"No, I-" Colin deflates, pinches the bridge of his nose. "I'm so tired of being so scared," he whispers, pushing his face in to Bradley's chest. Later, with Colin soft and pliant in his hands Bradley tries to piece together whatever may be broken inside of him.

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(Or the one where Colin asks Bradley to be his date for the Olivier Awards.)

Notes

Back on my bullshit I guess. Oops.

He's tense and on edge even in sleep; mouth downturned in a frown, his back arched and held so tightly Bradley counts each nub of his spine with feather-light touches. He dips, pushing his nose in to Colin's shoulder before dragging his lips up to Colin's ear, down his jaw and back up, pressing a kiss to his temple.

Colin stirs only long enough to curl further in to himself, push his face deeper in to his pillow. But Bradley waits until the furrow between his brows dissolves before he rises, dragging on clothes and leaving Colin to his fitful sleep.

Bradley slips out the front door, stretching his muscles in the thawing, early morning spring air. His back pops and he groans happily with the movement before setting off down the street, trainers pat pat pat-ing as they meet the pavement.
Bradley had never been sure of anything except for Colin, tugged in to his orbit from the first moment they met. His wide smiles, bright eyes, endearingly goofy ears that anchored him even when everything else went a little mad. But then Merlin ended and Colin pulled farther and farther away, put up walls until there was nothing left to fight for.

He hit the reset button on his life after that. Left for America, sought and landed roles in riskier shows, tried piece together something that was uniquely his. When it all fell apart - again - he spiraled for a long time, hit rock bottom's rock bottom before agreeing to carry a sword and play dress-up again, desperate to remind himself of the man he used to be.

He's had to go a long way to find his way back home.

The scene when he returns is familiar: Colin has risen but only just - coffee machine burbling while he slumps in a chair nearby, curls bent and clumped in awkward, sleep-dented angles, eyes puffy behind delicate wire glasses. (Those are new - to Bradley at least - and the sight of them still sends a thrill through him. Their past is just that; their younger selves distance echoes of the men they are now. There but refined, dormant but buzzing just beneath the surface. And he's greedy for the new Colin, drunk on him, and spends entire hours cataloging all that's changed: in the early morning light he counts the soft gray hairs that begin to pepper the unruly sea of black; in the quiet purple-black of pre-dawn he whispers promises to the burgeoning wrinkles drawn like lines in sand at the corners of his eyes; with Colin laid out under him he traces fingers and lips over every new scratch and bruise and scar.

Everything old is new and everything new is exhilarating.)

Colin is all sharp angles - unease and tension still rippling off him in waves from where he sits. It's so opposite to his normal bearing Bradley pauses at the threshold of the kitchen, wary to make a wrong move. Colin 2.0, new Colin, this Colin that Bradley gets to rediscover every day - everything about him is graceful, age having rounded him out, filling him in and bestowing a certain gravitas that pulls Bradley under again and again. He used to be so coltish - at times too awkward in his own body and unsure what to do with it. Sharp elbows, sharp cheekbones, sharp knuckles on long delicate fingers that were always restless, always in motion.

Bradley thinks new Colin moves like he's under water - fluid limbs, graceful arcs, everything purposeful and delicate but strong. Bradley thinks its devastatingly beautiful.

The coffee machine beeps with a final sputter and Bradley finds his footing again, pulled out of his reverie and presses a tentative kiss to the taller man's forehead as he passes. The crooked smile Colin cracks in response makes Bradley's heart swell so much it aches.

"Big night."

Colin hums in vague notion of agreement but diverts his gaze, scoops up the steaming mug Bradley's just placed in front of him and turns away, folding farther in to himself.

"You'll be brilliant," he offers, trying to draw Colin out but he's shrugged off in response, a delicate roll of limbs that's heartbreaking.

Bradley gets it then - or at least he thinks he does - sees the shield Colin's erecting between them (again. Christ, Colin let me in) and the force of it knocks him a little off kilter.

He draws a hand over his face, sighs as he pushes himself off the counter. "Right, yeah, that's fine. Best of luck tonight."
Colin reaches out whip fast as Bradley walks by, grabs his wrist to spin him around until they're a breath away. "No, I-" Colin deflates, pinches the bridge of his nose. "I'm so tired of being so scared," he whispers, pushing his face in to Bradley's chest.

Colin has always been sure of everything except for Bradley. His therapist says he's single-minded to the point of recklessness, laying waste to everything and everyone in his path. And Bradley - loud, brash, all around lad’s lad, isn't-gay-except-worships-Colin's-cock-like-a-porn star Bradley was never part of the plan he made for his life. He was and is everything Colin isn't and everything about the blonde has always terrified him. He’s never wanted more than when he’s with him.

Later, wrapped in the steam of the shower, the water falling in their eyes, dripping between their tongues, filling their ears to muffle the coaxed sighs and stolen groans; later, with Colin soft and pliant in his hands Bradley tries to piece together whatever may be broken inside of him.

Things are different but the same.

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As London flashes past the windows of the cab in a riot of light, Colin's hand slides over to Bradley's knee, fingers absently tracing the faint weave of his smart trousers.

The cab rolls to a stop and they tumble out, Colin on edge, skittish like a trapped animal looking for a way out. His hand seeks out Bradley’s and comes up with empty air, turning to see the blonde’s hand shoved in to his pockets, rocking on his heels.

"Mate, you're the one they're here to see," he says, nodding to the receiving line beyond. Colin hesitates, worries his bottom lip between his teeth and Bradley can see him pull back, slipping in to some pseudo-Colin character more apt to put himself forward as the center of all this attention.

Bradley softens, uncurls and takes his shoulders, kisses the tip of Colin's nose; smoothes down his lapels before pressing a kiss to his lips. Under his touch, he can feel the pieces of armor that Colin has been building for himself slowly shift, loosen.

"Go on," he mummers in to his lips.

Colin straightens and turns, steps on to the carpet and steps in to the blaze of cameras after a cue from a woman donning a headset.

"It's good your back," Rebecca, Colin's long-time publicist says as she comes to his side. He doesn't say anything, he doesn't need to, just leans in to her for a beat or two until she pulls away. "See you on the other side."

Bradley lingers, watches with a fond, quiet smile as the other man quietly works his way along the line. But it's not long before Colin looks back, frazzled and near frantic around the edges in a way that only Bradley can see and it's easy then to act without thought.

He strides forward, ignoring the whirr of the press pool until they're sharing the same space, the same air, and slides his hand along Colin's back, thumb rubbing small circles. Colin's shoulders drop just so and Bradley watches the tension melt away, watches as his smile becomes looser, lighter. Bradley twines their fingers together as they step down the line, nudges Colin's shoulder with his own, blue eyes devilish and electric. Colin huffs a laugh, angling their bodies closer together to a chorus of camera snaps.

It's easier then, with Bradley by his side. Bradley, who has always oozed an easy charm, who can make anyone fall madly in love with him a heartbeat after meeting - that much, at least, hasn't
changed. He knows how to play this game and Colin is happy to follow in his wake.

Bradley presses a kiss to Colin's temple - holds it a beat while the flare of camera flashes turns the world red behind his eyes in a selfish desire to mark this moment.

All of this should be enough - this kiss, the weight of Colin's hand in his own, the fact that they'll fall, exhausted and buzzed, in to the same bed together tonight, Colin spread like a starfish across Bradley's body- but he's also scared, still feels like the person Colin didn't choose over and over again instead of being the one he did. So he lingers for a moment longer than necessary, knowing one of the flashes that light up his vision will give him something as fickle as a watermarked photo to remind him, in the lonely darkness of a distant 2 a.m., after another sharp turn of Colin's heart (because it's always been Colin who's pulled back first) that this is real, this happened - that for this brief moment Colin was his and his alone.

Colin's breath catches at the contact and he closes his eye as their fingers untangle and Bradley slips quietly away. When he opens them again the world hasn't ended - buildings still stand, no one’s died, no blasphemous lighting bolt has rattled the earth and set things ablaze simple because he finally let go, finally let himself openly accept the warmth and love of another man.

He fidgets, alone, feels awkward in the flare of the assembled cameras. When the flashes have made his eyes near blind with burning dots, he searches Bradley back out, calls him back to his side with a soft smile and small tip of his head. In the space of one breath Bradley is back by his side, lips grazing his ear in hello. Its then a matter of lather, rinse, repeat - a dance that calls Bradley to his side and out again and again and again.

Colin grows more confident, stronger each time Bradley steps away. But when they're together, slotted side-by-side, everything else falls away. Bradley has always felt like the sun and Colin forgot how much he missed his warmth.

Down in the press line with recorders and phones and microphones in his face, he's intentionally coy. This thing between them is old but it's new and he clings to it, too scared it will fall to pieces at any moment.

"He's always been my biggest fan" he tells them all in turn, deflecting even while his face - with the way heat rises to his cheeks, the way his eyes crinkle with every involuntary smile - fills in the gaps of his story.

Later, tucked behind the safety of closed doors, they're giddy, drunk on the high of the previous 500 feet.

Bradley tips his brow in a way that Colin knows will be his undoing but he's helpless, clings to Bradley's hand like a lifeline while the blonde leads them away and down, down, down stairs that twist until he's lost and dizzy; pulls them to a dark corner, laughter on his lips and lets Bradley crowd his space, press in to him with fire in his eyes.

That night, when the time comes, he doesn't register the moment his name is called. He feels the surge of people rise around him, feels Bradley's hand steady on his elbow as he guides him to his feet. When he turns, his vision is full of Bradley's brilliant smile and blue eyes alight with tears welling at the corners and it's that alone that carries him down the aisle and up to the stage.

He feels directionless and clumsy, the award heavy in his shaking hands. He's not prepared - how could he be? - fumbles over his words and blindly races to the end while is heart pounds against his ribs so violently a part of him wonders if anyone can notice.
"And, uh," he starts, stops, clears his throat. He looks down at the award in his hands - this a wild, impossible dream come true - and runs his thumb along the ridges of the small bronze face before his eyes flash up, swimming through the sea of endless faces until they connect with Bradley's all those rows away.

When he inhales, his breath shakes but a smile slowly warms its way across his face. "And to Bradley. My Once and Future. Thank you."

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