “Diplomatic. Brave.”

Bayler flared his nostrils, exhaling slowly. He puckered his lips until they broke out into another one of his obnoxious smiles.

“Handsome too,” he said with a soft snort. “I noticed.”

Quentin felt his stomach tighten. “Was that before or after you tried to murder him?”

“I never thought you would sacrifice your principles to suck Earth cock,” Bayler said with a thoughtful frown, all academia. “But I suppose life is often filled with odd turns.”

Quentin clenched his hands into fists, raring to punch the wall. He would probably break all his fingers, but it would be worth it to get the fury out of his system, to feel the kind of pain that salves
could heal. But he wasn’t about to let Bayler see how much he could still get under Quentin’s skin. He wouldn’t give him the satisfaction.

He was done giving Bayler anything he wanted. He had been done for a long, long time. He needed to remember that he was looking at a total stranger, and thus, he needed to proceed accordingly. Quentin had seen him now, he had looked him in the face, he had confirmed the truth of what he knew— what he had always shamefully secretly known all about him, about his fanaticism, about his twisted loyalties. And now he had two choices. Quentin could walk away, forever…

Or Quentin could be useful.

“Why did you do this?” He asked because that was what he would ask anyone, he would ask that of anyone who would hurt Eliot. But the child in his soul was also aching, sobbing for answers from his friend, in muscle memory. “Why would you do this?”

Bayler gave him a disbelieving look. “That’s an inane question, Q.”

“Yeah,” Quentin said with a kick at the ground. “Don’t call me Q.”

“Pardon me,” Bayler said with a detestable bow, arms splayed wide. “Lord Quentin Coldwater of the Coldwater Cove Cold—”

“Stop it.”

“It’s an absurd title and you know it.”

“I don’t know anything that you know,” Quentin said quietly, finally looking up at him again. The familiar face almost crumpled under his gaze, but managed to stay still, stay strong. Like always.

To Quentin, Bayler always looked like every age he’d ever been. He looked like the nine-year-old kid who had grabbed a bulldog by the scruff and threatened to skin him for growling at the terrified Quentin. He looked like the boisterous and secretly fragile fifteen-year-old who had begged Quentin to stay the first time he visited home from Earth, the one who kissed him for the first time and nearly convinced him to forget everything. He looked like the nineteen-year-old who had started a discussion group. He looked like the adult man who had fucked Quentin against the tallest tree in the Cove, the man who had whispered sweet and angry and beautiful words into his skin, for two long, combative, dizzying years that were always filled with more questions than answers. He looked like the man who had demolished all of it with one decision, with one lie, and hadn’t even tried to stop Quentin as he stormed out of the room.

And now, Bayler also looked like the man who had tried to murder Eliot. He looked like a man who had broken his promise. Bayler had always sworn that his zealotry would never extend to violence, that no one would ever get hurt in his many appeals to the gods.

Quentin could forgive a lot.

...But hurting Eliot?

He shook his head hard, biting down on his teeth. He had to be useful. He had to be useful. If he wasn’t useful after this, how the fuck did he even deserve to live, let alone share that life with people so wonderful? He had to find out more, had to find out something that they could use, something that would protect the realm and the king at once. He had to be able to bring something back to the table, something to prove his worth to those he loved, the ones he had unwittingly, and wholly, betrayed.
“What the fuck were you thinking?” Quentin asked quietly, swallowing down his rage in pursuit of answers, in pursuit of information. “Are you so arrogant to think you could actually get away with this? That I would let you get away with this?”

“My concern isn’t with myself,” Bayler said, and he definitely meant it. He wasn’t selfless by anyone’s measure. But the so-called greater good had always been his focus.

Well, that, and Quentin.

“They’ll force you to take a truth serum,” Quentin said, keeping on track. “They’ll find out what you did, how you did it, why you did it, who else is involved. There is no end here where the FU Fighters survive.”

“Hm,” Bayler said, squinting. “Except it seems like it might be in your interest to prevent that turn of events.”

Quentin swallowed, heart going arrhythmic. “I won’t stop them. I’m telling Eliot everything.”

“Yes,” Bayler said, tossing his head back, “and you can tell me how that went when you join me down here.”

“That’s not going to happen,” Quentin said. He didn’t know how Eliot would respond, what it would mean for their—for their personal relationship, but he knew that Eliot would never, ever truly punish him for it. He wasn’t that kind of king. Wasn’t that kind of man.

Quentin glanced down at his clothing, at the blood that stretched across his white silk shirt. He could have done a spell to clean it up. He knew how to now. But he wasn’t going to do that. He wasn’t going to forget, in any way. He would walk with Eliot’s blood on him forever if that was what it took. He would burn the pattern of the blood into his godsdamned skin.

Bayler pressed his palms into the bed. The moonlight slanted over his face, making his expression unreadable. “You remember Ilario, the Master Enchanter. He works for your friend, Ess.”

In many ways, Quentin shouldn’t have been surprised. But the sting of another duplicity was like a slap across the face. “Ess is involved?”

He and Ess were not friends. They hadn’t been friends in a very long time. Ess was a dickhead and an alpha male asshole who didn’t care about other people’s needs. But he had never thought that Ess was so ignoble. Quentin’s fingers shook against his elbows, his world crashing everywhere.

“Don’t know, don’t care,” Bayler said, scratching at the slight stubble on his face. “But what the FU Fighters found out, despite it escaping the notice of your incompetent monarchs, was that Ilario received a boon from Ember, for illusion work. Chokesuck got bored, wanted to stir some thunder, I suppose. made our move when the horseshoe was on the striker.”

Quentin processed that, lips twitching. “So you made a deal with Ilario. To help sow chaos on behalf of Ember, while really trying to—”

“—meet our own goals,” Bayler said, finishing the sentence with a quiet glee. “Ilario thinks Ember has favored Loria. He also thinks we want to see Fillory itself dismantled and that we would find our own benefit in Lorian oversight.”

“Well, that’s naive,” Quentin said, rubbing his eyes. Okay, so there was no way Ess knew about any of this shit. Ess was many things. unintelligent wasn’t one of them. “Uh, at best.”
Focus, focus, focus, his stupid brain screamed.

Bayler snorted and spoke in his usual blunt manner. “Ilario is as stupid as a drunken sheep. But his potent mixture of horrendous decision making and powerful enchantments are favorable to the cause for the time being.”

“The cause is dead,” Quentin said firmly. “Fen is—”

“A traitor,” Bayler said, eyes flashing up. “Though she was motivated for your sake, it appears. I sympathize with that rationale, even if I find it wildly counterproductive.”

Quentin didn’t respond to that. “The monarchs will know everything.”

“Let them,” Bayler said, pursing his lips. “I welcome the challenge. As do the fifty strong who joined the cause on the day of Fen’s defection, on the day she invoked the heartstring.”

Something sharp twisted in Quentin’s gut. “Fifty men joined the FU Fighters that day?”

“And a few women,” Bayler said with a shrug. “Including members of your husband’s court. For obvious reasons.”

Quentin’s blood stopped. No. Not because of—“Bullshit.”

“I don’t know that term,” Bayler hissed, before he smiled. “The course is true. What Fillorians want solidifies. You’ve always been the fool who refuses to see it, refuses to join me as we planned.”

“Better a fool than a fraud,” Quentin snapped, dangerously close to treading dead ground. “You moved from petitions to heresy, and that is—”

“Meanwhile, of course, all the god cares about is his entertainment,” Bayler continued his tale like Quentin had said nothing, as he always did, “which we’ve been offering in droves. I believe, in the end, he’ll be so pleased that he’ll never see the truth until it overwhelms him.”

“So you’re, essentially, working with Ember,” Quentin said with a blink. “To defy Ember.”

“And here you are saying this Eliot is the brilliant one,” Bayler said with a renewed grin. “As such, your little monarch friends are pawns as much as anything. If I’m not concerned about our god, I’m not concerned over whether a bunch of schoolchildren want my bones serrated.”

“That’s dangerous and stupid,” Quentin shot out. “At best, Ember will tire of your shit quickly and at worst, you’ll be left dealing with Umber, who will never—”

“Worried about me, sweetbird?”

Bayler peered up at him, eyes soft, and Quentin’s heart stuttered to a stop. He swallowed daggers and his hands twitched at his side, curling into casting position.

“Definitely don’t call me that,” Quentin warned, voice low. “My concern is not for you, chokesuck. It’s for the innocent people who will die from your goddamned hubris.”

Bayler turned his face into the dark. Quentin could only see the glow of the torch along the line of his neck, the moonlight on his clenched hands.

“I did this for you,” the words came quietly in their devastation. “Everything I do is for you, Quentin.”
The floor below him may as well have opened up and swallowed him whole. Quentin almost collapsed right there, in a pile of skin and bones and gutless despair.

“That is—” He brought a shaking fist to his mouth, shutting his eyes against the sting of tears. “You’re insane. You’re out of your godsdamned mind.”

Every time he closed his eyes, all he could see was Eliot, his Eliot, on the ground and writhing in a pool of his own blood. All he could see was Eliot trying to reach out to him, trying to comfort Quentin in what must have felt like his last moments. But his husband couldn’t, because he was too hurt, he was gurgling blood, and growing pale and weak with his eyes rolling back in his head. All he could hear was the way Eliot had mournfully asked for Margo and the way he tried to grip his hand, but had no strength to do so. They could have found him dead. They could have found him dead, by Quentin’s former lover’s hand.

Quentin wrenched his eyes open. He had to see. He had to face this.

Bayler was looking at him again. His green eyes were almost iridescent in the mixture of silver moonlight and golden flame. He was an enormous presence, overwhelming in the small space. And he still looked at Quentin like Quentin was everything.

“I am as clear minded as the day we met, only older and much wiser,” Bayler said in a careful tone, like he was trying to rationalize with a feral cat. “I understand, you know. I do. You’ve always been tenderhearted. Wouldn’t harm a snail with no sentience.”

Quentin tightened his jaw. “Want to test that hypothesis?”

“Don’t be like that,” Bayler said softly. He clasped his hands on his lap and pressed his lips into a line. “You always want to see the best in people, the Child of Earth included.”

“That is not—”

“As I said, it’s understandable,” Bayler continued, speaking over him. “He’s indeed handsome, clearly charming, likely decent at, well, _kingly relations_ , let’s say, and he obviously dotes on you. It’s like your serpent call. It’s hypnotic.”

Quentin snapped his hands out and the torch fires blazed so bright and big the whole place nearly went up in an inferno. He caught any damage at the last second, save a black burn mark on the fur blanket upon the bed. But the only response was Bayler’s hum of victory and a lilt that grew in his voice.

“Little Quentin who always wanted someone to take care of him,” he finished, dark and light at once, “but never could never see his own strength.”

“You don’t know me.”

“Yes, I do,” Bayler said, standing up. His eyes were bright and even more fervent than his words. “I know the truth of you better than anyone.”

Quentin released a shaky breath. “No, you fucking don’t.”

“You know as well as I do, even if you won’t admit it, where the river course will take you, what is _inevitable_,” Bayler said, his pupils wide and lungs breathing deep as he loomed over Quentin. He wasn’t much taller, but it always felt like he was. “Deep in your heart, you know where you belong.”
With those words, Bayler reached out and pressed his hand against his chest, firm and hot, gripping at his blood-stained dress shirt.

—Quentin smacked him down as hard as he fucking could.

He leapt back to put as much distance between them as the space allowed, horrified beyond measure that the man who had tried to murder Eliot had dared to touch him. True to his true form, Bayler instantly snarled at him, his teeth white and sharp in the moonlight for a split second. But of course, he caught himself—caught his temper, like he always did when he wanted something from you, when he wanted your thoughtless obedience—and melted into something gentle, something warm.

“I told you once that I would do anything for the right cause,” Bayler said, moving his eyes all across Quentin’s face. “This is the right cause, sweetbird. For you, for us, for Fillory. When I said forever, I meant it.”

Bayler always meant what he said. With one major exception, he never lied. He only ever told the truth, though it was usually only the kind that helped the cause. He knew how to tell the truth better than anyone Quentin had ever met.

His chest grew tight and frozen.

He had seen.

There was nothing more now.

“I’ve been privileged with the opportunity to know Eliot well,” Quentin said, meeting Bayler’s eyes one last time. He stood as tall as he could. “He may spare you. It wouldn’t surprise me.”

Bayler tilted his head. “How kind of him.”

There were mountains of history between them. Mountains of feelings unspoken, mountains of hurt and anger and destruction. Mountains of affection and laughter and even joy. Mountains upon mountains, stretching as long as Fillory and as high as the heavens. The memories, the mischance, the misery, the magic between them had named each peak, for as long as he could remember.

...But Bayler had crumbled them all to ash with one act.

“If that happens?” Quentin walked to the door and knocked, calling the guards. He did not turn around. “I’m going to need you to stay away from my husband or I will make you stay away from my husband.”

He stepped through the threshold without looking back. He heard the angry pound of fists on the wooden doors and the bellowing shout of, “Quentin!” behind him, the harrowing of an ill-tempered child throwing himself to the ground in a tantruming desperation. It echoed across the hall until the magic sealed away all sound, until Quentin was gone.

Quentin was done.

Quentin only got around the bend in the corridor before a figure leaning on the stone stopped him in his tracks.
Long legs blocked the center of the hallway, stretched out and crossed like he had been waiting—and waiting—for a long while. Quentin’s blood froze and his soul withered, unprepared to deal with the questions that were sure to come. He dropped his chin to his chest and let out a sound, halfway between a laugh and a sob, and awaited his doom.

But Penny didn’t look at him.

He stared up at the ceiling, flicking a gold crescent up in the air and catching it. He flicked it up in the air and caught it. Flick up, catch. Flick up, catch. Flick up, catch. Flick up—

—On the last catch, Penny pocketed the coin and ticked his jaw. Black eyes hit his and Quentin wanted to shrivel up. He was so tired. He didn’t want to deal with this, even if he knew he had to deal with this.

Penny pursed his lips. “Sup?”

“What—what,” Quentin sniffed, eyes blurring, “um, what are you doing down here?”

“Yeah,” the lower king let out a low chuckle, rolling his shoulders back. “Spin that shit around, Quentin.”

“Taking a walk,” Quentin said, stilted even to his own ear. “You know, uh. Clear my head.”

“You are the worst liar.”

“Can you please let this go?” Quentin burst forward, pushing past Penny without looking back. “I am exhausted, and I am—I can not deal with your shit right now. Mind your own fucking business.”

But a stronger hand grabbed his arm and pulled him back. Quentin went like a marionette, floppily bending at the joints and resigned. His hair fell over his face and he almost broke out into wracked sobs right then and there.

Penny slit his eyes at him. “Your wards are like iron right now. You must be using a fuckton of energy to keep them that way.”

Quentin felt his jaw tremble pathetically and his voice came out in a sharp pop. “I’m—I’m not—”

“Whatsoever you’re hiding, I’m gonna find out,” Penny continued, hand tightening, bruising. “You’ll never maintain this.”

Wrenching away from his grasp with more adrenaline than strength, Quentin snapped his face at Penny like an angry goose. “Watch me.”

Shaking out his limbs, Quentin turned back toward the hallway. He walked as quickly as he could, sliding his numb feet and aching chest toward the spiral staircase. He needed to get to his quarters and get some fucking sleep. He needed to let the churning of his mind settle into something rational.

But before he could begin his way up the staircase, a booming and ominous voice echoed along the stone.

“...You know what I thought the first time I saw you?”

Quentin stilled and gripped the railing so he didn’t fall over. Penny wasn’t about to declare his
deep love at first sight. He heard sturdy footsteps ascend behind him until he knew, even without turning around, that Penny was mere centimeters away.

“Well, at least when you actually became relevant instead of a moepy lump that blocked the view?” Penny clarified, dickishly. He lowered his mouth next to his ear and hissed his next words. “I don’t trust that skinny, skittery little asshole.”

Quentin pulled away to glare at him. “Thanks for the trip down memory lane.”

But Penny surprised him, as he often did. He took a step back and crossed his arms, eyes going softer in the dim light. He let out a snort and glanced away, shaking his head.

“Except then I did the stupid thing and second guessed myself,” Penny said. “I actually thought you proved my instinct wrong. That you proved me wrong.”

Quentin’s mouth fell open and any words he had left died on his tongue. The fight fell out of him, a messy lump of false bravado on the floor.

Penny looked Quentin right in the eye. “Did you?”

“I know the prisoner,” Quentin said quietly but without hesitation. Penny actually broke into something like a smile at that.

“No shit, your thoughts were jumbled but I got the gist,” he said, rolling his eyes. “Explain.”

“His name is Bayler, uh, of Sultan’s Ridge,” Quentin said, heart slamming against his chest. “He was—he was my childhood best friend, other than Fen.”

“Small country,” Penny said with a sarcastic lift of his brows. Quentin closed his eyes.

“We were—really good friends.”

Penny let out a low whistle. “Quentin.”

“Really good friends,” Quentin breathed out, forcing himself to stare straight ahead, to face this. He rubbed the bridge of his nose, willing his head to stop fucking pounding for two godsdamned seconds.

“Like,” Penny cleared his throat, “when you were younger?”

“It ended six months before you arrived,” Quentin croaked out painfully, pushing his hair back and rubbing his neck, nervous tics galore. “But, um, it was a thing for, like, two years? Before? And, well, that’s that.”

Penny flicked his eyes at the ceiling. “Okay, yeah, you have to tell him.”

Quentin knew. “I know.”

“He’s gonna freak the fuck out.”

“I know.”

“Rightfully, Q,” Penny said, ducking his head. Quentin blinked back the hot burn of tears and nodded.

“I know.”
Penny exhaled and stared down at the ground. “Okay, that wasn’t—” He tightened his jaw and sniffed. “Look, I’m not saying it was okay that you didn’t mention that your boyfriend—”

“He wasn’t my boyfriend,” Quentin closed his eyes. “It was more complicated than that.”

“—that your complicated friend or whatever was an insurgency leader,” Penny continued, brows pinching. “But at the same time... I get it. And I’m sure after he has his mandatory hissy fit, Eliot will get it too.”

“Hissy fit is kind of an oversimplification,” Quentin said, letting himself fall back against the wall. His skull knocked into the stone too hard, reverberating heat and shock down to his ears.

“Sue me,” Penny said with a pointed shrug. “My point is that Eliot knows as much as any of us that you didn’t ask for this shit. The only reason you’re even here is because fate royally fucked with you, pun intended.”

That was exactly what Quentin feared the most. Eliot knew that too well sometimes. Sometimes Eliot’s eyes darkened, his mood shifted at the mention of the deal or any hint of Quentin’s past life, in ways that Quentin had never known how to assuage. Possibly because there was no real way to assuage something that was based in truth, objectively, logically. But objectivity and logic didn’t account for everything in life. It certainly hadn’t there.

But Penny was trying not to be a dick for once. So Quentin offered him a weak smile of gratitude.

“A lot of things you do and say are bullshit. I’m the first to tell you when that is,” Penny said, understating just a little bit. “But having a past isn’t one of them, Quentin. Choosing not to talk about your past isn’t one of them. You’ve never—you don’t actually owe us that, okay?”

It wasn't about what Quentin owed them.

It was about what was right. It was about his relationships with the people he loved, with the man he loved. In that regard, he had failed. He had failed. No matter how Eliot felt about him now—and gods, he had his hopes, how could he not?—this was going to change everything and not for the good. Eliot’s trust in him would be tarnished forever, irrevocably. He’d never look at him the same way again.

Rightfully, Q.

Yeah, uh, thanks, I guess,” Quentin said, lifting his hands with a burst of implacable energy. “But I need to—I can’t stay down here anymore. I need to go the fuck to sleep.”

Likely story.

“But now that shit’s gone down, you do have to tell him,” Penny reiterated, like Quentin didn’t fucking know. “You can’t let him find out any other way. That would be—” he glanced away, with an awkward throat clear. “I, uh, I think that might destroy him, Q.”

The tears burst like hot geysers down Quentin’s cheeks, his shoulders shaking as he hugged himself against the wall. Penny at least had the decency to keep looking away as Quentin fell apart, snot running down his lips and muscles trembling as his brain hammered home exactly how much of a fuck up he had always been, would always be, and how Eliot didn’t deserve any of his bullshit and how if Penny was trying to be nice to him and lie to him, to tell him that it wasn’t bullshit, then that was how Quentin knew he had really, really fucked up, worthless piece of shit.

“Quentin,” Penny’s flat voice came after a few long minutes or seconds or years. “Q, go to your
room, man. It’s been a long night. Deal with it in the morning.”

“Not everyone can compartmentalize their shit like you, Penny,” Quentin snapped, maybe not fairly, but who gave a fuck?

“I’m a psychic,” Penny said, still irritatingly calm. “I have to compartmentalize for my sanity and survival. You should at least try to do the same. Get some goddamn sleep.”

And somewhere along the way, Quentin must have listened to him.

He found himself walking the upper halls, feet moving without rhythm toward the long corridor of his private chambers. But without notice or reason, they took him the long way, so he passed the wooden door of the guest room where he had left Eliot. Where Eliot was still lying in bed, still recovering, still wondering about where Quentin was but trying like hell not to show it to anyone.

For a second, Quentin reached his hand out to the ornate doorknob. He heard hushed voices—Julia’s or Margo’s or El’s or all three—and his heart ached with the desire to walk through the door and join them, to take back his place by Eliot’s side and sleep there before he truly dealt with it in the morning.

But Quentin didn’t deserve that.

So he turned on his heels and walked away, into the cold dark and to his own cold, dark quarters.

Then it was morning.

Quentin went straight to Eliot as soon as the light hit his eyelids.

A wiser person might have held off until he had gotten more than an hour’s worth of restless sleep. A wiser person might have waited until things had settled, until Eliot was stronger, more recovered. A wiser person might have known there were more strategic ways to approach the conversation, to ensure they could discuss it as partners, come what may. But wiser people were often cowardly, and this was one thing Quentin couldn’t be cowardly about. If he was, even for a moment, he would never manage to get through it.

When Quentin arrived at the guest room though, it was empty, save a tonally confused note jabbed to the wooden door by a tasteless knife. It read:

Q. Eliot is back in his quarters. He’s fine, but get the fuck up there, you nervy little butthole. All my love and gratitude, M.

He wasn’t sure if the sign off was sincere or sarcastic or both at once. Either way, the thought of Margo finding out the truth about Bayler sent a ripple of cold new fear under his skin. Eliot would not be happy. But Margo would be—

Well, Quentin couldn’t think about that.

He needed to be like Penny and compartmentalize. He would deal with Margo and, gods, shit, Julia later. He would explain himself to them later, beg for their mercy later. Because right now, his king, his husband, his—not his, not really, but still—his Eliot was all that mattered. He needed to
look him in the eye and tell him the truth. It was the only possible way they could move forward and have their partnership ever mean anything again. Even if it killed any chance for what Quentin really wanted.

Heart ripping into fine gossamer shreds and hands quaking with fear, Quentin found his way to the High King’s chambers. His pulse was hot and heavy in his mouth, thudding along his tongue, and there was a real risk that he was either going to vomit or pass out. But somehow, he managed to nod his way past the doors, the guards bleary-eyed but steadfast.

Not surprisingly, as soon as he stepped through the threshold, he ran straight into a new ward that wrapped around his whole body, freezing him in place and seeping into his pores, like it was confirming his identity down to the molecular level. He didn’t know for certain, but it felt like Julia’s work.

Either way, the ward released and let him through, just in time for him to see Margo storming out of the next room, an axe in hand and at the offensive ready. As soon as she registered Quentin’s face—and that he had passed the newest test—she sighed, lowering the weapon down. She pursed her lips as she walked toward him, before finally resting a cool hand on his cheek.

“You look like shit,” she said, not unkindly. She ran her thumb across his cheekbone. “Glad you showed up. I’m trusting you to keep alert, you jumpy shit-for-brains.”

Quentin averted his eyes and barely felt the quick kiss she pressed to his cheek. His eyes burned as she patted his arm and left him alone.

—Margo was going to hate him soon.

With a thick swallow, Quentin managed to walk his way through the dressing room and around the stone bend, not even checking to see if he was interrupting a conversation. What he had to say was more important than anything else, so even if Margo or Julia or Penny or Soren or Tick or fucking Rhys or whoever were there, they would have to leave so that Quentin could speak.

His chest felt like a hollow vase being crushed by a vice. He felt every crack with agonizing precision.

Quentin stepped into the main bedroom. All of the fires were out. Sunlight effused the space with a natural white glow and Eliot sat in the center of the large bed. He wore simple green pajamas that brought out his eyes. His curls were wet from the bath, a rivulet of water coursing down his sideburn, and his ringless hands flipped the page of a book—The Battle Magicians of Krakow: A Political and Moral Travesty—with a frown etched in his brow.

Eliot was so beautiful, and Quentin hated himself so much.

“Um,” Quentin said into the quiet air. All other words—any actual words—escaped him. He swallowed down a shriek of anguish and tried to breathe, tried to calm the incessant pounding of his heart. But in an instant, Eliot made it so much worse.

El blinked at the page before peering his eyes up, surprised and eager and warm. He smiled at Quentin, bright and brilliant.

...Quentin wanted to die.

“Q.” Eliot sat straight up, green-gold eyes shining ever more bullets right to his chest. “There you are. I’ve been... “ He trailed off with a strange sound and slid off the bed, taking a step toward him. “That is, ah, how are you?”
“Hey,” Quentin said, tucking his hands in his pockets. Then he took them out. Then he put them back in. It was a loop. “No, I’m fine. I, uh, yeah, sorry about last night. I shouldn’t—I shouldn’t have just left.”

But Eliot shook his head, waving him off. “It’s fine. Are you okay?”

“Am I—?” Quentin bit his lip and shook his head, more ashamed than he had ever been. He wanted to reach out to him so badly. “Shit, no, Eliot, are you okay?”

It hadn’t even been twelve hours since Eliot had been lying in Quentin’s arms with blood pouring out of him like a godsdamned faucet. It hadn’t even been that long since Margo held her hands over his wound, shouting healing incantations into the night. It hadn’t even been twelve hours since grotesque rose vines grew under his skin like a serpentine sickness. It hadn’t even been twelve hours. Quentin sniffed back a rush of tears and looked away.

Achingly, wonderfully, horribly, Eliot made a soft humming sound, walking over to him. He cupped his jaw with one large hand and Quentin almost collapsed when Eliot stroked his thumb along the grain of his stubble. The touch was warm and familiar, and it soothed his every nerve in all the ways he didn’t deserve. He closed his eyes.

“I’m fine,” Eliot’s rich voice curled in his ear. “Tired, but all healed. Though I’ll admit I didn’t sleep particularly well last night.”

Guilt choked Quentin where he stood. “I’m sorry.”

It was the first time he had said those words in that room, that day, in that moment. It wouldn’t be the last. But even if his other sins were greater, Quentin really was sorry if he had scared Eliot by not coming back.

Eliot trailed his fingers up his arm, soft and feathery, without pressure, and then back down again. “Where did you go? I was—” He took another breath. “I was worried.”

Quentin forced his eyes back open.

He had brought about enough damage. He had hurt enough people. He had hurt Eliot enough. It was time for him to stop being a chickenshit dickhead and face the consequences of his spineless cowardice.

“Oh, okay,” Quentin rubbed at his neck, letting out a breath as he stepped backwards. “Yeah, we need to talk.”

“Is there a worse sentence in the English language?” Eliot said, pressing his lips together with a heavy sigh. “I know we do. But must we? Things have been so crazy since last night.”

Quentin scrubbed his hands down his face. Fuck. Shit. “That’s an understatement.”

“I’m jumbled,” Eliot admitted, his soft eyes still devastating in the gentleness that Quentin feared he would never see again. “I haven’t had a second to catch my breath until now.”

Quentin forced his eyes back open.

“Uh, okay,” Eliot admitted, his soft eyes still devastating in the gentleness that Quentin feared he would never see again. “I haven’t had a second to catch my breath until now.”

“No, yeah, obviously, I—I totally get that,” Quentin said, throat dry and pulse racing. It was now or never. “And I’m not trying to add to all of it, I swear, but this is—I’m really sorry, but it’s kind of unavoidable and urgent.”

Eliot cocked his head with a low grin. He had dark circles under his eyes, but his high cheekbones were flushed with vivacity and he moved with his usual elegance. He was gorgeous, and alive.
Quentin nearly fell to his knees right there.

“Will whatever you have to say still be unavoidable and urgent in an hour or so?” Eliot asked, voice even and almost airy. “Maybe two?”

“Uh, yeah, by the nature of those words,” Quentin frowned. He was confused by the question and squirming in his skin. “Meaning, uh, it’s both of those things now, so obviously the same will stand—”

Before Quentin could anxiously blather on, Eliot took one long step forward and closed all distance between them.

He kissed Quentin like he had almost died, hands tangled in his hair and every point of their bodies pressed together. And Quentin—Quentin was a fool, he was a coward, he was a worthless piece of shit who couldn’t help but kiss Eliot back with all the pain and heartache and love inside him. He kissed him like he never would again.

He fisted at the silky material of Eliot’s pajama shirt, pushing himself up on his toes to walk them back toward the bed. Eliot toppled over easily—with a smile against his lips—and Quentin crawled on top of him, out of his mind. He straddled him, rocking their already half-hard dicks together, and everything went white and blinding and nothing was more important than this, this, this.

“We haven’t had a moment alone since the ball,” Eliot panted out as their lips parted. His hands burned as they gripped Quentin’s ass. “Terribly neglectful of me.”

Those words in that context made no sense. Quentin blinked and pulled away, looking down at the mussed Eliot, beneath him with blown-out eyes, tousled hair, and a heaving chest. Quentin’s jaw twitched.

“You got stabbed,” he said out loud and the words tightened his stomach. “El. You got stabbed.”

But Eliot just rolled his eyes and gripped at his shoulders, trying to pull Quentin back down to him. But it was too late. Everything rushed back with stark clarity and Quentin rolled away, landing on his back in an ocean of blankets. He covered his eyes with the back of his wrist, reality anchoring him to the bottom of the sea.

Quentin groaned, “Shit, Eliot. I’m serious, we need to talk.”

The space on the mattress next to him dipped low and a hot mouth worked its way across his exposed collarbone, teeth scraping trails of tingling heat.

“I need to put my hands all over you,” Eliot murmured. He ran his long fingers over Quentin’s cock, squeezing through the fabric of his pants. “Need to fuck you slow.”

Gods, Quentin was weak. “El.”

He sucked in a breath as Eliot moved his hand under his shirt, tracing up his sides. He kissed up the line of Quentin’s throat, delicate and light, he lapped at the underside of his jaw with his expert tongue, he bit his earlobe and tugged, just right, and Quentin couldn’t help it. He couldn’t help turning his face and capturing his lips again and kissing him again, and again and again, until their hands were everywhere, their mouths everywhere, until time and space was nothing, until it was all meaningless.

“Then you’re right. We should talk,” Eliot whispered into his skin. He huffed a breath and his voice got thinner, smaller. “I, um, I have a lot of things I want to say to you. Need to say to you, Q.”
Somewhere in the distance, lightning crashed.

“Eliot, I—” Quentin tried to pull away, but couldn’t go far. Not with Eliot’s glowing eyes on his. He brought a shaking palm to his cheek and caressed him. “Gods, El, I thought you were gonna die.”

“I’m here,” Eliot promised quietly. He kissed the pulse point of his wrist, eyes not moving from his. “I’m right here, baby.”

“Thank gods,” Quentin whimpered.

Eliot tugged him in by the waist, kissing him hard. His lips moved down to suck raggedly at his neck, a delirious sensation of simmering heat.

“Oh, fuck, Eliot.” Quentin threw his head back, begging for more. Always one to oblige him, always one to indulge him, Eliot rolled on top of Quentin, kissing him into the mattress. He grazed his hands everywhere he could, not yet working off clothing. It was like he just wanted to feel Quentin, wanted to relish all the ways they could touch each other, slow and simple and endless.

“Q. My Q,” Eliot whispered, killing him with three words. “God, how did I get so lucky? How did I get so fucking lucky?”

—The air in the room vanished.

Quentin gasped and pushed Eliot off him, rolling away to sit on the corner of the bed with his knees tucked to his chest. His hair fell in waves over his face and he was glad. He couldn’t bear look directly as Eliot stood and shook out his limbs.

“We can’t do this,” Quentin said, his own voice sounding hollow. “We need to talk. Now.”

He heard Eliot let out a low breath and he forced himself to look up. Eliot stood by the edge of the bed, arms crossed and brow tightly furrowed. His cheeks were still flushed and his dick was still hard, tenting his silk pants. But his eyes—shit, his eyes were dazed and hurt and, worst of all, concerned.

“Q,” Eliot breathed out, licking his lips. “Baby, what the fuck is going on with you?”

Baby. Shit. Shit, fuck, godsdamned motherfucker. Quentin stared up at the ceiling. He was the single worst person on Fillory, in the universe, in the fucking multiverse. Or, well, he was the second worst. But that was all part of the bigger picture.

“This isn’t going to be a fun conversation,” Quentin said, pressing his palms into his eyes. He would sob otherwise. “But—shit, El, I need to tell you why I left last night. Like, right now. It can’t wait.”

Eliot let out a sharp breath that turned into a sharp smile.

“So you freaked out. It’s fine,” he said, deceptively nonchalant. “Fuck knows I’ve hightailed it out of much less intense situations before. Let’s not dwell on it.”

“I didn’t just freak out,” Quentin said, but Eliot wasn’t listening. He was sitting next to him again, brushing Quentin’s hair back, pressing his lips to the corner of his mouth. “Eliot, stop, I need to tell you—”

“Quentin, for the love of god,” Eliot growled against his face, his patience breaking for the first
time, “I don’t care that you were a member of Fillorians United, okay?”

“I was never a FU Fighter.”

There it was. As expected, Eliot pulled away and his mouth crept down into a frown. “Wait, what?”

“That’s not what I need to tell you,” Quentin said. He gathered his strength and looked him in the eye. “We need to talk about the prisoner.”

“Oh, Eliot said, with a blink. He touched his fingers to his lips and nodded. “Okay, well, yeah. Ah, so I’m sure you can guess that Bambi’s up my ass about executing him. She wanted it done at dawn but I asked for the day to think about it. What’s your take?”

Quentin sucked his cheeks between his teeth. “No, that’s not—”

“I was thinking about what you said a few months ago, about how *every execution is a step toward tyranny,*” Eliot said, tapping at his chin as he ruminated. “Can you talk me through that again, so it’s more of an argument? Because I agree in principle, but if I said that to Margo, well, woof, and—”

“Stop assuming what I want to say!”

The words burst right out of Quentin, his hands splaying wide in the air as they grasped at nothing and no one. He let out labored breaths, wheezing in his frustration and shame.

Beside him, Eliot’s mouth fell open, taken aback.

“Oh, he said quietly. He reached out to place his hand on Quentin’s knee, eyes filled with worry. “Hey, okay. Sorry. You’re right.”

Quentin hated himself.

“No, fuck, I’m sorry. I’m not mad. I, uh, I have literally no right to be mad,” Quentin said with a tiny inappropriate laugh that pulled out a deeper frown from El. “This is just—really hard for me.”

“Well, whatever it is, I’m listening,” Eliot said, so gently. Too gently, always so fucking patient. “You can tell me anything.”

Squirming to a squatting position on the bed, Quentin bit his fist. He took a final deep breath. “Okay, so, like, there’s no easy way to say this, so I’m just going to say it.”

Eliot’s brow pinched with the first hint of dawning fear. He couldn’t know what was about to happen, not really, but the shadow over his eyes spoke to something like the beginning of the end.

“That’s never a great start,” he said, before swallowing his troubled expression and schooling his face into masterful calm. “Tell me.”

Quentin twisted his fingers around themselves. “The prisoner—um, so, uh, I actually know him.”

“You know him?” Eliot repeated, face blank.

“Yeah,” Quentin said, biting his lip and staring up helplessly. He heard a slight shift of the covers from under Eliot, but otherwise he appeared unmoved. “So Bayler—uh, that’s his name—um, Bayler and I were childhood friends. Best friends.”
Eliot’s face fell back into concern. “Shit. Seriously? Are you okay?”

“No, stop asking that, I’m fine. That’s not—” Quentin grit his teeth and grabbed at his hair, readying to pull. But he stopped himself and lowered his shaking hands. “We haven’t been friends in—I don’t know, a long time.”

A warm chuckle followed. “Homicidal maniac does seem a bit incongruous for you.”

Fuck.

Fuck.

“But the thing is, Bayler was a forming member of the FU Fighters back while I was on Earth. We saw each other a few times, but not much,” Quentin said, spitting all the words out as quickly as he could, forcing himself to look at Eliot. “Then I returned as an adult and we reconnected, first when I graduated high school and then again when I came back for good. We kind of, uh, bonded, I guess, over our mutual political interests and goals. And I—”

The shadow over Eliot’s features turned to a storm cloud. “You what?”

Quentin’s heart pounded in his throat, making his voice shake. “I ended up spending a lot of time with him again.”

“Oh, okay,” Eliot said. His voice was flat. Eerily flat. “Go on.”

“Like, a lot of time.” Quentin was a coward and so he darted his gaze away for this part. “El, he’s—”

He cut himself off and the silence that followed was as heavy as the unicornhair cloak he had worn at their wedding. It was as black and thick, as uncomfortable, making his eyes burn and his skin itch with fire. And when he forced himself to look back up, Eliot’s eyes had shuttered completely. He wasn’t looking at Quentin.

At all.

“Ah,” was all Eliot finally said. His lips twitched exactly once before his face smoothed into a neutral mask. He still wouldn’t look at Quentin, but the lines of his face were unbothered, serene. Dangerous.

Quentin huffed a breath. “Uh, yeah.”

Eliot stood, long legs holding him high. He floated across the room with preternatural grace and poured himself a hefty goblet of wine, still studiously not looking at Quentin. “When was this?”

“It ended six months before you and I met,” Quentin said and Eliot smiled down at the goblet before taking a languous sip. “But we were, um, involved for two years before that.” He snapped his eyes shut. He had to be honest now. “And, like, on and off before that, starting when we were around, uh, fifteen. Whenever I was in Fillory.”

“Jesus, okay,” Eliot said. He laughed, stilted and harsh, gulping the drink and still, still, still not meeting Quentin’s eyes. “And now, he tried to kill me.”

“I know how it sounds,” Quentin said, bunching his pants fabric in his palms. “But I don’t think it’s about—”
Eliot spun around, sharp as an ice pick. “No, I’m sure it’s a coincidence.”

“I should have told you,” Quentin said softly. “I know I should have told you.”

“That your most recent ex is a violent mutineer with a penchant for regicide?” Eliot let his mouth fall open, eyes wide. “Uh, yeah, Q.”

“He’s never been violent before now,” Quentin said and, yeah, okay, he understood the disbelieving smile that crossed Eliot’s face at that. “To be fair, I’ve actually been—I’ve been trying to tell you what I knew about his involvement with the FU Fighters for weeks.”

There was nothing fair about what Quentin had to say. He knew that. But he couldn’t help the defensiveness, couldn’t help the need to make Eliot see he wasn’t that bad, that he hadn’t been actually aiming to betray him in any way. He needed Eliot to see that he had been trying, even if he had failed. He had tried, godsdammit, to be a decent and good partner before it all went to shit. He had tried his best.

But it didn’t help.

“That’s what you were going to—” Eliot nodded sharply. He stared down at the ground. “I am fucking stupid.”

“It seemed like an unnecessary complication to bring into our—our—our work. Our life,” Quentin said, frustrated at the crack in his voice. “Fillorians United is—or was, I guess—a fringe organization. I promise you, as far as I ever knew, violence was never on the table. It was never their plan.”

Eliot laughed again, this time an almost hysterical sound as he drank. “Gee, what could have changed? Such a mystery.”

“It’s not about our marriage, El.”

The goblet slammed on the stone table. “Do not bullshit me.”

He knew Eliot wouldn’t believe him. But he had to say it anyway, because it was true. Bayler was motivated by many things. He believed he was motivated by even more. But it wasn’t truly about his feelings for Quentin. None of it was. Quentin had known that for so long. Had made his peace with it long ago.

“Bayler has insane beliefs about the gods. It’s not rational, but that’s the only place he’s ever been focused, even when we were—um, a thing,” Quentin said with a swallow. Eliot burned his eyes down at the table, gripping the edge.

“What kind of beliefs?” Eliot asked, teeth grit and knuckles white. “What kind of beliefs does this stab-happy psychopath who you used to fuck hold exactly, Quentin?”

“It doesn’t matter now,” Quentin said with a sigh, because gods, it didn’t, “but please listen to me when I say—”

“Maybe I should decide what matters.” Eliot’s voice was hoarse and too quiet, but it reverberated through the room.

“Eliot,” Quentin breathed out, sliding off the bed and slowly walking over to him, standing by his wine and his goblet without moving. “Eliot, if I had suspected for a single second that he would hurt you, I would have—”
“God, fuck, I know,” Eliot roared, chugging the last of his wine until it was gone. He roughly wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “I don’t think you were involved, or that you had any idea this could happen, and—and I know you wouldn’t have let it happen if you had. I still—fuck, I still trust you.”

The door of hope creaked open, so slightly. Quentin fell back on his feet and a smile almost tugged at his lips. “Oh.”

“Don’t get excited,” Eliot snapped. “Your judgement’s taken a big hit.”

Quentin deflated. “That’s fair.”

“You had a year and a half to say hey, by the way, head’s up, my boyfriend formed a group dedicated to kicking you off the throne by any means necessary,” Eliot said, pouring himself more wine, all the way to the brim. “Then at least I could have had that information.”

“I know,” Quentin conceded. “But, uh, for the record he wasn’t my boyfriend. It was—it was complicated.”

“Wow,” Eliot said, holding his hands up. His wine splashed out as he did. “Honestly, I don’t want to fucking hear it, Quentin.”

“I’m sorry,” Quentin said, helpless. “I’m just—I know I fucked up. I don’t have anything to say for myself except that I am so sorry, El. I should have told you everything from the start.”

Eliot stood in profile to him, tilting his goblet back with a regal stretch of his long neck. He drank, eyes hooded and dark off into the distance.

“Do I execute him?”

Fuck.

“I don’t know,” Quentin said honestly, the words threadbare and raw. “I don’t think I can answer that. He was my best friend. Years ago and it was always complicated, but—”

“Stop calling it complicated,” Eliot said without inflection and without looking over. “That’s not as helpful to your case as you think it is.”

Tucking his hands back into his pockets, Quentin tried to make himself small. “Sorry.”

“We had the exes talk,” Eliot said, calm and collected, with only a slight tremor under his words. “You mentioned an ex-girlfriend and a few hook ups, on Earth and on Fillory. Yet you never said shit about a years long ‘thing’ with your oldest friend. Why?”

Because Quentin hadn’t wanted to think about it. Because Quentin had been torn in two for so long, between his duty and his desires, and explaining that would have taken more articulation than he was emotionally capable of. Because Quentin had spent so long recovering from the cratered hole it left him in, broken and bloodied. Because Quentin had been terrified that it would ruin everything. Because Quentin had fallen so in love with Eliot that he had forgotten about it. But none of that would be helpful or fair to say. Not right now.

Quentin sniffed. “Because of the word you don’t want me to use.”

“Did you love him?”
The question was asked so quietly that Quentin wasn’t sure if he’d heard it right. “What?”

“Do you—” Eliot squeezed his eyes shut and shook his head, that same flat expression on his face when he opened them again. “Did you love him?”

“I hate him for what he did,” Quentin said with more conviction, with more truth, than anything he had ever said. But Eliot narrowed his eyes, tipping his head over.

“That,” he said slowly, calculatingly, “was not my question.”

Quentin swallowed.

…Well, that was complicated.

He felt his mouth slide open, felt his muscles twitch with a thousand memories of frantic and undercover trysts, of bubbling and dizzying heights of laughter, of low threatening tones, of heart-ripping screams out into the dark and hopeless nothing that was his whatever with Bayler. Love had never been part of his thought process, let alone the conversation. Shit was way too—it was way too—

“Jesus Christ, Quentin,” Eliot breathed out, shakily throwing the empty goblet on the table. The metal made a tinny clanging sound against the stone and it snapped Quentin out of his reverie with the force of unexpected indignation.

“Don’t interpret my silence. I’m trying to think of the right words. It’s compli—” Quentin cut himself off with a hand to his mouth, almost biting his fingers in his desperation. He restarted. “This isn’t—it’s not—it’s not as simple as you want it to be.”

Eliot laughed breathlessly. “What the fuck does that mean?”

“It means that if I loved him, which is a big if,” Quentin rushed to clarify as Eliot clenched his jaw, which was kind of fucking unfair of him anyway, “then I loved who I thought he could be, in a distant bullshit hypothetical.”

“What the fuck does that mean?”

“Gods, do you seriously not get that my life wasn’t—?” Quentin bit down so hard on his teeth that his gums trembled and bled. “I didn’t think I had a life ahead of me, not really. Nothing I did, or well, you know, no one I did—” he added sardonically, sucking in too much air “—mattered. It was all meaningless, so what was the fucking point?”

But El didn’t give him an inch. “What the fuck does that mean, Quentin?”

Quentin’s chest cavity broke open. Out spilled all the fucked up mess of his life, everything ordained and destined, everything he never saw coming, everything he had ever wanted so badly. It all cascaded down together, all commingled and swirled until nothing was recognizable for what it was.

“How was I supposed to work out whether I loved someone or—or whether that could ever mean anything?” Quentin demanded, his skin burning and his limbs flying everywhere, graceless as the day he was born. “How could I open my heart to anyone? Everyone knew that I was the firstborn of Coldwater Cove. They knew what that entailed. They knew to whom I was promised even if he never collected.”

Eliot blinked, face going pale. “Q.”
“That meant I knew—I fucking knew that any piece of my—my—” Quentin swallowed hard, lower lip trembling “—my love would be seen as empty and cheap and—and so I never bothered.”

This wasn’t how it was supposed to go. He was such a piece of shit. Quentin sniffed back a thick line of tears and snot, ripping his eyes up off the floor to meet the rage he was sure he’d find in his favorite eyes. But instead, Eliot just stared at him.

He looked so sad.

—Which was, of course, much worse.

Eliot’s hands twitched at his side and he choked out another soft, “Q.”

It was the perfect time to leave well enough alone. Quentin had made his point, and now it was time for him to grovel again since he was the one who fucked up. But his mulish bullshit kicked its angry hooves in his gut and he set his jaw, staring out the gorgeous window of his husband’s gorgeous quarters, the one place that had started to feel like home. So he spat on it, because why the fuck not.

“The truth is, Eliot, I can’t give you an easy answer about how I felt about Bayler because I don’t know. I couldn’t know. Nothing about my life before you can be so—um, so easily delineated,” Quentin said, breath coming labored as he spoke in monotone. “I don’t think I’ve asked for a lot when it comes to any of this, but please accept that some shit for me is always going to be complicated.”

They stared at each other and Eliot’s face shifted between a thousand emotions, none of them discernible. But it landed on a gentle sorrow, a more painful wound than any scorn.

“You haven’t asked for a lot. You’ve been—” Eliot cut himself off to squeeze his eyes shut tight. “I knew all that. I did, Q. I do.”

“Well, you seem so shocked,” Quentin’s mouth said, acting on its own dickish accord. Fuck. He rubbed his temples and sighed. “Sorry. I’m not—I shouldn’t lash out at you. None of this is your fault.”

“I chose you,” Eliot said, meeting his eyes. “Pretending that I didn’t play a key role doesn’t make shit better for anyone, least of all you. I could have chosen Fen, who actually—who actually wanted this life.”

It was the perfect time for Quentin to reassure Eliot of his devotion, of their partnership, of how much this life had grown to mean more to him than he ever could have guessed or hoped. To reassure him that Eliot shouldn’t have had to choose a life of confirmed misery, not when Eliot’s back had been as much against the wall as anything. To tell him, wholeheartedly, that if the choice had to be made, Quentin was glad that Eliot chose the way he did and he always would be.

But Quentin was flippant when he was tense and a total asshole when he felt trapped by his own emotional cobwebs, spinning and sticky and venomous. So what he said instead was—

“Wouldn’t have mattered. I was fucked either way.”

Eliot’s eyebrows jumped and his eyes went glassy. Slowly, he nodded, a soft smile creeping up his lips.

—Quentin’s stomach slammed onto the ground.
“Shit, no. No, I’m an asshole,” he said, lurching forward, hand reaching out to grasp the falling sand of his words. “El, I’m not saying that being with you is—”

Eliot turned away, walking over to his nightstand. “No, it’s fine. I understand.”

“I don’t think you do,” Quentin said, throat threatening to close in on itself. “That was a shitty thing to say and it wasn’t what I meant.”

Dragging his fingers along the stone, Eliot picked up a tiny box, enthralled by its hinges. “I would have to be truly naive to think that having no control over your life has been a net positive for you. While I’m many unsavory things, naive actually isn’t one of them, Q.”

Fillory crashed around him and Quentin couldn’t stop it. “El, that’s not what I meant.”

“Quentin, truly, it’s fine,” Eliot said again, shrugging his shoulders back. He smiled at him, gently, though his eyes were hollow. “This is a lot to process, for both of us.”

“Eliot.”

“I suppose I never thought about what the deal meant for the romantic part of your life, in any real sense. Maybe I didn’t want to think about it,” Eliot continued, like he was musing over a fascinating piece of art or a plot twist in a telenovela. “Selfish of me, but no surprise there. Apologies. Truly.”

It was the third time he’d said truly in as many minutes.

Quentin shook his head. “El, don’t do this.”

Eliot glanced up in surprise. “Do what?”

“You’re doing that thing where you get, like,” Quentin swallowed, “uh, aggressively placid and pretend you don’t give a shit when you obviously give a lot of shits.”

“How on earth can one be aggressively placid?” Eliot asked with a chuckle, like he was so amused, like everything was so amusing. “That’s oxymoronic, Quentin.”

“Come on,” Quentin demanded. “Don’t do this.”

“Come on?” Eliot repeated, cocking his head like a beautiful and confused bird. “Don’t do what?”

Quentin folded his arms and shook his head. “We need to, like, actually talk about this. We can’t let it fester.”

Eliot blinked rapidly. “Actually talk about it?”

“Yeah,” Quentin said, steeling himself. “I want to know what you’re thinking. For real.”

“What I’m thinking for real?” Eliot hissed out his words in a whisper, though his smile didn’t move. Quentin gripped his own arms and nodded. It wouldn’t be easy, but they needed to do it.

“Oh, okay, sure,” Eliot said as he let out a melodic hum, airy and light. “You’re right. We should discuss.”

“I think we have to,” Quentin said, keeping his voice as steady as he could. “It’s too important.”

Eliot chuckled and looked down at his hands for a moment, contemplative. “Fine, well, in that case
He snapped his head up.

“Then here’s what I got for ya, Q.”

Oh, no.

Eliot’s facade shattered to pieces on the ground and he stalked forward, voice going low and dark. Oh, no. Quentin swallowed around his racing heart, but forced himself not to move. He deserved whatever Eliot was about to throw at him. He deserved it. He had asked for it. Literally.

“I got stabbed last night with a cursed blade and almost died, twice, first from blood loss and then from whimsical fucking rose vines growing around my vital organs,” Eliot spat. Quentin flinched. “Penny zapped the fuck into my coma dreams and saw shit I didn’t want him to see. I came back to a reality where my own people hate me so much that they’d rather see me dead than improve.”

“That’s not true,” Quentin argued weakly but Eliot held up a single stony finger for his silence.

“I would have—should have—felt like a failure of a man and king, for having been so stupid, except that my body was in shambles so I couldn’t really feel much except excruciating pain.”

Quentin bit his lip so he wouldn’t speak. He thrust his hands under his armpits and he blinked back tears that would only be read as manipulative, as self-interested. He breathed.

“And then, you know, I mean, my best friend, my husband?” Eliot’s voice cracked and he glared down at the ground, like he hated himself for it. “Well, it sure seemed like he gave a shit, at least until he fucked off out of nowhere and then didn’t return for the rest of the goddamn night.”

Quentin’s jaw trembled and his eyes closed. “El.”

“Oh, and now, it turns out? The assassin? You know, ha, the one who lured me off and then stabbed me in the gut?” Eliot’s laughter was desperate, and Quentin could hear him start to pace. “Funny story, because not only was he one of my own citizens, but he was also my husband’s fucking goddamn ex-boyfriend who he never told me about.”

Not my boyfriend, Quentin was desperate to say. He didn’t know why it mattered that Eliot knew he had never been committed to Bayler, never actually been Bayler’s anything. It was hardly relevant now and Eliot had made it so clear that the distinction was meaningless, even hurtful, to him. But it mattered to Quentin. It was the one thing he had, the one proof that maybe—maybe—he had done what was right, in some small way. That he had chosen correctly in the end.

But Eliot was still monologuing, frantically storming around the room with red-rimmed eyes and trembling white hands.

“But Eliot was still monologuing, frantically storming around the room with red-rimmed eyes and trembling white hands.

“On top of that, I’m High King—because there are no breaks from that constant nightmare—and so now I have to deal with a political insurgency wherein we still have no intel about your murderous ex-boyfriend’s methods, motives, or allies. With no knowledge of where our pals to the north stand on all this and whether we’ll be quelling civil unrest along with a foreign invasion. We don’t know how many of these amulets there are and who can be trusted as themselves, even within the castle.”

Quentin parted his lips with a soundless gasp, the urge to be useful rearing its inappropriate head. Luckily, Eliot didn’t notice.
“And all of this has occurred within the last twelve hours. I am overwhelmed and tired and newly healed from a motherfucking cursed stab wound,” Eliot finished, kicking at a stone wastebasket with his bare foot and immediately wincing in pain.

“I—” Quentin started pointlessly, with nowhere to go.

Eliot closed his eyes and hung his head, letting out a breathless sound of despair. “So you’ll have to forgive me, Quentin, if my reactions aren’t exactly what you want them to be right now. I am trying my fucking best.”

Quentin could feel his heart tick wildly in his chest. It almost wrenched out of him, longing to hold Eliot. To make promises he would try his best to keep, for the rest of their lives. But that wasn’t what Eliot—his husband, his king, his best friend—needed right now.

What he needed was for Quentin to cut all manners of bullshit.

“It was Ilario, the Lorian Master Enchanter, like we thought,” Quentin said and Eliot turned to look at him, expression inscrutable. “He received a boon from Ember and forged what I believe to be a private alliance with the FU Fighters. It’s all in service of fucking over Ember and his decrees’ hold on Fillory, from both sides. I doubt there’s more than one amulet. Even with Ember’s, uh, grace, that shit doesn’t go far.”

Eliot stared at him without moving. Without speaking.

Quentin hated silence, so he continued. “But members of the court have joined Fillorians United since Fen, uh, revealed the cause to them, I guess. So you should still be careful with who you trust.”

Eliot found his voice, airy all over again. “Sorry, but how exactly do you know all that?”

“I—I went to confirm Bayler’s identity myself last night,” Quentin said and Eliot smiled again, dangerously bright. “He told me everything. He’s not hiding it. He was toying with the guards because he could, because that’s who he is.”

Quentin knew Eliot would ask how or why Quentin would trust any information from Bayler. At least, that would be Quentin’s first question, were their roles reserved. He had an unsatisfactory answer prepared—that Bayler didn’t really lie, not about shit like that—but that he still thought truth serum might be a good idea, to be sure.

But as it turned out, that wasn’t actually Eliot’s question.

“So that’s why you didn’t come back?” He huffed a breath, voice dipping low and coarse. “Because you were visiting your ex in his jail cell?”

Eliot may as well have said the words conjugal visit outright.

“So that’s why you didn’t come back?” He huffed a breath, voice dipping low and coarse. “Because you were visiting your ex in his jail cell?”

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“Hades, not in any way your tone just implied,” Quentin said. Eliot looked away. “I needed to see. I needed to tell him fuck you to his face. I needed to know why he did it.”


Quentin ground his teeth and darted his eyes. “There are other factors.”

“Like what?” Eliot ducked his head, sarcastic as shit. “What are these other factors that would
change things so deeply, Q? What could possibly make this anything but a crime of passion, with the bullshit cover of politics?"

That was Quentin’s cue.

It was time to tell Eliot everything. Everything, like he had promised himself he would. So he took a deep breath and looked Eliot in the eyes...

And immediately lost his nerve.

The anger in those eyes, the overwhelming disappointment and hurt was too much to bear. Quentin was a coward and a fool, but he couldn’t compound it. Not with something so meaningless and stupid, not with something that had never mattered. Would never matter. Quentin would die first.

“It’s not a bullshit cover,” Quentin said, decision made. “You can’t understand how desperately they want a Fillorian on the throne. Their reasons may be shortsighted and futile and in some cases, even insane, but it’s real to them. I think ignoring that in favor of emotional shit is potentially dangerous.”

Eliot scoffed, loud and biting in the air. “Oh, we are way past potentially, on all counts.”

“How can I help?” Quentin asked, holding his hands out. “How can I—how can I help make this right? Make it better or easier for you?”

“You can leave.”

The answer came without hesitation as Eliot stared at the corner of the room, eyes shadowed and dead-serious. And Quentin’s heart fell out of his chest, splattered on the ground.

Of all the answers, it was the one he hadn’t expected. He had thought Eliot would yell at him. He thought Eliot would rage-organize his wardrobe or ask him a hundred questions about the kinds of sex he had with Bayler (“Did you top him? His dick is smaller than mine, right?”) He had thought Eliot would snark and bite, maybe even angrily fuck him, but not—

Never did Quentin think he would—

He didn’t see it coming.

“Um,” Quentin said, casting his eyes up to the light, willing himself not to cry. “Um, yeah, okay. No, I—yeah, no, that’s fair. I’ll just—yeah, I’ll go. I’m sorry.”

He tucked his hair behind his ear and swallowed, willing his legs to move. It kind of worked and he shuffled aimlessly toward the dressing room. But then Eliot called his name and he stopped. He would always, always stop if Eliot called his name.

“Quentin,” Eliot said again, on a broken breath. The anguish in his voice revived Quentin’s heart just enough to break it again. “I just—I just don’t think I can process this with you in the room, okay? It’s not good for my objectivity.”

Their eyes met and Quentin didn’t know how he was still standing. Eliot looked gaunt and vulnerable, wearing pajamas and wringing his hands. But he was a king, a good king, and he had to put his duties first. They both did.

“I’ll, uh, I’ll do anything that helps, El, even if that means you don’t want me around.” Quentin reassured him. In a flash, Eliot’s eyes went hot and miserable. “So I’ll leave. I’ll give you space to
figure this out. But if you need more information or context or anything, I’m more than happy—”

“To be useful. I know,” Eliot said in a hoarse whisper. He stretched a smile over his mouth and didn’t look at Quentin anymore. “I’ll call for you if I need you. But honestly, I wouldn't hold your breath.”

That was fair.

But Quentin couldn’t leave it like that.

“For what it’s worth, El, I don’t think I’ve ever been this sorry in my life,” he said with as much feeling as his exhausted body could muster. He never took his eyes off his beautiful husband. “I know I fucked up. I wish I had better reasons for it, simpler ones. I just hope—I hope you can eventually give me a chance to explain myself better and maybe forgive me.”

“I forgive you,” Eliot said to the ground. “No more explanation necessary.”

Quentin shook his head, miserable. “But I want to explain, I want to—”

“Yes, well,” Eliot said with a weak smile. He still didn’t look up. “Come what may, right?”

Every other time Eliot had ever said that to him, Quentin had said it back. It was the affirmation of their partnership. It was a call-and-response they could always rely on, no matter what. But this time, he didn’t play by the rules.

“You’re my best friend too.” Quentin spoke softly and almost crumpled when he saw how it made Eliot flinch. But he persevered. “I would have burned the whole of Fillory down if it meant getting you back. I hate him for what he did. And you—gods, you matter so much to me, El. I need you to know that.”

He wanted to say more, but—well, it wasn’t the time. So he held his breath and watched Eliot slowly blink as he absorbed the words. Maybe it was meaningless, considering everything. But Quentin couldn’t let him think that he felt any differently.

But Eliot’s lips just twitched again before they slid back into their damning placid smile. “I’ll see
you tomorrow, Q."

He still didn’t look at Quentin. Wouldn’t look at him. Not even as Quentin slowly, finally, made his way out the door and alerted Soren that Eliot wished to be alone.

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Eliot was probably going to execute someone.

Clutching a torch in his hand as he made his way down the wide and winding stairs of the Whitespire cellars, Eliot moved even as his heart pounded with trepidation. It was nightfall and the moons were hiding behind clouds, casting a sinister gray and blue pall to the darkened halls. The guards stood tall and still, nodding to him without a word. They knew who their boss was, but they also knew he really wasn’t supposed to be down there. They knew Margo would have their skin for letting him free during her emergency meeting with Tick.

But if he was going to do this, Eliot had to look the man in the eye. For so many reasons. He was the High King. He called the shots. Sorry, Bambi.

Of course, the facts were clear. Bayler of Sultan’s Ridge was a traitor and a violent radical. He was a threat to the realm, a threat to the progress the monarchs had made, no matter how tenuous and fragile it was. Letting someone like him live, even in the dungeon, would fracture that progress with bloodthirst and discord, with fear and doubt.

At least, that was what Margo had passionately argued, standing by the chalkboard at the front of the room earlier that day.

With a sigh and a smile at the clean chalk line drawn down the center of the black slate, Eliot had leaned back in his throne and felt the warm relief of proper planning settle on his tense muscles. His three fellow leaders were arguing back and forth over the minutiae and he was—well, he was really grateful. In their own focused perspectives, they each unknowingly allowed him to be taciturn without question, which really helped him not have a fucking meltdown right there on the throne steps.

(Also, incidentally, Eliot had always loved a good chalkboard. Small victories.)

Anyway, surprising no one, Julia had vehemently disagreed with Bambi’s appeal to the gods of vengeance and death.

“We need to give him a fair trial, Margo,” Julia had insisted as she stood up and tapped on the board with two fingers. “And for the record, there are a lot more examples of successful diplomacy other than ‘Cuban Missile Crisis’ with a question mark.”

Margo pursed her lips. “Name one.”

“The Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty,” Julia said, and Margo immediately snorted. “Also, you know, uh, the motherfucking Cold War.”

“First of all, the NNPT is a circlejerk,” Margo said. Eliot pursed his lips, trying to look thoughtful and distant so no one would ask his opinion on the matter. “Second of all, the Cold War ended with the dissolution of the USSR, not fuckin’ diplomacy.”

“Debatable,” Julia said, flashing her eyes. “Gorbachev was a Magician and—”
Margo cut her off with a groan. “Seriously, for real, have you met Putin? Because I have and trust me, homeboy’s gonna be crooning ‘Don’t Call it a Comeback’ in short order.”

Penny threw his head up from his hands. “Uh, when the fuck did you meet Putin?”

But Margo waved the question off. “Point is, sparing this guy is a bandaid over a rotting wound. If we don’t amputate the finger now, the whole hand will be next.”

“Sure, fine,” Julia said, ticking her jaw. “Then a fair trial with a jury of his peers should reach the same conclusion.”

“I know you’re not that dumb, Wicker,” Margo said, pitching her voice low and queenly. “Fillorians have a different way of life and a different justice system than we do. Throwing our own wrenches into it for idealism’s sake could fuck it all up, at a time when we can’t afford it.”

“Or you want an excuse to be bloodthirsty,” Julia countered. “Crack skulls now, ask questions later.”

“We can look at pics of my twenty-first birthday party later,” Margo quipped back. “But until then we have a country to run. We can’t afford to be sentimental.”

Julia craned her neck toward the doors. “Where’s Q? I feel like his perspective would be particularly invaluable here.”

Eliot’s heart seized, but Margo shook an angry finger at Julia before he could find his balance. “Uh-uh, no, you do not get to push through your plan with your little bleeding heart Fillorian shield. He’s smart, but more than that, he’s a dumbass.”

“Quentin won’t be joining us,” Eliot had managed to say. He shut down the creep of harrowing despair and held his head high. “This is a matter for the monarchs.”

“What?” Julia scrunched her nose. “No, that’s stupid. Q has actual insight here, to how the people think, to what they want. He knows this group and that’s—”

Eliot breathed a laugh. Oh, Quentin knew them alright.

“Julia,” Penny’s voice boomed, cutting off Eliot’s most vicious instincts. “We know what Q would say. It doesn’t help to have him here, insisting on it ad nauseum.”

“Besides, reminder, this asshole tried to kill Eliot,” Margo said coolly. “I’m not sure he’d be as angelic as you’re hoping.”

Julia closed her eyes, breathing for patience. “Seeking due process is not angelic.”

Eliot stood abruptly, about to jump out of his skin. He needed the subject to change. He couldn’t take hearing about how angelic Quentin would want the assassin dead, how easily his Margo had presumed Quentin’s unwavering loyalty to Eliot, how much she clearly believed Quentin cared about Eliot. Even if it was true, even as his stupid heart hoped it was still true, even as his stupid heart kind of knew it was true because Q was genuine and principled and honorable and, and loyal to a fault and would never, ever, ever —

It had just been entirely too fucking much.

“I think you both have good points,” Eliot said, on autopilot. He took a big breath and spoke for the sake of speaking. “But as Rousseau once said, civilization is a hopeless race to discover remedies
for the evils it produces.”

“How did you—?” Julia had blinked. “Yeah, that’s right.”

Margo’s eyes went wide. “Are you reading philosophy? In your spare time?”

No. He hadn’t been. He’d been too busy trudging his slow way through drier-than-dried-shit magical government history books to go any deeper than the basics. But goddammit, Quentin loved that fucking quote. Eliot had heard it so many times, without even realizing it. He had felt those words vibrate against his cheek as he would rest his head on Quentin’s chest, listening to his heartbeat and his rambling, commingling like a symphony. All while gentle fingers twined in his curls and a smart mouth happily pontificated about the nature of ruling. Eliot had been quietly happier than he’d ever been in his whole fucking life, as the whole world went low-lit and beautiful and private between them.

It was inescapable.

He was inescapable.

God, even as Eliot was actively trying to move the conversation away from Quentin, to move his own focus—his obsessive, screaming focus—away from the fact that Quentin had come to him that morning to tell him that he had been hiding fundamental shit about himself the whole goddamn time they’d known each other and had kicked Eliot’s world on its side with barely a glance back, he had inadvertently—

His throat had closed over itself and he bent at the waist, grabbing onto his knees so his swimming vision and pounding head wouldn’t collapse him on the floor right there. Julia dashed forward toward him, but he waved her off.

“All I’m saying,” Eliot said, voice embarrassingly weak and hoarse, “is that we need to examine the root cause of this Bayler guy’s actions before we automatically condemn him. Even if we can’t ultimately change it or solve it, we need to face it, don’t we?”

“This isn’t a Civ class, Eliot,” Margo said, shaking her head. “We can’t treat him like a political experiment. He needs to die.”

“Ordered execution is a tool of oppressors,” Penny said, crossing his arms and looking away. “I’m sorry, Margo, but I agree with Julia. He deserves a trial.”

Penny would surely pay for that later, but Margo was too focused on Eliot to pay him any mind.

“You know I’m right,” Bambi had said, grabbing Eliot’s arm and forcing him to stand up to his full height. “Remember what I said—you are the strongest man I know. You wanna rule a kingdom? People are gonna die either way. Let’s make sure it’s not you.”

“There is strength in mercy,” Julia said, floating over to his other side. “There is strength in the arc of justice, there is strength in your inherent—”

“If you say ‘kindness,’” Margo had threatened, sliding a hard look at Julia, “I will fuck you up.”

But Julia had matched her fire-for-fire. “I’d really love to see you try.”

“You weren’t there,” Margo said with a growl. “You do not get to swoop in with last-ditch, shady heroics and then tell us how to—”
“Fuck off and with your bullshit on your own time,” Eliot said with a rush of lionhearted ferocity. Both women jolted, clearly shocked. He didn’t care. He sniffed hard and glared between them, the force of everything bursting outward without reprieve.

“Honey,” Margo started to say, but Eliot had shaken his head, completely done.

“This isn’t about us, Margo,” he said, gritting his teeth on the words. “This isn’t about interpersonal betrayals or who was where, or who said what. It sure as fuck isn’t about how I feel, or about whether we’ll ever be able to overcome this massive change in everything we thought we knew, everything we thought we were finally starting to be able to trust about Fillory and our place here. We are talking about a man’s life and that is not something we should take lightly. It’s not something we should decide based on—on—on our emotions, as much as, you know, we might want to strangle him with our own goddamn hands for everything he’s taken away from us, for everything he destroyed, for everything that he proved was never really ours anyway. For everything he represents. But we can’t do that, Margo, because we have to be better than that, okay? Jesus fucking Christ.”

Eliot spun away and all he could hear was the rush of his own pulse, the heaving pants of his own breath. His hands clenched at his sides and he wanted to scream until blood gurgled out of his mouth again. He wanted it to drown them all, to fill the castle with his rage. He needed a nap. He needed a drink.

So Eliot roughly turned around, in hot pursuit of wine—

Only to find three pairs of wide eyes staring at him over rounded mouths.

…Shit.

“Eliot,” Julia said, husky voice low. But she didn’t continue.

“Yeah, uh, El?” Margo had said slowly, hands going to her hips. “Honey, what’s going on? That speech took a weird turn.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Eliot saw Penny glance away, face lowered and uncomfortable.

(God, of course Penny already knew.)

“One life-altering crisis at a time,” Eliot had said on an exhale. Getting into the sordid details was a road from which he wouldn’t return, a road filled with all the whiskey and Dolly Parton in the multiverse. For now, Eliot had an actual job to do.

So he sighed, walking closer to the chalkboard. “I promise I'll reach a decision by the morning. But until then I need to sit with it on my own. The man’s life is my burden to bear.”

“Get over yourself, Ned Stark,” Bambi had said with an eye roll. But then she snapped her fingers and pointed at the chalkboard. “Ned Stark.”

“Fictional,” Julia had said, throwing her hands up. “Irrelevant.”

“Uh, more like way more applicable to Fillory than any of this,” Margo had countered, waving a vague hand at the board. “We’re in uncharted territory. George is the closest to a scholar we’ve got.”

“Except all the texts by literal Fillorian scholars, Margo!”
And they had kept arguing even as Eliot had slunk his way out of the room, unable to take the subject any more. After that, he spent the rest of the afternoon and evening alone, drinking in his chambers and thinking of all the ways he could either justify executing Bayler against a drab wall, a single gunshot to the back of the neck... or magnanimously sparing him, with a halo of glowing mercy around his beautiful curls, all for the praise and veneration of the grateful citizens.

High King Eliot the Kind indeed.

What a fucking joke.

He drank on his bed until he ran out of wine. He drank as he watched the sun set below the flat horizon, he drank as he watched the torches outside his window glow. He drank until he felt nothing. Nothing, that is, except the urgent need to face the problem head-on. He drank until his thoughts were lasered on the face that had tried to kill him, the green eyes that had peered up from the stab wound, the clenched teeth, the unadulterated fury as the weapon had twisted inside him. He drank until he was flying down the hallway, in nothing but floaty white pajamas and a shimmery red robe, torch in hand.

—And Eliot did not think about Quentin.

He did not think about Quentin.

He did not wonder where Quentin was. He did not feel disappointed that Quentin hadn’t even tried to join him in bed, hadn’t pleaded with him on his hands and knees, begging for his forgiveness and promising him the kinds of things that Eliot now knew he would never hear, except in his wildest and most tortured fantasies. To be fair, Quentin was only doing what Eliot had asked. He was being respectful. A good partner. Who could ask for anything more?

In the present, Eliot didn’t look at the guards posted in front of the locked cell. He merely nodded and they opened the doors for him, so he could stride past without a word. Perks of being a king. Courtesy was for commoners.

(He did not think about Quentin.)

The doors closed with a click and Eliot frowned, realizing that his torch was unnecessary. Several enchanted lanterns hung about the room, imbuing it with an ominous irradiance, flickering and casting looming shadows across the walls.

On the bed, the prisoner—Bayler—sighed, eyes glued to the ceiling, but clearly aware of the presence in the room.

“Have you calmed enough now,” he said, in a sing-song, as though to a child, “so that we may talk about this like sentient beings?”

Eliot gripped the door frame for balance.

Bayler thought Eliot was Q. That was how he spoke to Q. Which was—well, it was a lot. Almost too much. It was almost enough to make him turn around and order the execution without another thought.

But he wasn’t about to be weak in front of this asshole.

Not again.

“Well, last time,” Eliot said with a rough chuckle, “you didn’t exactly let me get a word in
Bayler stilled. He sat up slowly, his big green eyes sliding up Eliot’s frame in an unbroken line. When they made eye contact, Eliot was struck with the undeniable fact that no one, not in his entire life—not Logan Kinnear, not his teachers, not the man at the gas station, not even his dad—had ever looked at him with more hatred.

In the glow of the torch, Bayler snarled. “Leave.”

“You have fifteen minutes to save your life,” Eliot said, uncowed. “Tell me what Fillorians United wants for Fillory and how we could work together to achieve it.”

“Leave.”

“You’re in my castle,” Eliot reminded him. His voice was neither gentle nor harsh. He knew from asshole. He knew how to deal with assholes.

Bayler sucked in his lower lip with a popping sound. “Which is on my land.”

“Then help me be the king your land needs,” Eliot said, imploring without begging. “We have the same goal—a prosperous Fillory. Despite the nature of our initial meeting, I sincerely want to hear your grievances.”

“Gods,” Bayler spat. “Don’t tell me you’re as idealistic as he is.”

The bullet to the neck option shot ahead on the leaderboard. Eliot narrowed his eyes. “You now have ten minutes to save your life.”

“Let’s not play these games,” Bayler said with an eye roll that literally any other king would have immediately killed him for. “Executing me would be a political win for the FU Fighters. Your actual power is limited.”

“If the FU Fighters were in charge,” Eliot said, purposefully using their stupid shortened name in a small act of unanimity, “what would they do to fix Fillory?”

Missing nary a beat, Bayler perked up. “Have you spoken to your husband about me?”

Eliot grasped the torch with all his strength, so that he wouldn’t throw it at his smug fucking face. “I’m not discussing Quentin with you.”

The flame crackled in the warded air.

“That’s a yes,” Bayler said in a low tone. “So he must have told you what we want. Unless you were too caught on, ah, the other aspects of our history together.”

“I’m not discussing Quentin with you,” Eliot said again, throat scratchy and pained. “Clock is ticking.”

“If I don’t know the extent of your knowledge—”

“You want a Fillorian on the throne,” Eliot said, suspending the torch in the air with a thoughtless bit of telekinesis. “I sympathize in some regards but it’s not happening, so let’s go with Plan B for the good of everyone.”

Bayler regarded him for a long moment. “We’re making it happen.”
“Killing me opens the door for other Children of Earth,” Eliot argued. “It doesn’t change Ember’s decree. It makes King Penny the High King.”

“Then we kill him. And the next. And the next.”

“A waste of time,” Eliot said with a light shrug. “One that will indirectly kill Quentin too, if I recall the most common historical chain of events.”

Two could play the manipulation game. Eliot in particular could throw around the weight of his own enormous dick all damn day.

Bayler narrowed his eyes. “I would never allow harm to come to Quentin.”

“Same way this plan worked?”

“We’ll recover,” Bayler said, ticking his eyes to the ceiling. “Your survival is a minor setback.”

“His death would be one too,” Eliot said, stomach going tight and hot as he did. “To someone like you.”

Bayler bolted forward to stand, fast enough to make Eliot raise his hands to cast. He’d blast a motherfucker with bells on. But the wannabe assassin came to a standstill, inches from him, and held bottomless eye contact without flinching.

“You know nothing of who I am, Child of Earth,” Bayler whispered, though it felt like a shout. “But know this. I would sacrifice the lives of every native Fillorian for Quentin’s safety. I would rip out the dual hearts of the gods themselves. I would crush the universe to ash between my fingers to keep him out of danger, to ensure his long life. Everything I do, everything I will ever do, is for Quentin of Coldwater Cove. That will be true to my last breath.”

All at once, Eliot felt his indignation, his fury, his fight, crash to the ground. Everything clicked into place. His heart tumbled and his lips wobbled, resolve dying like the last cinder of a wildfire.

Bayler tilted his head like a threat. “Understood?”


“There is no impasse for us,” Bayler said. “Our goals are incompatible. We cannot and will not exist in the same realm. So you should leave me to rot or kill me, as those are your only two viable options. But we have already won, by every measure, in the end.”

“Those aren’t the only two options,” Eliot said, his voice far away from his body. “Queen Julia would like you to have a trial.”

Bayler squinted. “Wombats are despicable creatures.”

Eliot had no idea what that meant or how it was possibly relevant. Desperately, he wished for the voice in his ear, the one that quietly laughed through explanations of the odd intricacies of this still-foreign world. The one that made him feel safe and like the answers weren’t that hard to figure out, if he only listened to the gentle, stammering, teasing words, offered without pretense beyond their famous useffulness.

He closed his eyes against the sting along his eyelids and the crawl of his heart up his throat.
“But there’s a fourth option too,” Eliot said, shaking it away. He was a king. He was goddamn king. “The Children of Earth could help you reach Ember. We help you get your petition in front of him, once there is stability in the land. I won’t promise results, but I can promise an audience.”

Once again, he surprised himself with his own words. But a cool breeze of calm washed over his aching body as he said it. It was right. It was what he had to do. Because, yes, sure, Bayler was a murderous traitor to the current order of things. Margo wasn’t wrong that, in the current order of things, he should probably die for his crimes.

But Eliot knew—Eliot knew that the current order of things wasn’t always as it should be. Who the fuck was he to say that Bayler was wrong? That the FU Fighters were wrong? That the word of a drunk goat mattered more than the actual desires of the people?

Maybe Bayler had a point. Even if he shouldn’t have stuck the sharp edge of one in Eliot to make it, maybe he had been trying his best in a world that had allowed so few to thrive despite every magical advantage that should have been available. Maybe Bayler and Eliot could both learn and grow from this, and the rebel and the king could find common ground.

And as Bayler took in his words and processed them—handsome face shifting through various levels of stunned—Eliot also couldn’t help but think that someone who obviously loved Quentin so much just... couldn’t be all bad. No matter what had happened between the two of them that day, there was one truth Eliot knew.

Quentin was good.

He was so good, and cared about things so much, and lit up the world with his faith in magic and people. To love him was to absorb that, even if your worst impulses still remained intact. To love him was to be good, if only by his grace.

Bayler clasped his hands and stared him down. “In what way would that benefit you?”

“It wouldn’t,” Eliot said simply. “But it’s the right thing to do.”

“You are as idealistic as he is,” Bayler said, though this time he didn’t sound so disdainful. And Eliot wasn’t so selfless that his gut didn’t twist like a cold rag at the fraying edge of fondness creeping into his husband’s ex-lover’s tone. He was only human.

“No. I’m not,” Eliot said, turning on his High King voice. “I am doing this because it creates a stronger kingdom, it unites the people under us, and makes us look good in the meantime. It also has the added benefit of putting egg on your face, should we succeed.”

“Wait, what?” Bayler shook his head with a deep frown. “Are you—going to throw eggs at me?”

Tempting.

“But in the meantime, until we can reach Ember, whenever the hell that is, you will share with me your group’s concerns,” Eliot said, continuing without response. “Their complaints, their needs, their worries. I think I might need the unbridled honesty of a man who wants me dead if I’m ever going to be a great leader.”

He could hear Margo’s unbridled scream of you stupid motherfucker, what the fuck is wrong with you, shit-for-brains? already ringing in his ears, puncturing and feral. But Eliot was High King in his blood. Sometimes that meant following his instincts, even against his better judgement. Or even his better half’s better judgement.
“Quentin did tell me that you’re a good man,” Bayler said. “Or, at least, that you’re diplomatic. I see what he means by that now.”

He said it so easily, as if he and Q had discussed Eliot’s policies over a cup of tea. He knew that wasn’t the case—that Quentin had been furious, that Quentin cared that Eliot had been hurt—but it was hard to feel it in that moment. In some ways, it was almost worse than if Quentin had cried about his circumstances to Bayler, had spoken of nothing but pure hatred. Because then at least Eliot would know that it had all been false, all been in his head, rather than just…

Well, the parts he had already suspected were.

Eliot cleared his throat and kept looking at Bayler. He would give him nothing. “I am not promising anything beyond a sincere effort, to improve Fillory and to get your petition in front of Ember.”

“Such kindness for the man who tried to kill you,” Bayler said, hissing the epitaph like a snake. Eliot clenched his hand into a fist.

“I’m not doing it for you. I’m doing it for Fillory.”

Proving again that he wasn’t stupid, Bayler twisted his lips into another cocky smirk. “Will your fellow monarchs agree to this plan?”

“Doesn’t matter,” Eliot said. He swallowed his heart’s adoration and a deepest apology to Bambi. “I’m High King. I have final say.”

Bayler’s eyes went dimmer and less heated. Almost cautious. “Will Quentin agree to this plan?”

Everything turned to static white noise. Eliot forced a smile and another lie.

“That matters even less,” he said in a hoarse whisper and Bayler leaned back on his hands, silent. “You have my word that your life will be spared and your appeal will be heard. All you have to do now is answer my first question.”

The prisoner chuckled. “Remind me what that was.”

“If you were in charge,” Eliot said, low in the flames, “what would the FU Fighters do to fix Fillory?”

Bayler looked at him for another long moment, before settling into a slouched and lounging position on the bed. He grinned.

With that, it was done.

As Bayler spoke, eloquent and mostly thoughtful, if a touch bombastic, Eliot listened. He listened and he considered, even to the parts he didn’t agree with, even to the parts that cut deep to the decisions he had made with care. He didn’t feel bitter or angry facing the man who had tried to kill him not even two days before. Time was an illusion and kings didn’t hold grudges, especially not against the aggrieved.

Because the thing was—

Eliot knew this story.

Once upon a time, there was a beautiful maiden, pure of heart. She was born to an unforgiving
world, captured under a curse that made her life not her own. A whimsical fairy had promised her to a king that may never come, cast her under an ancient spell that bound her to the worst of the land she loved so well. She would remain duty-bound for all time, until a wicked king came to steal her away from her hearth, home, and helpless family.

Now, most maidens in her place would have drowned in their sorrow and calcified in bitter hopelessness. But this maiden was extraordinary. She was filled with such light that she flourished despite her circumstances. She was brave and kind, stubborn and stalwart. She found adventure in faraway lands, snubbing her nose at the fates and finding her way to joy, to spite them, to prove her own worth. She found stories and knowledge. She found the sea, and boats and waves bowed to her endlessly. She found magic, her truest calling.

And the maiden even found love.

It was star-crossed, but no less true. He was a handsome young village boy, maybe a bit hot-headed and brash. But he was valiant and loyal and deeply in love with her, as any man would be. He would fall to her knees and promise his eternal devotion, promise her that one day he would break her from the curse so that they may be together. He swore he would never stop fighting for her, not until his dying breath. Beyond, if he could.

But one day, the darkness arrived, and with it the king. He stormed into the maiden’s town, took one look at her, and deemed her appealing. It was all this callous man needed to know to rip her away from her hearth, her home, her helpless family. Away from her love.

At the cold and dreary castle, the king dressed her in fine things and treated her as a wife, with little care for anything but his own greed and selfishness. He was a handsome monarch with a rotten soul, and it was only because of the goodness of her heart, the strength of her spirit, and the purity of her valor that the maiden did not crumble to nothing under his cruel and empty rule.

But somewhere beyond the fortified stone walls, beyond the moats and rivers wide, the man she loved refused to give up on her. He refused to let this be the end. He would fight for her, come what may. True love conquers all, every time, and so they would happily ever after.

It was how it always went.

Which, sure, in real life, the details were a little different. Maybe it was a little less heteronormative. Maybe the evil king had some pathos, a few justifications that actually passed muster. Sure. He could concede that, if it pleased the court. But everyone was the hero of their own story, right? Even if it was false, even if it was a way to cope with shitty decisions and heartless fate. Spun bullshit didn’t matter in the end though. What mattered was that if one took the macro view—the objective view—everyone could see the truth, bright as a blinking neon sign.

It was always clear who the villain of the tale truly was.

So as Bayler finished speaking, Eliot smiled and thanked him, sincerely. He promised to be back in a few days time and shook his hand. Then he left and ordered the guards to lock the door twice behind him.

The man had still tried to kill him.

Eliot wouldn’t forget that. He wouldn’t be stupid or weak. He wouldn’t betray Margo that way. Or Penny, or Julia, or even Quentin, for that matter. But at the same time, Eliot would try to be better.

He would try to mitigate his damage, to bring the promised peace and prosperity to his inherited
land, to his ill-begotten people. He would be a good partner, even a good husband, to Quentin, as much as could, as much as he was able. He would work well with his fellow monarchs, he would bring them into the fold of seeking true justice even as it went against their personal interests. He would be clear-minded and he would be kind to all and he would try to be brave through every uncertainty. Come what may.

—But Eliot would also never kid himself with impossible things again.

Lesson learned.

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tbc.
Chapter Summary

"The nights are so unkind"

Chapter Notes

Hey folks! Few housekeeping items:

1) Warning here for brief suicidal ideation (check end notes for skippable lines) and an overall heavier level of depression/malaise for our boy Quentin here, especially to start.

2) DON’T PANIC (:p) but I have to take the next two weeks off from posting. Basically, the world changed drastically, and like a lot of people, my creativity took a major hit/a backseat to more pressing IRL concerns. I’m getting back in my usual writing groove, but I need a little time to catch up. Plus, this is an extra long chapter AND there’s no major cliffhanger, so I figured it was the best possible time to take a break. :) Thanks for bearing with me! I can’t wait to get the next parts out to you.

3) My beta Rizandace is a rock star always but *especially* for this chapter. Seriously. Phew. Also, if you aren’t reading Maybe This Time, what are you doooooing? It’s so good.

4) I love you all! Thank you so much for your support and kindness, I truly appreciate it more than I can say. Catching up on comment responses is something I really want to do, but in the meantime, please know I read every single one and tuck them close to my heart. Same with kudos, and Tumblr messages (I’m @hmgfanfic, by the way), and just knowing that people are reading and enjoying. Thank you. <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

One Month Later

*

Castle Whitespire
Southernhaven Province, Fillory

* 

A Monday of Waning Wintermoon
Quentin raked a hand through his unwashed hair. Then he scrubbed it right back down his face, without even the energy to sigh. His skin was delicate and every touch felt like a bruise, clotting blood rushing to the surface with a single graze. His shirtsleeves were loose, his eyelids spasmed without warning, and his body was worn down, muscles aching in their need for rest. But every night, sleep evaded him. Every night, his dry eyes peeled to the ceiling of his quarters, pulse racing and mind spinning.

It was basic depression shit, Quentin reminded himself, pressing the cool palm of his hand to his neck. It was important to call it by its name. To greet it as a companion, even when unwelcome. Knowing what it was had always helped him get through the worst of it.

—And was going through the worst of it.

He licked his lips and reoriented himself to his surroundings. He was walking down the same godsdamned corridor in Whitespire that he always walked down, holding the familiar weight of a portfolio under his arm. He was going through the motions, but he was functional. Functional was all he could ask of himself right now. It was all he could expect.

There was work to be done.

Quentin stepped inside the royal chambers after a brief nod to Soren. A ward wrapped tight around his body, confirming his identity with a sting he registered but didn’t really feel, not in any significant way. His feet were cold from the stone, even through his boots, and that was all he could bear to focus on.

The once mild Wintermoon had surprised them all, releasing a blizzarding fury of hailstorms and frozen lakes in the middle of its season. The Nameless Mountains were dusted white, unusual even in the historic chill. For weeks, the sun had refused to come out from behind dark clouds, stubborn and lazy. Like always, the darks days aggravated his mind with rancid thoughts and cast a gray pallor to his every waking moment. But it was all apropos. He had to admit that. Maybe he even appreciated it, in a fucked up way. He’d always appreciated thematic relevance.

When Quentin reached the dressing room, the air was undisturbed. Everything was neatly arranged, painstakingly organized like it had never been when Quentin—well, when Quentin was there more often. At the quiet reminder, he exhaled, eyelashes growing wet. But he sniffed it back, staying focused. Focused. If he stopped, even for a second, it would all fall apart, it would all break. Even more than it had already broken.

Around the bend, the only sound from Eliot’s bedroom was that of a Fillorian lute. It was played delicately, simple frets and strums over thin strings in perfect rhythm. Quentin’s skin hummed with the melody of a soft, sad, beautiful song he didn’t recognize, in a low and mournful key that he couldn’t name. Helpless, he closed his eyes, head resting against the stone wall. especially as Eliot began to sing quietly.
“Two drifters off to see the world,” his rich voice undulated, drawing trembling pools of heat under Quentin’s weak eyelids. “There’s such a lot of world to see.”

Heart thudding in time, Quentin peeked around the bend and his whole chest disappeared when he found him—his Eliot—relaxed beside his windowsill in a chair, legs draped over the arm and instrument resting low in his lap.

Of course, Eliot was stunning.

He wore shining blacks and etched silver brocade, elegant and regal underneath his messy curls, charcoal drawn eyes, and trimmed beard. Every discrete part was arranged precisely imprecisely, in something Eliot had recently deemed seasonal affective chic. Margo had countered that he actually looked more like Mumford’s most hungover son, which was a reference Quentin hadn’t understood, like, at all. But El had laughed because he understood it, clearly, and also because laughter was a normal thing humans did. People could laugh. People could enjoy things. People could even be happy, even if Quentin wasn’t.

He knew that.

Now though, on that gray morning, Eliot wasn’t laughing. He looked pensive, glassy eyes gazing out to the distant sky, his fingers deft and languid as they played the ancient instrument with both mastery and carelessness. Plucking a final strum, Eliot closed his eyes and pressed his hands along the strings. And Quentin almost turned around, to let him have more time. He didn’t want to disturb him. He never did.

But there was work to be done.

“Uh,” Quentin tried to say as softly as he could. Eliot blinked his eyes back open, but didn’t move. “Hey, sorry, I didn’t mean to startle you.”

A thin smile lifted on Eliot’s lips. “Nonsense, I knew you were there.”

Swallowing tightly and digging his fingernails into his palm, Quentin stepped forward. He tucked the portfolio tighter against his body, like a security blanket. It helped.

“You’re, uh, getting really good,” Quentin said, nodding to the lute. Eliot nodded back in acknowledgment, turning the instrument over in his hands in a clinical examination.

“It’s a bitch to learn,” Eliot said with a light, disaffected sigh. “I could play the mandolin on Earth, but it definitely didn’t translate.”

“Well, yeah, um,” Quentin said with a small catch in his voice. He coughed it away. “That’s because magical instruments are different from non-magical instruments. Usually.”

Two months earlier, if Quentin had said those exact same words in the exact same context, Eliot would have rolled over in the chair to rest his chin on his forearms, holding his tongue between his teeth. Oh, is that so?—his voice would have been condescending, but a bright smile would have given his fondness away—Enlighten me, darling.

And Quentin would have blushed and blown his hair out of his face with a reluctantly amused yeah, yeah, shut up, and Eliot would have stalked over, like the cat about to delight in its hard won cream. He would have crowed Quentin against the wall, hands sliding down his sides, mouth ducking low against his throat. His teasing lips would have pinned him to the spot—kissing him softly and whispering gentle, clever words—all while the world went hazy under the undeniable thrum between them.
Quentin could feel the ghost of it all over his skin.

But across from him, in the real world, Eliot wasn’t looking at him. In the real world, he hadn’t touched him in weeks. For good reason.

“Yes, a Fillorian lute is certainly different from anything else,” Eliot finally said, a cool poison of politeness. Quentin’s chest constricted, claws sinking deep into the flesh of his lungs. He nodded quickly, too quickly, watery eyes darting around in an embarrassing show of his uncontained bullshit.

But Eliot must not have noticed. When their eyes met, his were as affable and warm as ever. “Anyway, don’t ask me how I found out, but apparently, feeding it confectioner’s sugar goes a long way for cooperation.”

When Eliot patted the lute’s belly with a waggle of his brows, Quentin let out a puff of air from his nostrils. It was the closest to a laugh he could manage. But Eliot was trying to be friendly. He always tried to be friendly, even after everything.

Quentin could offer the same back.

“I’ve also heard their favorite incentive is a beautiful song,” he said, shuffling his feet. “So it’s, uh, no surprise you’re golden.”

Eliot’s eyes went from affable to astonished. He swallowed slowly, lips spasming up and down at the edges. He cleared his throat and stood, gliding across the room to his bed (their bed their bed their bed) and placing the instrument down. He stared at it for another moment before nodding, face lifting congenial toward Quentin once again.

“Yes, well, I suppose we have Audrey to thank for that,” he said with a melodic lilt to his tone, breezy and light. He smoothed out the duvet as he spoke. “Even the crankiest lute wouldn’t be able to resist.”

Quentin didn’t recognize that name.

“Oh, uh, is that a friend of yours or something? Did she, like,” he scratched at his forehead, shifting his weight, “help you write that song?”

Eliot froze. His hand gripped the fabric, bunching under his ringless knuckles. Margo had declared it too dangerous to replace his burned collection for fear that the sacrifice wouldn’t take long term. So Eliot went without, fingers always naked. No more moonstone, no more emeralds and brass. No chance for Quentin to write a little spell for him, like they had once talked about, a lifetime ago. No more silver wedding ring. Now only Quentin wore one.

...Maybe that was also apropos.

“No,” Eliot said. He smiled at Quentin again, softer and sadder. “No, I didn’t write it. Moon River is a famous Earth song.”

Abruptly, Quentin felt stupid, trapped under a spotlight of his own idiocy. His throat stuck together, tacky and dense, and trembled with the threat of irrational tears. “Oh,” he said, licking his lips. “Yeah, that’s—um. That’s good to know.”

Eliot exhaled. His gaze pierced through the invisible veil between them, beseeching and almost concerned. Quentin wanted to look away, to preserve and protect. But ever a fool, a fool, a fool, he couldn’t. His time with Eliot was so rare these days. They saw each other all the time, but they
never saw each other anymore. Eliot never saw Quentin. He looked past him, if he looked at all.

Quentin didn’t blame him. Eliot hadn’t broken his heart; he had broken his own godsdamned heart. He had fucked up everything, he had broken everything between them, like he had always broken everything in his life. He had no right to burden Eliot with any of it.

But right now, Eliot was looking at him. He would take what he could get.

“What do you need, Quentin?” Eliot asked gently, voice low and soft. Pitying. “I’m expecting Tick in a minute here.”

Two months ago, Quentin would have snorted and offered his condolences. Two months ago, he would have already known, because they would have already been talking petty shit about Tick for hours. Quentin would have spent the morning in their room—reading, working, and pretending to be annoyed as Eliot shamelessly flirted with him. Quentin would have held firm to the flimsy act of disinterest, at least until Eliot started dropping trailing kisses behind the shell of his ear and stroking him from behind, slow to start, until Quentin gave in and pushed the book away to spin into his arms. They would have fucked against the desk, and then tangled on the bed, naked limbs wrapped around each other amidst dopey smiles. Eliot would have been smugly victorious and Quentin blissed out, even in defeat.

But it wasn’t two months ago. It was now.

“Uh, I just wanted to drop off this policy proposal. It’s the one I’ve been—it’s the one I told you I’d get to you awhile ago.” Before.

Eliot clenched his jaw. “Fucked off back to Earth?”

That was the sore subject to end all sore subjects. Her departure had been swift and without warning, like a vacuum storm above the hills. Two weeks earlier, Julia had left without a word, except a bunny that said, MAGIC EMERGENCY SORRY EL. No one had heard from her since. Obviously, in the midst of the worst possible timing, everyone was furious. All agreed that it was really shitty of her. Because it was.

(Quentin hoped she was okay.)

“Yeah, since then,” Quentin said, biting the inside of his cheek. He bit too hard and blood pooled across his molars. Great. “Anyway, I tried approaching Penny about it, but, uh, you know.”

Penny had told him to fuck off.

“Say no more,” Eliot said, pulling his shoulders back and holding out an expectant hand. “What’s it in regards to again?”

Quentin handed over the portfolio. “Public education.”

“Of course,” Eliot said, flipping his thumb across the thick stack of pages. He almost smirked. “This is pretty fucking long.”

“Sorry,” Quentin said, stuffing his hands in his pockets. “It has to cover a lot of ground.”

Eliot lifted his brows, focused on Quentin’s tiny handwritten print on the first page. “Evidently every square.”

Quentin felt a blush creep across his cheeks, unsteady. He didn’t know if Eliot was teasing or
“So the thing is, right now, the Fillorian national curriculum is about as useless as—” Quentin started to clarify, but he lost his point of comparison. He snapped his fingers. “Shit, what was the name of the school in that Harry Potter series again? Smogburps? Hogwarts? Something like that?”

“Smogburps,” Eliot said, not looking up.

“Right, so our lessons are about as useless as how all the magical kids who go to Smogburps—” Quentin continued and Eliot must have found something on the page funny, smiling into the print “—didn’t get basic, uh, maths or reading or world history.”

“I have yet to figure out a discernible pattern in what your memory clings to and what it doesn’t,” Eliot chuckled. “It’s an intricate puzzle.”

Eliot still wasn’t looking at him. But at his soft tone, the prickling pink on Quentin’s face went from uncertain heat to pleasant warmth. He bit his lip, taking an unusually bold step closer, shifting his body toward his.

“I always analyze the structure of education within literary worlds,” Quentin said, keeping his face straight. “It’s the single most important way to understand character motivation.”

Eliot snorted and his eyes twinkled up, baldly and sincerely fond. “Sure.”

Quentin’s heart fluttered, a little beat of hopeful paddles against the relentless tide of despair. He hadn’t gotten a look like *that* from Eliot since before. He was desperate to keep it.

“So yeah, uh, similar to Smogburps, all of Fillory’s mandatory classes are obscure animal languages and ancient superstitions,” Quentin explained, voice softening out of teasing and into information. “This draft outlines a way to revamp it all from start to finish, without stepping on the villages’ toes. Which is important for, like, sensitivity reasons. The change will upset them, even if it’s right.”

Eliot’s eyes stayed on him, going from warm to fully shining. Quentin usually preferred to brute force what was objectively right in the long run, even if it pissed off small-minded assholes in the present. But he was trying, especially with things that mattered to Eliot. Diplomacy mattered to Eliot.

So.

“I put some notes in the back so you don’t have to read it all,” Quentin said, tilting his head and pointing forward. “But it should be Pickwick proof. He won’t be able to give you shit about it.”

“Trust me, he’ll find a way,” Eliot said, closing the portfolio with a crack. He looked away from Quentin and the world went dark again. “Thank you, I’ll try to work on it later.”

“Yeah, of course,” Quentin said, smile tight and painful. “No rush, obviously. Just wanted you to have it for when you—uh, get a chance.”

Eliot sighed and placed the portfolio down. He walked over to the stone table with his perfectly arranged wine and goblets, pouring himself a large glass. Politely, he held one up in silent question and Quentin shook his head, declining. Eliot gulped his down in a single take, before pouring another cup.

“Believe me, it sounds much more enticing than the latest round of shit,” Eliot said. “The Floater
Queen has been circling like a goddamn vulture, trying to get Margo to marry her son. Our favorite Destroyer has received it as well as you’d think.”

Quentin frowned. “Margo has a proposal from Micah?”

He had met Micah once or twice through Ess, years ago. Micah visited Earth on behalf of his strange mother—who was obsessed with the Eiffel Tower, for some reason—and they would help him find books in the city about it. It had always been nice to see another native of his home planet, even during the height of his Earthly thrall. And it didn’t hurt that the Floater heir was tall, respectful, quiet. Good looking. Like with most people who bothered to treat Quentin with basic consideration, Quentin had had a bit of a crush. But only at first: eventually, it became clear that while Micah was handsome and kind, he was also too— nice .

Cardboard nice.
Boring nice.

“You know him?” Eliot asked, taking another sip. Quentin nodded, though he opted out of saying any of that, for several, layered, obvious reasons. “Margo presumes he’s a rapey Neanderthal.”

“Uh, no, I mean, he’s nice enough,” Quentin said with a dry swallow, rocking back and forth on his heels. “Weird family. But mostly I can’t see what benefit the match would actually bring, especially to Fillory.”

“There’s zero benefit,” Eliot said, shaking his head as he drank. “But word about Ilario’s little stunt has reached outside our borders and she thinks the marriage would create a military advantage against Loria in our time of instability.”

“That’s bullshit,” Quentin said automatically. “And a shrouded threat.”

“Indeed,” Eliot said, plastering his free hand to his forehead. “But Penny made the mistake of arguing that to Margo, who took his concern as possessive, and now she’s pretending to consider it because she’s fucking contrarian on principle.”

Quentin rolled his eyes. “Wow, and I’m sure Penny is taking that well.”

Eliot let out a harsh laugh, closing his eyes with a sardonic grit of his teeth. “At the moment, they are still loudly fucking but will otherwise only speak to each other via goading servant messages. It’s deeply uncomfortable for everyone.”

Quentin winced and blew air out the side of his mouth. It sounded shitty. And he was more than a little pissed at both Penny and Margo for not keeping it together now, of all times, if only for Eliot’s sake. Julia was gone. Everything was falling apart. It had still only been a month since—since Eliot had almost died. Everyone should have just kept their fucking shit together.

Not that Quentin was one to talk.

But at least he was actively trying not to make any of his shit Eliot’s shit. He could have come crawling to him every single night with sobs and snivels, with frantic apologies and delirious promises. But Quentin didn’t do that. He didn’t do that because Eliot had been extremely clear about what he needed from Quentin. And it was space. Lots and lots and lots of space. So much space.

Nothing but space.
Eliot gingerly placed his empty goblet back on the table. “Though I’m sure Fen filled you in on all that.”

Quentin snapped back to the conversation at hand, just in time for his stomach to plunge at the name of his heart-cousin. Fuck.

Fuck.

Yeah, suffice it to say, Fen hadn’t filled Quentin in on that. She hadn’t filled him in on anything. At all. Because when shit rained upon the land, it came in deluges.

“Oh, no, she—Fen and I,” Quentin swallowed, voice trembling. “We’re not really, um, exactly on speaking terms right now. At all. Er, yet.”

Eliot’s brow furrowed. “Oh. Gotcha.”

So, okay, that wasn’t totally accurate. Fen and Quentin actually interacted almost every day. It was strained and awkward, sure, but it wasn’t something they could actually avoid, much as they may have wanted to.

—Because Fen was working for Margo.

Well, in a manner of speaking.

After everything with the FU Fighters had come to fullest light, the High Queen declared that Fen needed to prove her mettle and loyalty by becoming what Margo termed her *bitch boy*—or, essentially, her personal assistant. Fen had happily, breathlessly agreed, especially in lieu of being imprisoned or worse.

“Keep your friends close and your enemies closer,” was the queen’s only explanation for her choice, which made Fen frown every time. Fen had never been anyone’s enemy in her life. She was pathologically obsessed with being everyone’s friend and Margo was her greatest challenge yet.

So Fen threw herself into the work with gusto, determined to turn the High Queen’s frown upside down by being the best godsdamned bitch boy who had ever refolded paper napkins into origami sloths. She worked herself down to the bone every day, taking on every tiny demeaning project with such a glow of pride that it almost made Quentin miss her.

Almost.

“It’s not that I won’t work with her,” Quentin quickly clarified as Eliot continued to frown at him. “Like, if she’s speaking on behalf of Margo, obviously, I’ll talk to her. Of course. For as long as needed.”

“I’m not worried about that, Q,” Eliot said. Fuck, he had never stopped calling him Q and Quentin had never stopped grabbing onto it every time with his entire stupid heart. “I just… I didn’t realize you two were still at odds.”

Eliot sounded pained and even a little regretful. It cut Quentin down to the quick. He sniffed and turned his face to the dark gathering clouds outside the window.

“Fen did a shitty thing,” Quentin said, voice flat and remote. “That doesn’t just go away. You don’t get to expect immediate forgiveness and normalcy after doing a—a—a really shitty thing. That’s not how it works. Sometimes you have to *suffer for it* because that’s what you deserve.”
“Quentin,” Eliot said sharply.

And Quentin was so frayed, so broken, that he couldn’t help but breathe out a choked, “Gods, what, Eliot?”

Their eyes met and Eliot’s face swam in his blurred vision, quivering like a mirage. He was a phantasma before him, unreachable and dim. But the look in his eyes burned Quentin where he stood, intense and sad and angry and **incinerating**.

“If you have something you want to talk to me about,” Eliot said slowly, “all you have to do is—”

Quentin laughed.

He didn’t mean to laugh. But he definitely laughed and all his tears fell as he did and he was an **asshole**. His anger and his sorrow knew no boundaries, toxically entwined. The hysterical sound thudded like a heavy stone between them as it dissipated past his lips.

Predictably, Eliot clicked his teeth shut, flew his mask up, and turned away. And his hand reached back for his goblet. Of course.

“No, uh, keep going,” Quentin said, his tongue snapping. “I’m really curious how you were gonna finish that sentence.”

Eliot shot a smile back. “I’m not doing this right now.”

“Of course you’re not.”

“Was there something else you needed?” Eliot asked, pouring his wine. “Because I told you I have another meeting.”

His voice and hands were steady. Eliot was always steady. He was the strong thriving oak to Quentin’s brittle dead twig.

“No, I’m good,” Quentin said, the words like ash in his mouth. “I’ll be sure to make an appointment next time, Your Majesty.”

(Quentin was an asshole.)

Eliot closed his eyes, fingers gripping around the brass of his cup. “Jesus fucking Christ, Q, are you kidding me? You know that is not what I—

Quentin didn’t know shit. But it didn’t matter anyway, because Eliot cut himself off as the door slammed closed in the background. Soren entered the room, with Tick and Heloise close behind.

The interruption was probably for the best.

“Your Grace,” Soren said, bowing swiftly. “I present High Councilman Tick Pickwick of the Northern Marsh Pickwicks, Esteemed Head of the High Council, and Councilwoman Heloise Ladateese of the Beggar’s Rest Ladateeses, Secretary of War.”

—Tick made him do that every time.

Tick laughed, hand to his heart. “Soren, as always, your formality is entirely unnecessary.”

Eliot rolled a muscle in his jaw as he dragged his gaze over, his High King visage clicking into place. “Let’s make this fast, Tick.” Then he smiled, more genuinely. “Hello Heloise.”
“Your Majesty,” Heloise said with a slight incline of her head. “We’ll be brief.”

But Tick froze, bug eyes stuck on Quentin like he had spotted a Bear in a Horse tavern.

“Lord Quentin,” he said, in his most saccharine and vicious tone. “I was unaware that you would be joining us. What a delight.”

Heloise twisted her lips. “I suppose a common opinion on this matter could prove valuable. If His Majesty thinks so.”

Quentin felt like someone had cut out his stomach and replaced it with a paper bag.

“Don’t worry, I’m not staying,” he said tersely, pushing his hair back. “I was just dropping something off. Have a good meeting.”

Eliot kept looking at his drink as Quentin turned to leave, palms tingling and neck burning with some potent combination of mortification and rage and an anguish so deep it transcended itself into a numb chill. Every time he was around Eliot, the fragile strings holding him up weakened and strained under the power of his forceful emotions. He wasn’t sure how long he could keep it up, before he broke into a pile of boneless wood, that worthless marionette on the ground.

“Are you two quarreling?” Heloise asked, eyes narrowing between them as Quentin continued toward the door. “I must say, this seems a disrespectful manner for a consort to take his leave.”

*Umber’s motherfucking crusted scrotum*. Quentin popped his eyes open wide, trying his best to project a calm confusion rather than the fury building at the pit of his stomach. Heloise had always been a stickler for tradition. She was a little much about it sometimes, but he had never hated her for it before.

He sure did now.

Quentin scratched at his scalp so hard that strands of hair came out with his fingernails. He inhaled and exhaled, forcing a polite smile to the unfeeling eyes on him as he walked over to Eliot. The king, his husband, didn’t look up, still studying the surface of his wine, though he knew what was coming. Quentin took a deep breath and tilted his head, kissing Eliot lightly on the mouth.

They did it almost every day. Didn’t make it easier.

Because every time, Quentin hoped that Eliot would linger close before their lips parted. He hoped that when he opened his eyes to look at El, his would still be closed with his lips parted and eyelashes fluttering. Every time, he hoped Eliot would grip his hip a little too tight, would let out a heavy sigh as they parted, would cling to Quentin and press their foreheads together, with all the desperation Quentin constantly, constantly felt, every moment he was away from Eliot, away from what they had been building together.

But every time, in actuality, Eliot would only briefly lean in. A quick brush of lips without pressure. Then he would turn back to the task at hand, Quentin thoroughly dismissed. Eliot was a consummate professional. It was perfunctory. This time was no different. No reason to be different.

—Except this time Quentin was pissed.

So just this once, Quentin pushed up on his toes. He pressed a firm kiss to Eliot’s lips, hand curling around the point of his jaw. It burned like a flare, sparks racing down his arms as their lips melded together, soft and real and warm. Quentin only lingered for a moment, so Eliot would feel it, so he’d be forced to feel what they had lost, what Quentin regretted, what Quentin still wanted even if
it was too late. He didn’t expect anything back, even in his anger. He just needed Eliot to know.

But as Quentin stepped back onto his heels, swallowing down his pride and his sorrow, Eliot let out a stuttering breath and for the shortest, most miraculous of moments—

His lips chased after Quentin.

Eliot caught himself, of course. His Adam’s apple bobbed once and then his eyes slowly opened, maybe dimmed, but otherwise unaffected. He stared down at Quentin for a moment, with nothing more than an accusing tilt of his head.

Guilt crashed on Quentin’s shoulders, slumping them to the floor. He was an asshole. He had no right to push anything, even for a moment, especially not to prove a point. Quentin was the one who had fucked up. He was the fuck up.

“Sorry,” Quentin said under his breath, before clearing his throat. He bowed once to Eliot and spoke so all could hear. “I hope you have a fruitful meeting, Your Majesty. Be well.”

Eliot nodded, eyes focused elsewhere, and then turned his lifted brows to Tick and Heloise, to his actual responsibilities. He didn’t say anything else to Quentin.

Because there was nothing to say.

______________________________________________________________

Quentin hid from scrutiny by retreating to his favorite nook of the castle. Again.

It had only been one week since the attack but it felt like a century. Escape may have been his worst vice, but now wasn’t the time to worry about that. Instead, he mindlessly ran back to the place he found when he had first arrived at Whitespire, when panic attacks were around every unknown corner, when overwhelming dread calcified in courtly smiles.

There was a trick door in the north tower, one that pushed in and then up, leading to a spiral staircase and the spire attic. It was a slanted room with wooden framing and small windows that let in streams of natural light. There was no magic there. Just quiet.

Quentin had a love-hate relationship with quiet. Sometimes it amplified, sometimes it calmed. The white noise of the sea—the low whoosh of the tide, the crashing of waves upon the deck, the creak of a boat’s near-constant complaints—had always been the truest source of relief for him. But without that, the attic was fine.

It was quiet, but the whir of the spires vibrated the wood. It was quiet, but the air was soft and dusty, like old books and sunlight. It was quiet, but Quentin could curl into a ball in the corner. He could be small. At his lowest, all he wanted was to be small. It wasn’t about meekness or even about wanting to disappear. It was about how he took up space, how he related to space. There was comfort in smallness.

So Quentin had made his way up the stairs in a blind daze, heart rattling his bones. Not because anything had happened. It had been a normal day at Whitespire. At least, as normal as a week following Eliot almost dying from an assassination attempt by his former best friend and lover could possibly be. As normal as a week where Eliot would barely talk to him and never look at him could possibly be. As normal as Julia looking at him differently could possibly be. As normal as a week where Fen’s notes and letters had stopped could possibly be. As normal as a week where Penny was being nice because he felt bad for him could possibly be.
That kind of normal.

Quentin fell to the floor in a heap of limbs. When his ass hit the ground, a shimmering cloud of dust kicked up into the cold light. It tickled his nose, making him sniff, and he buried his face against his knobby knees. He stayed like that for some unknowable amount of time, maybe a few hours, just breathing into the fabric of his pants and trying to keep from completely falling apart in the harsh new reality he had wrought.

When the floorboards creaked with quick and confident footsteps, Quentin didn’t even startle. That was how bad shit was. His body had no flight response, no fight. It just accepted its doom with all the calm of an undisturbed pond on a sunny day.

Lace fluttered out in the patterned sunlight and a warm weight dropped beside him. Two small hands arranged the fabric precisely and there was a loud throat clear, repeated until he finally looked up. Quentin acquiesced with a sigh. He didn’t bother asking how she had found him.

She never suffered stupid questions from stupid men.

“We haven’t chatted in a hot minute,” Margo said without any other greeting. Her eyes narrowed at him, though not necessarily unkindly. “Gotta say, it kinda feels like you’re avoiding me.”

Quentin picked at a loose thread on his sleeve. “I figured you wouldn’t want to see me.”

“Why the fuck would you figure that?”

Quentin almost laughed. “Uh. I mean,” he said, holding out his hands and letting them fall lamely to the ground. He thrust his head back against the wall, slamming his skull hard enough to see little birds fly.

But Margo let out an actual laugh, melodious and crystal clear. “Hm, yeah. Well, let she who has not thrice fucked a successful assassin in a West Hollywood club bathroom cast the first stone.”

“Did he try to kill Eliot?” Quentin flashed his eyes up, not in the mood for her games. “Because otherwise, I don’t see how it’s comparable.”

“No, she didn’t,” Margo said, nudging him, as though the issue at hand was the underrepresentation of female hit men. Hit women. “But hey, do you know what the flip side is to being an unforgiving bitch?”

Quentin wanted to say something snappish and cutting. But he didn’t have the energy. Besides, Margo was being inexplicably nice to him. There was no reason to look that particular pig in the rear butthole and destroy it in a word. So he just lifted his brow in a silent go on, peering up at the ceiling through his lashes. The dust was still hanging in the air above them, a swirl of fool’s gold.

Margo pressed her hand to his forearm, leaning in with a whispered secret. “It’s as hard to lose my favor as it is to gain it.”

Quentin felt his mouth twitch. He hadn’t smiled in awhile, so the muscles strained and popped under the spasm. He rubbed his hand down his jaw, licking his lips, as he turned to look at Margo with scrutinizing eyes. “Uh, really? ‘Cause you seem pretty quick to turn on people.”

Margo smirked, jostling his arm with her shoulder. “Only the ones who haven’t earned it.”

Quentin finally laughed, for real. But it was more like a gag, a biting and regurgitative sound. It echoed harshly in the suffocating space. “Right, yeah, sure, like I have?”
At that, Margo sat up, towering the way she always did, even inches below him.

“I’ve known you for almost two years, Q. I’ve seen your loyalty,” she said, letting out a slow breath. “And I know you would have died for him that night. Do you have any idea how far that goes with me?”

Her own big doe eyes fluttered, holding an overwhelming and undefined emotion back with all her formidable strength. The lines on her face were tinged with concern and a gentleness Quentin couldn’t understand. He understood even less when she reached over and placed her hand atop his.

“What your shitty ex did has no bearing on who you are, Q,” Margo said quietly, not looking at him. He sniffed and shook his head, hair falling over his eyes.

“Maybe not,” Quentin said, voice catching on itself. “But I—I should have told you all about his involvement, about my connection to him, about—”

About all of it. Guilt nipped at his skin, threatening to tear him to shreds. But he pushed it away. He had made his decision. He had to keep moving forward.

“Yeah, you fucked the fuck up,” Margo said, though she gave him a wry smile as she did. “He’s not wrong to be so pissed.”

Quentin closed his eyes. “I know.”

“What the hell were you thinking?” Margo asked, a commanding bite in her voice. But when Quentin looked at her, he also saw that omnipresent curiosity in her eyes, the one that made him trust her from the start. She was really asking.

“That I had ended it and that it would be the end of it,” Quentin said, scratching the surface of a shitstorm. He swallowed knives down his throat. “And that I never, ever thought he would be so—”

Margo snorted. “Obsessed with you?”

“Hateful,” Quentin said in a whisper, opening his eyes to the cruel light.

The sun had shifted, hiding under a cloud, and the room descended into blue-gray. He stared at his hand, still entwined with Margo’s, and there was nothing, until he heard a soft intake of breath.

“Is it fucking you up?” Margo spoke delicately, with a cautious cadence he had never heard before. When he looked at her in surprise, her eyes had a sheen over them and she shrugged. “It would fuck me up.”

Quentin hadn’t thought about himself once since any of this had happened. His spine lit on fire all at once, painful and disintegrating, and he choked out a shaky breath. “Um, I’m managing.”

Thinking about the man in the dungeon didn’t lead anywhere good, especially after Eliot announced that he was indeed going to give him a trial. On the one hand, Quentin couldn’t say that he wanted the man in the dungeon dead, exactly. But on the other, every second that the man in the dungeon was at Whitespire was a blight on his already broken spirit. It was the shadow on his back, the spiked and heavy shoe dangling over his head. It was the jittering anxiety that woke him at night, the cold sweat that beaded down his skin.

Quentin couldn’t trust that Bayler wouldn’t figure out another way. And if that man ever came
near Eliot again, Quentin wasn’t sure what he would do.

Nothing good.

He couldn’t say that to Margo though. She and Eliot had barely just made up over his decision, over the way he had firmly overruled her vehement concerns. Picking at a tender new scab was no way to get back in some form of Eliot’s good graces.

“Well, if you ever need to talk—” Margo said, before furrowing her brow and frowning. “Honestly, you should probably hope Julia’s around. Feelings aren’t my rice bowl.”

That shocked Quentin enough to pull out a good natured snort. “Thanks.”

Margo grinned. “But I’ll get you drunk as shit.”

Quentin rocked his head back against the wall again and Margo rested hers on his shoulder. He briefly worried that it was a betrayal, that shared warmth between them was a denial of Eliot's pain, an undermining of the undeniable hurt Quentin had caused with his deceptive omissions.

But that was stupid.

Margo may have been angry at Eliot, even privately hurt by his decisions. But there was nothing Eliot could do that would make Margo seek to wound him, no matter what brusque jabs she threw out at her angriest. Hell, Quentin even wondered if Eliot had wanted Margo to talk to him, maybe had asked her to. Maybe he had nudged her to check on him, in a way Eliot wouldn’t. Couldn’t. Wishful thinking, but too strong to ignore. He almost wanted to ask her, but he wasn’t sure if either answer would make him feel any better.

Not that he deserved to feel any better.

“You know, if Eliot and I were just, like, friends or I was just his advisor or whatever, and he told me this whole situation?” Quentin said aloud, knowing it was abrupt but needing to get it out. He barked a laugh. “Yeah, I wouldn’t have even blinked before telling him to cut his losses.”

He wasn’t sure if that was true. Quentin could be forgiving to a fault, always keeping the door open, always keeping one foot back, on the off-chance that new information—new nuance—could come to light. Case in fucking point: everything currently happening. But luckily, Margo was keen. She nodded, lips pressed together, as she considered the message Quentin was actually trying to convey.

“Not unreasonable,” she said, and Quentin’s stomach dropped. Then she cuddled in closer to him. “But while I’m not just Eliot’s anything, for the record, I actually told him to get his head out of his ass and talk to you.”

What was left of Quentin’s unsteady heart slammed hard against his ribcage, a leaping jump out of his body. “Bambi would be so mad that I’m doing this now,” Eliot said. “She’d say it’s the dumbest way to go about it. That it wasn’t her point.” Somehow, Quentin had almost forgotten that he and Eliot had almost—that it sure as fuck seemed like Eliot was going to—oh gods, oh gods. Shit. He couldn’t let himself think about that, not if he wanted to be able to function. He was barely functioning as it was and if he remembered that he had almost had everything he wanted then he would—

It didn’t matter.

Especially because that wasn’t what Margo was referencing now. Quentin swallowed and
refocused, turning his eyes back to Margo. He gave her a soft smile, something like gratitude. It still hurt his mouth, but less than before. He couldn’t remember when Margo’s presence had begun to calm his nerves instead of setting them on anxious fire. But he was glad for the change.

Margo shook her head. “I told him that he needs to have a calm conversation with you, now that it’s not so fucking raw. But El is—”

Quentin’s dumb heart constricted, anguish in its fondness. “Stubborn.”

“Skittish,” Margo corrected with a sad smile. Her big eyes reached deep into his. “You have to give him some time, okay?”

“Not like I have any other choice,” Quentin spat out bitterly. “’Til death do us part.”

Margo jolted off him with a glare he felt down to his toes. “Do you actually think saying shit like that helps?”

He was the godsdamned worst.

His jaw trembled and he shook his head, darting his eyes away from her. He wanted to die. Gods, sometimes he just wanted to die. It would be so much easier. It would be better. He knew he shouldn’t think like that, whatever that meant. But it wasn’t a thought so much as a feeling. A wish for unburdening, for peace. Was that really so fucking wrong? Who could fucking blame him? He was the most useless person alive. What was the fucking point?

Quentin closed his eyes.

He really shouldn’t think like that.

“No,” he sniffed, still shaking his head. “No, I know it doesn’t help. I’m just—”

“Do you love Eliot?”

Quentin’s lungs collapsed. He hiccupped, eyes flying wide open as he looked at Margo, who stared straight ahead.

“Chill out, I’m not asking if you’re in love with Eliot,” she snapped. “I don’t care.”

His hands trembled. “Then I don’t—”

“Simple question, Quentin,” Margo said with an audible swallow, contrasting her stern voice. “Do you love Eliot?”

Everything went quiet. Tension melted out of his muscles and he could breathe, air easily filling his lungs and floating his spirit up from the depths. Because for once in his worthless life—

Quentin had a simple answer.

“Yes,” he said, voice strong and steady. “Always.”

The sunlight peeked a glint through the window, shining and brilliant, right as Margo graced him with one of her rarest smiles. She kissed his cheek, speaking into his skin. “Then it’s gonna be okay.”

Her lips were soft and her hair smelled like flowers. She nuzzled the cool tip of her nose into his cheek, a gentle nudge, and without warning, Quentin broke down sobbing.
His shoulders jumped and bounced as hot tears rushed down his cheeks, and his hollow stomach folded over. He buried his face in his hands, to hide its twisted and ugly anguish, to muffle his loud howls. He had already broken down in front of Penny, which had been bad enough. But shit, crying in front of Margo? Over Eliot? Fuck. Fucking godsdammit, he hated himself.

“T’m sorry,” Quentin gasped out, his nerves vibrating. “I’m sorry, you can go. This isn’t—this isn’t your problem, my bullshit is not your problem. You can just let me be a worthless piece of shit on my own, okay?”

“Are you kidding?” Margo murmured, stroking his hair back. “He’d kill me.”

Quentin sobbed so hard he laughed. “He doesn’t care.”

“Oh, honey. Don’t be stupid.” Margo wrapped her arms around his shoulders, pulling him to her collarbone. He went too easily. “Cry it out. Then dust it off and be a member of society, okay?”

Quentin shuddered his agreement, tears falling faster and more suffocating. Long fingernails scratched up and down his back, and Margo clicked her tongue. “But if you get snot on my dress, I’ll slit your ballsack in half.”

“Please don’t tell him,” Quentin whimpered pitifully into the scratchy lace. “I know you tell each other everything, but please—please don’t. Please.”

“I won’t,” Margo said, tucking his head under her chin. He sobbed harder and she squeezed him tighter. “Hey, I promise, sweetie. I won’t.”

Quentin returned to that memory a lot.

Sitting on the floor of the Armory, the wooden doors bolted shut behind him, Quentin shuffled around until he found an aligned spine and a somewhat comfortable position. He breathed and tried to focus. He tried very hard.

There were important things happening around him, things he was supposed to focus on. But all Quentin could feel was his head spinning and buzzing. His lips were dry and all he could think about was how he had forced a kiss on Eliot earlier, a kiss he obviously didn’t want, like an asshole. What a shithead he was. What a motherfucking godsdamned horrible loser of a—

“Jesus, Quentin,” Penny sighed loudly. rubbing his eyes with the heels of his palm. “Come on, dude.”

The candles around them were growing dim in their concentric circle. They had been at it for hours, trying the final version of a spell from Dean Henry Fogg’s materials. It was the one that should allow Penny insight to the broken frequency, the one that a psychic patch could help mend, if not heal. It was important work and Quentin knew it. But he hadn’t been able to keep his shit together for the duration of the ritual.

...Which was three minutes long.

He had no excuse.

“Sorry,” Quentin said, gathering his hair back into a low knot. He had no ribbon, so it fell down his back. “Um, yeah, sorry. What do you need me to do again?”

Penny’s eyes bore holes into his skull. “Fucking seriously?”
Quentin clenched his fists, staring over at the overflowing bookshelves. “Can you just—can you just tell me again? And not make it a thing?”

“What I need you to do,” Penny bit out, every syllable an aimed missile, “is repeat the incantation and completely clear your mind of any thoughts. Relax all your muscles. Let yourself reach a state of pure calm.”

“Oh,” Quentin said with a huff of sarcastic air. “Is that all?”

Penny crossed his arms with an incredulous blink. “Do you care about Fillory or not?”

“You do not get to ask me that, you dickhead,” Quentin snarled, thrashing forward once. “Fuck you.”

The heat from the candles radiated in waves, smoldering in the humid room. The magic was heavy and waiting for them. Penny lowered his brow and leaned forward on one hand, chest puffed out as he stared at Quentin like he was a biting gnat in the Slosh.

“What the shit crawled up your ass?” Penny spoke in low tones, evenhanded and quiet. “I am trying to do the spell we’ve been working toward for over a year and you’re being uncooperative as hell. You can’t remember the basic instructions I gave you. And now, you have the nerve to bitch at me over some pretty minor pushback? Kind of fucked considering how patient I’ve been for the past four hours .”

Quentin swallowed. “I mean—”

“Actually, make that the past four weeks ,” Penny said with a wide, wide smile. He let out a laugh, sucking his lower lip in between his teeth. “But, sure, I’m the asshole. Jesus, do you ever listen to yourself?”

Quentin stared right ahead with a twitching jaw. “I have been having a hard time.”

“I’m aware,” Penny said, before closing his eyes. “Trust me, Quentin, we all are.”

Heart stopping for a moment, Quentin frowned. “Um, you’re all having a hard time?”

Fuck, of course they were. Shit was awful right now. He had been selfish and caught up in his own mess of feelings, and yeah, that was wrong. But just as he was about to say as much, Penny peeled his eyes open, slow and vicious.

“We’re all aware that you are having a hard time,” Penny said and Quentin looked away, face burning. “How long has it been since you’ve taken a bath?”

“I’ve been busy.”

“You’re not taking basic-ass care of yourself.”

Quentin ran his tongue over the rough enamel of his teeth. “Why do you care?”

“Because I’m trying to accomplish something and I need your help,” Penny said. “Well, I need Quentin’s help, but I’ll settle for Eeyore the Bog Monster if it’s my only option.”

“Yeah, you’re not an asshole at all.”

Penny opened his mouth, raring to bite right back. But he stopped, eyes pulling down toward Quentin’s shaking hands. With a shot of embarrassment, Quentin thrust his hands under his legs.
Penny let out a breath.

“Q, look,” he said, gravelly. He stared up at the ceiling. “The thing is, man, I went through a breakup not too long ago. A bad one. A really bad one. So I know—I know how much it sucks.”

Quentin felt his stomach turn. Nausea crawled up his throat. “I’m not going through a breakup.”

“You kinda are,” Penny said quietly. He fixed his dark eyes on Quentin under a tightly bunched brow. “I know it feels like drowning, like everything is crashing around you. And I know it’s easy to say but hard to do. But you cannot let this consume you.”

“Eliot and I have to stay married until one of us dies,” Quentin said, meeting Penny’s eyes directly. “We will literally explode if we aren’t faithful to the other, regardless of how we feel about each other, regardless of how he feels about me. We are physically bound by ancient magic that no one understands.”

Penny blanched. “I’m not saying that doesn’t suck, but—”

“We are not going through a break up,” Quentin repeated. “It is way fucking worse than that. Don’t—don’t—don’t try to make this something that fits into any conventional box, okay?”

Quentin slumped back on the floor and cocked his jaw to the side, ready for whatever angry barb Penny was sure to lodge for daring to contradict him. Probably something about how Quentin was a whiny little flaccid penis. Which—sure. Fine. If that’s what he was, that’s what he was. Nothing to do about it.

But Penny surprised him once again.

“You’re right,” he said, with a quick nod. “My bad. I’m sorry.”

Well—

Fuck.

Quentin dropped his jaw. “Seriously?”

“Don’t crow about it,” Penny said. He swallowed with a serious glower. “But what we’re doing here is still important, Q. Tell me you don’t know that.”

Of course he did.

Of course he did. Quentin brought his hands up to his face, pulling his fingers down his greasy skin with a shuddering breath. When they reached his jaw, he let them fall and he nodded, staring off into space for a moment. The whole point of everything, in his whole life, had always been about Fillory. It wasn’t about Quentin. It wasn’t about Eliot. It wasn’t about Quentin-and-Eliot. It was about Fillory, the land he loved so well. The one he had been chained to forever. It was complicated.

But he needed to do right by it. It was the one thing he knew he could do, even in the midst of the longest winter he had yet known. It was what he owed Fillory. It was what he owed Eliot, who had also given everything up for this wonderful, magical, fucked up place. And it was what he owed himself, after all this time.

“Fine, yeah. Let’s do this,” Quentin said, pulling himself up. “I’m ready.”
Penny didn’t smile at him. He didn’t give him a coddling thumbs up for finally agreeing to do what he should have been doing the whole time. He just nodded once and rolled his eyes back into his head, waiting for Quentin to do the thing.

So Quentin did the thing.

He repeated the Latin, eyes closed. He shook out his muscles, letting them drain down to the floor. His heart beat quickly but he cleared his mind until it was blank, only briefly imagining warm lips on his and a strong hand in his hair, tugging with a zing to implore, *breathe, baby, let go*. The room disappeared until all that was left was Quentin and Penny, suspended in a magical nothing. They waited until the images started flowing, until the answers they were seeking began to form in shards around them.

Quentin wasn’t sure what he had expected to see.

—But it sure as fuck wasn’t *this*.

There was mist over deep green grass, rolling in waves around looming gray rock. The slabs stood tall and strange along broken circles. Quentin walked toward them beside Penny, only he wasn’t Penny, not anymore. He was a short man with a bright red beard and smoldering bloodshot eyes. His dark brown robe dragged on the ground, a straw colored rope tied along his waist to cinch. A crucifix hung from his splotchy neck, but he ripped it off and fell to the ground with a scream.

*I renounce thee*, he yelled in anguish, hands moving in tuts until the metal melted into the ground, until the ground quaked and broke with shimmering gold. *I renounce thee, I renounce thee, I renounce—*

The air filled with haze and smoke, opium imbuing his lungs with newfound potency. He wore white robes and the red-headed man writhed in pain, an ocean spilling from his orifices. Quentin held a knife and he could see his own heart. He could see the man’s heart, his own heart, but they were not Quentin and Penny. They were not Quentin and Penny.

The temple was drenched in blood and flower petals. Two bodies moved together, rutting and heaving. Hooves scraped the stone floor and a hand wrapped about a large cock, saliva and sweat and rancid meat filling the senses. His skin was covered in amber-gold fur, and he was aroused, he was dancing, he was panting his desires. His cock stood tall and hairy and ready, ready for the sacrifice, for the promise.

*Brother*, the voice broke as he thrust between the strong thighs, his smile the sunlight upon the world. *Brother, if you hear me, know that dawn arises*. Quentin and Penny, not Quentin and Penny, he and the man bowed before him and their lips opened to taste his power. Their sisters cried behind them, pleading for their turn, for their right. The men did not yield.

The obsidian burned. The circle was complete. Precious stone and glass shattered like rain. Lightning struck and never stopped. Quentin and Penny were not Quentin and Penny, they were falling, falling falling fall—

“*What the fuck?*” Quentin gasped back to the Armory, air strangling his throat. He fell forward onto the ground, trembling and sweating. “Holy—oh my gods, what the fuck was that?”

Penny sat stone-still across from him, eyes flown open wide, twitching around his pale face. “I don’t know,” he said absently. He blinked. “I don’t know.”

Quentin breathed in and out, trying to find solid ground. “Was that supposed to happen?”
“I don’t know.”

“What—what was it trying to tell us?”

“I don’t know.”

“Did you, like, get any information at all?” Quentin swallowed, darting his eyes around. “Did it make sense to you? And—and—and was that Stonehenge?”

Somehow that seemed the most egregious thing of all, even though he was pretty sure he had almost sucked a goat cock. What the fuck? What the fuck, what the fuck, what the actual fuck? Quentin splayed a hand on his chest and coughed. Penny didn’t move.

“I don’t know.”

“Penny.” Quentin reached a hand out and shook him by the arm. Penny barely registered it. “Penny, this is your spell. What the fuck just happened?”

Penny wheezed out a sound, small and shaken. He shook his head and stared at Quentin, eyes glassy and wet. “I—” He sniffed, irises hollow and lips trembling. “I don’t know, Q.”

The icy hand of dread gripped at Quentin’s stomach. All the candles had snuffed out and his heart raced erratically in his chest.

—A knock on the door made them both jump.

They faltered backwards into a pile of books. Pages fluttered and spines fell to the floor with a thunk. Quentin and Penny caught eyes, a shared tremor of fear passing between them.

The knock came again.

“King Penny?” A soft, muffled voice came through the crack. “King Penny, it’s Fen. May I enter?”

Quentin let out a held breath and tucked his chin to his chest. His muscles relaxed and he shook his head, exhaling one more time before glancing back up at Penny. But Penny didn’t look any more relaxed. He was still staring at the door with fearful eyes, like he hadn’t heard Fen at all.

“Penny,” Quentin said. Penny slid further away from the door, eyes still glued to the door, still filled with horror. “Penny, Fen’s looking for you. Are you going to get it?”

The knock came again and Penny flinched. “King Penny, are you in there?”

Penny clutched at his chest and looked at Quentin, desperate. Quentin cleared his throat and stood, brushing off his legs.

“Just a second, Fen,” he called, pushing his hair back.

“Oh,” came the tiny answering voice. She paused and Quentin could hear her shift. “Hello, Q.”

He ignored that to look down at the unmoving Penny. “Penny, do you—are you good?”

Penny fell back onto his heels, knuckles white around his knees. He swallowed. “I don’t know.”

That—wasn’t great. Quentin clenched his jaw as he squinted, shaking his shoulders once before turning around and walking to the door. Penny was a psychic and more than that, a Traveler. Sometimes spell shit hit him a little longer and harder, affected him a little deeper than others. But
no matter what, Penny was always able to shake it off.

Twitching his hair back with a long stride forward, Quentin opened the door with a click. Fen stood there, blue eyes on the ground and hands wringing around each other. She peered up at him, frowning, uncertain. Quentin offered her a tight smile, stepping back to let her through the threshold. She followed, sniffing as she held her head high.

But as soon as Fen saw Penny, staring into space on the floor, her face crumpled. She shot Quentin a questioning look. He shrugged, not willing to explain, and she glared at him, frustrated at his unwillingness to explain. It was weird to still be able to communicate with her without a word, when they were as far away from each other as they had ever been. But shit didn’t change easily, he supposed. For better or for worse.

“I hope you are well, Your Highness,” Fen said gently, inclining her head at Penny. He blinked. “I apologize for the intrusion.”

“S’fine,” Penny said blankly.

“I have a question from the High Queen,” Fen said formally, albeit with a crinkle in her brow. “She would like to know if you—if you think pink or white peonies would flatter her complexion more.” She braced herself. “For her wedding bouquet.”

Quentin rolled his eyes. Hades, Margo could be so petty.

“I don’t know,” Penny said, shaking his head with wide eyes. “Either would be nice.”

Fen cocked her head. She stepped forward and floated down to the ground, her plain gray and white dress gathering under her knees. She pressed a light hand to Penny’s knee, jolting him to attention.

“Penny,” Fen said softly, using his given name with a quiet concern. “Are you okay?”

“Uh,” Penny said, tilting his face to meet her eyes. He covered her hand with his, seemingly unconsciously. “I’m not sure.”

Fen frowned. “How can I help? Do you need a glass of water?”

“A glass of what?” Penny asked, scrunching his face in confusion.

“A glass of what?” Penny asked, scratching his face in confusion.

“Water,” Fen repeated in a low voice. Quentin felt his stomach lurch. The two of them exchanged a quick glance as Penny shook his head, clearly baffled.

“Is that a Fillory thing?”

“Penny,” Quentin said urgently, bending down next to Fen, who squeezed the king’s hand with giant, scared eyes. “Should I call a healer?”

Penny darted his gaze back and forth between them, a growing panic painted all over his face. He stayed like that for a beat too long and Quentin was about to stand up again when—

Penny burst out laughing.

“I’m fucking with you!” He said jovially, hitting his thigh with a guffaw. Fen exhaled with relief and annoyance, rocking backward away from him. “Jesus, you should see your faces.”

“Fuck, Penny,” Quentin said, crossing his arms over his chest, angry and hot. “What the hell’s
“Absolutely nothing,” Penny said with a grin. He stood up and shook out his limbs. The corner of his eye twitched but he snorted. “Man, you two are easy.”

“Hilarious,” Quentin deadpanned.

Penny cracked his neck and smirked, staring straight at the door. But Fen’s eyes didn’t leave him, gentle and wary.

“That was a little mean,” Fen said and Penny physically flinched, though he tried to play it off as a stretch of his arms. “But I’m glad you’re alright.”

“Yeah, thanks,” Penny said and Quentin narrowed his eyes at his still-trembling hands. “Anyway, we’ll finish this later, Q. I’m gonna get some food.”

With a fast wave behind his head, Penny stormed through the door and disappeared. Fen and Quentin sat on the floor in silence, both frowning at the space where his retreating form had once been.

“He still never responded about the bouquet,” Fen said, more to herself. “When High Queen Margo made me ask him what color cummerbund he wanted to wear, he ranted about her capacity for cat’s scat for nearly ten minutes without a single break.”

“Yeah,” Quentin said, mind spinning. Penny was probably fine. This kind of thing happened. The side effects of magic.

Fen let out a breath. “Q?”

“Yeah?”

“What’s a cummerbund?”

Quentin closed his eyes as he stood, rubbing the bridge of his nose. “I’m gonna go too, Fen. I need a nap.”

“You’ve been sleeping a lot,” Fen said, standing with him. Her voice sounded far away. “Good sleep or bad sleep?”

Quentin flashed to a small straw mattress, a few short years before. Her arms had wrapped around him as he sobbed into a pillow and her brow had furrowed as she spoke into his hair, **Q, I don’t understand. Isn’t it good that you can sleep now? You always say you can’t sleep.** He had shaken his head, over and over, saying, **no, Fen, no, it’s bad sleep, this is bad sleep, it’s bad.** And sweet Fen had kissed his forehead and whispered, **I wish I understood, I wish I could help,** without ever knowing that she was helping. She always had.

Shit really did change sometimes though.

“Sleep-sleep,” Quentin said, wrapping his arms back around himself. “Neutral.”

Fen nodded, eyes drifting away. The silence grew between them and Quentin cleared his throat to cut it away, so he didn’t have to feel it anymore. She tucked a piece of hair behind her ear, the golden-brown curls flowing down her shoulders in waves.

“What really happened? Is King Penny going to be alright? Were
you two doing—” her voice dipped to a whisper, as she looked behind her, toward the door “—a spell?”

A freeze coursed through his veins. Quentin stiffened, staring at the corner. “That is none of your godsdamned business.”

Fen sucked in a breath and released it on a hum. She smiled, bright and sharp.

“Okay. Well, it was lovely to see you as always, Quentin,” she said. She flattened her dress with her hands and nodded. “I must attend to other errands for Her Highness. Be well.”

Quentin looked away again, firmer than before. After another long moment, the wooden door slammed.

He was all alone.

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Eliot was losing at backgammon.

Rolling the quartz dice in the small cup, he let them fall across the board with a flourish, and then cursed aloud when a cockeyed one and two glared up at him. His opponent smirked, leaning back on the stone bed on one arm.

Every individual game came down to luck. Strategy and skill were only applicable when looking at the number of wins accumulated over time. But so far, Eliot hadn’t born off a single pawn. It was a pitiful showing. Meanwhile, Bayler’s small bounty of smooth white stones was up to a smug thirteen. The final pawns were a given victory.

“Falling off your horse today,” the prisoner said, clacking two of the game pieces between his fingers like castanets. “Or will you do the prideful thing and claim you’re yet still easing me into your inevitable triumph?”

Eliot offered a wan smile in return, shrugging as he reached for the cup. “Tired, that’s all. Your good pal has been causing endless issues for us.”

The Fillorian army had captured Ilario the Enchanter. They had surrounded him as he trespassed on their land, as he slit his hand with a knife, bleeding and calling to Ember at his temple. The troops had arrested him with relative ease and that seemed to be the end of that.

Except having Ilario in custody meant that Eliot had finally heard from the famed and elusive King Idri of Loria. It turned out his fellow king was an excellent writer—even if his letter outlined the graphic manner of execution Idri would perform on each Fillorian monarch if his *wrongfully accused friend* was not returned *posthaste*. Idri had actually used that word, which would have normally made Eliot like him on principle. But he had also written about locking Margo in a room filled with a specific toxic fume that would slowly macerate her insides until she bled out from her pores. The traditional execution for a *hostile foreign queen*.

So the two of them had a few minor differences they would need to overcome before sitting down for tea.

“Ah, but as I’ve said, Ilario is the least of your concerns,” Bayler said and Eliot didn’t bother to ask him to elaborate. He knew he wouldn’t. “So that still sounds like a shoddy excuse to my ears.”
Bayler rolled and easily took his final pawns with a grin. Eliot nodded his graceful defeat and they reset. As the victor, Bayler rolled first and considered his opening move with all the intensity of a dedicated military leader.

The thing was, Eliot considered as he yawned for real, eyes stinging with the stretch, he actually was exhausted. He hadn’t slept at all the night before. But it hadn’t been about Ilario. It was much worse than that.

Eliot had given in.

After a month of careful resistance and dreamless sleep potions, he lost the battle with himself and gave in with a rush of arousal, stroking himself to the vision of Quentin. He had tried for weeks to ignore his own impulses, the nightly twitching of his cock and the cresting pit of want low in his stomach. He told himself that he could be chaste and virtuous. That there were more important things.

But then Quentin had held his face and kissed him.

However briefly, for one glorious moment, Quentin had kissed Eliot like he still wanted to kiss Eliot, like he missed it. Naturally, Eliot’s whole day had been shot after that and his hand had found his cock the second the final evening candle flickered out. He let his mind fall to the places he had sealed off and there was nowhere else he would have rather been, even in mere fantasy. But it also made him feel like his soul was dying, because it was only fantasy. Breathtaking dichotomies all the way down.

His palm was too wide and his fingers too slender. But his eyes fell closed, and Quentin’s pink lips and rough stubble and warm scent enveloped him, paralyzing him to the bed. The sound of Quentin breathlessly moaning in his ears, the shock friction of their hard cocks grinding together as they kissed. The slickness of oil and the tight heat of Quentin as Eliot cooed his praise, slid fingers in deeper, and worked him pliant until he trembled. Eliot could still feel him. He could always feel him.

“Eliot, gods,” Quentin used to babble, smiling with half-lidded eyes, skin burning bright. “You make me feel so good, so good. How do you always—how do you always make me feel so good?”

“Baby,” Eliot would breathe, incapable of anything else. Because anything else he had ever wanted to say— you’re mine, you’re mine, you might be the love of my life, I would do anything for you, making you feel good is the only joy I know—had always been too fraught, had always been too dangerous. It had always been on the tip of his tongue, always ready to pounce and destroy everything. Every quiet beat of his heart had always wanted to whisper it in Quentin’s ear, as the only promise he ever knew he could keep.

—Thank god he never had.

So alone in his bed, Eliot came with a sob, a real one. And after that he couldn’t sleep.

Which meant now, as he played backgammon with his husband’s best childhood friend and star-crossed lover of many years—the one who loved Quentin so desperately that he had gone to the ends of the world to destroy that which kept them apart—Eliot was definitely, in fact, falling off his horse a little bit when it came to the game. The stupid game.

Bayler handed Eliot the dice cup with a wide smile. “Your turn.”

“Thank you,” Eliot said lightly. He rolled and snake eyes glared up at him. He didn’t read into it.
“Like I was saying before, the truth is, the FU Fighters don’t want violence, except as a means to an end,” Bayler said, going back to the real reason they were there. “But having a Fillorian on the throne is non-negotiable for us. Any other discussion will end fruitlessly.”

“I get that,” Eliot said, sliding out four precise moves. He was in a favorable position. “I do. You’ve all been dealt a shitty hand by your gods.”

Bayler smirked. “The fact that you say you instead of we speaks to my point too.”

“Come now, you can’t play both sides,” Eliot said. He reached for his coffee goblet and took a long sip. “Would you ever accept us as Fillorian?”

Bayler paused, pressing his lips together into a thoughtful line. Eliot had to admit he was thoughtful, under all the brash and boisterous bullshit.

“I’ve never considered the idea,” Bayler said after another moment. “You have to understand, Eliot, that the Children of Earth have not had Fillory’s interests at heart. Trust will never be easily gained, for good reason.”

“I do understand that. Really.”

“Frankly, I don’t think you can,” Bayler said with a chuckle. He reached across the table and picked up a small piece of precut waffle, dunking it into the Plumwood syrup Eliot had graciously provided. “The sins of your people go deeper than most realize. Even the smartest of us have our blind spots.”

His oblique references to Quentin were as jarring as car sirens. Eliot didn’t take the bait. “You’ve said that a few times, yet you remain vague on the details.”

Bayler widened his eyes, neon green in the light. “That’s ‘cause I’m not here to do your job for you.”

A chill passed over the room. Eliot straightened his back and stared down his nose at the man who had tried to murder him.

“No,” he said quietly. “I guess that’s not why you’re here.”

Bayler ripped another bite of the waffle with his teeth. His jaw worked hard as he chewed and his eyes didn’t move from Eliot’s. He swallowed slowly and reached for the dice cup, rolling his turn without a word. The dice read five and seven, and Bayler smiled.

“That was harsh,” he said, almost blithely. He shook his head with a happy little hum as he moved his pawns. It was a tune Eliot knew well by now, an Old Fillorian anthem. “I apologize, Eliot. I’ve come to appreciate you taking the time to hear me out.”

“Mmm,” Eliot said, twitching his lips up in forced acknowledgment. “I wish there was more for me to hear. So far, all you’ve given me are platitudes and veiled predictions of doom. Dramatic, to be sure, but not actually helpful.”

Bayler bore off a pawn and bit his lip. “Let us speak productively then. May I ask what you plan to do about public education?”

Oh, what a dickhead.

Bayler was nowhere near as clever as he thought he was. Huffing a laugh, Eliot touched his tongue
to the roof of his mouth. “You know we can’t discuss that.”

But Bayler looked up in surprise, genuine bafflement screwing up his features. “Why not? It’s a crucial bedrock to structural development within the kingdom.”

“I’m aware,” Eliot said, keeping his tone even, despite his knee bouncing under the table. “But it’s a topic we can’t discuss.”

At that, Bayler pinched those goddamn lips and a shadow crawled over his eyes. He took another aggressive bite of food.

“Hm,” Bayler said, staccato. “I see. Simply because of his obsessive interest? Seems an arbitrary boundary.”

Eliot flicked his wrist in the air and called over a small purple bottle. “Would you like some Kahula in your coffee?”

Bayler averted his eyes down to his lap. “I do think you should listen to him.”

“I also have Bailey’s, which is creamier,” Eliot offered loudly. “King Penny says it was embarrassing to buy, but I say he’s a spoilsport.”

But Bayler wouldn’t read the goddamn room, purposefully or not. “Q knows what he’s talking about. It’s his passion. I used to tell him he should be a teacher, but he thinks he doesn’t have the patience.” He snorted. “With humans, that is. Boats all day, every day.”

“I’m going to add whiskey to mine,” Eliot said with a smile. “That’s called an Irish Coffee. Sort of.”

Officially, Irish Coffees had brown sugar and cream in them too. What Eliot was about to drink—nothing but black coffee and whiskey—wasn’t so much a *cocktail* as it was *depressing as shit*. But it got the job done. He untwisted his flask and poured three-ish fingers into the goblet.

Eliot had a feeling he was going to need it.

Bayler melted into a gentle grin, eyes sparking with a fondness that dropped Eliot’s stomach. He leaned forward conspiratorially, voice dropping low. “Though I find it prudent to warn you, between us, that you must be careful he doesn’t try to sneak in a way to undercut bunny cigarette stipends in any policy suggestions. He may believe the bunny union is *state-sanctioned organized crime*, but that doesn’t mean—”

“Got it,” Eliot said, cutting him off as he rolled his turn. “Thank you.”

Bayler sat back up and turned his eyes toward the sunlight streaming through the small window. He spoke so quietly Eliot could have easily pretended he never heard him. “He refuses to see me.”

“Well, you tried to murder his husband,” Eliot said, without thinking it through. He bore off a pawn. “Bit of a faux pas.”

Bayler inhaled sharply and Eliot closed his eyes.

Shit.

He had promised himself one thing when he had started all this. Yet somehow, he always fell into the trap, even when Bayler wasn’t trying to set it. If Fillorians United ever found out how stupid
Eliot actually was, it would all be over.

Bayler shook his head. “I hadn’t realized that he considers you a friend. If I had more information, more context—” He cut himself off with a small laugh. “Well, I still would have done it. I always would have done it. For him, I’d do anything.”

Eliot sniffed hard. “Know thyself, I suppose.”

“But I can admit when he’s right,” Bayler said. He closed his eyes and held a finger up. “He would laugh at the notion, but I can.”

The jail cell was hot and closing in on them.

“You know what, this was my fault,” Eliot said, heart racing and stomach squirming. He tapped his fingers along the backgammon board, the game forgotten. “I shouldn’t have engaged.”

“I can admit that you do seem like a decent person, Eliot,” Bayler continued, meeting his eyes with a bonechill of sincerity. “If we had met under other circumstances, I never would have wished you dead.”

“Well, if that’s not the tagline of a buddy comedy,” Eliot said, raising his goblet, “I don’t know what is.”

Bayler frowned. “Pardon?”

“Never mind,” Eliot said out the corner of his mouth. He gulped down several mouthfuls of bitter caffeine and booze.

Bayler stared at him again, dark and calculating. He radiated the kind of intensity that Eliot had once found absurdly appealing, had even once wanted to possess for himself. Bayler was the kind of man who could rip you apart in a word and put you back together with a smile. Eliot understood what Quentin saw in him. Way too well.

“Our trouble lies in what I’ve said from the start,” Bayler said quietly. “Our causes are at odds. A few sweet flavored way -fles and a drink that makes me feel pleasantly jittery will not change that.”

Bayler stretched his hand out along the spread of food that Eliot had provided. He spoke politely, but firmly, as though he was sorry that his mind would never be changed.

But it was too late.

It was too late because Eliot had seen the burning glimmers of humanity in him now. He had seen enough of who Bayler was under the bravado. He was a man who loved his country, who loved Quentin, who wanted the best for both. In those fundamental ways, he was no different from Eliot, except that they had been born on different planets, except that fate had been cruel to them in different ways. For that alone, their differences were worth trying to bridge.

Good kings didn’t give up.

“My cause is whatever is best for Fillory,” Eliot said. “Doesn’t that make us the same? Deep down?”

“ Best for Fillory ,” Bayler laughed. He swiped his tongue across his teeth. “You have no idea what you’re saying. If you did, you wouldn’t speak so readily.”
“Then tell me.”

“I will,” Bayler said breathlessly. But then his eyes went dull and his lip sneered. “After you hold up your end of the bargain.”

A cold anger tightened Eliot’s knuckles together. “I’ve already promised that.”

“Then we have no quarrel,” Bayler said with a biting shrug. “In the meantime, the best piece of advice I can give you is to continue listening to Quentin on policy matters. Never Pickwick.”

“Stop bringing up Quentin,” Eliot said in a low hiss. He had boundaries too. “I am not discussing Quentin with you.”

“Well, except when it comes to bunny cigarette stipends,” Bayler continued with a snort. “Seriously. He has a fixation. Don’t listen there.”

“I am not discussing Quentin with you.”

“In the meantime, I can continue giving you the context you need,” Bayler said, eyes casting downward. “I can provide the hard truths that Quentin has always refused to see.”

“Give me a break, he is more clear-eyed about Fillory’s problems than anyone else I’ve met here,” Eliot snapped. He closed his eyes. Shit. Shit. “But I am—I am not discussing Quentin with you.”

But Bayler frowned, ignoring the last part like Eliot hadn’t spoken.

“In some ways, that’s true. It was certainly his whole rationale for going to Earth, at least outwardly, when he was trying to deny the spite that truly fuels him,” Bayler said, staring up at the ceiling. “But in more pertinent ways, he has always had the heart of a crying child.”

Condescending prick. “I am not discussing Quentin with you.”

“You know I’m right.”

“I am not discussing Quentin with—”

“Hades,” Bayler barked, a burst of temper igniting the tense air. “You’ve made your point.”

Eliot flared his nostrils. He tilted his head and leaned forward slowly, his own anger a magnet toward the man in front of him.

The image of Bayler glaring up at him from the knife was burned in his brain forever. It no longer made him fearful, but it was always there. It was always a stark reminder of who he was actually dealing with. But to the same end, it was about time that the prisoner realized who he was dealing with. Because he wasn’t only dealing with the High King of Fillory.

He was dealing Eliot fucking Waugh.

“Do not speak over me,” Eliot said, commanding every molecule to stillness. “Let’s remember that I’m the one doing you the favor here.”

Bayler didn’t back down, hissing forward. “That line of thought is why no Fillorian will ever trust you, nor any Child of Earth.”

“So be it,” Eliot said with a shrug. He would give him no satisfaction. “I will still do my best to do right by my kingdom.”
Eliot hadn’t chosen this life. He didn’t even want this fucking life, even now, save the one thing that had wholly surprised him, enthralled him, and then broken his heart without a backwards glance. But it wasn’t about him. It wasn’t about his goddamn feelings. For any of it to be worthwhile, he needed to try. He needed to persevere. He even needed to deal with a *chokesuck* like Bayler. For Fillory, for all. Come what fucking may.

Eliot sat back in his chair, arms folded across his chest. It was the rebel’s move now. The game was his to lose.

Bayler considered him again, for a long beat. Then he took a sip of his coffee. “Tell me about road infrastructure and your planned taxation plans.”

Victory rolled through Eliot’s muscles like the onset of good molly. “What do you want to know?”

“Do you plan on levying a toll tax upon the Chicken community?” Bayler leaned back, mirroring Eliot down to the tilt of his head. “Or will you allow them to continue to cross roads unlawfully, like the thieves they are?”

Exhaustion hit Eliot all at once again. He took a deep breath and pulled out his flask to chug.

It was going to be another long day.

An hour later, Eliot nodded at Soren and Rhys as they locked the cell door behind him. He carried out his tray—still covered in waffle remnants—and dreamed of a relaxing bath and a massage, a worthy reward for a difficult work session.

But alas, some dreams were not meant to be.

A vision of red chiffon and steely doe eyes waited for him against the white stone. Margo angled her perfect jawline in a lukewarm greeting, displeasure apparent in every tense line. When Eliot sighed, her eyebrow ticked up. She dusted off her dress and stared at him blankly, refusing to speak first.

Eliot surrendered. “Did you wait out here the whole time?”

“Obviously,” Margo said, rolling her eyes. “When have I not?”

“Don’t you have other work to do?”

“Of course I do.”

“Then doesn’t this seem like a waste of time?”

“Of course it does,” Margo said, taking one step forward to glare right up at him. Her chest hit the tray. “But until you see it that way, here the fuck we are.”

“Soren and Rhys have been guarding me the whole time,” Eliot said, ducking his head at her. “I’m perfectly safe.”

“You mean the fuckers who let you get stabbed once already?” Bambi snorted. “Excuse me if I don’t want to take my chances on *incompetence.*”

She spat the final word over Eliot’s shoulder, toward the guards standing at attention. Soren
stiffened but gave no other indication that he heard her. Rhys’s lip trembled but he sniffed and stared ahead. Once, Margo had made him cry. It had not gone well for him.

Eliot sighed. “Bambi.”

“Don’t fuckin’ start with me,” Margo said, setting her jaw. “If you’re going to do this shit even though it’s objectively the stupidest shit you could do, then you can’t say shit about me doing *this* shit, you shithead.”

“I lost the direct object there,” Eliot said, frowning. “But your general point has been made, noted, and—”

“And dismissed,” Margo swallowed. “Because the High King knows best, right?”

“I was going to say *considered,*” Eliot countered, swerving away from danger. Margo rolled her eyes again and grabbed one of his waffles off the plate, taking a huge bite. “Those aren’t actually for you.”

She flipped him off as she munched down and twisted her mouth. “Why the fuck do you have waffles? Is it like a brunch book club in there?”

“Not exactly,” Eliot said carefully. “I think of it more as a cultural exchange.”

“One way to a man’s heart,” Margo said, licking syrup off a finger. “Quick pitch. Have you tried fava beans and Chianti yet? I’ll bet it’s his fave.”

Eliot was so exhausted. “You’ve run that joke into the ground.”

“Who’s joking, Clarice?”

“Margo,” Eliot said roughly, handing the tray off to Smedley who had appeared out of nowhere. “I do not have the— anything for this conversation again.”

Smedley scurried away before Eliot could verbally thank him. Which made sense, because Smedley hated verbal thanks. But Eliot still felt like he was *failing* every time he didn’t manage to sneak it in. He bit the side of his tongue and looked away, energy draining out of him.

Margo took a deep breath and wrapped her arm through his.

“You know my stance and I know yours,” she said, walking them down the hall. “We don’t need to talk about it if we’ll end up at each other’s throats.”

“I wouldn’t go at your throat, Bambi,” Eliot promised, resting his cheek on the top of her head. “Never.”

She narrowed her eyes up at him. “I guess I was more speaking for myself.”

“Fine,” Eliot spat. His stomach tightened cold and he stood up straight. “Then we won’t talk about it.”

“Fine,” Margo said in that infuriating airy voice of hers, the one that promised that nothing was over about the conversation. He could practically count down the seconds to when she would add the commentary that she was obviously just fucking *dying* to— “But don’t come crying to me when this blows up what’s left of your marriage.”

Eliot barked a bitter laugh. “What marriage?”
He could feel his words hit her with a sour and discordant force as he stared straight ahead, glowering into the distance. Margo paused to look up at him, the beginnings of real concern on her face.

“Eliot,” she said softly, not quite a warning, not quite a question. “Come on.”

He closed his eyes against the weight of his crushing hopelessness and kept focused on the practical reality at hand. “I’m not hiding it from him out of malice. But I know Quentin and he just wouldn’t—Quentin wouldn’t understand my reasoning, okay?”

“Gosh,” Bambi said with a fluttering sigh, “I can’t relate.”

“I’m doing what I’m doing for Fillory,” Eliot said, peeling his eyes open and boring them down at her. “Bayler will undergo a trial, he’ll probably even end up executed. You’ll most likely get what you want. But why wouldn’t I use a resource at my disposal in the meantime?”

Margo scrunched her whole face with exasperation. “Because he’s a psycho who tried to murder you.”

“Or,” Eliot said quickly, holding a finger up. “Or he’s a revolutionary, trying to build something strong and true out of injustice.” When Margo threw her head back into an eye roll of epic proportions, he sucked in a breath. “I mean, who’s to say that he’s isn’t, perhaps, Fillory’s answer to Alexander Hamilton, hm?”

“Oh my fucking god, El,” Margo said, mouth slack. “Jesus.”

“Talking to him works to our advantage, Margo,” Eliot said, letting out his breath with a tremble. “Fact is, he’s smart. Um, really smart. He’s a strategic thinker. He has a wealth of knowledge. He speaks several languages and he loves Fillory and he’s well-spoken and he considers all angles of every problem and—and—and he has just, like, an assload of this salt-of-the-earth yet intellectual charm about him.”

“Eliot,” Margo said, her voice definitely a warning now. But Eliot laughed, a dry and clawing sound up his throat.

“Not that any of that is a surprise,” Eliot finished. His heart thudded painfully and he stared down at his shoes. Beside him, Margo went silent for a moment, before she rested her tiny hand on his forearm.

“You’re way too close to the situation, honey,” Margo said softly. Fuck, Eliot was stupid. Everyone saw how stupid he was. “Don’t do this to yourself.”

Eliot clenched his jaw. “I know he tried to assassinate me, but—”

“You know that’s not what I mean,” Margo said, wrapping her arms around his waist in a hug. She pointedly jabbed her chin into his chest. “At least delegate the interviewing. Let me do it.”

“Hmm,” Eliot tilted a small smile down at her, brushing his hand through her hair. “Do you promise not to kill him?”

“Let Penny do it.”

“He’s got his hands full with that patch project,” Eliot said, kissing her forehead. “Besides, Bayler wanted me dead. I know you don’t understand, but it’s something I have to see through. I have to be the one to reach him.”
Margo shook her head. “Not everyone is reachable, baby.”

“I need to try,” he said. She gave him a resigned sigh and hugged him tight, cheek to his heartbeat.

“Ugh, I know you do,” Margo whispered into his lapel, cuddling closer as he buried his nose in her hair. “But he’s a total fucking mess. You know that, right?”

She wasn’t talking about Bayler.

Eliot felt his chest constrict and swell with the desperation he tried so hard to keep at bay. But he kept his eyes open. He knew if he surrendered and closed them, all he would see would be dark circles and stringy hair and sallow skin. He knew it would rip him apart. It would kill him acutely, instead of steadily. His hands shook against her back, so he tightened his grip to hide the tremor.

“I know,” Eliot said breathlessly. He knew. He knew. God, of course he fucking knew.

The most important person in Quentin’s life—the one Quentin had hidden from Eliot, the one he had obviously loved so much but could never be with, the one he couldn’t even talk about until it was way too goddamn late—had tried to kill Eliot. Bayler had tried to kill the High King, the man Quentin had been forced to marry. Bayler had tried to kill the High King, the man Quentin had finally started to see as someone he could share a life with, even if not the life he ever would have wanted for himself. Bayler had been so hellbent on saving Quentin that he had upended his world. That had to be a lot to process, to say the least.

Not to mention, Quentin was apparently still fighting with Fen. He had also parted on bad terms with Julia, who had been too angry with Q to even say goodbye before she had fucked off to—wherever. And beyond the worst of it, Quentin had even lost Eliot. Because Eliot was a weak and cowardly bastard who couldn’t be what he needed, who couldn’t be an actual friend and partner while he was licking his own lovelorn wounds. Quentin must have felt so alone. Of course he was a mess. Fuck.

Margo held him even tighter. “He told me that he thinks you don’t care.”

“Well,” Eliot said, laughing so he wouldn’t cry. “Well, that’s stupid. He knows better than that.”

He pulled away from Margo, pacing across the corridor. She watched him, taking a deep breath as she crossed her arms. “How long are you going to punish him, El?”

“I am not punishing him,” Eliot snapped. “Jesus, I am—forget it.”

She wouldn’t understand.

“I’m only saying this once and then I’m letting it go, got it?” Margo crossed her arms. “Quentin is miserable.”

“You think I’m not?” Fuck, she knew him better than that. He bit his lip and shook out his hands. Enough. “But I am a king. I have actual shit to do. I can’t sit around worrying about everyone’s feelings all the goddamn time.”

“And normally, I would never be prouder to hear you say that,” Margo said. Her eyes went wide and her lips trembled in that tell-tale way they did when she really gave a shit. “But the only thing you’re doing right now is concocting some circuitous bullshit that will only hurt you.”

“Thanks, Dr. Phil,” Eliot said, voice hoarse.
“It will weaken you as a leader, not strengthen,” Margo continued, deadly serious. Eliot grimaced. It seemed like that was how she felt about every choice he made. “Just let him give you apology blow jobs until you forget all about this asshole and then get back to the real work, Waugh.”

Eliot turned his hardest gaze on her. “Is this you letting it go?”

With a deep sigh, Margo pinched her lips. “It is now.”

“Good,” Eliot said with a tight grin. “Glad that’s settled then.”

Their eyes remained locked in a heated challenge. Until, surprisingly, Margo yielded. She let out a long-suffering groan and lifted on her toes to pop a kiss on his cheek. It was their universal signal to end a fight, no questions asked. He loved her for it every time.

She adjusted his lapels and smiled up at him.

“So FYI, we’re meeting with a bunch of Centaurs this afternoon, because there’s a plague happening in The Chankly Bore,” Margo said. At the likely visible concern that spiked Eliot’s heart rate, she rolled her eyes. “It’s fine, not lethal or anything. It causes giant facial warts on the talking Rats or some shit.”

Eliot wasn’t proud that his automatic reaction was a guttural a and breathless, “Ew, gross.” But that was what it was and he had to live his truth.

“Tell me about it,” Margo said with a shudder. “Anyway, turns out, it’s a PR nightmare for The Retreat and they want some magical resources from Ours Truly and Co., to quell panic.”


“Mmm, it is,” Margo said with a nod. But then she shot him an anxious look as they turned toward the stairway. “The thing is though, El, I met the head doctor briefly this morning and you need to know…” She stopped and swallowed, eyes closing. “You need to know that he has the biggest dick I have ever seen.”

A laugh burst out of Eliot’s chest, unbidden and delighted. “What the fuck?”

“I’m serious,” Margo said, eyes flashing hot and slightly terrified on his. “It’s massive and in your goddamn face. You need to prepare yourself.”

“I mean,” Eliot said with a shrug and a grin. “I’ve seen horses before, Bambi.”

Margo rested her hand on the railing and looked both ways, dipping her voice low. “Except it’s more like a human-horse hybrid. And it’s bright fucking red.”

“Oh,” Eliot frowned, pausing for a moment. “Jesus.”

“Prepare yourself,” Margo said with a deep breath. She shook her head and cuddled into his side. “I’m not kidding.”

Eliot snorted, kissing her hair. “Good to know.”

Night fell again, the ruinous bastard.
Eliot stepped into the cold air and wrapped a black velvet cloak around his shoulders. He lifted the hood with a furtive glance on either side of the secret exit. The underground tunnel led right out to the Twin Harbors, the royal docks floating and creaking in the calm waters of the bay. The seasplashed wood was slippery under his boots and he made his way down the ramp, covered in flowers like the rainbow bridge. White petals floated up into the air like snow, swirling around him in the wind.

He took a breath and wrapped his fingers around the biting metal of the railing, taking a moment to gaze at the beauty of the new vessel before him. Tick had said something or other about why it was there, why it mattered, but Eliot hadn’t listened. He had a hard time listening lately, and especially to Tick, and especially about a boat.

Eliot hadn’t spent time around boats since his coronation, which was mostly a good thing. He didn’t care for them. The last time had been during an official tour of the standard royal fleet with Admiral Lacker—along with an equally bored Margo and an enthralled Quentin, who begged to join. It was a dull affair, involving far too many historical recitations of ancient battle strategy. One was in song form, rhyming naval warfare with fatal childcare. It was terrible.

The lone bright spot had been when Quentin had seen an incorrect knot in one of the ropes. With a huff, Q muttered more like Admiral Slacker and then spent the next hour lovingly and grumpily redoing every fastening they came across. And Eliot got to watch Quentin’s hands as he did, strong and steady in their concentrated, earnest efforts, gripping rope and wood like there was no other task that mattered. Everything else the Admiral had said had washed away into the harbor, in lieu of focusing on Quentin’s grunting determination, his quiet beauty.

It had been a good day.

Eliot inhaled the salt air, eyes fluttering closed. The force of his shuttered emotions threatened to burst out like a broken dam, pulling all of Fillory along with them. There was nothing good that could come from being around boats right now. He knew he should turn around.

—Instead, Eliot stepped onto the ship.

(Eliot was an idiot.)

He walked around the deck toward the sea, careful not to disturb the intricate rigging as he did. The moons were bright in the cloudless sky and they shone down on the water in two straight lines, stretching out to the unbroken horizon. It was beautiful.

But then a loud clunk sounded behind him and Eliot spun around in a snap. He faced the cabin with raised hands, ready to strike. But as a figure curled against the wall came into focus, Eliot dropped his hands to his side and exhaled with equal parts exasperation and amusement.

It was Quentin.

Of course it was Quentin, Eliot thought with a breathless laugh. Of course he would find Quentin sitting on a boat, alone and in the dark. It was Quentin. It was Quentin, who rocked his head back against the painted wood on the exterior cabin wall and passed an open bottle of wine between his hands, eyes cast up toward the heavens. In the moonlight, they looked distant and dreamy.

Eliot felt his heart drop low and he cleared his throat. Fuck it. “Hey, stranger.”

Quentin startled, of course, but nowhere near his usual flailing panic. He tensed up for a moment and then froze, squinting forward in the dark. “...Eliot?”
“The one and only,” Eliot said, leaning back on his elbows. “Well, except Todd, but we don’t talk about that.”

“Uh, okay,” Quentin said with a long blink. “Am I supposed to know who that is?”

“No, the gods have taken great mercy on you,” Eliot quipped lightly. But of course, Quentin just looked more confused, so he dropped his gaze and sighed. “What are you doing out here?”

“I mean, uh, you’re the one who’s unguarded,” Quentin said, a grating tone of accusation in his voice. He pointedly furrowed his brow. “Does Margo know you’re out of your quarters right now?”

Eliot felt a flare of annoyance ignite in his stomach. He cracked his neck and smirked, glaring off into the middle distance for a moment.

“So, *ha*, fun fact,” he said, with a false whisper of conspiracy. He stared Q down. “Margo is not my mother.”

To his credit, Quentin deflated. “Sorry, I didn’t mean—”

God, he was so sick of being treated with kid gloves. Eliot bit the tip of his tongue. “I can walk the grounds of my own castle without a hall pass, thanks.”

“You’re unguarded,” Quentin shot back again, eyes bright and a little angry. “Sorry, but it’s just hard not to be, uh, concerned. After everything.”

*Oh, you mean, after your lover tried to assassinate me?* Eliot wanted to say, but didn’t. *After he spent almost two years developing an elaborate plan to destroy my reign from the inside out, all because he wanted to save you—the beautiful and brave and gentle love of his life—from my clutches? After that?*

Eliot needed a cigarette. He shifted his weight once, jutting out his hip to project the calm he didn’t feel.

“I needed some air,” Eliot said, drawing his eyes up to the sky. “But I can’t handle the gardens on my own yet.”

With a low sigh, Quentin brought his knees to his chest and rested his chin there. “I’m sure Soren would have gone with you.”

“There’s something a little strangling about being followed everywhere,” Eliot admitted quietly. He shook his head with a laugh. “Well, and honestly, I was going to try to sneak off to Brighthaven? To check out the pubs there?”

It was true. Brighthaven was a town he had seen on a map, and he had jumped on the idea in a frenzy, desperate for some sense of goddamn normalcy, albeit in a world where normalcy would forever evade him. Where normalcy was fucked up by matter of course. Wearing a glamour and getting piss drunk with a bunch of workmen and Talking Bears like a Fillorian Prince Hal wouldn’t have helped. He knew that. But as established, Eliot was an idiot. So.

Clearly, Quentin concurred with that assessment. He sputtered, “Are you serious?”

“Only sort of. It was a half-baked fantasy,” Eliot said with a chuckle at himself, before closing his eyes. “Based in how much I need to blow off some steam.”
That was too close to an edge of uncomfortable truth. Eliot twitched his mouth into a smile and shot a look over at Quentin. He didn’t seem angry anymore, at least. Just thoughtful.

“I get that,” he said with an empathetic shrug that burned down to Eliot’s toes. “But how the fuck were you planning on getting to Brighthaven?”

“It looked nearby on the map,” Eliot said. “Figured I could walk the scenic path along the shore and through the western part of the Orchard.”

Immediately, Quentin licked his lips to hide a grin, tendrils of hair falling over his face. Eliot’s heart jumped five stories in the air, tingling all the way back down.

“Uh, yeah, it’s not the worst part of that plan and you know it,” Quentin said, voice gentle and eyes twinkling. “But also Brighthaven is a two hour gallop away.”

That did not track with any visual indication on the map. “Really?”

Quentin nodded, widening his eyes. “How have you still not learned how the static maps are scaled?”

“I would if the system wasn’t so wildly inconsistent,” Eliot said, twisting his face with a stab of annoyance. “Better to wing it than waste my time.”

“It’s not inconsistent, it’s just different than what you’re used to,” Quentin argued with a tiny grin, hands out like a frame. “Okay, again, from the upper to lower quadrants when taken at an eighty degree angle, every other half centimeter is—”

Eliot couldn’t do it.

He couldn’t take their usual banter, the back and forth of happy know-nothing Eliot and sweetly-cum-grumpily knowledgeable Q. Everything was too bruise-tender for that, too raw.

“Much as I could listen to you explain Fillorian maps all day,” Eliot said abruptly, forcing a lightness and normalcy in his tone, “let’s agree to disagree, hm?”

His words made Quentin let out a sharp exhale and look away, as though he doubted the truth of it, as though he thought that Eliot could never really mean it. That was the problem. Quentin grimaced and took a swig of his wine, face dark and eyes glaring at nothing.

“Sorry,” he said tersely, sinking further into himself. Eliot held back a sigh, swallowing roughly. Quentin was an idiot too sometimes.

“Seriously,” Eliot said, softening his voice to show that he came in peace, “why are you out here, Q?”


Goodie. More contextless nonsense. His favorite.

“The—what?” Eliot let the word stretch out, until Quentin sighed. He gestured around the boat itself without a word. Eliot flicked his eyes up at the newly waving sails, the stony silence around them. If a boat’s vibe could be haughty unamusement…

“We know each other,” Quentin said in an even tone. “She doesn’t enjoy a lot of, uh, fanfare. So I waited until after the naval guards were gone to greet her.”
Quentin always loved talking about the boats he worked with, all the ones he knew. Eliot never totally understood the whole thing, but he knew that Ursidae was his closest ward, the most important to him. He knew she was funny and fierce. He knew that Bilby was softer and more cautious, but irrationally pissed Q off all the time. He knew that Saurop was by far the smartest creature Quentin said he had ever met. But—

“You’ve never mentioned this boat.”

“We’re not close,” Quentin said with a sharp crack of a smile. He took another pull from the bottle. “She’s greatly respected at the Cove though. An ancestral vessel. It would have been considered improper for me not to offer my welcome, especially considering our close tie.”

Eliot lifted a lofty brow at the bottle in his hands. “And now you’re drinking with her?”

“No, I’m drinking on her,” Q said, smiling a little again. “Everyone can use sentient boats as actual boats. To do otherwise would be denying them their purpose.”

Ever a fool, Eliot smiled back, a warmth unfurling in his chest. “Sounds like the House Elves conundrum to me.”

“The what?”

“It’s a Harry Potter reference.”

Quentin rolled his eyes, the brattiest hipster that ever lived. “There were only two books when I was on Earth and I only read them because my girlfriend made me.”

“Well, you’re in luck, because it’s from the second movie,” Eliot said and the warmth grew to a smolder as Quentin mimed gagging. “Remember, the dopey little guy who was obsessed with Harry Potter and wanted freedom? Even though all other house elves were thrilled to work for free because they were, apparently, born that way?

“Yeah, yeah,” Quentin said. He played with his fingers and snorted. “Didn’t realize you were such a Harry Potter superfan.”

Eliot tsk’d his tongue and sighed theatrically. “Please, I live for Smogburps.”

“But it’s not the same thing,” Quentin mused seriously, rapping his knuckles along the floor. “The way tree consciousness is bound to the materials is different from how our nervous system works. It’s comparing apples and tangfruit.”

“Hm,” Eliot said with a stroke of his chin, “I feel like a philosopher would have a lot to say about that.”

“Except that it’s a matter of metascience, not—”

“Lucky for you though, delving into that debate sounds dull as death to me, so I’ll take your word for it,” Eliot finished, tongue lilting over the alliteration. He ran his thumb along a metal hinge. “So where did she come back from?”

Eliot hadn’t heard anything about The Muntjac before now, other than what Tick had unsuccessfully tried to tell him. But Quentin had used the words fanfare and naval guards, indicating some amount of importance. It would probably be good for him to have some context. And stupid as it was, he still preferred to hear it from Q, rather than Tick.
“From her own voyage,” Quentin said. “Her whole thing is doing espionage on her own terms. Really, it means she comes and goes as she pleases. That’s why she was always at the Cove. Her real home.”

That all actually sounded familiar. Foreboding tensed its way up Eliot’s back. “Wait, Q, is this the boat that got traded for—?”

The deal.

“Yeah, in part,” Quentin laughed around the lip of the bottle. He took another gulp. “We have an odd relationship.”

“Shit,” Eliot said, falling back against the rail. It was probably a mutual resentment fest. He swallowed a tightness in his throat. “I’ll bet.”

“Anyway, it’s been a weird day, and so I just—I decided to drink some wine here?” Quentin waved the bottle high. It sloshed with ample remaining booze. “I don’t have a better reason than that.”

“None needed,” Eliot said because, well, who the fuck was he to judge? About anything, but especially. “You must be cold though.”

Quentin looked cold. He only wore a thin knit sweater over his tunic, and Eliot could just make out the raised gooseflesh on his wrists. It would be weird—very weird—if Eliot wrapped his own cloak around him, he knew, but it was not an insubstantial instinct. Q was shivering a little and that was—

Eliot didn’t like that.

“Still better than my quarters,” Quentin said softly and it stabbed Eliot worse than any knife ever could. “But, uh, sorry. I get the message.”

Quentin started to lift himself off the ground, and Eliot felt his lips pull down. “The message?”

“I’ll just—I’ll go,” Q said, taking a breath. “I can find somewhere else to mope.”

Eliot’s heart stopped. “I was not in any way asking you to leave.”

“It’s fine,” Quentin said, holding his hand and the wine bottle up in surrender. “I’ll give you space.”

“Don’t be silly,” Eliot spat out even though he didn’t find any of this silly, in any definition. “You were here first.”

Quentin smiled, but no light reached his eyes. “That doesn’t matter. If you want to be here, you can be here. If you want me to leave, I’ll leave. You’re the—”

“I’m the what?”

Eliot grit his teeth as his words whipped across the deck. The wind spun hard around him and Quentin, who fell back to a seated position with a pained look on his face. Silence passed, unmoving and grim.

“I don’t want to fight with you, Eliot,” Quentin said quietly. Eliot closed his eyes before he could help it.

“Me neither,” he said, a breathless admission. He ran a hand down his face. “I don’t want to fight
with you either, Q.”

“So I should leave,” Quentin said, like that was that. “It’s not a big deal.”

“Avoiding each other for the rest of our lives seems like something that might eventually prove difficult,” Eliot said, cocking a sardonic grin.

Quentin offered a weak smile back, lacing his fingers together. “Got a better idea?”

Well. Eliot had no idea if it was a better idea, but it was certainly more in line with what he wanted. He stepped forward and held a hand out to the empty space beside Q. “May I join you?”

“Um.” Quentin froze. His mouth fell open before his brain caught up, and he scrambled further into himself, plastered against the side of the cabin. “No, yeah. Of course.”

With a tentative lift of his heart, Eliot sat down before he could second guess it. He stretched the long muscles of his back up against the wood, careful not to touch Quentin. He stared straight ahead, out to the lines of the water and the dusting of stars that were almost lost in the luminance.

Beside him, Quentin shifted, his knee brushing against his, and Eliot felt the gentle movement through every nerve in his body. Helpless, his eyes found Quentin again, gazing down at him like the idiot he was. And there, the moonlight illuminated too much. His skin was paler than usual and his hands twitched against his knees. The dark circles under his eyes were depthless shadows.

“Q,” Eliot murmured, fingers itching to reach out. Baby. “Have you been sleeping?”

“What?” Quentin shuddered at the question, hair falling over his face. “Of course I haven’t—fuck, I mean, like, why are you asking me that?”

He hugged himself tight and scrunched away from Eliot. Eliot felt his stomach tighten and his eyes burn.

“Never mind,” he said, snapping his face away. He was a fucking idiot. “Forget it.”

Of course Quentin hadn’t been sleeping. Everything in Quentin’s life had gone to hell and Eliot hadn’t been helping. In fact, emotional hindrance was actually kind of Eliot’s thing, you know. Big part of the brand. Why the fuck would this be any different?

Quentin sucked his cheeks between his teeth. “Whatever works for you, El.”

Eliot squeezed his eyes shut. “I’m fucking this up.”

“There’s nothing to fuck up,” Quentin said flatly. “We’re sitting on a godsdamned boat.”

The tension between them was riddled with land mines. Eliot sucked in a breath and let it out on a shaky exhale. He hated this. He hated this so much, but there was no easy pathway back to where they had been. Correction. There was no pathway back to where they had been. All that was ahead was an amboeic blob of the moldable nothing, the broken framework of an uncertain future that inevitably awaited them. Together.

But Eliot couldn’t talk to Quentin about that right now. Not when things were so shattered and fraught. Certainly not when Eliot was actively hiding shit from him. Which, yeah, he had his reasons, good reasons, but that didn’t mean Q would understand. Not yet. Right now, it would make things worse and they could not handle worse. But it also meant that rebuilding their partnership—their political marriage—was at a confused crossroad, with no easy pathway forward.
Eliot sniffed. Quentin startled.

It was the first sound between them in minutes.

“I know you want to delve into it all and I know we have to at some point.” Eliot stared straight ahead and spoke quickly, trying to get the words far away from him. “But the thing is, Quentin, I am just not ready to—”

“Wanna play a game?”

The floor of the boat lurched underneath Eliot and he shot a dazed look over to Quentin. “What?”

Quentin pulled out a gold crescent and flipped it up into the air, letting it fall back down before snatching it with his fingers. He did it again and the sheen from the coin twisted in a blurred whir back up, then down.

“The way I see it, we have three options,” Quentin said after another moment. “We sit in awkward silence, we fight, or we, like, try to hang out.”

Eliot blinked. “Okay.”

“But the only way that last one is happening is with a structure that makes it harder to slip into the first two,” Quentin finished with a shrug. He held the coin between his thumb and index fingers, spinning. “Ergo, we play a game.”

It was sound logic.

“Make it a drinking game and you’re on,” Eliot said, heart thudding low. “Do you have anything harder than wine?”

“No, but the game I know will get us drunk fast,” Quentin said in a firm promise. Good enough. Eliot offered him a salute and leaned back, awaiting instructions.

“Take a crescent,” Quentin said, holding the coin up. “Flip it high as you can.”

Eliot watched it rise and fall. “Riveting.”

Quentin rolled his eyes and continued. “When the coin is in the air, you ask a question about yourself. Then your opponent has to guess the correct answer before you catch the coin. If they get the answer right, you drink. If they get the answer wrong, they drink. If you drop the coin, no matter the answer, you drink twice.”

“I’m telekinetic,” Eliot reminded him. “I don’t think I’m going to drop a coin.”

“Well, you can’t use magic,” Quentin said, screwing up his face. He was always so easy.

“Obviously.”

“You always have to say that explicitly when playing games with Magicians,” Eliot said with a condescending tilt of his head. When Quentin pulled an even more annoyed face, he laughed. “Okay, fine, back up. So the flipper asks a question about himself?”

“Yeah, it’s a diplomacy ice breaker,” Quentin said, cheeks flushing. Eliot tamped down a smile as best he could. “Makes it so you can reveal as much or as little as you want. But the drunker everyone gets, the more personal the game gets. Typically.”

*Personal* didn’t exactly sound like his current bag of chips, but Eliot trusted Q to feel the same.
“Walk me through it.”

“So to start, I’d flip and then ask, ‘What’s my favorite color?’” Quentin said, flipping the coin as high as he could. He prompted: “And you answer—”

“Navy blue,” Eliot said quickly, before the coin fell to Q’s outstretched palm. Quentin snapped his fingers around it and shot Eliot a look.

“To which I’d say, fuck you, it’s green.” He smirked, sliding the coin through the slots in his fingers. “So now you have to drink.”

“Green is irrelevant to the Quentin Coldwater experience,” Eliot felt compelled to say as he reached for the bottle and tipped it to his mouth. “I call shenanigans.”

Quentin ignored that. “But if you had gotten it right, I would drink. Or if I had dropped the coin. Which I’ve never done, FYI.”

God, he was so fucking cute. Eliot felt his smile go softer, taking in the wind blown strands of his hair, the ruddiness of his cheeks. This was a terrible idea.

“Shouldn’t we have to write the answer down first?” Eliot asked, scooting back to rest more firmly against the wall. If it pressed his leg into the warm line of Quentin’s thigh, so be it. “That way we know we’re not dirty, lying cheats?”

“You could,” Quentin said. He became suddenly interested in the etchings on the coin. Two moons and a diamond spire. “But, uh, part of the point is the acknowledgment of your opponent’s honor.”

Q swallowed. “Uh, and honesty.”

The mast above them groaned in the wind.

“Okay,” Eliot said softly. Quentin caught his eyes with a hesitance that sliced through the bones of his rib cage. “My turn then, right?”

“Right,” Q said just as softly, brow coming together like a question. “Your turn.”

Eliot settled his face into a grin, one that fooled the world and now hopefully Quentin, and flipped the coin in the air. “What’s my favorite color?”

“Purple.”

“Wrong,” Eliot said as he pinched his fingers in the air and caught the coin mid-flip. It was a showy bit of dexterity, entirely magic free. But Quentin wasn’t impressed. He folded his arms across his chest and huffed a breath.

“What the fuck?” He narrowed his eyes. “Bullshit. You love purple.”

“My favorite color,” Eliot said with a cadence of careful condescension, “is Tyrian purple.”

At that, Quentin locked eyes with him. He said nothing as his lips twitched. Then he grabbed the bottle and thrust it hard at Eliot’s chest.

“No, fuck you,” Quentin said, ever a sportsman. “Purple is purple. Drink.”

Something dead inside Eliot sparked back to life. He sat up straight as his reawakened nerves lit up the night like fireworks. “It’s redder than what most people think of as purple. Not to mention, historically, it’s a foundational—”
“Now you have to drink twice,” Q said, holding an authoritative finger up in the air. “You don’t get to be hyper-specific about shit.”

“Oh,” Eliot said with a blinking frown.

“Yeah,” Quentin said with a nod. He tapped on the bottle. “Not in the spirit.”

Eliot curled his frown up into as slow a smile as he could. “Oh.”

Quentin blew his hair out of his face and cast his eyes up to the sky. “Yeah, okay.”

“Oh,” Eliot repeated, touching his hand to his heart. “I’m sorry.”

“I see where this is going.”

“Did Quentin Coldwater just tell me that I cannot be hyper-specific about shit?”

“Okay, yes, but—”

“J’accuse, sir,” Eliot said with a soft pucker of his lips. Quentin glared at him heatlessly, blowing air out his flared nostrils. He opened his mouth once, twice, before setting his jaw with a bratty smirk.

“It’s different,” he said huffily and Eliot’s heart raced as he smiled brightly, tongue clicking and head shaking.

“How the tables have turned.”

“It’s supposed to be a fast game!”

“Hypocrisy is a pestilence.”

Quentin didn’t look at him and held out his hand. “Give me the coin.”

“You know, I don’t think I will,” Eliot said, rolling it between his fingers. “I think I deserve another turn after this treatment. And you should drink three times.”

“You don’t deserve shit, I’m not drinking shit,” Quentin said, the corners of his mouth wavering with a delicious tell-tale. He reached over and grabbed at Eliot’s hand. “Give me the coin.”

“No,” Eliot laughed, clasping the treasure tight and holding it high. Undeterred, Quentin pawed upward, making an undignified giggle burst out of Eliot’s mouth as he slid further back. But true to form, Quentin didn’t give up, reaching out with more determination each time Eliot used his own considerable height against him, easily keeping it out of reach.

“Oh my gods.” Quentin held back his own laughter as his fingers finally wound around Eliot’s wrist. “You’re such a child. Give it.”

“Say that the distinction between standard purple and Tyrian purple is a significant one,” Eliot offered, bowing backward and holding his tongue between his teeth, “and I will.”

“That’s literally extortion.”

“More like—”

Eliot never got a chance to finish his quip. The coin slipped out of his hand as Quentin pressed his
mouth against his and the world lost all meaning.

Everything was still. The wind halted, the sea froze over. There was nothing but the homecoming of sweet lips and the thrumming pound of his heart, sighing yesnoyesno like a metronome. And then Quentin nipped at his lower lip, and the next thing Eliot knew—

They were kissing.

They were kissing, zero to sixty, pressed against each other and desperate, lips parting and moving endlessly between them. Eliot had no control—his hands flew up to bracket a perfect face, pulling Quentin into his lap with a pained groan. And Q kissed his lips, his jaw, his nose, he kissed everywhere he could reach, like he was starving, like this was everything he needed.

Vaguely, Eliot knew he shouldn’t be doing this. It wasn’t the plan. He tried to remember that, tried to make his brain function enough to remember that. He forced it to the front of his mind as he curled his tongue into a honey-warm mouth.

This wasn’t the plan.

But god, how the fuck had Eliot gone a whole month without this? His nose dragged in a line against the rough, familiar stubble and his lips locked back on the warm ones that haunted him endlessly. It was like a whole month without sunlight, without water, without air. It shouldn’t have been survivable. He should have been nothing but rotting bones along a barren wasteland.

It didn’t matter. His thoughts, his rationale, his spiral didn’t matter because Quentin whimpered and everything went beautifully blank again. Eliot twisted his hands in the fabric of his soft blue shirt, pushing him down to the ground and starting to crawl over him. Quentin tangled his fingers into his curls, the hot line of his body a wildfire under him.

Maybe they could live like this. Why the fuck not? They wanted each other. Fuck, they wanted each other, Eliot thought as he gripped the nape of Quentin’s neck. Quentin had kissed him, he reminded himself with brain melting delirium, as Quentin’s half-hard cock pressed into his thigh and made all the edges of reality fuzzy and nonsensical. What were they going to do, deny themselves for the rest of their lives? Pretend like they had other options, for the sake of fucking nobility? Joan of Arc already had the martyr market cornered as far as Eliot knew.

Their hands laced together and Eliot kissed Quentin deeper, letting his senses surrender to the familiar scent, the gentle touch he knew better than anything, the dizzying whirl around him, all so perfect and warm and dear. Quentin slid his hands up under his shirt and everything was stars and champagne.

Maybe Eliot could handle being Quentin’s second choice, or his eighth choice, or his only choice, fucked up as it was, if it meant that he got to have this. Maybe he could get over it, maybe he could learn not to care, not to want more for himself, to not want more for Quentin, maybe he could—

A flash of green eyes bore into his. Quentin’s favorite color. Everything I do, everything I will ever do, is for Quentin of Coldwater Cove. That will be true to my last breath.

—Eliot broke away with a gasp.

God, it was all so crushing in its unfairness.

For everyone.

“Q, shit,” Eliot breathed. He ripped off him and turned his head toward the ground. “Fuck. I’m sorry.”
He knew better than to let that happen. Eliot was such an idiot. He wiped at his mouth like he could erase the bad decision if he rubbed it hard enough.

“Sorry,” Quentin repeated back to him. He sat up and scooted back on his ass, staring at his hands. “Uh, sorry, I shouldn’t have done that.”

“It wasn’t just you,” Eliot said, a choked tightness in his voice. He brushed off his pants, not looking up. “But we shouldn’t. We really shouldn’t—”

“Go for the secret fourth option?”

Eliot slammed his eyes shut. “Jesus.”

There was nothing he had ever wanted more in his entire life than to fuck Quentin right there on the deck of that goddamn boat. Honestly, kind of fuck him for even putting the idea in his head, especially so casually. Eliot breathed in the salted air through his nostrils. He needed a fucking cigarette.

“You’re right,” Quentin said, plastering his palms over his eyes. His voice was low and husky and unbearable. “It’s a bad idea. Sorry.”

Eliot sent out a breath toward the winking stars. “It’s not that I don’t want to, Q, but—”

“I know,” Quentin said, shifting further away. The ocean separated them in those scant inches. “Or, uh, actually I don’t know. But that seems like something we might fight about.”

“And we don’t want to fight,” Eliot said with a harsh lick of his lips.

“No,” Quentin said, clipped. He ran the pad of his thumb around the lip of the wine bottle. “So until we can talk about this productively—”

“Which is not now.”

“—let’s keep playing?”

Quentin pulled up the lost gold coin as if from thin air. He had always said he was good at sleight-of-hand, the dorky type even muggles could do. It was absurdly charming, even in the worst of circumstances. Eliot let his shoulders relax as Quentin’s endless and warm brown eyes looked up at him with a gentle frown, silently imploring and hopeful.

Eliot was such an idiot.

“Good idea,” he said against his better judgment, half his mouth tilting up. “I think it was your turn.”

Quentin swallowed audibly and nodded, eyes darting everywhere. He loosened his jaw with a sharp intake of breath, then flipped the crescent high. “What’s my favorite Earth song?”

The metal glinted in the light, twisting and falling as Eliot rubbed his chin in contemplation. He landed on the only possible answer, right before it hit Quentin’s palm.

“MMMBop.”

“Oh, fucking drink, you asshole,” Quentin groaned. “Hades.”

But Eliot just tilted his head. “Drink, liar.”
“No, okay, here’s the thing. It was stuck in my head one time and Penny’s a dickhead about my wards. But that doesn’t mean—”

When Eliot eventually reigned victorious and Quentin eventually brought the wine to his lips—with a raised middle finger accoutrement—something tight unraveled and something broken began to rebuild.

The rest of the night passed on that way, with Eliot and Quentin shooting the shit and giving each other shit, until the empty bottle was laid at their tipsy feet. It was nice. It was familiar and warm, full of laughter and easy conversation that flowed once they got over themselves enough to let it. They talked a bit about work, about their friends, about Fillory. It was nice. They didn’t touch each other again, but they could smile and catch eyes. They could be around each other, be together, without it being weird for the first time in weeks. Which was nice.

It was nice.

And all Eliot had to do was avert his gaze from the happy lines of Q’s dimples, the ones he had put there, and convince himself of a new falsehood, another pretty lie. It was nice. It was nice.

—Eliot was already made entirely of pretty lies.

What was one more?

____________________

tbc.

Chapter End Notes

TW: Suicidal ideation -- during the long italics flashback scene where Quentin and Margo chat, Q has a brief flash of self-loathing that manifests as suicidal ideation. Lines are: "He was the goddamned worst" through "He really shouldn't think like that."

- See you all in the comments, on Tumblr, and your own fics... and here, the first week of May then straight on 'til morning. <3

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!